

The Conceptualization of Digitally Networked Participation

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Abstract

The conceptualization and measurement of political participation has been an issue vibrantly debated for more than 50 years. The arrival of digital media came to add important parameters to the debate complicating matters further. Digital media have added inexhaustive creative and nonpolitical ways to engage in social and political life that not only often appear to form the basis of political participation but also, in a plethora of everyday contexts, seem to become embedded into what eventually evolves to become a politically meaningful act. This article argues that digitally networked participation—and its manifestations—is a form of *political* participation and should be conceptualized, identified, and measured as one. Relying on recent conceptual and empirical work, it shows how various common manifestations of digitally networked participation conform to minimalist, targeted, and motivational definitions of political participation. Finally, tackling common misconceptions about the value of such acts, this article argues that nonpolitical forms of digitally networked participation can occasionally be far more impactful than forms of participation commonly accepted as political. This article concludes by recommending the systematic development of measures for digitally networked participation and its formal integration in the study of political participation.

Keywords

political participation, digital media, social media, social networking sites, creative participation

Introduction: What Happens on Twitter, Stays on Twitter . . . or Not?

On 9 August 2014, a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, shot down Michael Brown, an unarmed black man. Four days after the shooting more than 6 million tweets have been sent about #Ferguson. For many people, coverage of the resulting protest and civil unrest among black communities in the area begun only 4 days after the incident, when people started tweeting and retweeting pictures of heavily armored vehicles and policemen, along with angry statements about racism and the militarization of US police departments. On Twitter, various thematic hashtags emerged during the protests. #*ifTheyGunnedMeDown* referred to the portrayal of young minorities by mainstream media, and #*Dontshoot* was devoted to excessive police force against peaceful protests. Tweets such as that of the war veteran Brandon Friedman, declaring that policemen in Ferguson were more heavily armed than when he was invading Iraq, and the virally personalized symbol “Hands up, Don’t Shoot” (Figure 1), were shared by tens of thousands on Twitter and Facebook.

Isolated violent incidents such as this one rarely make national news. Yet, the events in Ferguson gained international attention and shaped US public opinion largely due to documentation, images, live-feeds, and real-time content distributed by digital media (Tufekci, 2014b). These were picked up quickly by mainstream media bringing the issues of race relations and the militarization of US police to the forefront of domestic and international news.

Experts argue that reactions on social media had a political impact and attribute the return of race relations to the top of the agenda in Ferguson (CBS News, 2014)—as well as the stripping of local police of their law-enforcement authority

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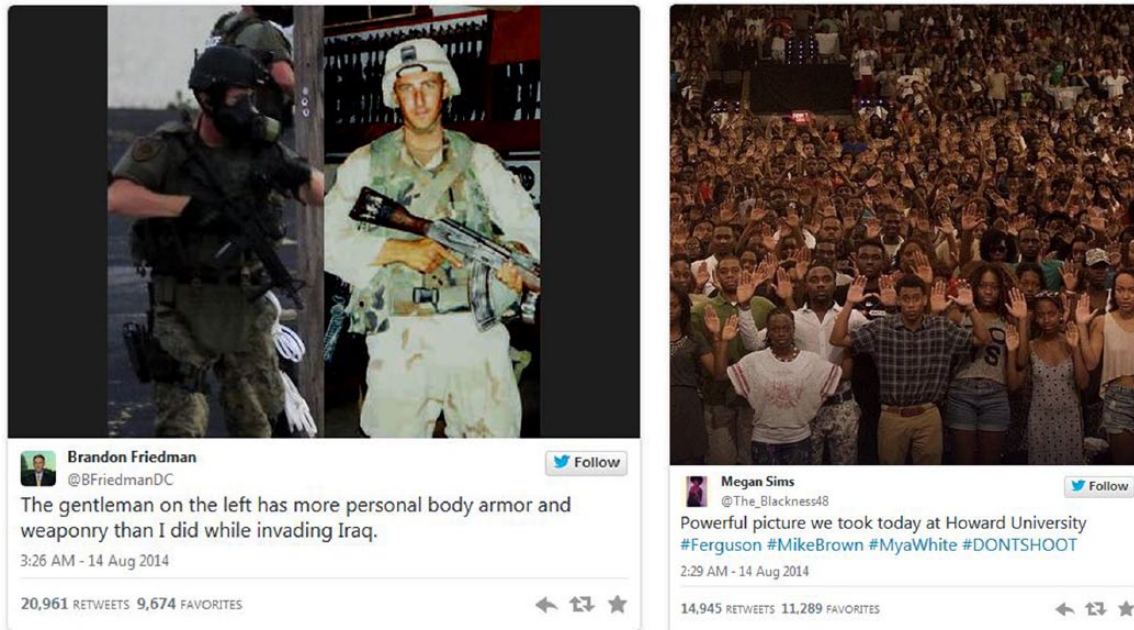


Figure 1. Brandon Friedman’s tweet about the militarization of U.S. police departments and an example of the personalization of the symbol “Hands up, Don’t Shoot” (source/credit for image on the left: <https://twitter.com/BFriedmanDC/status/499728733830676480>; source/credit for image on the right: https://twitter.com/The_Blackness48/status/499714499688300545).

after 4 days of clashes—to the digital media coverage of the incident (*New York Times*, 2014). Various national and international news media outlets emphasized the political power and impact of social media users. Yet, were the acts of “liking” and sharing a Facebook post, or that of gathering one’s friends, taking a photo with raised hands, and sharing it on Twitter forms of political *participation*?

Although initial debates about the political use of digital media saw them mainly as tools for activist network building and coordination (Juris, 2005), recent events and studies show that their (political) user base has expanded. Studies in more than a dozen societies have shown that digital media are important political tools for a significant amount of people not only in the United States (Smith, 2013) but also in Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East (Howard & Hussain, 2013). In Europe, where a decline of political engagement through traditional electoral avenues has been extensively documented (Fieldhouse, Tranmer, & Russell, 2007; Henn, Weinstein, & Forrest, 2005), social media have become means of political expression and participation for previously politically uninvolved citizens in Spain, Norway, the Netherlands, and elsewhere (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2014; Mercea, Nixon, & Funk, 2013).

Digitally networked acts are the latest addition to an expanding repertoire of participatory opportunities. There is, however, a debate as to whether such acts should be placed alongside conventional repertoires of *political* participation (Fox, 2013; Gladwell, 2010; Zuckerman, 2014). Much of the public commentary considers these acts a weak substitution for the physical activism often practiced by committed

activists (Gladwell, 2010) or as illusory acts that provide one with the feeling that she can have an impact (Morozov, 2010). This raises serious doubts as to whether these forms can be meaningfully juxtaposed next to “conventional (and proven) forms of activism (demonstrations, sit-ins, confrontation with police, strategic litigation, etc)” (Morozov, 2010). Perhaps, more importantly—and in relation to academic debates rather than mainstream media, large-scale comparative surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study, the European Election Study, the World Values Survey (WVS), and others do not include any questions measuring digitally networked participation, leaving this task to specialized academic projects (e.g., Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014) or surveys carried out by research institutes of individual countries (such as the Pew Research Centre in the United States). The tendency to leave out the measurement of such acts stems not only from the lack of their conceptualization but also from the belief that “many forms of political engagement in these venues do not fall squarely under the rubric of a definition of political engagement” (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 532).

Indeed, depending on the definition of participation employed, acts such as those pursued through digital media may be simply creative expressions that add to an ever-growing definition of participation whose expansion will, in the end, inevitably lead scholars to considering everything as participation (Van Deth, 2001). For others, digital acts may be just the online equivalents of offline political acts—and thus legitimate forms of political participation (Fox, 2013). Still, for others, these acts may be an entirely new way of

participating in politics that has no offline equivalent and needs to be defined and conceptualized as such in order to enable us to capture a new type of “engaged” or “actualizing” citizenship (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008). It is the ambiguous nature of participatory acts such as these that have led some to ask: “is it time to update the definition of political participation?” (Fox, 2013).

The consequences of not arriving at a common conceptualization for these forms of participation are, thus, important. As this type of engagement becomes more common among citizens, scholars who accept a more inclusive definition will tend to see more participation than those who only accept a narrow one. As the notion of political participation is at the center of the concept of democracy (Pateman, 1970), and suspicions that digital interactions through sites like Facebook may “dilute the meaning of politically engaged citizenship” have surfaced (Schlozman et al., 2012, p. 532), understandings about the health of democracy and predictions about its future will also inevitably vary.

This article argues that digitally networked participation—and its manifestations—is a form of political engagement and should be conceptualized, identified, and measured as one. In what follows, I offer an overview of the concept of political participation and the main dilemmas that its expansion has posed for political scientists. After proposing a definition of digitally networked participation, I rely on recent conceptual, theoretical, and empirical advances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Hooghe, 2014; Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013; Rojas & Puig-I-Abril, 2009; Van Deth, 2014), to show how various common manifestations of digitally networked participation conform to minimalist, targeted, and motivational definitions. This article concludes by discussing the consequences of expanding forms of online participation and recommends ways to formally integrate them into surveys and the study of political participation in general.

Political Participation: Conceptual Approaches and Dilemmas

Brief Overview of the Concept’s Development

In one of the earliest works in the field of political behavior, Lester Milbrath (1965) wrote that “the first task is to find a way to think about political participation. Participation must be defined; variables relating to it must be specified; and the subject must be *bounded* so that it is kept to *manageable size*” (p. 5, emphasis added). He set a narrow conceptual boundary offering a (in a way, cumulative—those who engaged in one action being engaged in others too) hierarchy of political involvement based on costs and focused exclusively on the electoral arena. He subsequently defined participation as “actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or support government and politics” (Milbrath & Goel, 1977, p. 2). Subsequently, Verba and Nie (1972),

who defined participation as “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or they actions they take” (p. 2), took steps toward empirically assessing in a comparative manner and bounding the concept. They organized participation into four broad *modes* (voting, campaign activity, cooperative activity, and citizen-initiated contacts) which they observed had a common structure in different societies and subsequently specified their empirical measures by breaking them down into a set of 13 specific political activities. Contrary to Milbrath’s observations about a hierarchical structure of participation, Verba and Nie found that people tended to “specialise” in one or the other form of participation. Their approach expanded previous conceptual and empirical boundaries by stressing the importance of considering “alternative” forms of participation (such as activities involving groups or organizational activity by citizens) that stretched beyond the context of electoral politics and to which citizens could participate in-between elections (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 47). Seven years later, Kaase and Marsh (1979) went on to add at least seven new “unconventional” modes of participation (such as attending lawful demonstrations and joining boycotts), opening up the possibilities for wider definitions of political participation.

Although the repertoire of political participation acts included in large cross-national surveys has not changed much since then, the definition of political participation did evolve in subsequent works becoming wider in scope (Brady, 1999). Macedo, Alex-Assensoh, and Berry (2005), for example, noted that the boundaries between political and civic participation are blurred, allowing the concept of participation to expand to civic activities. The expansion is also reflected in Norris’s (2002) definition according to which we can consider as participation “any dimensions of social activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behavior” (p. 16). It is crucial to note that all of these definitions have in common that participation should refer to *observable actions* that people take part in voluntarily as ordinary citizens deliberately attempting to influence others. Interest in politics (manifested, for example, as political discussion) or simply displaying support is not considered participation based on these definitions (Brady, 1999; Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992), with the exception perhaps to that of Norris.

This brief tour through the evolution of the conceptualization of political participation shows that the attempt to establish the boundaries of the concept and keep it in a manageable size, as Milbrath suggested, is a formidable task. It becomes especially challenging when the meaning of citizenship is itself shifting and, with it, so do the arenas for political engagement and the means through which citizens engage in politics. Since the late 1970s, scholars have shown that there has been a process of change in the political culture of liberal

democracies (Cain, Dalton, & Scarow, 2003; Inglehart, 2007). Modernization changes have contributed to the transformation from a more traditional dutiful model of citizenship that sees voting as the epitome of participation in the democratic process to a more “engaged” (Dalton, 2008) one that is based on expanding means of political participation through lifestyle choices, self-expression values, and noninstitutionalized actions. Participation is now aimed at diverse, moving targets, ranging from governments and parties to corporations, banks, and brands. In Bennett’s (2012) words, today’s mobilizations

. . . often include a multitude of issues brought into the same protests through a widely shared late modern ethos of diversity and inclusiveness. The identity politics of the “new social movements” that arose after the 1960s centered on group identity [. . .] or cause issues [. . .] still exist, of course, but they have been joined by more heterogeneous mobilizations in which diverse causes such as economic justice [. . .], environmental protection, and war and peace are directed at moving targets from local to national and transnational and from government to business. The more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized the expressions often become, typically involving communication technologies that allow individuals to activate their loosely tied social networks. There are still plenty of conventional politics based on identification with parties, ideologies, and common causes. However, the rise of a more personalized politics has become a notable trend. (p. 21)

Bennett’s last three sentences convey precisely the challenge that the expansion of political participation poses for scholars: setting the limits of the concept of political participation.

Bounding the Concept of Political Participation

Setting the limits of the concept of political participation is crucial for efficiently identifying, systematically measuring, and understanding the democratic consequences of political participation (or of its absence). But how can we keep in a “manageable size” a concept that depends on personal identity and individual self-expression, thus expanding into every aspect of social life (Norris, 2002)?¹ If we go down that road, then we are not far from accepting that political participation has endless permutations, adopting what Van Deth (2001) called a “theory of everything.” In light of this challenge, two paths are presented to the political scientist interested in studying the expansion of forms of participation and, more specifically, digitally networked participation. *The first path* is to let the concept evolve running, however, the risk of diluting conceptual clarity (Hooghe, 2014, p. 341), by accepting general, all-embracing definitions and using measures that are hardly ever comparable with those used by others. *The second path* is to attempt to bound the concept by providing systematic criteria that will allow to “recognize a mode of participation if you see one” (Van Deth, 2014, p. 5)

and, subsequently, to establish valid measures for the assessment of its pervasiveness.

The first path is unhelpful for two reasons:

- *First*, because it promotes the unsystematic study of new ways through which citizens express themselves politically and feel politically efficacious. For example, although forms of digitally networked participation are often included in individual case studies, the aspects of participation examined vary wildly as they are obviously aimed at capturing diverse research questions and aspects of engagement. The lack of agreement on specific survey items has led to arbitrary measures and inconsistent question wording that complicate cross-national comparisons and strengthen the uncertainty that what is being observed can be used for conclusions of more general validity. As a result, although both theoretical emphasis and empirical evidence identify the increasing predisposition of citizens to participate in such acts, our methods of estimating the magnitude of this trend and its consequences for democratic politics remain poor.
- *Second*, because using all-embracing definitions, rather than properly conceptualizing and measuring emerging forms of participation, we prevent the construction and entry in large-scale surveys of new measures which could systematically capture this type of participation. This leads to the continuation of measuring participation chiefly through modes that for many citizens (especially young and especially in Europe; Cammaerts, Bruter, Shakuntala, Harisson, & Anstead, 2014) are becoming obsolete (such as working in a political party, displaying a campaign badge, etc.) Moreover, it additionally prevents us from capturing what is potentially a new way of exercising citizenship; that is, of observing new and fundamentally different ways of engaging politically which are, however, understood by many as elements of politically engaged citizenship.

In light of these issues, the second path seems to be the way forward. Few attempts have been made toward a constructive debate on how to conceptually and empirically deal with the expansion of forms of political participation, in general, and digitally networked, in particular (for notable exceptions, see Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Van Deth, 2001, 2014).

Digitally Networked Participation

Digitally networked participation—and its many manifestations—has often been perceived as a purely expressive form of engagement that provides the illusion of having a meaningful impact on social change (Morozov, 2009). Its reliance on digital media such as Facebook, which are primarily used for entertainment and recreation, and its much-trumpeted

ineffectiveness, have opened up a debate as to whether it can be considered a legitimate form of political participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Halupka, 2014; Hosch-Dayican, 2014; Kristofferson, White, & Pelozo, 2013; Van Deth, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014). The large variety of digitally enabled forms of participation, their reliance on digital platforms with diverse affordances for personalization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Earl & Kimport, 2011), and their frequently nonpolitical or creative character, often leads to their understanding as specimens of “individual expression” (Endersby & Towle, 1996) and as a subdimension of political participation (Rojas & Puig-I-Abril, 2009) or lifestyle politics (Micheletti & Stolle, 2010) whose fit within traditional definitions of political participation is questionable (de Moor, 2014). Yet, online participatory acts have been empirically shown to be standalone forms of engaging with politics. As Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) note, online forms of participation are practices that “can be differentiated into distinct clusters of interrelated activities as is the case with offline participation” (p. 714). Such online acts are thus not structurally different from offline acts such as signing petitions or donating money. Crucially, especially more expressive behaviors that take “a more active, collective, and *networked quality* in the online environment” (such as uploading and embedding videos, posting, and forwarding content in social networking sites or microblogs) can be *independent* acts (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 714, emphasis added; see also Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Oser et al., 2013; Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). With this in mind, digitally networked participatory acts are of particular interest as they can, often, be more than just the online versions of offline political acts and thus a new type of behavior altogether.

The core premise for accepting this type of participation as a legitimate form of political participation is the acknowledgment that the act of activating one’s personal networks via digital media with the aim to mobilize others for social or political purposes constitutes a *mode* of participation with different manifestations. Following recent theorizing about the participatory properties of social networking and microblogging platforms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Freelon, 2014; Wells, 2014; Zuckerman, 2014), it is helpful to think about digitally networked participation in relation to two interrelated core elements:

- *The act of (digital) communication as a form of mobilization, understood as integral to political participation.* A number of rich theoretical and empirical contributions have placed emphasis on the organizational importance of using digital media for the purpose of politically mobilizing others: to vote, to boycott, to demonstrate, and so on (Bennett, Breunig, & Givens, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Yet, mobilization, which is defined as “the process by which candidates, parties,

activists, and groups induce other people to participate” (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 25), is treated as a separate concept from participation because it refers to *inducing* others to participate and not to the act of political participation itself. Digital media render this, already contested,² distinction not only less clear but also less relevant. Trying to convince someone to act in a certain way about a social or political issue using of digital media can be considered the same as “persuading others to vote in a certain way.” Digitally networked participatory acts are thus often inseparable from a conventional understanding of participation—even by the standards of the narrowest definitions (Verba & Nie, 1972). Borrowing elements from the definition of mobilization (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Hansen 2015), and of the fundamental prerequisite for participation—an action deliberately attempting to influence others (Brady, 1999), mobilization in this context is, thus, understood as the deliberate *activation of social networks as a method of diffusing awareness about a social or political problem or of exerting social and/or political pressure for its resolution.* According to both theoretical (Bennett et al., 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and empirical (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, Rivero, & Moreno, 2011; Theocharis, 2013) work, information aimed at raising awareness of a certain social or political issue can rapidly travel across digital media networks, mobilizing distant others. These might be like-minded people who, as a result of this information, will be quickly convinced to act in a certain way in support of a social or political cause (examples abound, from the so-called Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street—Conover, Ferrara, Menczer, & Flammini, 2013; Lotan et al., 2011). It may also be that these are previously uninterested (in a certain cause) others, who receive such information from distant acquaintances as a by-product of their otherwise entertainment-oriented use of digital media but, nevertheless, end up being convinced to act in a certain way (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebaek, 2013; Tang & Lee, 2013). Overall, a number of social movement scholars have argued (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Diani, 2003; Earl & Kimport, 2011), the activation of personal networks is a core mobilizing act and can have a multiplying effect that transforms the scale and form of a certain political action through the process of digital communication.

- *The frequent embeddedness of self-expressive, identity, and personalized elements as part of the action.* Although an act does not necessarily have to be self-expressive and personalized to be considered as digitally networked participation, the elements of self-expression and personalization are crucial. An expressive act of participation has been broadly defined

as a political act that “entails the public expression of political orientations” (Rojas & Puig-I-Abril, 2009, p. 906). In digital media, such an act is inseparable from (a) the activation of one’s networks—thus from the opening up of one’s views to the public, and (b) the act of personalizing content as part of one’s approach to convince others to act in a certain way in relation to a social or political cause.

Based on these properties, digitally networked participation can be understood as *a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of, a social or political problem.*

There is mounting evidence showing that citizens engage into such digitally networked acts extensively (Anduiza, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2012; Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014; Rainie et al., 2012). Based on a representative sample of the American population, the PEW Research Internet Project found that 40% of American adults have done at least one out of the eight digital media-based civic or political activities, including “liking,” promoting, and reporting political content (such as news).³ Although data are scarce for Europe, comparative sources show that there are similarities in political social media use, especially among young people (Xenos et al., 2014). To put these findings into perspective, according to the latest wave of the WVS (2010–2014), 34% of Americans signed a petition and attended a peaceful demonstration at least once during the last year. Almost 35% joined a boycott.

Perhaps most importantly, many of the studies investigating digitally networked acts reveal that use of social networking sites is associated with counter-trends to participatory inequalities based on age (Schlozman et al., 2012; Xenos et al., 2014), while some studies have shown that protest participants mobilized via social media display a different sociodemographic profile when compared to that of the “typical” protester (see, among others, Anduiza et al., 2014; Enjolras et al., 2013). If we accept these acts as political participation, then it is likely to see not only a greater number of people participating in politics but see among them citizens who have traditionally been disengaged from politics and for whom this type of participation has come to be the only repertoire (Earl, 2014).

Engagement through digitally networked acts is, therefore, not just a notable popular trend, rather a new form of participation that is not only structurally similar to forms of offline participation in the sense that it is an independent participatory act in itself but in that it potentially captures a different conception of citizenship (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2008). It is thus worth asking what we might be gaining by continuing to include *only* traditional (and sometimes long-declining) forms of participation in large-scale cross-national

surveys, and what we might be missing by not studying digital media-based forms of participation in a systematic way.⁴ The quick answer is that these forms of participation are too many, too diverse, and, most of the times, have nothing to do with the conventional meaning of the term to merit inclusion in large-scale comparative political research.

Is Digitally Networked Participation a Form of Political Participation?

To answer this question, one must look at the defining elements of widely accepted definitions of political participation. This will allow for the examination of how digitally networked participation differs (or not) from acts traditionally considered as participation. Recent theoretical and conceptual work by Van Deth (2014), Hooghe (2014), and Hosch-Dayican (2014) can be used as a point of departure. Van Deth (2014, p. 351) notes that four points are common among widely used definitions of political participation. That participation is an *activity*, that it is done by people in their *role as citizens*, that it should be *voluntary*, and that it *deals with government, politics, or the state* in the broad sense of these words (Van Deth, 2014, p. 351). For my investigation of whether digitally networked participatory acts can be considered as forms of political participation, I build on Van Deth’s framework (reproduced and modified in Figure 2; Van Deth, 2014, p. 355). The framework offers a set of decision rules for deciding whether an act can be classified as political participation. There are three important reasons why the proposed system is helpful for deciding whether various forms of digitally networked participation can be considered as political participation.

First, it allows for arriving at basic, minimalist, definitions based on the above-mentioned four common points shared by widely available definitions. Second, it integrates the expansion of self-expressive forms of engagement that may take place outside the realm of formal politics by considering the *target* toward which the act is directed as an additional specification. Third, by considering the role of political *motivations*, it allows for further deciding on acts that are removed from the locus of formal politics and are not directed toward political actors, but may, nevertheless, be politically motivated. The last consideration is criticized by Hooghe (2014, p. 339), who correctly stresses the difficulty of determining what the individual’s exact intentions are. A solution to this problem is proposed in the conclusion.

Leaving motivations aside for the moment, one can still see that the majority of digitally networked participatory acts conform to minimalist and targeted definitions. Consideration of the following diverse but common acts is instructive: sending a tweet that addresses a policy-maker, posting a photo of a rubbish-filled area near your house on the Facebook page of your municipality, re-posting information about a protest event in Tahrir square on your Facebook page, uploading and sharing a video of yourself providing

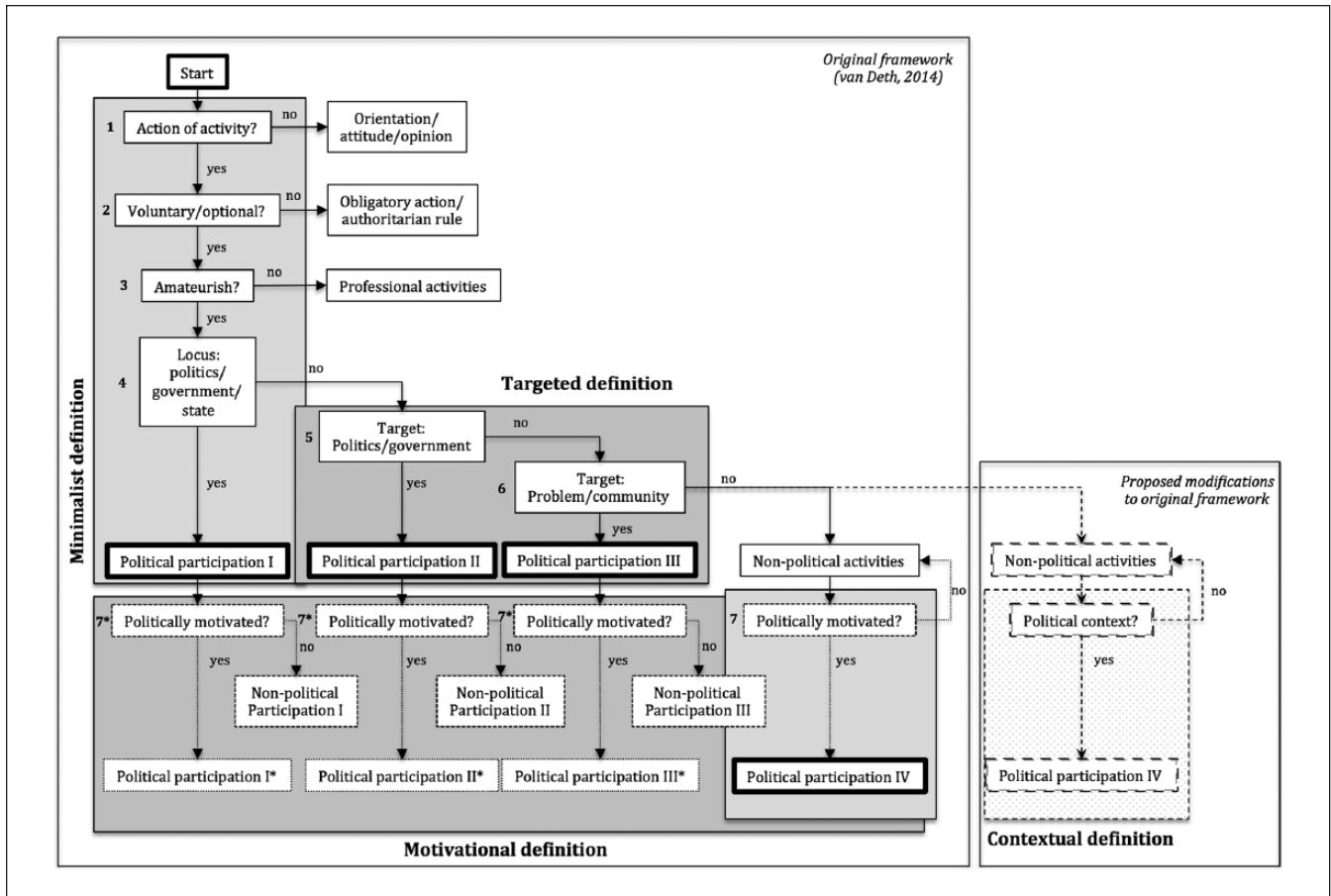


Figure 2. Reproduction of Van Deth’s (2014, p. 355) conceptual map (permission acquired by the author) and proposed modifications.

legal information to occupy protesters about their rights in case of arrest, taking and tweeting a photo of a policeman pepper-spraying a bunch of students protesting at your university, and sharing a tweeted petition by Avaaz that demands from your government to stop selling arms to Syria.

These are all, quite clearly, *activities*. They require accessing a digital media platform and using embedded features to create content and share it with one’s social network. They are done by people in their *role as citizens*, *voluntarily* from their semi-private spaces (depending on the platform), and they *deal with political or community issues*. As they also target the government or a community problem, the above-mentioned conform to both minimal and targeted definitions of participation in van Deth’s framework (Figure 2). From a conceptual point of view, this makes them similar to acts dealing with political issues that are carried out voluntarily by citizens such as, for example, participating in a legal demonstration. As far as these definitions go, thus, a good number of common digitally networked acts are indeed forms of political participation. Table 1 uses five of the most systematically and continuously studied digitally networked participatory acts by the Pew Research Centre to show that they can be clearly and unambiguously (i.e., without having to engage

with difficult issues such as the intentions behind the acts) classified as forms of political participation.

A skeptical reader can potentially detect two problematic issues here. The first is that I have avoided acts such as one-click Facebook “likes” and simple retweets of the #bring-backourgirls variety whose commonness and extreme low cost makes them too easy, too insubstantial, and, most importantly, too ineffective. The other issue is that I have not referred to “hard” cases of purely self-expressive nonpolitical acts. Examples may include that of Figure 1 which depicts an image tweeted under #Dontshoot. The image shows a group of young students in Ferguson raising their hands. These “problematic” issues are interrelated and underline one of the major objections for considering digitally networked participation as a form of political participation. This objection, as Tufekci (2014a) notes, assumes that “technical ease corresponds to the depth of the engagement” (p. 205). It is based on the idea that digitally networked participation is a formerly offline (and presumably high-cost act) that is now carried out online in a purely symbolic manner. The problem is, the argument goes, that such an act is not only carried out by people who have no interest in politics, but it also has zero cost and almost certainly zero outcomes.

Table 1. Demonstration of How Commonly Used Digitally Networked Participatory Acts Can Be Classified as Forms of Political Participation.

Forms of digitally networked participation	Minimalist definition	Targeted definition	Motivational definition
1. Joining a group on a social networking site that is involved in political or social issues or that is working to advance a cause	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ (if group is outside the indicated locus, then a targeted definition applies) →	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 or 1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ 6	Does not apply
2. Posting (sharing) links (on Facebook, Twitter, or Google+) to political stories or articles for others to read	X	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 or 1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ 6	Does not apply
3. Posting your own thoughts or comments (on Facebook, Twitter or Google+) on political or social issues	X	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 or 1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ 6	Does not apply
4. Encouraging other people to take action on a political or social issue that is important to you using on Facebook, Twitter, or Google+	X	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 or 1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ 6	Does not apply
5. Reposting content (on Facebook, Twitter, or Google+) related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else	X	1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 or 1 ⁺ , 2 ⁺ , 3 ⁺ , 4 ⁺ , 5 ⁺ 6	Does not apply
6. “Liking” or promoting material related to political or social issues that others have posted ^a	X	X	Does not apply

Questions source: Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, and Verba (2012) and Smith (2013).

^aIn the case of question 6, the digitally networked participatory act is not classified as participation because “liking,” as indicated in the text, is understood by this author as an expression of preference and not as an action aimed at raising awareness about a political or social issue as per the definition offered (although under certain circumstances it may end up having this effect—see page 18). In its current form, the question seems rather problematic as “promoting” material is already covered by posting (question 2) or promoting others’ (question 5) material.

The proponents of the so-called “slacktivism,” defined as “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (Morozov, 2009), are effectively uncomfortable with three aspects of digitally networked participation: the action’s extreme *low cost* (thanks to digital media), its purely *symbolic* aspect, and the potential feeling of empowerment for the individual when in fact the *impact* is close to or nothing. However, although modes of participation differ significantly in terms of their cost, effort, and consequences (Barnes et al., 1979; Earl, 2000, 2014; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), *none of the traditional definitions of political participation excludes acts based on their costs, their symbolic nature or their low impact, as long as other definitional requirements are fulfilled.* Following Van Deth (2014, p. 359), therefore, who suggests that political motivation is a sufficient condition for considering a nonpolitical activity as political participation, in most cases, “hard” digitally networked acts fulfill those requirements. As an example, tweeting a picture of oneself with the hands raised and sticking #Dontshoot next to it is a politically motivated act that fits neatly within the definition of digitally networked participation (by being a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out with the intent to display their own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of, a social or political problem—namely, police violence and race relations in Ferguson) while, conceptually,

it qualifies as a form of political participation conforming to targeted definitions.⁵

Van Deth’s framework also allows for the exclusion of common digitally networked acts, of which Facebook’s “liking” function is an example. I argue that “liking” something, be it a video with cute cats on YouTube, or a friend’s post on Facebook about donating money to Obama’s campaign, is *an expression of preference* or an *attitude* but not an *action*.⁶ It is important to keep in mind that the cost of displaying that attitude (usually the reason why some consider “liking” a form of slacktivism) is irrelevant here; the point is that the displaying of an attitude through “liking” is not an action aimed at raising awareness or exerting any kind of political pressure for the solution of a social or political problem. In other words, strictly speaking, not only there is no action but also, most crucially, *no political intention is adequately conveyed.* In contrast, the potential follow-up act of *redistributing* (i.e., sharing) to one’s followers a link about how to donate to the Obama campaign (see Table 1) *is* a form of political participation. As Van Deth (2014) notes, for some acts, “only the expression of political aims or intentions transforms them into modes of political participation” (p. 350).

There is, however, an important point to be made here. Although “liking” something on Facebook cannot, based on the arguments presented above, be considered a form of political participation, displaying an attitude through “liking”

before the eyes of one's personal network *can* become an act of political significance. As Tufekci (2014a) notes,

just showing up in a symbolic manner for legalizing gay marriage is an assertion, often with consequences, and a commitment to a very real policy (and cultural) fight [. . .] symbolic acts can be consequential, especially over the long-term, in some contexts, while indeed being superficial and largely irrelevant in others. The key distinction for symbolic acts is not whether they are online or not, but the political context within which they are committed. (p. 204)

It is thus important to consider the following: in digital media platforms, what may often be a simple expression of preference may end up having serious consequences.⁷ Liking a friend's post about the legalization of gay marriage, "checking-in" at Christian Democratic Union (CDU's) headquarters, or RSVPing on Facebook for a "Yes Scotland!" campaign event may be observed by someone who, for example, holds different opinions and who may comment—or even complain to the liker—on the purpose of the "like." If the complaint is public (in the form of comment), this may quickly evolve into a heated discussion involving multiple people from one's network. In this sense, a rather passive behavior such as "liking" becomes important because for some "likers"—probably few—responding may become the first step to engage into what may eventually lead to political participation. Although this is not to say that all, or even most, likes may have such an outcome or that "likes" are a form of political participation, research shows that being exposed to political information and discussion on social networking sites can lead to discussion and, subsequently, participation (Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Finally, some argue that acts such as "liking" detract people from "real" offline activism by persuading them that they have an impact when they actually have none. This argument deals with two issues: the participant's feeling of efficacy and that of the action's impact (both irrelevant for defining participation). Various scholars have pointed out problems with this argument. First, with the exception of voting, it is notoriously hard to show that a political action, be it high or low cost, online or offline, has an impact (Earl, 2014, p. 172). Second, impact is itself a contentious term; for some people, impact translates into policy change, for others into media attention that helps set the agenda, and for others into public endorsement by the policy elite. Depending on one's notion of impact, the same action or event can have a massive, minor, or no impact whatsoever. Third, it would indeed be hard to argue that recent digitally enabled actions, such as the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) mobilizations and the KONY 2012 campaign, did not produce outcomes that "mattered" more than those most often produced by traditional street protests (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2012). Clearly, the majority of online campaigns that are

based *solely* on digitally networked acts hardly ever get a mention in the media. Yet, rather than having zero impact, the above-mentioned two cases exemplify that, acts as "liking," exactly because of their low cost and opportunities for symbolic action, and of innovative uses of digital media that often require small-time investment by participants, can become a form of currency and lead to a "massive influx of participation" (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 73; Shirky, 2008). Due to the strength in numbers, such acts may end up having a direct and very visible impact.

Conceptualizing Digitally Networked Participation

By reviewing available definitions of political participation and relying on recent theoretical, conceptual, and empirical work and some "conceptual evidence," this article has argued that many digitally networked participatory acts (that are far more popular among publics than widely used traditional or extra-institutional political participation repertoires) can be comfortably classified as political participation. Building on Van Deth's framework, which allows for systematically deciding whether an act conforms to looser or narrower definitions of political participation, it used various examples and measures used by the Pew Research Centre to show that various specimens of digitally networked participation conform to both narrow (minimal) and expansive (targeted and motivational) definitions of political participation. Van Deth's framework helps in the classification of most digitally networked acts that have an (rough) offline equivalent. But purely self-expressive and seemingly nonpolitical acts often found only online require the consideration of motivations if they are to be considered political. This aspect has been criticized not least because the identification of a person's actual motivations is notoriously hard. This is especially the case in survey research but, admittedly, less so in more recent methodological approaches relying on digital trace data. The difficult problem political scientists are presented with is that if motivations are not taken into consideration, a good number of seemingly nonpolitical acts (and a large number of digitally networked acts *are* of this kind due to their self-expressive nature) will not be considered as political participation. Shifts in the conception of citizenship and the novel forms of digitally networked engagement that capture it render this option undesirable for understanding contemporary participatory trends. Can the conceptualization of digitally networked participation be improved by avoiding the consideration of motivations?

The improvement I propose builds on the framework proposed by Van Deth. It takes into consideration recent theorizing about the utility of symbolic acts that give clear signals about the context (Tufekci, 2014a) and the fact that, in digital media, establishing whether the context in which a participatory act takes place is a political one is fairly straightforward.

Cues about the context in which an act is being conducted not only abound in digital media platforms but also they are most of the times embedded in the act itself. From the accompanying text of Facebook posts or YouTube videos, to the predefined hashtags used alongside content posted on Twitter, one can quickly gather an impression as to whether a seemingly purely expressive act is part of a wider political mobilization and is thus indented as raising awareness about a certain issue. Posting on Twitter a photo with your hands raised may be a purely expressive act, but the *#Dontshoot* note attached to it is a signal that leaves no doubt that this is a symbolic act of political significance carried out with the intention to send a strong political message to one's personal network. As seen in the lower right corner of Figure 2, considering—and, in survey setting, explicitly asking about—the context in which a certain digitally networked act was carried out will resolve complications rising from trying to identify an individual's motivations. This proposition, which taken to its full extent becomes necessary for all the three other forms of participation within the Van Deth (2014) map, can even help to identify political acts which political participants themselves often do not (want to) recognize or label as political—a tendency often seen among people who are particularly disillusioned with politics (Zuckerman, 2014).

This article raises another pressing question. Should, especially European, scholars continue to rely only on traditional political participation repertoires and on concepts of political participation that exclude digitally networked forms of participation? Or should they make a systematic effort to produce a set of valid measures that can subsequently become part of cross-national studies? In her meta-analysis of research on how Internet use affects political participation, Boulianne (2009) found that the likelihood of finding a positive or large effect depended on how Internet was measured and urged that future research should use more nuanced measures that take into consideration specific civic and political activities. Surprisingly, although studies have shown that online participation is a distinct form of participation (Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010; Oser et al., 2013), that there are distinct submodes of online participation that are comparable to those occurring offline, and that a new social media-based type of political behavior is on the rise (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013), little has been done in terms of studying such forms in a more systematic and comparative way. Part of the reason is that these forms of participation evolve too fast and will soon be replaced by new ones. Yet, there is clearly a number of very common digitally networked acts that have been around since at least 2005. Much can be gained by (a) settling on a set of already existing measures such as those developed by the Pew Research Internet Project (Kohut, 2008; Rainie & Smith, 2012; Rainie et al., 2012; Smith, 2013)—who have been shown above to be forms of political participation, or other, comparative, studies (Xenos et al., 2014); (b) establishing that they have validity by using them consistently across a

number of (pilot/small-scale) studies; and, finally, (c) using them in cross-national surveys.

Developing questions for the comparative study of digitally networked participation with these considerations in mind can be very beneficial for understanding contemporary (particularly youth) participation. This is especially the case in Europe where established cross-national surveys such as the ESS can accommodate special modules. Europeans are deeply disillusioned with politics, especially after the recent financial and economic crisis (Della Porta, 2013). Comparative research on young Europeans shows that people not only feel disempowered but also have increasingly serious doubts that traditional engagement with formal politics can solve their problems (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Digitally networked participation with its personalized nature and immediate reach is, as Tufekci (2014a) notes, suitable for individuals who see their own agency as crucial, aspire to be empowered individuals and cherish this empowerment (p. 204). As this form of participation is not only popular in quantitative terms but seems to capture a new conception of citizenship based on alternative means of engagement, it also carries political significance. Continuing to focus only on whether European publics voted, demonstrated or boycotted products means that we may be missing a very important part of the picture, gaining instead a distorted understanding of what political participation is shaping into (or fails to). The perception of young people as disengaged from politics, and the continuous criticism of their model of citizenship as one that may lead democracy into trouble, may itself be based on an obsolete understanding of youth participation. As Zuckerman perceptively notes, “people who are disengaged from traditional politics might not be bad citizens under an old paradigm but good citizens under a new one.”

The literature on online political participation has been evolving swiftly over the past few years. Yet, a general framework that would allow scholars to identify and conceptualize digitally networked participation in a systematic way has not been proposed. This has delayed the processes of developing the appropriate items to measure such participation, using those measures consistently across surveys in different countries (and in large-scale international surveys), and, most importantly, assessing whether emerging digitally networked acts consist of political participation or not. This article puts forward a framework that makes the first step toward systematically reaching the above aims. Grounded in classic and recent literature on political participation, and taking into consideration the fundamental definitional requirements that make an act a political one, the framework can help in distinguishing new participatory acts that are becoming an important part of democratic politics and politically engaged citizenship. There are aspects of this framework that may lead to disagreement among scholars, and there will be more as novel forms of engaging in politics through digital media continue to emerge. Howard (2014) is making a good case when he notes that as “the Internet of

Things evolves, it is safe to say that in a few years the theories we have for understanding civic will be tested and strained in ways we can't anticipate" (p. 201). This said, the systematic structure and idea of decision rules, first advanced by Van Deth (2014), make the reconstruction and adaptation of the proposed framework flexible and lay the groundwork for guiding ideas and proposals for future revisions.

The intention of this article is not to shift attention away from traditional forms of participation. It is rather aimed at starting a more vibrant discussion not only on how we can identify whether forms of digitally networked participation are political but where exactly they fit in citizens' existing participatory repertoire. Digitally networked participation is a popular way of engaging in politics, and its manifestations deserve to be suitably defined and measured. Despite the use of arbitrary measures, case studies leave little doubt that by totally excluding measures of digitally networked participation, there may be empirical variation that we are not observing. There is no other way to concretely find out how much this type of participation matters to citizens and how strongly we should expect it to affect democracy, unless we measure it.

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Notes

1. Scholars have started to conceptualize and measure creative forms of engagement (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005) and expand our understanding about their value for democracy (Van Deth, 2011). Some forms of creative participation, such as political consumerism, have received elaborate and stimulating theoretical and comparative empirical treatment (Stolle & Hooghe, 2004; Stolle et al., 2005) and have even been included in cross-national surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS). This has enabled cross-national comparisons that led to the crucial realization that, especially young, citizens in advanced Western democracies may not be abandoning politics—as initially assumed—rather than their model of citizenship and preferred forms of participation are

in transformation (Cain et al., 2003; Dalton, 2008). The same, however, is not true for digitally networked forms of participation which, save the large number of case studies, have not been included in large cross-national surveys such as the ESS or the World Values Survey (WVS).

2. Whether the act of trying to persuade others is itself an act of participation is a contested issue in the literature with scholars often using the survey question "persuading others to vote for a particular party or candidate" to measure mobilization (e.g., Karp & Banducci, 2007, p. 221) and others classifying it as a type of political participation (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 31).
 3. These are activities carried out through social networking sites and microblogging platforms, and extant research provides some support that especially such acts are independent forms of participation (as opposed to being replications of offline acts; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Hirzalla & Van Zoonen, 2010).
 4. Interestingly, the last wave of the ESS, the most authoritative data source for European political scientists, did not even include a question about whether participants had access to the Internet.
 5. A possible counterargument in classifying this act as political participation III (in Van Deth's map) and not as a form of political expression, is that the act does not itself *directly target* politics or government, or a problem or community, and that it would only qualify as such if it was literally addressing, as it were, Ferguson's police department (i.e., if the tweet begun with @FPD_PUBLIC_INFO). Yet, even if one was to accept this alternative interpretation, the act would still qualify as a form of digitally networked participation once motivations—and/or the context provided by #Dontshoot—are taken into consideration. That is, it would be a politically motivated nonpolitical act performed voluntarily and aimed at raising awareness of one's personal network about police violence and race relations in Ferguson, thus conforming to political participation IV. Although this act may initially seem as conforming to political participation III, thus running the risk to fit in more than one category—as Hosch-Dayican (2014) has warned, a closer look reveals that simply posting the photo on your twitter feed does not itself target. Despite using the relevant hashtag, the act remains a creative way to show support toward a heated issue. Thus, the act ends up as a nonpolitical activity in the Van Deth map but becomes political participation.
 6. In claiming this I draw on a tradition of political scientists (Brady, 1999; Parry et al., 1992) who consider action as the beginning of (offline) participation and leave out the simple display of attitudes—which I perceive "liking" to be
- We have sought to define participation as a form of action. For this reason, to show an interest in politics or to talk about it to members of the family is not regarded as sufficient. Nor is it enough simply to display attitudes of support or hostility to certain forms of political action. (Parry et al., 1992, p. 16)
7. This is especially the case in authoritarian regimes where access to the Internet is heavily controlled, social media interactions are monitored, and "improper" activity may even lead to imprisonment (The Guardian, 2014).

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