Advancing Research into Dark Participation

Westlund, Oscar

Commentary

Advancing Research into Dark Participation

Oscar Westlund [1,2,3]

[1] Oslo Metropolitan University, 0167 Oslo, Norway; E-Mail: oscarw@oslomet.no
[2] Volda University College, 6101 Volda, Norway
[3] University of Gothenburg, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract
Dark participation is and should be an essential concept for scholars, students and beyond, considering how widespread disinformation, online harassment, hate speech, media manipulation etc. has become in contemporary society. This commentary engages with the contributions to this timely thematic issue, which advance scholarship into dark participation associated with news and misinformation as well as hate in a worthwhile way. The commentary closes with a call for further research into four main areas: 1) the motivations that drive dark participation behaviors by individuals and coordinated groups; 2) how these individuals and groups exploit platforms and technologies for diverse forms of dark participation; 3) how news publishers, journalists, fact-checkers, platform companies and authorities are dealing with dark participation; and 4) how the public can advance their media literacy for digital media in order to better deal with dark participation. Authorities must advance and broaden their approaches focused on schools and libraries, and may also use emerging technologies in doing so.

Keywords
dark participation; disinformation; journalism; misinformation; platforms; platform exploitation

Issue
This commentary is part of the issue "Dark Participation in Online Communication: The World of the Wicked Web" edited by Thorsten Quandt (University of Münster, Germany).

1. Introduction

The moment a person decides to engage with digital or social media, and billions have globally, they enter an online world filled with information and opportunities and also various forms of dark participation. Individuals as well as more coordinated groups and organizations use social media platforms for various forms of *dark participation*, such as media manipulation, misinformation, hate speech and online harassment. These in turn connect with several important aspects of dark participation, such as actors, reasons, objects/targets, audiences and processes.

In his original article featured in a 2018 *Media and Communication* thematic issue, Quandt (2018) problematized the intersections of journalism and publication participation via digital technologies and advanced the concept dark participation. This is a valuable concept that can guide empirical research and makes for

an important and timely theme for a thematic issue entering the 2020's. This thematic issue makes a substantial advancement of knowledge into some more specific areas of dark participation. Altogether, the thematic issue consists of 10 original articles, authored or co-authored by highly respected scholars. The call for papers sought for diverse contributions from all corners of the world, including efforts to engage the Global South. Notwithstanding such efforts, all submissions must go through rigorous peer-review, and in the end the articles meeting quality standards for this thematic issue turn out to be authored mostly by scholars from Europe and the United States.

This commentary will engage with the thematic issue, highlighting some of its key contributions. The article contributions span diverse forms of dark participation, such as a study of visual forms of political communication on Twitter and its association with social media manipulation. This study advances our understanding

of euro-sceptic imagery and anti-systemic communication in the salient case of the European Union (Marchal, Neudert, Kollanyi, & Howard, 2021). Ultimately, I have chosen to sort most of the contributions into two main thematic areas for discussion. The first thematic area is *news and misinformation*. Many scholars may immediately come to think of traditional journalists and normatively important news about public affairs and politics, but here it includes a broader spectrum of actors, such as "alternative news media." The second thematic area is *hate* and similarly includes several thematic issue contributions.

2. News and Misinformation

What makes journalism, and who is a journalist, has been a recurring issue of discussion, debate and boundary work in journalism studies literature for decades. This is not only a form of normative academic exercise but can be closely linked to the practice of policy. What is news is crucially important for assessments of financial subsidies (such as in Scandinavia), and authoritarian regimes enforce rules for defining who has the right to work as a journalist, and in such ways controlling who gets to scrutinize the authorities (Badr, 2020). Journalism studies scholars have advanced diverse conceptualizations of emerging social actors associated with journalism, such as so-called interlopers (Eldridge, 2017), in-betweeners (Ahva, 2017) and peripheral actors (Belair-Gagnon, Holton, & Westlund, 2019). In this context, and for this thematic issue, von Nordheim and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2021) have added "parasites," discussed here as a subsystem that act in ways relating to and even threatening journalism as the primary system. They have co-authored a theoretically oriented article titled "Uninvited Dinner Guests: A Theoretical Perspective on the Antagonists of Journalism Based on Serres' Parasite." Von Nordheim and Kleinen-von Königslöw take their point of departure in how journalism, in the traditional sense with legacy news media and its journalists, have become confronted with emerging actors of various kinds. Their article highlights how so-called "parasites" have increasingly entered into the journalistic system, albeit operate in a much different way and with other norms and logics. The authors explicitly seek to theorize the parasites in the role of the antagonists, and how such parasites threaten the well-established journalistic system. Thus, this article builds on a normative perspective that the historically established journalistic system is something being harmed by emerging parasites, whom take advantage of its resources and affect output and values. Parasites as a concept clearly is associated with actors having a negative effect. Von Nordheim and Kleinen-von Königslöw clarify four key characteristics, including but not limited to them acting from within the system with journalistic resources and thus difficult to eliminate without affecting the system itself. The authors do not discuss concrete

examples who such parasites are, with the exception of intermediary platform companies, for which there fortunately is a discussion on dissolvement of the host vs. parasite distinction.

Well established institution(s) of journalism are indeed associated with epistemic and journalistic authority, and for producing different forms of knowledge relevant for citizens (Ekström & Westlund, 2019a). It is common that publishers and journalism studies scholars, policymakers and pundits take their departure in some sort of established journalistic system, positioning this as the center and everything else as peripheral, alternative or parasitic. However, such positioning has normative underpinnings, and the fundamental idea that journalism is placed at some sort of center is problematic (Steensen & Westlund, 2020; Tandoc, 2019). There are ongoing processes of dislocation of news journalism, including but not limited to how platform companies as intermediaries have shifted the dynamics for how news is shared, consumed and engaged with, moving it further away from journalistic actors and their epistemic practices (Ekström & Westlund, 2019b). A recent article has developed and introduced the concept of *local political information infrastructure* for a study of platform civics and Facebook. The concept suggest we should broaden our perspectives when it comes to actors producing local news and local information beyond traditional news media, and account for the role of networked media logics (Thorson et al., 2020).

Multiple actors can benefit from being like or associated with, journalistic news. On the one hand, producers of "fake news" and disinformation repeatedly imitate the form and style of journalistic news, presumed to increase likelihood to deceive. On the other hand, alternative news media oftentimes imitate the form and style of journalistic news, while potentially being explicit in their offering of an alternative voice and their intentions towards narrowing their focus, the scope and plurality of voices. The relational aspects are central to scholarly conceptualizations of alternative news media, and how such intentionally produce and publish "news" that legacy news media do not bring forth (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019). In Scandinavia, some members of the public have discontinued turning to the public service broadcasters for news, questioning their credibility and instead turning to alternative news media. In this thematic issue, Schwarzenegger (2021) presents an interview-based study focusing on how users of diverse alternative media connect with their media and its community. He identifies different nuances of grey, concluding that these communities, or audiences, experience ambivalence in relation to aspects such as alternative sources, experiences of community and comfort, and anti-systemness (see also the article on anti-systemic communication in this thematic issue by Marchal et. al., 2021).

As this issue proposes, journalistic authority has been challenged by diverse stakeholders and actors, including

powerful politicians in various countries, repeatedly questioning and delegitimizing legacy news media by using "fake news" as a label. Additionally, "fake news" is a genre of producing intentionally false news (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), an area that Tandoc, Thomas, and Bishop (2021) thematic issue's article tackles. The authors contend that much is known about motivations for "fake news," and the different kinds of deceptions emerge, but less about how this genre imitates "traditional journalism." Following a content analysis of fake news materials, they found overall similarities with traditional journalism in terms of inverted pyramid format storytelling, timeliness, negativity and prominence. The authors discuss that the main difference comes down to fake news articles oftentimes featuring an opinion by its author. Notwithstanding this, also news journalism comes with many choices of different kinds, following epistemic values and practices, genre conventions etc., making it difficult to neutralize opinion even though only resorting to voicing opinion of sources etc. Wahl-Jorgensen (2020), for example, discusses that emotional labor linked to news production often has been made invisible when portraying journalists as detached observers.

To continue, we may ask what effect corrective messages have for citizens that have exposed themselves to online misinformation and disinformation? Martel, Mosleh, and Rand (2021) discuss that existing research witnesses mixed results in terms of what approaches are effective. Their experiment-based study is focusing on how correction style may affect the efficacy of corrections. Martel et al.'s study finds that analytic thinking and active open-minded thinking are most clearly associated with citizens absorbing corrective messages in a way that results in updating their beliefs. To continue, another thematic issue article advancing knowledge about online sharing of misinformation comes from Metzger, Flanagin, Mena, Jiang, and Wilson (2021). The authors stress the importance of studying the motivations people have for sharing news and misinformation online, and the beliefs associated with the misinformation they are exposed to. They analyze a large dataset of comments online, leading to the conclusion that misinformation being spread on social media oftentimes is disbelieved. The next thematic issue article, authored by Chang, Haider, and Ferrara (2021), focuses on the intersection of citizen's online political participation and misinformation, in the salient case of Taiwan and its 2020 presidential election. The authors studied online participation in discussions across three social platforms, and reveal that some topics are selectively discussed, and others are largely avoided. In studying misinformation, the authors argue the importance of acknowledging clashes associated with practices, ideologies and cultural history. Ultimately, a red thread for the articles discussed concerns a sort of interrelationship between journalism, publishers and news on the one hand, and misinformation on the other. While it is problematic to juxtapose these in relation to each other, yet there remains a strong dynamic between the two.

3. Hate

While the world wide web initially was associated with visions regarding access, participation etc., a growing body of literature witness to the prevalence of what Quandt (2018) refers to as dark participation, in its diverse forms. Publishers have been struggling to deal with participatory journalism, and much of the participation with news has been displaced to platforms non-proprietary to the publishers (Westlund & Ekström, 2018). Some publishers have maintained participatory features such as comment fields but have had to develop their content moderation strategies to cope with hate speech, disinformation and other forms of dark participation (Wintterlin, Schatto-Eckrodt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2020). Similarly, platform companies are wrestling with both human—and technology-led approaches towards content moderation, for which disinformation has become a central concern (Napoli, 2020), not least during political elections such as the United States' 2020 presidential election where platform companies such as Twitter have flagged misinformation coming from various actors, including but not limited to the president himself.

This thematic issue features articles on aggressive behaviors, hate speech and uncivility, and hate is a common denominator across these studies although incivility extends to also anger and fear. A basic definition of hate suggests it has to do with people's feelings of hostility towards a person or a group. Hatred towards others as an inner feeling kept to oneself is problematic in itself but may in such instances actually do no harm. However, harm will likely take place when people enact or communicate their hatred. Social media platforms affordances have most certainly enabled people to take advantage of platforms for such purposes. Social media platforms have lowered the threshold for individuals to express hate, and for coordinated groups and organizations to give expression for intentional and systemic hate towards someone or something.

In their thematic issue article, Paasch-Colberg, Strippel, Trebbe, and Emmer (2021) have focused on hate speech, which they discuss in the broader sense in terms of forwarding expressions about one's emotion of hate vis-a-vis the more specific legal understanding of the concept as referring to prejudice or violent expressions towards specific groups in society. The article advances a more nuanced understanding and framework for different forms of hate speech as well as offensive language, which is used to analyze the materials collected through a rich mixed-method study focusing on migration and refugees, conducted in Germany and across news publishers, a blog, Facebook and YouTube. Moreover, Bodrunova, Litvinenko, Blekanov, and Nepiyushchikh (2021) focuses on obscene speech

and politically motivated hate speech and aggressive content in the salient case of Russian YouTube. The authors have carefully selected 13 videos that altogether have generated a large amount of comments and views. Their study of obscene and hate speech reveals a link to expressing solidarity and support, shapes dynamics of public discussions, and helps place criticism towards authorities and regimes in context. And Frischlich, Schatto-Eckrodt, Boberg, and Wintterlin (2021) further expands on hate, its roots and uncivility. Their article "Roots of Incivility: How Personality, Media Use, and Online Experiences Shape Uncivil Participation" takes its point of departure in a situation where dark participation is salient in society and offers a survey-based study from Germany focusing on how personality, media use and online experiences influence incivility. The article finds that a relatively high proportion of the citizens exposed to uncivil actions have themselves engaged in uncivil participation, and those who are exposed to both hate speech and civil comments are most likely to engage in incivility themselves.

In extension of the research advanced in this thematic issue, scholars may explore the ways in which social actors (humans) and technological actants (machines) have agency in the development or pursuit of emotions (Lewis & Westlund, 2015), if there are systematic reactions to individual feelings and emotions, and what the causes are? Research associated with the so-called emotional turn in journalism has brought forward how social media platform affordances have impacted the space for emotion (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

4. Concluding Reflection

This thematic issue advances research into several critically important aspects of dark participation, such as hate (including hate speech and incivility) and the tensions between journalists and other news—and misinformation producing actors that may or may not be harmful. This thematic issue provides worthwhile insights for scholars, students, policymakers and practitioners in diverse fields. Notwithstanding the above, this does not mean that the findings can easily be turned into actions that substantially reduce dark participation. We thus must reconcile our perspectives on the mediascape and dark participation, acknowledging that such is and will remain to be a core component. Lending from the 4 A's framework (Lewis & Westlund, 2015), the prevalence of dark participation can be seen as a complicated interplay of activities between diverse actors (such as publishers, fact-checkers, policymakers, platform companies, fake news producers, alternative news media etc.), distinct technological actants (such as platform algorithms, software for editing phots and videos, artificial intelligence etc.) and audiences (e.g., citizens and their media—and information literacy skills).

These four areas—actors, actants, audiences and activities—are generally important to consider when advancing research. First, scholars should study motivations further to understand better the "roots" to the various emerging forms of dark participation, offering much more granular understanding of political and financial motivations, and also seeking to identify potential other motivations.

Second, researchers should ask how do such motivations intersect with the current mediascape, and the opportunities for enacting different forms of dark participation. Emerging technologies in combination with the social architecture of the Web, offering low thresholds for "produsage" (Bruns, 2012) and participation, has enabled laymen as well as coordinated groups to achieve high impact with their dark participation. Science and technology studies (STS) has consistently shown how the uses of technologies are not determined beforehand (i.e., technological determinism), but rather can be seen as socially constructed. This means that whatever good purposes platform and tech companies may have in terms of building platforms that are safe and useful and marked by positive participation that can be associated with civil conversations and informed citizens there will be motivated people and groups taking advantage of the very same tech and platforms for purposes of dark participation. Ultimately, people and groups exploit platform affordances for their own interest and motives, fueling dark participation and causing substantial concerns for societies and democracy such as through hate speech and incivility etc.

Third, scholars should inquire how do news publishers, journalists, fact-checkers, platform companies and authorities deal with dark participation. Researchers need to recognize that there is a broad spectrum of actors (and actants and audiences) engaging in different activities, some of their own and some in collaboration with others, to combat dark participation. While some stakeholders complain that Facebook and other platform companies are unpredictable in changing their algorithms, such changes may well be necessary to undermine systematic exploitation of their platforms for dark participation. While the accessibility to data via some platforms (most notably Twitter) has enabled research, other platforms have enforced significant restrictions to their data sharing (most notably Facebook). Numerous scholars have called for an improved collaboration with platforms, involving social media platforms sharing relevant data for research (e.g., Pasquetto et. al., 2020). Importantly, social media platforms are used for questioning journalism, publishers and journalists, through various forms of digital press criticism (Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2020). Moreover, journalists have become targets of online harassment (Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020) and mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020). Ultimately, various actors are taking advantage of platforms and their affordances for dark purposes, such as to destabilize journalism as an institution, and the journalists carrying out newswork. It is important that scholars study such behaviors and actors further, for instance

by applying the lens of parasites (c.f. von Nordheim & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2021) for more concrete empirical work.

Fourth, an important question for scholars relates to what can be done in terms of the public advancing their media literacy for digital media in order to better deal with dark participation. Media—and information literacy should not be approached as an explicit form of knowledge that one can develop theoretically by reading or watching instructions, but must also be approached as a form of tacit knowledge that is developed through experiences, ideally together with someone having tacit knowledge that can supervise (such as a school teachers, alternatively an interactive program designed to simulate situations and offer feedback). Scholars should explore and study ways that authorities, NGO's and other stakeholders (with the public's interest in mind) *can* and possibly *should* take advantage of emerging technologies and platforms for purposes of countering dark participation. For example, how can schools and libraries develop or appropriate AR/VR technologies into instructional role play games that allow individuals to embody others (e.g., age, gender, race etc.) and get such first-hand and emotional experiences in the interaction with others? A prerequisite may well be to conduct and integrate basic science with applied science, enrolling key stakeholders such as funding bodies for research and innovation, commercial companies, together with authorities and governmental institutions such as schools, libraries and media oversight institutions.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Ahva, L. (2017). How is participation practiced by "in-betweeners" of journalism? *Journalism Practice*, *11*(2/3), 142–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1209084

Badr, H. (2020). The Egyptian syndicate and (digital) journalism's unresolved boundary struggle. *Digital Journalism*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1799424

Belair-Gagnon, V., Holton, A. E., & Westlund, O. (2019). Space for the liminal. *Media and Communication*, *7*(4), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2666

Bodrunova, S. S., Litvinenko, A., Blekanov, I., & Nepiyushchikh, D. (2021). Constructive aggression? Multiple roles of aggressive content in political discourse on Russian YouTube. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 181–194.

Bruns, A. (2012). Reconciling community and commerce? *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(6), 815–835. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.680482

Carlson, M., Robinson, S., & Lewis, S. C. (2020). Digital press criticism: The symbolic dimensions of Donald Trump's assault on U.S. journalists as the "enemy of the people." *Digital Journalism*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1836981

Chang, H.-C. H., Haider, S., & Ferrara, E. (2021). Digital civic participation and misinformation during the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 144–157.

Egelhofer, J. L., & Lecheler, S. (2019). Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: A framework and research agenda. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *43*(2), 97–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2019.1602782

Ekström, M., & Westlund, O. (2019a). Journalism and epistemology. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.806

Ekström, M., & Westlund, O. (2019b). The dislocation of news journalism: A conceptual framework for the study of epistemologies of digital journalism. *Media and Communication*, *7*(1), 259–270. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i1.1763

Eldridge, S. A. (2017). *Online journalism from the periphery: Interloper media and the journalistic field*. London: Routledge.

Frischlich, L., Schatto-Eckrodt, T., Boberg, S., & Wintterlin, F. (2021). Roots of incivility: How personality, media use, and online experiences shape uncivil participation. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 195–208.

Holt, K., Ustad Figenschou, T., & Frischlich, L. (2019). Key dimensions of alternative news media. *Digital Journalism*, *7*(7), 860–869. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1625715

Lewis, S. C., & Westlund, O. (2015). Actors, actants, audiences, and activities in cross-media sews work: A matrix and a research agenda. *Digital Journalism*, *3*(1), 19–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.927986

Lewis, S. C., Zamith, R., & Coddington, M. (2020). Online harassment and its implications for the journalist–audience relationship. *Digital Journalism*, *8*(8), 1047–1067. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1811743

Marchal, N., Neudert, L.-S., Kollanyi, B., & Howard, P. N. (2021). Investigating visual content shared over Twitter during the 2019 EU parliamentary election campaign. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 158–170.

Martel, C., Mosleh, M., & Rand, D. G. (2021). You're definitely wrong, maybe: Correction style has minimal effect on corrections of misinformation online. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 120–133.

Metzger, M. J., Flanagin, A. J., Mena, P., Jiang, S., & Wilson, C. (2021). From dark to light: The many shades of sharing misinformation online. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 134–143.

Napoli, P. M. (2020). Connecting journalism and public policy: New concerns and continuing challenges. *Digital Journalism*, *8*(6), 691–703. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1775104

Paasch-Colberg, S., Strippel, C., Trebbe, J., & Emmer, M. (2021). From insult to hate speech: Mapping offensive language in German user comments on immigration. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 171–180.

Pasquetto, I., Swire-Thompson, B., Amazeen, M. A., Benevenuto, F., Brashier, N. M., Bond, R. M., . . . Yang, K. C. (2020). Tackling misinformation: What researchers could do with social media data. *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, *1*(8). https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-49

Quandt, T. (2018). Dark participation. *Media and Communication*, *6*(4), 36-48. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519

Schwarzenegger, C. (2021). Communities of darkness? Users and uses of anti-system alternative media between audience and community. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 99–109.

Steensen, S., & Westlund, O. (2020). *What is digital journalism studies?* London: Routledge.

Tandoc, E. C. (2019). Journalism at the periphery. *Media and Communication*, *7*(4), 138–143. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2626

Tandoc, E. C., Jr., Thomas, R. J., & Bishop, L. (2021). What is (fake) news? Analyzing news values (and more) in fake stories. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 110–119.

Thorson, K., Medeiros, M., Cotter, K., Chen, Y., Rodgers, K., Bae, A., & Baykaldi, S. (2020). Platform civics: Facebook in the local political information infrastructure. *Digital Journalism*, *8*(10). 1231–1257.

von Nordheim, G., & Kleinen-von Königslöw, K. (2021). Uninvited dinner guests: A theoretical perspective on the antagonists of journalism based on Serres' parasite. *Media and Communication*, *9*(1), 88–98.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, *8*(2), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626

Waisbord, S. (2020). Mob censorship: Online harassment of US journalists in times of digital hate and populism. *Digital Journalism*, *8*(8), 1030–1046. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1818111

Westlund, O., & Ekström, M. (2018). News and participation through and beyond proprietary platforms in an age of social media. *Media and Communication*, *6*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1775

Wintterlin, F., Schatto-Eckrodt, T., Frischlich, L., Boberg, S., & Quandt, T. (2020). How to cope with dark participation: Moderation practices in German newsrooms. *Digital Journalism*, *8*(7), 904–924. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1797519

About the Author

Oscar Westlund (PhD) is Professor at Oslo Metropolitan University, where he co-leads the OsloMet Digital Journalism Research Group. He holds secondary positions at Volda University College and University of Gothenburg. Westlund is the Editor-in-Chief of *Digital Journalism*. Westlund has published widely on digital journalism, media management, mobile news and epistemology. His four most recent books were all co-authored/co-edited and published with Routledge in 2020: *What is Digital Journalism Studies?*, *Critical Incidents in Journalism, Definitions of Digital Journalism (Studies)*, and *Mobile News*. Westlund wrote this commentary as a project member of Source Criticism and Mediated Disinformation, a project funded by the Norwegian Research Council.