

Dark participation: Conception, reception, and extensions

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Abstract: While the new possibilities of online participation were initially described and analyzed from a mainly optimistic perspective, more recent work in communication studies draws a rather bleak picture of the state of communication in today's online world. The concept of “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018) picks up on this profound change of perspective. In addition to the systematization of negative participatory forms, the concept was also used as a rhetorical device to comment on the change in scientific perspective: the original publication was primarily meant as a call for balance in the analysis of online participation—something that was often neglected in the subsequent debate. Based on a brief summary of the core ideas and the context of the original publication, the current paper revisits the concept of dark participation by discussing its reception and potential extensions. Furthermore, a reassessment of its value and the limitations for analyzing (negative) forms of online participation is presented vis-à-vis related concepts.

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Thorsten Quandt & Johanna Klapproth

Dark Participation

Conception, reception, and extensions

1 Scientific construction of a changing mosaic

Numerous scientific articles analyzing online communication start with overarching statements about “all-encompassing and unprecedented media change” and suggest that “the Internet revolutionized not only the media system but also how we live as a society.” Typically, these studies illustrate statements with cogent arguments and middle-range empirical work on aspects of communication that support the idea of a “media revolution,” incrementally contributing pieces to a grand mosaic of what public communication in the current era looks like. Indeed, it has been argued that normal science can be considered a laborious and collaborative process of piecing together such a mosaic image based on existing patterns of thinking about the world (Kuhn, 1962). In that sense, the grand picture depends not only on its object, but also on the concept, tone, and style of the representation, as well as the arrangement of elements and even the individual tessera.

Judging from recent work in communication studies, one might get a rather bleak impression of the state of communication in the online world, as if the mosaic is full of pitch-black pieces and the overall atmosphere is dark and depressive. Researchers have identified “toxic talk” (Anderson et al., 2018) and

“partisan incivility” (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017) in online discussions and comment forums, even going so far as to declare a “cyberspace war” that uses “propaganda and trolling as warfare tools” (Aro, 2016). Online communication seems to be pervaded by “hate speech” (Silva et al., 2016) and “fake news” (Bennett & Livingston, 2017, 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) that are assumed to be a serious danger to societal coherence. As a protection against this, scholars propose interfering by “moderation” (Ziegele et al., 2018), “deplatforming” (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Rogers, 2020), “counter speech” (Bartlett & Krasodomski-Jones, 2015; Garland et al., 2020), or other means of “controlling the conversation” (Santana, 2016). Indeed, further inspection of current communication journals and conferences would most likely strengthen this rather dismal impression of today’s online world. In that sense, even the current volume is a reflection of this and may add further tessera to the mosaic.

However, turning back the pages of said journals and checking the volumes from just a few years ago would reveal a completely different, uplifting, and much more positive picture. One and a half decades ago, scientists described the online world using bright colors, and there was a lot of hope and optimism in their analyses. In contrast to the depictions of today, scholars were hoping for a “communicative democracy in a redactional society” (Hartley, 2000) in which users were empowered to become part of the production process (labeled “produsage” by Bruns, 2008), leading to the “future of news and information” via “we media” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). “The people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006) would become actively engaged in the information flows, leading to “an age of participatory news” (Deuze et al., 2007). There was a spirit (and expectation) of revolution in many of these works, not only for information flows, media, and journalism, but for society as a whole. The new options of online participation were also regarded as a rejuvenation of—somewhat congealed—media democracies by means of an “online agora” as the ideal space for a digital assembly of the people.

Naturally, the inconsistency of these two totally different depictions of online communication leads to an important question: Has the world changed so much in such a short time—or just the scientific perspective?

This is a difficult question to answer since the observer may have changed in tandem with the object being observed. Naturally, even long-term empirical data are subject to (re)interpretation, but certainly some of the forms or participation

heralded by communication scholars briefly after the millennium still exist—and one could even argue that the options for participation have dramatically improved since then. However, these positive spaces are often overlooked in light of the negative aspects so prominently featured in today’s research and public discussion. This may be partially due to frustrations with the empirically observable world not following the normative ideas and expectations espoused back then (both in science and society). In line with this assumption, Peters and Witsche argued that we came “from grand narratives of democracy” and ended up with “small expectations of participation” (2014). Usher and Carlson even identified a “midlife crisis of the network society” (2018).

This profound change in the perspective and tone of the discussion about online participation was also the motivation of one of this chapter’s authors to introduce a concept called “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018). On the surface level, the original article was a reflection and systematization of the negative or even sinister forms of participation scholars seem to witness these days—at first sight, another dark tessera added to the overall picture. However, on a second, more subtle level, the original article was also used as a rhetorical device to comment on the change in perspective. It included a call for balance in the discussion instead of overpronouncing dark aspects in favor of more positive ones (or vice versa). In that sense, the article and concept were something of an academic conjuring trick: by presenting the audience with a dark tessera and discussing it in detail, the author enticed the audience to follow his argument and the idea of an overly negative, depressing mosaic—only to reveal that this was done on purpose and that caution is necessary when arguments appear one-sided.

The dark participation concept quickly developed a life of its own, with a notable—and sometimes critical—reception. Further work also embraced the systematization of dark participation. It needs to be noted, though, that some of the discussion overlooked the more complex nature of the original publication, while others extended it beyond what the author hoped for (or even considered), partially transforming it into something else (e.g., Kowert, 2020).

Therefore, the current paper will revisit the concept of dark participation by briefly summarizing its core ideas and the context of its original publication, discussing its reception and potential extensions, and finally re-assessing its value—and limitations—for analyzing current (negative) forms of online communication vis-à-vis other related concepts.

2 From “Participation” to “Dark Participation”

2.1 *The reversal of the participation concept*

As noted above, participation in online media was a highly relevant concept in many theoretical and empirical works in communication studies at the beginning of the millennium. The options online communication offered, in contrast to the traditional system of societal information distribution (primarily via media and journalism), were considered promising for both socio-political and economic reasons. Some scholars argued that online communication would turn the information and news flow from a lecture to a “conversation” (Kunelius, 2001), while media businesses and journalists more often perceived the new influx of user-generated content as a valuable resource for exploitation (Vujnovic et al., 2010). Accordingly, the understanding of participation at that time ranged from the limited contribution of raw material to the production processes in journalism and enclosed debates in “walled gardens” of forums provided by media companies (Domingo et al., 2008; Hanitzsch & Quandt, 2012) to the influential and decisive role of citizens in public communication as active „producers“ (Bruns, 2008).

As a reflection of this range of ideas and the empirical work on the topic, Domingo et al. (2008) proposed the conceptualization of participation as a continuum along an analytical grid consisting of five stages of news production (access and observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation) that may or may not be (partially) open for citizen participation. This is in line with more general conceptualizations of citizen participation in relation to other aspects of societal life that preceded the discussion of online communication. In such early works (in political science and sociology, for example), it was noted that participation can take multiple forms and may reach various levels, ranging from non-participation and placebo forms of tokenism to decisive citizen power in societal processes (Arnstein, 1969).

Despite this potential variance, the general expectations regarding participation in online media were high. Scholars hoped such participation would have a positive effect on journalistic businesses (which were already struggling), public communication, and society in general. However, many of these works at the beginning of the millennium suffered from notable limitations. They modeled participation as an enhancement to or extension of the existing system of information flows in society,

with citizens contributing to the well-known information production processes enabled by (journalistic) institutions and actors. Social media as we know it today were in their infancy—the forerunner SixDegrees.com had economically failed and closed in 2001, and Mark Zuckerberg only started to work on what would become Facebook in 2003. In that sense, many communication and journalism scholars approached participation from the perspective of the previous traditional system, and this viewpoint presented natural limitations to the visions of the future since institutionalized media and journalism in particular were still regarded as the most relevant references for the understanding of information flows. In line with this understanding, many scientific (empirical) works dealt with participation in the news-making process or contributions to forums provided by journalistic media.

Furthermore, the early conceptualizations often implicitly understood the participating citizens as intrinsically motivated members of liberal democracies; thus, they were following normative ideas of how an ideal society should communicate. The options for online communication were regarded as the key to a door opening to a free and mutual exchange of ideas that, more often than not, was perceived as a solution to many societal problems (such as hegemonial structures and the neglect of minorities). In that sense, the previous system of limited access to information distribution and control via journalistic gatekeepers was regarded as suppressing an existing motivation to communicate and participate, and online communication was a liberating force for this will to participate.

The subsequent developments, and especially the success of social media, did not necessarily follow the expected path. While the number of users communicating in (more or less) publicly accessible online spaces began to grow, their motivations and contributions were often much different from the normative concepts of participation that had been implicitly projected as serving democracy and the public interest. Naturally, there were motivated online contributors to societally relevant information production and public discourse, sometimes even in the expected narrow sense but more often in a much wider sense and not necessarily reflecting a traditional (journalistic) definition of “relevant news.” However, an active contribution to information flows regarding issues of public interest—even in a rather broad sense—was not necessarily what most people regarded as their main interest in online communication. As a result, the unfolding new communication system was, essentially, quite different from early expectations and was certainly not just an extension of a traditional news-centered media system.

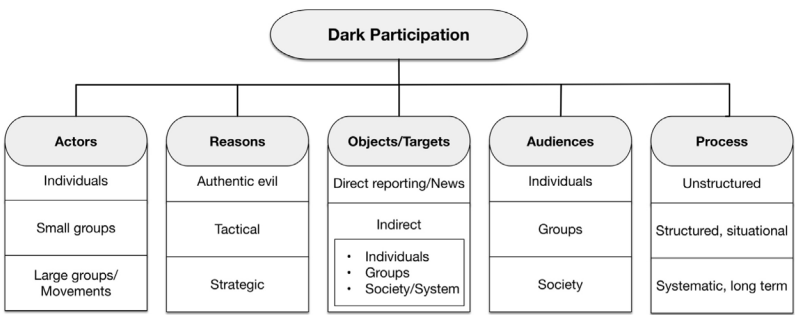
Indeed, one may argue that large parts of social media communication today are tied to the individual experiences of users and are private in nature. And on some platforms, only a fraction of users actively contribute content (Springer et al., 2015). Thus, some of the academic discussion on the problems of today's online communication can be understood as a reaction to a violation of expectations (as also noted by Peters & Witschge, 2014). To put it more precisely, the actual active user was a disappointment when judged against the normative ideal of a highly engaged online citizen fully motivated to serve democracy via participation in information flows and valuable contributions to public discourse.

However, when judging from the early, quite hopeful perspective, the situation is probably even worse: not only does a rather limited fraction of users participate, and often in a different way than expected, but some of these users do not follow the principles of constructive, positive participation. Instead, they spread lies or hate and act in a destructive or manipulative way, as also discussed in the current volume. These rather "sinister" forms of participation were not only disappointing; they also seemed to offer a glimpse at the dark heart of society, in stark contrast to the hopeful promises that followed the new millennium. Accordingly, many communication scholars switched their perspective by 180 degrees and fully embraced the research on manipulation (as discussed above), negativity, and hate fueled by a fear of the individual and social damage these may cause. And perhaps also by a slight fascination with evil and darkness.

2.2 *Systematization of dark participation*

The dark participation concept introduced by Quandt (2018) addresses this debate in the field and offers, on the surface level, a universal "umbrella" concept for the various forms of negative, manipulative, or destructive participation. The initial article introduces the concept based on a reflection of the situation in the field and then systematizes the various strands of debate and the corresponding sub-concepts into a general model. This model delineates variants of dark participation (see Figure 1). It includes five main dimensions on which variations of dark participation may occur: the actors (i.e., participators), the reasons for their behavior, the targets or objects of their participation, the intended audiences, and the structure of the process.

Figure 1: Dark participation umbrella model



Source: Quandt, 2018, p. 42

Actors are differentiated according to size and complexity, ranging from individuals to large movements (since forms of dark participation are often carried out by coordinated groups or ideological movements). The reasons for dark participation can be classified as tactical or strategic, since they are often intended to achieve a situational or long-term goal (such as orchestrated hate campaigns). There are also purely destructive actions that do not follow goals beyond the destruction itself; in that sense, the actions are self-serving (trolls often claim that they just do it “for the sake of it” or “for fun”; Buckels et al., 2014). It needs to be noted that this differentiation already refers to the fact that, despite being perceived as “sinister” from the outside and when judged against societal norms, forms of dark participation may serve a function for the actors. Such functions range from signaling a standpoint or exerting social influence and control to emotional gratifications (Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012).

The third category refers to *objects or targets* of participation. As noted in the original publication with reference to participation in journalistic forums or social media, actors “may attack specific articles or topics, and they can also divert content-driven hate to actors mentioned in the article or the journalists themselves” (Quandt, 2018, p. 38). In that sense, participation in such contexts may directly attack the communication of others, the authors of said communication, or third parties (that may or may not be addressed in said communication). Even a mix of direct and indirect targets may occur. For example, during the “refugee

crisis” in Europe of 2015/16, right-wing participators targeted press articles on refugees in the comment sections of journalistic media and typically criticized the journalists for not telling the “full truth.” Thus, “the press and journalism in general became representative of an adverse system and the intended target of the negativity” (Quandt, 2018, p. 42).

Audiences must not be confused with the former category. For example, by bullying others or starting hate campaigns against specific societal groups, actors often try to address an “overhearing” audience or third groups that are not directly involved. These actors want to “convey a message” to these groups (such as showing how relevant or powerful the actors are, where they stand politically, or who they oppose in order to attract supporters for their cause or new followers for a movement, etc.). The intended audience can even extend to the whole of society, such as when groups try to position themselves according to their political/ideological standpoint via dark participation.

Finally, the *process* category refers to the structure and planning of the process. As discussed in the original publication, some forms of dark participation may be “unstructured and random,” some “structured, but still bound by the specifics of the situation” and others “systematic and long-term processes” (Quandt, 2018, p. 43). These variations are not fully independent from reasons and motivations since large-scale strategic disinformation campaigns are typically planned and systematic long-term processes, whereas individual outbreaks of emotion-driven, situational trolling may not be following a clearly defined, structured process (incidentally, such a process does not equal behavioral patterns as observed by scientists).

The original model, as summarized here, is deliberately broad and all-encompassing. It is meant to offer a rather universal system of categorizing all potential forms of dark participation according to the main categories. While the original publication presents several examples and references to empirical research, they are primarily meant to illustrate the more frequent variants. Naturally, some combinations are more likely than others: as outlined above, long-term strategic actions of co-ordinated groups will be typically planned and structured, whereas individual tornados of rage will be most likely unstructured, episodic, and not follow a long-term strategy (as noted above). This does not rule out divergent options, though; for example, the latter can be part of a larger plan if groups use highly emotional trolls in an instrumental way. Other empirically less frequent

and therefore less “typical” combinations are also easily conceivable and underline the spectrum of possibilities the dark participation model offers.

2.3 *The reversal of the reversal: Dark participation as a mirror trick*

The concept and model were quickly picked up in the field and were subject to numerous reactions, from embrace to rejection (see below). However, it has often been overlooked that the original article has a dual message and uses the concept of dark participation as a tool to illustrate the fallacies of normative, one-sided approaches. By introducing the concept and developing it in a way that is similar to earlier works on participation, Quandt tries to lure the reader to his side of the argument, only to reveal in the last few sections of the paper that the construction of a convincing, one-sided argument solely in favor of dark participation was a “mirror trick” (Quandt, 2021, p. 85) meant to evoke a reflection on normativity and empirical balance in the research on participation: “If you now believe that the future is all doom and gloom, then you have stepped into a trap I intentionally set” (Quandt, 2018, p. 44). So, the article deliberately misleads the reader about its goals, and it is designed as an “experienceable” warning. In the final sections, the author argues that embracing the concept and model of dark participation without considering other forms of participation would be as wrong as the earlier works were in their overwhelmingly positive (and therefore uncritical) approaches to participation:

(...) the current wave of apocalyptic analyses of media and society are partially born out of the same fallacies that plagued the early enthusiastic approaches. (...) The issue here is not the (most relevant) topic of dark participation itself, but a growing lopsidedness that repeats the earlier failings in approach, just with an inversed object of interest. (Quandt, 2018, p. 44)

Thus, dark participation is not only a concept, but also a commentary on the mistakes of doing one-sided research as a projection of one’s own expectations. Therefore, the concept can still be used as an umbrella term for specific forms of participation – but never in a nonreflective way and without proper balancing (i.e., one should not forget that participation as a concept has a history and a much broader meaning). In this sense, dark participation is also an incomplete

concept by design. A more general approach to participation—neither naively positive nor fascinated by the dark—would be needed to fully achieve the goal of a balanced discussion:

(...) media and communication research must be careful that it is not taking the exception as the rule. (...) A normalization of the debate and maturity beyond uni-polar depictions of the world is essential. (...) This would require the development of integrative theories on the conditions of participation that are neither driven by wishful thinking nor doom and gloom. (Quandt, 2018, pp. 44–45)

3 Reception and discussion of the concept

The original publication of “Dark Participation” stimulated a discussion on the concept and led to some “strong, and sometimes even quite emotional reactions” (Quandt, 2021, p. 84). This may be due to the dual message of the piece and its critical perspective on previous approaches to participation (including the work of the piece’s author).

For example, Carpentier et al. (2019) criticized the concept of dark participation on the basis of a democratic theory perspective. The authors point out that dark participation and related concepts are rather “perversions of participation” (Carpentier et al., 2019, p. 25). From their (normative) perspective, participation is an essential component of democracy and, as such, an ethical idea by definition. Carpentier et al. argue that this understanding of participation as an ethical idea allows for a differentiation of participation intensity but makes concepts of bad or dark participation inherently contradictory. Instead, the authors propose a focus on differences in participation intensity. Furthermore, they distinguish between participation and the results of participation, and they emphasize that although participation is ethical in itself, the results of participation may not necessarily be ethical. Consequently, even if the results are negative, the process of participation is ethical in itself. From their perspective, the social practices covered by the concept of dark participation cannot be considered participatory, and they perceive them as antagonistic forms of violence (Carpentier et al., 2019).

In contrast to Carpentier et al., Kligler-Vilenchik (2018) does not rule out the possibility of dark participation. Rather, she calls for concurrent research on “good participation” (p. 111) and proposes focusing more scientific attention on the research

of participatory phenomena in everyday contexts, assuming it would align better with the positive view of participation. She further argues that one should not limit oneself to case studies with extreme examples (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2018).

Other authors did not necessarily criticize the concept and the differentiation between “dark” and other, more positive forms of participation. Instead, they asked for more details, expansions, or a different contextualization. For example, in his initial commentary on the original piece, Katz (2018) proposes an integration of the concept into a historical perspective. He identifies parallels between the current situation and the arrival of the telephone and considers the lack of making such connections in a more systematic way a “missed opportunity” (Katz, 2018, p. 104).

While some of these critical pieces (of which the ones mentioned above are just a selection) make some valuable points about dark participation as a theoretical concept, they partially miss its use as a means to elicit an “aha reaction” by the reader in the context of the original publication (as outlined above). Indeed, one may even argue that the article’s somewhat uncommon “mirror trick” has been overlooked by some critics, and that their criticism therefore points in the wrong direction (since their position does not oppose the original piece’s stated intent).

4 Extensions and transfer of the concept

The original publication not only elicited a critical reception, but also prompted follow-up works that expanded on its core ideas. In some ways, this is to be expected: as a universal concept, dark participation is deliberately open to further delineation and can function as a starting point for empirical research and theoretical extensions. In particular, the concept has been picked up by journalism research since it aligns with the long tradition of research on participation in that particular field.

For example, Nordheim and Kleinen-von Königsłow (2021) identify a growing infiltration of the journalistic system by antagonistic actors as concomitant with the process of digitalization due to a specific destructive potential inherent in participatory technology. They argue that this infiltration of the system intensifies journalism’s already-existing crisis. To describe and classify these relationships and sample cases of antagonistic behavior, the authors expand the concept of dark participation by drawing on “The Parasite,” a work

by French philosopher Michel Serres (2007). Building on a normative perspective (which interestingly very much contrasts the above-mentioned normative criticism by Carpentier et al., 2019), the authors take up the concept of dark participation and add the idea of certain actors being “parasitic,” such as political-strategic actors and self-proclaimed “alternative media” of the alt-right, manipulators that use journalistic structures for disinformation campaigns, and even large platform providers. These “parasites” position themselves as intermediaries of the system’s boundaries. As Nordheim and Kleinen-von KönigsLöw (2021) note, the parasites then function as a subsystem and inherent part of the journalistic system and act from within by utilizing journalistic resources while compromising the values on which the freedoms of a democratic public are based. Furthermore, parasitic disruption triggers differentiation and de-differentiation in the media system and initiates a re-definition of system boundaries. In such a dysfunctional process, the parasites destructively modify the system from within (as both part of it and as an antagonist force), ultimately threatening its integrity.

Based on the understanding of participation as “one of the guiding normative values of journalism in the digital sphere” (as proposed by Kreiss and Brennen, 2016), Anderson and Revers (2018) draw on the concept of dark participation and contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolution and transformation of participation by reconstructing the evolution of societal and journalistic meta-discourse about citizen participation in the news production process. In their socio-historic analysis (which potentially adds the missing historic perspective called for by Katz, 2018; see above), they also problematize participation as an underlying journalistic epistemology. As a form of journalistic knowledge, this “participatory epistemology” modifies professional expertise through public interaction—although not always with expected or desirable results, as they conclude, “Dismissing the interests of Trump supporters as false consciousness does not detract from the uncomfortable reality that the internet gave many people the opportunity to find and express their previously unheard voices and make them heard, including by reproducing and modifying racist memes” (Anderson & Revers 2018, p. 32). As they note, however, the roots of this may be found earlier and in an ideologically very different context, i.e., in the early left-activist Indymedia movement that “was one of the earliest progenitors of these developments,

promiscuously mixing participation, political identity, and agonistic politics, and deeply influencing journalism as a result” (p. 32).

While the above authors extended the theoretical base concept or contextualized it, others differentiated it by identifying factors that may influence the phenomenon or explain its current flourishing. Sjøvaag (2019) suggests a refinement of the concept by considering the economic interests of the media that may contribute to the persistence of dark participation. She argues that media deliberately opened spaces for participation—and thus opportunities for dark participation as well—for financial reasons. They promoted the production of user-generated content as a content strategy with a particularly low cost (Sjøvaag, 2019).

User-generated content as a target of dark participation has also been discussed by others. For example, Van Leuven et al. (2018) note that it is becoming increasingly difficult for journalists to identify the dissolving boundaries between elite and non-elite actors. For example, astroturfing campaigns or the manipulation of online discussions serve as means to maximize the public relations efforts of elite actors, and due to the strong presence of influencers, the boundaries between public relations material and user-generated content are also increasingly dissolving (Van Leuven et al., 2018). Essentially, this enables various options for manipulation and dark participation.

Finally, the concept of dark participation has also been transferred to contexts beyond journalism and social media. For example, Kowert (2020) analyzes the degradation of gamer cultures into toxic ones due to the prevalence of “toxic” gamer behavior characterized by exclusion and hostility. She draws on the concept of dark participation in order to categorize and analyze forms of toxicity in games. To do so, she develops a comprehensive catalogue of what can be defined as dark participation in games and classifies toxic behaviors based on characteristic features on a spectrum ranging from verbal to behavioral and transient to strategic (Kowert, 2020).

5 Dark participation as work in progress

When the dark participation concept was proposed just a few years ago (in 2018), it seemed to hit a nerve within the academic community of communication scholars. Not only did it trigger critical reflection in debate pieces (see above) and

serve as a reference point for empirical studies¹, it also led to several extensions and transfers beyond the intended application in social media and online forums of journalistic media. The concept is obviously universal enough to be applied to related areas, such as participation in digital games (see above). This universality is not necessarily surprising since the overview in the original article was “one that leaves the concept fully open for further delineation,” as de Vreese (2021, p. 215) notes.

This openness was purposeful, as discussed above. The original publication worked on two levels: it introduced the concept of dark participation itself and outlined its potential variants in a general model. Furthermore, it used the development of this model as a persuasive device to later reveal to the reader that this model—when not being balanced against other forms of participation—may be as misleading and one-sided as earlier approaches to normatively positive participation. In that sense, both concept and model were meant to be incomplete, as they ignored certain aspects of participation by design (analogous to earlier approaches but with reversed intentions).

This form of self-awareness may be a benefit of the concept vis-à-vis other concepts that are currently discussed in relation to issues of online communication (such as online hate speech, incivility, mis- and disinformation etc.; see the chapters by Sponholz, Frischlich, Benesch, Bormann & Ziegele, and Udupa in this volume for a more comprehensive discussion). Dark participation—when used as intended—links to the previous rich discussion of participation in the field and does not negate earlier approaches, instead balancing them with an intentionally bleak mirror image (that is, indeed, a reflection in a dual meaning). This embedding in an ongoing debate on participation may be seen as a relevant advantage of the concept, especially when approaching it from a communication studies perspective: participation as a process has been at the heart of numerous works in political communication and journalism studies. These discuss the role of actively participating citizens in democratic processes or public communication, and dark participation builds on these rich foundations. Related to this, by pronouncing the role of the actors (as participants) in an inherently social process (i.e., participation), the approach is genuinely compatible with a *social-scientific* viewpoint,

1 The use in empirical studies was not the focus of this theory-oriented overview. For examples, see Bodrunova et al. (2021), Chang, Haider and Ferrara (2021), Frischlich, Boberg and Quandt (2019), and Wintterlin et al. (2020, 2021).

arguably more so than approaches that primarily link the issues to a specific type of content (such as hate speech, mis-/disinformation, etc.).

In addition, the weakly specified, rather universal model allows—and even calls—for extensions. Indeed, as noted above, several authors developed the concept further or took it as a starting point for their own deliberations. Some linked it to broader debates on the role of citizens and other participants in public (online) communication, while others added more depth to the categorization and specified various forms of dark participation. Admittedly, some of these works took the concept and model as their starting point “without the proper ‘balancing’ contextualization — maybe overlooking the mirror trick this article [the original publication] really is” (Quandt, 2019, p. 85). However, there were numerous thoughtful expansions that placed the piece in context, and even without contextualization, expansions may be very valuable as long as the warning of the original piece about a one-sided discussion of participation is not ignored in the field in general.

It needs to be noted, however, that the benefits of the concept may also be its greatest weaknesses: The concept is tied to actors and the process of participation in social contexts—and therefore, it is also open to other actors’ (re)interpretation and multiple viewpoints. The perception of participation as “dark” is an external attribution; as noted above, a destructive and seemingly dysfunctional action (when judged against social norms) may be totally functional from the subjective viewpoint of the participators or supporting parties. Here, content-based concepts (such as hate speech) may be easier to discern since they may be linked to specific and measurable content features (such as negative sentiments, swear words, etc.), whereas the views of participators, the targets of dark participation, the various audiences, and the external scientific observer will most likely diverge. Indeed, this may lead to a discussion of values and norms and what type of (anti)social behavior is defined as “dark”—and by whom.

Furthermore, the universal approach of the model makes it largely unspecific. While the original publication included some cases that were used to illustrate variants of dark participation, it did not offer an exhaustive mapping of empirical cases on the dimensions outlined by the model (since this mapping was not within that piece’s scope). Indeed, one may even argue that the model is so universal that it may be transferred to all kinds of participation, not just its “dark” form—potentially with the exception of the “authentic evil” reason subcategory (which could be re-labeled, in a more generic way, as spontaneous, transient, and affective; this

may also include “positive” forms of impulsive, emotion-driven behavior without tactical elements or strategic planning). As explained above, this openness for further delineation was done on purpose, but leaves the concept as a work in progress *by design*. In that sense, a more comprehensive discussion of dark participation would not only mean a differentiation, refinement, and expansion of the concept and model itself, but also a re-balancing and consolidation with all other potential forms of participation, in line with the original piece’s intent.

As de Vreese states, this process could entail a re-calibration of communication studies in general and lead beyond “the ‘doom and gloom’ perspective” that “seems pervasive” these days:

In the midst of worries about, and research into trolling, incivility, conspiracy, mis- and disinformation, automated pollution of the information environment, populism, and democratic backsliding, is there also space for optimism and a positive research agenda? (...) The bottom line is, that in the era of darkness, it will also be a task of scholars to provide guidance on the upsides. (de Vreese, 2021, p. 216)

In this sense, dark participation is not only a concept. As paradoxical as this may seem at first sight, it is also a call for action to research the concept and to understand participation in a much broader—and positive—way.

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