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Non-participation in digital media: toward a framework of mediated political action

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Nathalie Casemajor

Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada

Stéphane Couture

McGill University, Canada

Mauricio Delfin

McGill University, Canada

Matthew Goerzen

McGill University, Canada

Alessandro Delfanti

University of California, Davis, USA

Abstract

This article explores the notion of digital non-participation as a form of mediated political action rather than as mere passivity. We generally conceive of participation in a positive sense, as a means for empowerment and a condition for democracy. However, participation is not the only way to achieve political goals in the digital sphere and can be hampered by the ‘dark sides’ of participatory media, such as surveillance or disempowering forms of interaction. In fact, practices aimed at abandoning or blocking participatory platforms can be seen as politically significant and relevant. We propose here to conceptualize these activities by developing a framework that includes both participation and non-participation. Focusing on the political dimensions of digital practices, we draw four categories: active participation, passive participation, active non-participation, and passive non-participation. This is not intended as a conclusive classification, but rather as a conceptual tool to understand the relational nature of participation and non-participation through digital media. The evolution of the technologies and practices that compose the digital sphere forces us to reconsider the concept of political participation itself.

Bartleby! quick, I am waiting. [...] ‘What is wanted?’ said he, mildly.
‘The copies, the copies’, said I, hurriedly. ‘We are going to examine them. There’ – and I held toward him the fourth quadruplicate.
‘I would prefer not to’, he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen.

In Herman Melville’s (1996[1853]) novel *Bartleby*, the owner of a 19th century Wall Street law firm tells the story of one of his employees: Bartleby, the scrivener. As the story unfolds, Bartleby increasingly stops performing the tasks that are assigned to him, eventually refusing to eat and starving to death. Like other well-known characters that choose retreat over engagement with the world – think of Thoreau in *Walden*, for example – Bartleby expresses negative choices: he would famously ‘prefer not to’. A long debate has revolved around the philosophical roots of Melville’s novel, and hence the nature of Bartleby’s revolt. Some critics in particular have focused on the relation between Bartleby and free will (see, for example, Emery, 1976; Patrick, 1969). In the novel, the employer finds Bartleby difficult or even impossible to discipline, unlike the other scriveners in the office. As noted by Emery (1976), Bartleby ‘can be interpreted as the surrealistic representative of a great number of quite real rebels’ (p. 178). Can we draw a lesson from Bartleby that applies to the contemporary digital sphere?

This article explores the notion of non-participation as a form of political action rather than as mere passivity. We generally conceive of participation in a positive sense, as a means for empowerment and a condition of democracy. Voting and expressing opinion in the public sphere are two processes through which we participate as citizens and consumers. The development of digital media, especially those based around user production and interaction such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, births new forms of digital participation. Users are invited to contribute by posting content, commenting, deliberating, and sharing their discoveries. However, while much of current scholarship focuses on a positive view of mediated participation (Carpentier, 2011b; Coleman and Blumler, 2009), we should also consider emergent ‘dark sides’ (McChesney, 2013; Marwick, 2012). The digital sphere is increasingly characterized by an unwillful state of passive participation in which certain freedoms and information are surrendered to third parties. We are interested here in an array of practices, both collective and individual, that aim to resist or overcome these surreptitious or disempowering forms of involvement through considered non-participation. Such tactics may be understood in isolation, but also for their ability to underwrite the creation of alternative infrastructures and platforms through which the power of decision is more equally shared.

The main contribution of our article is the proposal of a conceptual basis through which 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. Focusing on non-participation from the perspective of media studies allows us to signal the heterogeneous character of online politics. Also, our approach situates practices of resistance and political action in

relation to well-recognized forms of mediated participation. In fact, non-participation intervenes in shaping the mediated participatory landscape, and thus should not be subsumed into pre-existing models of digital resistance or civil disobedience but explored in its own right. Our definition of non-participation is one of positive negation, in the sense that the refusal to participate in a flawed dispositive unresponsive to substantive, internal change can afford greater political efficacy than accepting to be part of it. We propose here to conceptualize these activities by developing a relational framework in which both participation and non-participation effectively shape digital communications possibilities.

We begin by exploring current theories of politically meaningful participation in media studies. Then, we draw a framework of participation and non-participation processes, dividing them up into four categories: *active participation* (+P), *passive participation* (-P), *active non-participation* (+NP), and *passive non-participation* (-NP). Active and passive here refer to the actor's intentions rather than results. By looking at this relational framework, and pointing at the inevitability of shifts between categories, we aim to ground a thorough exploration of the under-theorized field of non-participation. We recognize that our viewpoint inevitably neglects many relevant cultural and social dimensions; we do not aim to compile a conclusive classification of participatory and non-participatory practices, but rather to provide a conceptual tool for thinking their relational nature. The many benefits derivable from digital participatory media lead to a complex dynamic that pushes some to oppose the conditions of online participation while others, even while aware of the risks, accept them. In fact, the evolution of the technologies, infrastructures, and practices that compose the digital sphere forces us to reconsider the concept of political participation itself. Finally, in the conclusions, we will return to Bartleby to illustrate the paradoxes which lie between participation and non-participation. Indeed, by 'preferring not to', Bartleby appears to exert a freedom which is both extreme and quite limited at the same time.

Linear models of participation and their limits

In political theory, participation has been widely analyzed within the parameters of democratic theory. Its rising importance in scholarly debates is associated with a renewal of political thought that aims to rethink processes of collective deliberation and experiments outside of the traditional, institutionalized settings of parliaments and local government assemblies. At least since the publication of the now classical book *Participation and Democratic Theory* by Carole Pateman (1970), much of the debate in the field of democratic theory has focused on the difference between two models: *representative democracy* and *participatory democracy*. Sherry Arnstein's (1969) much cited typology of participation uses the metaphor of a ladder wherein the bottom two rungs are formed by non-participation, understood as hampered citizen action. According to the author, these form a 'substitute of participation'. The following three levels are constituted by *informing*, *consultation*, and *placation* (pacifying) and are categorized under the term 'tokenism'. We finally ascend to *citizen power*,

which has three levels of positive empowerment: *partnership*, *delegated power*, and *citizen control*. She thus distinguishes between processes that are participatory, and processes that are not (tokenism and non-participation). Yet, in this linear and normative model, *non-participation* is conceptualized only in a basic and entirely negative way. Non-participation, here, is something insignificant – defined by absence of the more desirable ‘citizen power’.

As interactive digital technologies mature, media scholars can be seen to tend away from political questions of participatory decision-making. Instead, participation is addressed as a renewed mode of content-production and interaction. Many authors claimed that emergent digital technologies enabled a revolution in the transmitter/ receptor chain, especially with the once-called Web 2.0, which was described as a democratic revolution (see Henry Jenkins’ ‘participatory culture’ or Clay Shirky’s ‘mass amateurization’). Other authors critiqued these claims about the uniqueness of Web technologies and inherent, associated democratic properties. A more recent wave of studies has further broadened and complicated this view by introducing issues pertaining to the structure and genealogy of commercial participatory platforms (Fish et al., 2011; Gillespie, 2010), the governance of peer-to-peer projects (O’Neil, 2009) or their gendered construction (Collier and Bear, 2012), and, finally, neglected forms of engagement such as lurking (Crawford, 2011). Building on political theories of participation, media studies scholars have written extensively about an expanded political sphere in which participatory practices become central. Nico Carpentier has been one of the most vocal proponents of the need to introduce the dimension of power into the concept of mediated participation and analyze it within the parameters of democratic theory (Carpentier, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Carpentier and Dahlgren, 2014). His articulation of democracy in the digital sphere relies on a ‘maximalist’ view of participation, characterized by inclusive political decision-making processes: processes of co-decision on issues that concern the collective, made at the level of media production and reception. For Carpentier (2011b), participation is political when ‘the actors involved in decision-making processes are positioned toward each other through power relationships that are (to an extent) egalitarian’ (p. 31).

While we embrace the infusion of political theory into digital media studies of participation, we also identify two specific weaknesses in these established models. First, the linear model of participation proposed by Arnstein and re-elaborated by Carpentier does not consider practices like subtraction and sabotage, which aim to achieve political goals by slowing down, blocking, or deserting digital environments or communities. These forms of *politically willful non-participation* are not included in the model, even though Carpentier mentions the right to *not* participate in some forms of enforced participation. In this article, we claim that non-participation should not be understood merely as apathy or passivity but as something that can sprout from conscious collective and individual political choices. Moreover, we argue that the established model normatively posits participation as the exclusive means toward citizen power and as something inherently desirable per se. Meanwhile,

non-participation is construed as powerless or negative – a perception that obscures a consideration of its possible function in a new model of mediated political action.

The second weakness stems from overlooking what we identify as pervasive and ubiquitous contemporary practices that hamper participation in the digital sphere. These include data collection for surveillance or recuperative purposes by powerful actors – practices that force individuals to be part of processes they do not choose or control. Counter to emancipatory narratives, some participatory platforms require users to depend on centralized structures of power wherein sites of governance or decision-making are maintained out of reach. Scholarship on political participation has traditionally overlooked these contemporary phenomena, instead assuming that citizen participation takes place within an unproblematic sociotechnological context. However, recently, a number of authors (see Dean, 2005; Krueger, 2005) have pushed to include problematic phenomena like surveillance into models of political digital participation. In this article, we address surveillance and also reach beyond it, finding a bevy of additional roadblocks to political participation in the digital sphere.

A conceptual model for non-participation

The framework we propose systematizes processes of participation and non-participation by contextualizing them in the broad sociotechnical ecology of digital media. Defining non-participation is not an easy task. Participation itself is a polysemous term, covering a wide range of practices. Furthermore, participation and non-participation are not just the positive and negative facets of the same coin. Non-participation exceeds this scheme, enabling us to highlight complex social, technical, and political apparatuses that frame the conditions of online participation today. Non-participation is not just the refusal to participate in certain spheres of social and political life. Instead, we want to reconceive it as a form of political action and introduce an active category of non-participation, exemplified by practices of productive dissent and refusal, and distinguish it from a passive category of participation in which agency is taken away from the participant individual. Our definition of non-participation encompasses collective and individual practices that aim to disrupt or subtract from conditions that allow certain forms of digital participation to be exploitative. Yet, while some practices of non-participation can be characterized as political action, others can include behaviors that are based on contingent, incidental, or imposed decisions or reasons. In order to construct a more nuanced spectrum of mediated participation, we introduce the terms *active* and *passive* as modulators of participation and non-participation (could discuss intentionality here in 1 sentence). These distinctions are intended as heuristic tools to describe the spaces in which participatory strategies lack or devolve their political character, and others where non-participatory practices become politically willful (Figure 1).

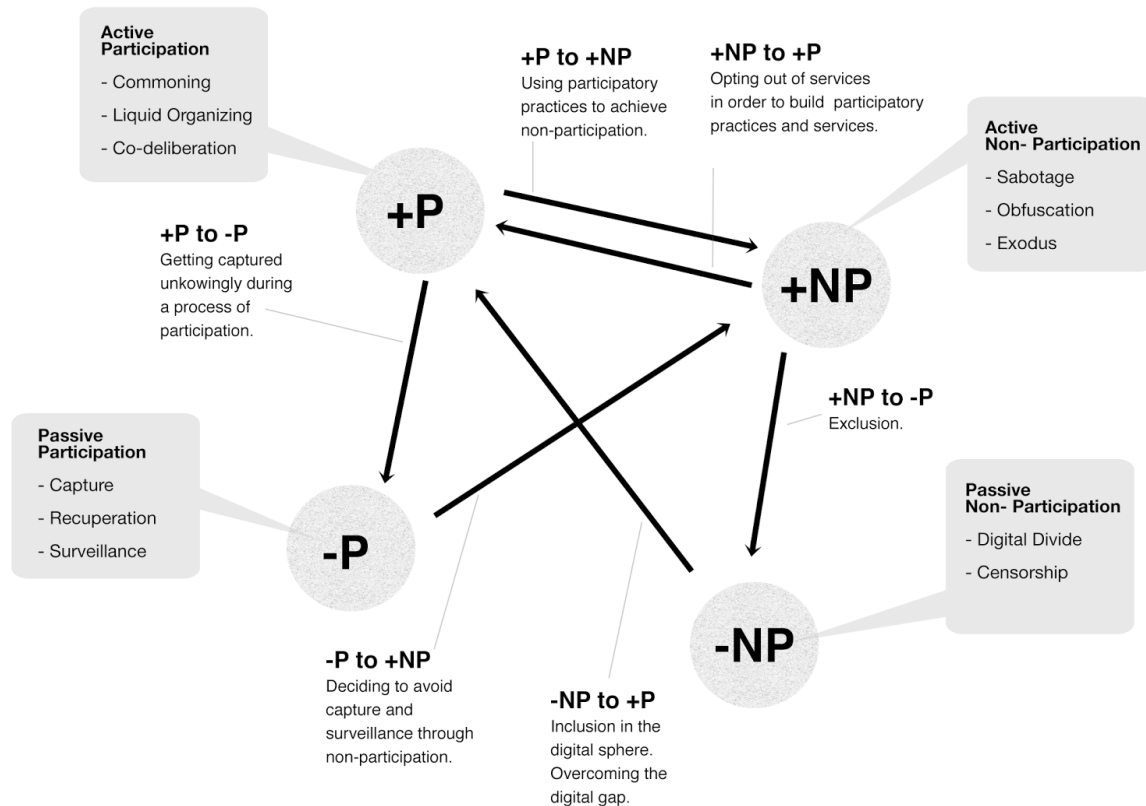


Figure 1. The shifting dimensions of participation and non-participation in digital media.

In communication studies, this polarity has been traditionally used in the field of cultural consumption to define active and passive audiences or publics in terms of their interpretative and/or productive capabilities. While some authors have pointed at the ability to create ‘subversive’ or ‘resistant’ meanings (Morley, 1993), others have noted that to be ‘active’ is not the same as to be ‘powerful’; active audiences are not necessarily critical and might not develop alternative views (Ang, 1996; Clarke, 2000). In the last decade, those concepts have been transformed and adapted to the analysis of interactive digital media: definitions such as productive publics, recursive publics, prosumers, participatory culture, and commons-based peer production all point to the ability to produce content and/or negotiate and organize its production.

In order to gain a handle on some of the complexities which attend the politics of non-participation, we advance a different operational modality of ‘active’ and ‘passive’. The distinction can be seen to align along a similar axis as the ‘agency’ versus ‘structure’ debate (Giddens, 1984). Following Margaret Archer, we suggest that the two concepts are intimately related (endlessly shaping one

another through a recursive, or even dialectical, process) yet also analytically distinguishable through their divergent properties (Archer, 1995; DeLanda, 2006). Active engagements, then, in our framework can be understood as those through which an actor, reflecting on his or her capabilities, seeks to act in a way which furthers an intended political end. Passive, conversely, are those engagements which do not reflect will or intention toward a specific political end. Of course, a passive form of participation can still aggregate a political end – but not due to the ‘active’ disposition of the participant. Likewise, an active participant (or non-participant) might end up effecting something she in no way intended. In the case of digital networks, convincing cases have been made that technologies can create structural influences which might prompt a non-reflective, and thus ‘passive’, sort of participation which still very much delivers an effect of political significance. As Woolgar (1991) points out, a designer of technology has the opportunity to ‘configure’ a user toward an intended mode of interaction. That is, active and passive refer to intentionalist rather than consequentialist understandings. This distinction is important because it affords us the ability to consider the unique predicament of the passive participant, the power of the active non-participant, and the ability for an individual to simultaneously be a participant and a non-participant when understood from different perspectives. Following these considerations, we propose a framework of mediated political action that revolves around these four categories:

Active participation (+P). Politically willful participation in a platform in order to achieve explicit goals. Our definition of active participation overlaps with Carpentier’s theoretically informed description of digital participation. Examples of +P include processes of deliberation and co-decision structured by digital platforms such as LiquidFeedback, as well as the building of common resources through a free software initiative or the creation of an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel to discuss political action.

Passive participation (-P). Engaging in a platform while being subject to processes of decision that happen outside of one’s control. Here lies Woolgar’s unreflective configured user. Passive participation can further a political, economical, or organizational agenda set by someone other than the participant themselves. For example, liking a Facebook status means producing data that will be captured, analyzed, and utilized toward the company’s goals. In everyday, online activities like search and email, Web users are also subject to pervasive surveillance which enables social control and economic profit regardless of their awareness or approval.

Active non-participation (+NP). Politically willful engagement in a platform in order to slow it down or disrupt it, or exiting the platform entirely due to active decision-making. This category includes the use of tools for achieving anonymity, such as Tor, as well as practices of disruption, such as DDoS attacks. We also describe as +NP the abandonment or refusal of a platform or service: for example, the disconnection from Twitter because of perceived privacy problems and the decision to join an alternative social network.

Passive non-participation (-NP). The inability to use a technology or participate in a platform or digital environment for incidental or imposed reasons, ranging from the trivial (like a mere lack of interest or preclusion due to an alternate consumer choice) to the profoundly structural (like lack of geographic access or socioeconomic disparity). Another cause of -NP might be censorship, as when a government shuts down access to a service to prevent counterinformational campaigns or political mobilization.

We would like to stress that these four concepts are relational and context-dependent. In our view, participation and non-participation are not universal or essentialist activities but are, rather, oriented toward a particular platform, protocol, environment, or ecosystem. A mode of participation in one platform may be understood as a mode of non-participation in another platform. For example, *active participation* in a Facebook group made up of politically motivated trolls as they organize a raid on another Facebook group may be simultaneously regarded as *active non-participation* in relation to the prescriptions of Facebook more generally. Also, *active non-participation* in one aspect of a system may be the pre-condition for *active participation* in another, and vice versa. Similarly, what appears as *non-participation* in our framework might be understood as a form of principled, *active participation* in the linear models of participation surveyed above. For example, the use of AdBlocker in order to avoid surveillance (+NP) when using Google coincides with active participation in the AdBlocker user group (+P). The relation between P and NP can only be understood within a shifting network of practices.

The shifting network of participation and non-participation

In order to set the scene for the discussion, it becomes prudent to elucidate this ‘shifting network’ of participation and non-participation and their relational nature. By this, we mean that social practices are dynamic and can be understood as trajectories of action rather than as fixed categories: practices which seem participatory or non-participatory might quickly cede into intelligibility as the other. In this section, we describe processes of active participation, passive participation, and passive non-participation. The choice to attribute a certain practice to one category follows our heuristic decisions and is not meant to essentialize the practice to one category. We suggest that in understanding these shifting sands of participation, we might find new affordances to think the tensions, desires, and pitfalls which populate the field of mediated political practices (see Figure 1).

Active participation (+P)

The *active participation* category includes practices of politically willful participation in a platform or network, often utilizing democratic decision-making processes. We stress Carpentier’s (2011b) clarification of political processes by appeal to media studies terminology: most of the processes occurring at the level of media reception are best described as interaction or access rather than

participation. *Access* is the act of achieving presence (in relation to a technology or media content) – as in one’s online presence when Web browsing, while *interaction* relates to the set of socio-communicative relationships established within the media sphere. In our framework, *active participation* is distinguished from these weak engagements. We emphasize actions, mediated by digital networks, which are collectively oriented or directed toward achieving collectively determined goals as structured by platform design and organizational affordances (Fish et al., 2011). While scholars have described forms of digital political action in several different ways, for our definition of active participation, we adapt a framework described by Felix Stalder (2013) as ‘digital solidarity’ and thus divide active participation practices up in three subcategories: *commoning*, *co-deliberation*, and *liquid organizing*.

Building information *commons* means contributing to the creation of the informational resources that are the basis of +P practices. Information or digital commons are projects like Wikipedia, free software, or Creative Commons. Participatory processes in the creation and maintenance of commons have been studied by Elinor Ostrom (1994). According to Ostrom, commons need some kind of governance to be maintained, and active participation in the creation of the commons might involve performing this governance.

Co-deliberation refers to participatory democratic practices transposed into the digital sphere. Co-decision processes can be structured in a number of different ways and can be understood as typical of the maximalist-type of participation conceptualized by Arnstein and Carpentier. Free software projects, as well as political entities such as the European Pirate Parties, often rely on civic platforms that allow contributors to express their ideas, vote, support, and dissent. One example is LiquidFeedback, an open source software which facilitates a version of participatory democratic process.

Forms of *liquid organizing* are collective efforts framed to unfold in informal and loosely organized ways which still enable the pursuance of a common goal. Following Stalder (2013), we can observe networks coordinated horizontally and constituted by self-directed, conscious individuals. A good example is Anonymous, a collective effort mainly organized through chan boards, IRC channels, and, most recently, encrypted instant messaging services. The reflexivity demonstrated participants’ active approach distinguishes massive participatory events, like certain Anonymous operations, from other mass processes conceived of as passive within our framework. As Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) reminds us, the political horizontality conceptualized by some digital media theorists should not be taken as granted by technology alone: these phenomena typically depend upon crucial forms of ‘soft leadership’ that can be obscured by thin analyses of the role social media plays in political mobilization (p. 134). Nevertheless, these liquid hierarchies are characterized by active processes of reflection, mobilization, and give and take that we regard as demonstrative of *active participation*.

Passive participation (-P)

Activities designated *passive participation* (-P) are, typically, those in which individuals are compelled to interact within participatory or decision-making processes beyond their control or engaged unwillfully. Key to our framework is the recognition that the experience of being online today is characterized by a number of participatory interactions describable as minor, non-empowering, tacit, and imposed. Passive here does not mean individuals are necessarily unaware of the presence of such mechanisms. These interactions entail a multitude of data flows the user may or may not be aware of, and may or may not decide to accept or overlook. These pervasive interactions typically subtract from the affordances of power offered to the participating individual or collective, instead of redistributing it. Even when merely accessing the Web (navigating) and interacting (publishing, 'liking' posts), we passively participate in the production of data, leaving trails that are recorded, analyzed, and exploited by companies and institutions for their own purposes. We also contribute to a layer of participation which involves implicit decision-making processes and power dynamics. This is part of what Jodi Dean (2005) has termed 'communicative capitalism', characterized by a seemingly democratic or public sphere-style political discourse where participation (through forums and social media, for example) is offered as a liberatory solution, only to be negated, treated as inconsequential, or outright exploited by the institutional actors who created the channel in the first place. We identify three sociotechnical regimes that affect digital participation: *surveillance*, *capture*, and *recuperation*. These concepts are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. We do not propose them as essentialized categories and invite readers to further problematize them.

Surveillance is a non-disruptive and surreptitious data collection and categorization process, centrally organized and monitored by private or public actors to control individuals and influence their behavior (Lyon, 2001; Marx, 2003). Often, this is framed as being in the interest of the public good, protecting individuals or society from criminal activity, deviant behavior, or subversive political activity. In the pre-digital world, surveillance was a finite resource narrowly focused on mitigating these activities. Digital networking has ubiquitized surveillance through urban closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and mass collection of information from emails, social networking websites, and general web browsing (Marwick, 2012).

Capture was theorized by Agre (1994) as a regime based on gaining efficiency in the rational organization of industrial production and services through the tracking of people, objects, and resources. Examples include Google's use of user data and metadata to generate better search results or place personalized advertisements, and supermarkets' practice of tracking customer shopping patterns through online catalogues, loyalty cards, and in-store cameras. Data collection and analysis is also part of social networking sites' main economic model, based on building user profiles which inform highly directed personalized advertising campaigns and also function as a commodity in their

own right. Contrary to surveillance, which is non-disruptive, capture depends upon the capability to reorganize or control user activities (Agre, 1994: 740).

Finally, *recuperation* is the process in which an institutional or corporate actor redirects individual and collective practices toward goals other than those pursued by the individuals or groups themselves. Often, this involves the incorporation of grassroots technologies into capitalist modes of production, for example, in the contested passage from free to open source software (Hess, 2005). Open, unpaid competitions called hackathons deploy hacker working styles toward the improvement of corporate products – embraced even by non-tech companies like McDonald's. Social networking companies' monetization of user-generated content without compensation is another example. Our definition of recuperation further comprises forms of participation referred to as 'tokenism' or 'placation' in the surveyed linear models. An example might be participation on an institutional website created for civic engagement but not offering any meaningful ability to make decisions or alter the way the participatory experience is designed and implemented. An aesthetic veneer of seeming participation can thus be instrumentalized as a smokescreen or misdirection behind which other political goals are deployed (Carpentier, 2011b).

It is important to keep in mind that passive participation processes are part of a shifting landscape of practices and should not be understood as completely isolated from other forms of participation and non-participation. For example, +P and -P commonly overlap; several forms of active participation stratify services and platforms wherein users otherwise operate in a state of capture or are subject to surveillance or recuperation. Even while participating in a meaningful collective process on a free software platform, a cookie from another platform may be collecting information regarding the activity at hand. Finally, in our conclusion, we will explore a scenario where passive participation is politically desirable.

Passive non-participation (-NP)

Opportunities to participate in digital environments are not equitably distributed either socially or geographically. *Passive non-participation* (-NP) is broadly characterized by inability or unwillingness to participate due to economic, technical, physical, or social conditions. These phenomena can manifest variably as the hampered desire to be part of the digital world (incapacity of accessing or interacting) or refusal to use digital technology (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). The reasons may be trivial or incidental (i.e. lack of interest or lack of time). -NP can also derive from consumer choices unrelated to political positions, such as a preference for a Windows computer over an Apple device (precluding use of the iTunes store). Finally, it encompasses implicit and overt structural reasons, such as the lack of access due to socioeconomic factors or censorship.

The concept of the *digital divide* has been used to describe inequalities of access to the Internet since the mid-1990s. This issue entails multiple dimensions such as inequality in skills, access to equipment, or social support, and the use scenarios of technologies which are available (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001: 1). Pippa Norris (2001) defines the digital divide as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing three distinct aspects: the *global divide* separates industrialized and developing societies, the *social divide* concerns skill gaps within each nation, and the *democratic divide* refers to the uneven engagement of Internet users in digital public life (p. 4). The distribution of Internet access follows the global wealth divide among the West/East and North/South lines and reproduces the socioeconomical stratification between rich and poor. Within Western countries, Internet adoption is dominant, but a minority still does not access the Web. In a study of the connection rates in the United States (Rainie, 2013), Internet non-users variably cited a lack of relevance to their lifestyles (they are not interested, do not want to waste their time or are too busy), difficulties with using a computer or learning digital skills, the price of equipment and connection, and disabilities. Finally, non-access to the Internet or to specific platforms can also be imposed by *censorship* in authoritarian states or during episodes of sociopolitical upheavals. Examples include the lack of access to Western social networking sites in some Middle Eastern or Asian countries, and the shutdown of the underground marketplace Silk Road by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2013.

In contrast to +NP, -NP is non-empowering, demonstrating a lack of choice regarding the modalities of one's participation and inability to directly influence the institutions that shape digital social life. Yet, passive non-participation is also subject to sudden shifts. The drive toward +P from -NP is foundational to international development approaches which aim to increase the scope of access to digital technologies, such as the One Laptop Per Child initiative. The democratic injunction to resist and overcome censorship also depends upon this shift (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Yet, this shift which aims at +P is precarious: strategies of capture, surveillance, and recuperation always threaten to move it closer to our -P category. Even as social interactions increase, they can be diverted toward purposes unreflected upon at an individual or collective level, or even orthogonal to their desires.

Active non-participation

Within the spectrum of participation and non-participation practices, *active non-participation* stands as a privileged site for political engagement and resistance. Such practices manifest as willful engagements aimed at slowing down, disrupting, or exiting platforms that implement policies or regimes of surveillance, capture, and recuperation. Typically, this is a shift from -P to +NP. Forms of active non-participation can be grouped in three major operational categories: *obfuscation*, *sabotage*, and *exodus*. *Obfuscation* includes the production of misleading information and attempts to becoming invisible while surfing the Web, thwarting the outcomes of passive participation (-P) by hiding

information or gaming data collection. *Sabotage* slows down participatory platforms and systems, by either disrupting their technological infrastructure or subverting their linguistic and communicative system. Finally, *exodus* represents the withdrawal from platforms or online environments that rely on dispositives of passive participation, and can be the basis upon which better active participation practices can be built upon. In this section, we construct ideal types of these three categories: they are intended as epistemic tools to better conceptualize non-participation which regard as the preliminary basis upon which further theoretical and empirical work could be built.

Obfuscation

Producing misleading information and feeding it into networks encompasses a set of practices that we define as *obfuscation*, borrowing a term proposed by Brunton and Nissenbaum. In their definition, this misleading, false, or ambiguous information makes data gathering 'less reliable and therefore less valuable' (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2011). A basic level of obfuscation is implemented by individuals who refuse to provide online platforms with their personal data, attempting to maintain their anonymity and avoid advertisement profiling. Although services like Facebook require users to register with their real name, age, and address, many users deliberately ignore this requirement. Such forms of identity construction can represent acts of resistance and manifest a desire for digital empowerment (Zhao et al., 2008). Another level of obfuscation is attained by people who resist data capture by collectivizing the mechanisms of data gathering. Card swapping groups circulate supermarket loyalty cards online in order to both enjoy discounts and make the information they provide less useful (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2011). Tor is another example of 'network effect' tactics that require collective organization. This encryption system provides anonymity to its users, thanks to a network of relays (other computers connected to the network) that masks the origin of data flows. Information transits through a maze of nodes, a routing circuit that makes its traceability very complex. The security of the system relies on its popularity: the more users are connected, the more nodes are created to relay and obfuscate the trajectories of data flows (Dingledine and Mathewson, 2005). Obfuscation tactics cover a vast array of motives and practices, from political organizing to scamming and criminal activities.

Sabotage

Attempts at *sabotaging* participatory or interactive platforms are those which aim to hinder their functioning (disruption) or turn them against their original goals (subversion). Disruption can happen at two different levels. The first targets the technical infrastructures that sustain passive participation (-P) processes. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks (Sauter, 2013) are perhaps the quintessential example of this tactic. Another form of disruption aims at social, linguistic, and communicative spheres. For example, by swarming into a platform, trolls may be able to dilute its ability to function toward a certain goal (Wilson et al., 2013). A second form of sabotage

subverts passive participation (-P) processes toward goals other than those envisioned by the actors which run them. An example is the 2012 mobilization against Ikea in Italy. Ikea was facing problems related to workers' strikes and piquetes in its Piacenza warehouse after the firing of several outsourced workers. This coincided with the launch of a website intended as a participatory space for customers to communicate regarding Ikea products and 'change' – in line with their ongoing branding campaign. People subverted the website into a bulletin board against Ikea, in which they expressed 'ideas of change' such as 'stop firing workers' or 'boycott Ikea'. After a few days, Ikea shutdown the website (Delfanti, 2012).

Exodus

Finally, the third set of tactics is *exodus*, or desertion, which encompasses principled acts of subtraction or withdrawal. In this strategy, opposition is not exerted through direct confrontation but rather by 'slipping away from its grasp' through mass defection by those wishing to create new forms of community (Graeber, 2004). This form of resistance was understood by Paolo Virno (2005) as 'engaged withdrawal', going back to Marx and his pages on the American frontier. For Virno, exodus nourishes social conflict by modifying the conditions within which it takes place. We could also identify this as 'exit' in Hirschman's (1970) system, wherein the act exerts exogenous pressure on a system to change (although he prefers 'voice' – a dialogic process of constructively advocating change from within a system). In the digital sphere, exodus is often a reaction to perceived instances of surveillance and capture. Gary Marx (2003) defined this move as a displacement to times, places, and means in which the identified surveillance is presumed to be absent or irrelevant (p. 375). Often, this means avoidance of an entire service, for example, leaving Gmail and other Google services in order to avoid pervasive surveillance. Other forms of avoidance may aim at resisting recuperative social media platforms which may appear open-ended but tend to funnel processes toward institutional goals. The political goal in this case is often de-legitimization. Exit is a double-edged form of +NP – the stakes of opting out of a platform can be higher for those who are more dependent on the processes of interaction and care that characterize social networking sites. The use of Facebook can be mandatory as part of a job, or instrumental in nurturing affective ties within families, a gendered kind of labor bound up with traditional caring roles (Portwood-Stacer, 2014).

Principled non-adoption can function as a pre-emptive form of exodus. Maxigas (in press) describes cases of non-adoption in which hackers struggle to avoid recuperation by refusing 'evil' new technologies based upon designs and processes that are perceived as restricting user power and control. For example, they write software which enables them to use Twitter through older interfaces or refuse to adopt new generations of mobile phones. The same dilemma is present among media activists that perceive older technologies such as frequency modulation (FM) radio to be more coherent with their values, even though refusal to adopt a later platform or technology can

make it difficult to communicate values to those publics who have embraced change and moved into closed ecosystems (Dunbar-Hester, 2009).

The relationship between active non-participation and active participation is dynamic. For example, individuals may use active participation practices in order to deploy tactics of active non-participation. Anonymous has demonstrated this in their use of liquid organizing (+P) to plan and organize the disruption of websites (+NP) using DDoS. Exodus (+NP) can be a crucial step toward constructing platforms which enable active participation (+P) by mitigating the possibility of coding which encourages mechanisms of passive participation (-P). Examples include alternative social networking sites such as Diaspora or alternative network infrastructures such as local meshnets. Crucial to this shift is an exit that enables time and resources to design and build a new online environment. However, exit may also be a terminal gesture: individuals may choose to leave a service or technology altogether, without replacing or being involved with the configuration of other alternatives.

Conclusion: the paradoxes of non-participation

Addressing the shifts among different forms of participation and non-participation allowed us to highlight how any model that aims at systematizing these phenomena should be presented as dynamic. And one movement expresses the paradoxical nature of non-participation above others. A conclusive exit from the digital sphere entirely, in an ultimate bid to resist surveillance or capture, might also pre-emptively deny any possibility of an internal engagement which might positively configure technologies toward desirable forms of participation. At the end of Melville's novel, *Bartleby* eventually prefers not to eat and, ultimately, starves to death. As his employer concludes, *Bartleby's* example does not seem to be able to provide 'hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities'. Does *Bartleby's* death represent the risks of non-participation? Should we take the narrator's final lament ('Ah, *Bartleby!* Ah, humanity!') as a warning about the paradoxical nature of non-participation, or rather acknowledge the radical potential of *Bartleby's* passivity?

Answering these questions would require a deeper analysis of non-participation practices, while this article merely aims at opening up a field of inquiry: adding complexity rather than providing a firm ground for solving such problems. The framework we propose is an attempt at going beyond the linear model of participation and showing that non-participation cannot just be considered as hampered citizen action or passivity; it can also be empowering. Observing that non-participation is an under-theorized field in media studies, we aimed at situating it within a coherent framework, using the active/passive distinction to elucidate mechanisms of imposed and incidental participation (and non-participation). By examining the shifts among our categories, we highlighted specific forms of online engagement that cannot be reduced to the opposite of participation. In a final complexity,

we must take care not to universalize the ‘active’ disposition as normatively superior. Indeed, an active commitment to a digital participatory process, as a valued end-in-itself, may entail acceptance of and deferral to a collectively determined goal which an individual would not otherwise advocate or has not reflected upon. For example, deliberative services such as LiquidFeedback facilitate a diverse journey through varying forms of participation, wherein individuals are active when voting, passive when their votes are aligning to their interest, and actively non-participating when they desire to withdraw their vote. Certain collectivist or communitarian styles of politics thus require ‘passive’ engagements at a granular level to enable ‘active’ commitments at a higher, systemic level.

And so Bartleby’s paradox remains: what form of free will can be exercised by not participating? Can radical passivity entail forms of political resistance? A long debate has discussed whether Guy Debord’s suicide was an extreme revolutionary act, the ultimate form of political refusal (Hussey, 2001). Further analysis of mediated non-participation practices might help understand whether, in the context of today’s digital sphere, negative forms of political engagement, such as subtraction, disruption, or exodus, facilitate empowerment or not. These reflections on the social, technical, and political apparatuses that frame the conditions of digital participation prompt a much needed reflection on the transformations inherent to a notion of political participation itself. One example of such work is an exploration of how digital media and networks problematize political theory’s distinction between *positive* and *negative* freedoms, a task currently engaged (see, for example, Kelty, 2014). In this sense, the concept of non-participation might contribute to updating the relation between digital media studies and political theory. In an age when participation and interaction are increasingly defined in normative ways – as we are *expected* to participate and can even be pathologized for failing to do so (Barney, 2010) – exploring non-participation might just mean re-politicizing current debates on digital cultures.

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