Towards a Broader Understanding of the Participation Divide(s)

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1   Investigating Divides in Online Participation: Today and Tomorrow

Online participation is a thriving topic in communication and Internet research (Rice & Fuller, 2013). One prominent area within research on online participation focuses on participation divides. Participation divides are frequently understood as social inequalities in online content creation (Blank, 2013; Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Schradie, 2011). The participation divide is a sub-category of the digital divide and, accordingly, findings in both areas overlap: SES has been shown to affect content creation, while gender influences the type of content created by users (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Schradie (2011) finds that the effect of SES is more pronounced on participatory than on consumptive Internet uses. Variables such as income and education, particularly, affect users' propensity to create and share content. Yet, this effect was not found for all forms of content creation. Correa (2010) finds that among college students, gender, age and race (but not SES) impact the level of online content creation. As for age, the consistent finding is that younger users are more prone to make use of participatory web features, such as blogs (Schradie, 2012).

As pointed out by Blank (2013), previous studies – while significantly extending our understanding of the issues at hand – are associated with some limitations. A notable limitation can be found in an insufficient understanding of what constitutes online participation. Research on online political participation abounds – in fact, research is largely focused on this particular area of participation (Rice & Fuller, 2013). Yet, a number of studies show that the online participation divide is not the same and doesn't necessarily follow the same patterns in all areas of online participation. To create a broader understanding of the domains of online participation, and thereby participation divides we conducted a systematic literature review[1].

Analyzing 192 journal articles and conference proceedings on online participation, we identified central definitions, antecedents, and outcomes of online participation. Most notably, we identify

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[1] Methodological details can be found in a working paper version of the literature review upon request.

five distinct domains of online participation: political & civic (OPP&CE), economic/business (OBP), cultural (OCP), health-related (OHP), and educational participation (OEP). Surveying all five domains, we found some noteworthy differences in the respective participation divides. It needs to be noted though, the both research foci and methodologies differ somewhat between domains. We found that demographic characteristics, user skills, interests and self-efficacy are crucial antecedents in the OPP&CE cluster, while other domains focus more on user interests and motivations (e.g., in OCP and OHP). In some domains, the discourse on the antecedents of participation is more pronounced (OPP&CE) than in others – which, in turn, focus more on consequences (e.g., OEP). Overall, we find that age tends to distinguish engagement levels of participants in all domains, while the effect of gender appears much more ambiguous. There is also evidence to suggest that SES isn't equally a driver of the participation divide in all domains. In summary, we propose that research should differentiate analyses of participation divides by domain of online participation (Blank, 2013; Hoffmann, Lutz & Meckel, 2014).

2   Pertinent (Open) Questions and Methodological Propositions

Based on the conducted literature review, we would suggest that in order to better understand the participation divide, research needs to establish a better understanding of online participation. There isn't a commonly accepted definition of the term yet. In fact, a surprising number of studies in the field do not define the term at all. Operationalizing online participation as content creation is certainly a valid approach – but as of today, it is unclear whether it completely captures the phenomenon. Therefore, more theoretical, conceptual analyses as well as qualitative studies directed at fully understanding and differentiating the phenomenon would be helpful before further quantitative studies are conducted on an under-defined concept.

A key methodological conclusion of our analysis is that future research should go beyond the relative uniformity of quantitative, explanatory studies based on survey data (mostly regression). We did find a number of qualitative, descriptive approaches (mostly case-studies). Yet, there is a lack in mixed-methods approaches and data sources beyond surveys and interviews. We detected only few studies employing observational data. Social network analysis could be a valuable framework to research participation within a relational perspective that transcends actor-centric views and accounts for individuals' social embeddedness. Finally, a systematic process-oriented perspective based on longitudinal data should complement the cross-sectional studies that dominate the field.

Another key insight we derived from the literature analysis is a need for awareness of the diversity of forms and domains of online participation. As our overview shows, there are a number of participation domains, oftentimes investigated by distinct disciplines. We found only little cross-discipline discourse and exchange or comparison of findings. We confirm that OPP&CE dominates the overall research agenda; yet, research from the other domains could help interpret existing findings and generate ideas for new research endeavors.

Finally, we propose that research on participation divides should transgress geographical boundaries. Until now, most research on online participation published in English peer-reviewed journals focuses on the English speaking world. The field could therefore profit from a more cross-cultural view that compares online participation (divides) in different social contexts (Calenda & Meijer, 2009; George, 2005).

3   What It All Means for the "Good Life"

One recurring discourse we found in a number of research streams is the one on *"empowerment"*. Empowerment entails user access to online information and conversation. By sharing and discussing information, users not only gain in knowledge, but also self-confidence. Accordingly, established authorities – such as doctors, teachers or politicians – are called into question. Traditionally hierarchical relations, e.g. in health care or education, are shaken up by increasingly self-confident and self-organizing users. Online participation might be especially empowering for marginalized groups without a strong voice in political and economic contexts (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Certain forms of participation and online content creation tend to be heavily embraced by lower status users (Blank, 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2014). As proposed by Jenkins (2006), if low SES users indeed participate more heavily, they might acquire valuable skills that help boost their confidence/self-efficacy and online skills: "A growing body of scholarship suggests potential benefits of these forms of participatory culture, including opportunities for peer-learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered concept of citizenship." (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3) Again, differentiating our understanding of online participation may help generate further insights into empowerment effects and their potential for low SES users, in particular.

In some cases, empowerment could even be associated with economic opportunities. We found a number of studies documenting how online participation calls established business models into

question (e.g., in education, health, business and cultural participation). Examples such as citizen journalism, crowdsourcing, peer-help and others show that the Internet provides new opportunities of self-directed value creation for users. Established providers find that the provision of services is no longer their prerogative. Just as lay users start reporting and commenting on current affairs, students self-organize their learning experience and patients find information and support online. These developments need not be disruptive, alone, as some businesses strive to incorporate stakeholder input into their value chain. Yet, we may find new opportunities for citizens previously not interested in or able to engage in business ventures. Such opportunities could arise from new forms of cooperation enabling new business models, or from users gaining in knowhow and self-confidence through online participation.

Just looking at findings in the domain of OPP&CE, there is reason to believe that online participation divides tend to reinforce existing social stratifications. Yet, by gaining a broader understanding of the forms and domains of online participation, this finding might need to be reevaluated. Policy suggestions based on findings from the domain of OPP&CE alone might be misdirected or biased, as for example the effects of gender or education on participation appear to vary between participation domains. A number of studies in our review suggest some positive effects of online participation that should contribute to a "good life" for the involved. Among these effects are self-confidence, self-efficacy and optimism for socially marginalized groups – be they religious or sexual minorities, patients or students being bullied in class rooms. Much more work needs to be directed at the question of how these empowering effects translate into socio-economic opportunities, though.

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