Article

Social Media + Society
January-March 2022: 1–11
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20563051221084297
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms

What Makes a Good Citizen Online? The Emergence of Discursive Citizenship Norms in Social Media Environments

Emilija Gagrčin[1], Pablo Porten-Cheé[1,2], Laura Leißner[1], Martin Emmer[1], and Louise Jørring[3]

Abstract

The importance of citizenship norms—shared understandings of how citizens ought to participate in society—has been discussed at length in the past two decades, particularly in conversations around changing notions of citizenship in the digital age. Yet, most studies have gravitated between the two poles of dutiful and self-actualizing citizenship. In this study, we explore which citizenship norms people express related to their political participation in social media environments and which affordances and experiences in social media environments shape these norms. Through interviews and focus group discussions, we found that citizenship norms emerge in response to positive and negative experiences in social media environments. We found three groups of norms that are distinctive to the networked environments of social media: *individual information care, discourse care*, and *considered contribution*. These can serve as conceptual frames for understanding the normative underpinnings of discursive participation in social media environments from the perspective of ordinary citizens.

Keywords

good citizenship, discursive citizenship norms, political participation, political expression, social media

It has become a truism that social media environments, constituted by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, have expanded the venue where and the repertoire of how individuals can participate politically (Bode et al., 2014; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018), prominently to more discursive forms of participation (Vromen et al., 2015). Underpinning these changes is the paradigm of alternative citizenship models, which posits changes in the nature of citizenship itself and thus in citizens' perceptions of what it means to be a "good citizen" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Research on changing citizenship has mostly concentrated on novel *acts* of citizenship, where social media serve as *tools* for action and expression (Bennett et al., 2011; Cohen & Kahne, 2012), and focused on the question of to what extent citizens believe that these acts constitute good citizenship. However, part of the alternative citizenship paradigm is acknowledging that social media are more than tools for enacting citizenship (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Rather, social media constitute socio-technical environments where political participation as a communicative process is intertwined with imagined affordances that both enable and constrain citizenship (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Accordingly, social media may provide an environment in which normative understandings of "good citizenship" develop due to citizens' experiences, for example, through imagined affordances. An open point in the agenda of alternative citizenship is to theorize how citizenship norms emerge and evolve in socio-technical environments on social media platforms (Lane et al., 2021).

In this study, we sought to identify the citizenship norms people express in relation to participation in social media environments and to uncover what experiences and affordances shape those norms. For this purpose, we conducted three focus group discussions and 25 interviews with young adults with extensive social media experience. The findings indicate an awareness that new possibilities to engage entail a

[1]Freie Universität Berlin/Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Germany
[2]Heidelberg University, Germany
[3]Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Corresponding Author:
Martin Emmer, Institute for Media and Communication Studies, Freie Universität Berlin/Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Garystr. 55, 14195 Berlin, Germany.
Email: martin.emmer@fu-berlin.de

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).

novel set of responsibilities that pertain to the role of citizens in the public discourse. We identify three groups of norms—individual information care, discourse care, and considered contribution—that emerge from positive and negative experiences in social media environments. Paradigmatically, discursive citizenship norms help enhance our understanding of how citizenship norms are actualized and how they evolve on social media. The article sheds light on the democratic underpinnings of political participation on social media from the perspective of ordinary citizens and provide a number of implications for future research.

Changing Participation Forms, Changing Citizenship Norms

Digital and, in particular, social media have been intensively discussed as drivers of new political participation practices (Lane et al., 2017; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Studies interested in changes in how citizens exercise their role in democracy have commonly focused on assessing citizenship norms instead of participation practices. Citizenship norms are a type of injunctive norms ("norms of ought," Cialdini & Trost, 1998) that elicit shared expectations of citizens' role in politics (Dalton, 2008) and shape the meaning that citizens assign to participation (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013; van Deth, 2007). Citizenship norm research is informed by the democratic theory that enables scholars to assess forms of political participation against this background, evaluating to what extent some forms of political participation contribute to or hamper the democratic social order (Schnaudt et al., 2021).

Early work has revealed a diversification of political participation forms (Dalton, 2008) and communication styles (Bennett, 2008). For almost a decade, then, research into changing participation remained fascinated by the presumed shift from participation grounded in the sense of duty toward institutions (dutiful citizenship), such as voting, toward participation driven by one's own political passions (self-actualizing citizenship), such as buycotting and political expression, and oscillated between the two poles of dutiful and self-actualizing citizenship (Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Feezell et al., 2016; Leißner et al., 2019; Shehata et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the underlying conceptual debate has transitioned into a hybrid and pluralized understanding of contemporary citizenship (Ohme, 2019; Thorson, 2015).

Initially, the notion of norm hybridity was invoked to describe that most people are, in fact, between dutiful allegiance to formal politics and a preference for self-expressive forms of participation (e.g., Vromen et al., 2015). Recently, it has been suggested that feelings of duty might play a role in digital citizenship (Amnå, 2013; Penney, 2019), for example, when young Americans say that they feel a duty to engage in partisan debates (Penney, 2019) and consider political self-expression as a part—albeit the least important one—of good citizenship (Lane, 2020), or when users engage in collective sanctioning of what they perceive as norm violation (Kunst et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2019; Ziegele et al., 2020). However, the language of hybridity seems more like an easy way out than it helps carve out the normative particularities of discursive participation (Vromen et al., 2015). Notwithstanding, existing research provides useful indications of where to search for more clarity.

While the democratic theory has typically informed citizenship norms research by providing benchmarks for assessing the viability, desirability, and efficacy of political and civic behavior as such, it does not provide instruments to register the actualization and emergence of norms. Instead of reducing citizens' political action and interaction in social media environments to their support for predefined democratic norms (Schnaudt et al., 2021), looking at citizenship norms as communicative practices that unfold in social media environments may be more fruitful. Research has revealed that social media not only afford new tools for political communication (Bode et al., 2014; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018) but as spaces where political communication unfolds, they also enable processes of social and communicative change (Flanagin, 2020). Specifically, social media alter the nature of engagement in the public life (Baym & boyd, 2012), including changes in citizenship norms, for example, due to risk-return calculations (Parviz & Piercy, 2021).

One reason to believe that new or altered norms may emerge in social media environments is that "people shape their media environments, perceive them, and have agency within them because of imagined affordances" (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 1). Accordingly, transforming the social meaning of technical features is possible, as the example of the "hashtag" illustrates: hashtags were initially made not for political mobilization but as features to help build groups around messages on Twitter (boyd et al., 2010), but people recognized that they could be used as powerful mobilization tools even outside the social media sphere (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Wang et al., 2016). Following this logic, imagined affordances may shape what political action is possible and desirable from the citizens' perspective.

Citizenship norms may also emerge in social media environments because social interaction is a constitutive part of social media environments. A relevant, yet mostly implicit, aspect of the existing research is that political participation online occurs in the context of socially mediated publicness (Baym & boyd, 2012). Social interaction is based on socially constructed behavioral scripts that provide individuals with guidelines for action and enable them to navigate various situations (Bicchieri, 2017; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). However, interaction at times yields unintended consequences and dynamics, which, in turn, can induce a renegotiation of existing norms or emergence of new norms. For example, norms can emerge due to individual or collective actions that harm or benefit individuals and collectives (Coleman, 1990; Opp, 2001). Although social media environments induce benefits for individuals' civic participation

(such as political mobilization on an unprecedented scale or political emancipation through self-expression), they also induce harmful experiences that may constrain individual agency (such as hate speech that aims to intimidate and discriminate) (Parviz & Piercy, 2021). In the presence of both harms and benefits, there is reason to believe that there would be a demand for norms (Coleman, 1990) that help people navigate social media environments in a democratic sense. Thus, we ask the following:

RQ. What citizenship norms do people express, and how are they related to experiences in social media environments?

Methods

Having highlighted several desiderata that need more exploration and data-based theory development, like whether there is a certain kind of "digital citizenship" or a new plurality of norms and practices, we formulated a research question of an exploratory nature that we addressed with qualitative methods. We collected individual data with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to provide personal reflections on how citizenship on social media is experienced, what norms of good citizenship in social media environments are expressed and shared, and how these inform civic practice online.

Participants and Data Collection

For younger generations, social and digital media play a far more central role in obtaining news and participating in society than for older generations (Andersen et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020); hence, they can serve as spaces for political socialization (de Vreese & Moeller, 2014). Accordingly, we believed that people roughly in their twenties are suitable for studying the emergence and actualization of norms in social media environments. We purposely sampled 40 people aged between 18 and 35 years, all residents of the German capital, who used at least two different social media platforms daily. We recruited participants via flyers and social media groups and offered gift cards to encourage participation. The average age of the sample was 27 years. All participants used Facebook, whereas roughly half used Twitter or Instagram. Participants with academic backgrounds and women were slightly overrepresented in the sample. Table 1 provides an overview of sample characteristics.

Table 1. Overview of the Sample.

Criteria	Specification	Interview participants $n=25$	Focus group participants $n=15$
		Frequency	Frequency
Age	18–26	6	8
	27–35	19	7
	Average	29	26
Gender	Female	15	9
	Male	10	6
Education	Non-academic	10	6
	Academic	15	9
Political interest	Strong	13	10
	Medium	9	2
	Low	3	3
Social media use	Facebook	25	15
	Twitter	14	4
	Instagram	12	4

The semi-structured interviews covered the participants' social media use and perceived role as citizens. We further encouraged reflection about past experiences applying conversational props, such as examples of Facebook posts. Midway through the interviewing period, we conducted a set of three focus group discussions as an additional method, using a slightly adapted interview guide. We found this method suitable for ensuring that we did not overlook relevant topics, as focus groups provide a social situation for negotiating the topic at hand (Morgan, 1997). Based on our evolving understanding of the topics, we adapted the semi-structured interview guide for the remaining interviews. When we noticed that no new topics were coming up, we assumed we had reached a state of theoretical saturation and stopped data collection at the 25th interview. Each interview lasted 60–90 min, and each focus group took up to 2 hr. One of the authors conducted the interviews and focus group discussions on the university campus or at locations selected by the participants. German was the language used in the interviews and focus groups.

Analysis Strategy

The interviews and the focus group discussions were coded using MAXQDA. While one author undertook the coding, all authors regularly discussed the emerging categories and decided how various terms had to be coded and categorized (Saldaña, 2016). The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Gioia et al., 2013). In the initial coding phase, we themed the data (Saldaña, 2016) and then openly coded the interviews. Open coding yielded first-order categories that were still very close to the original text of the interviews (Gioia et al., 2013; see Figure 1). In the next step of axial coding, we aimed to integrate the first-order categories into higher level categories (referred to as second-level themes) by seeking similarities and differences among the generated codes and asking questions about conditions, the meaning people gave to certain actions and interactions, and the consequences thereof (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this phase, we searched for "oughtness" in the stories of our interviewees, aiming to distinguish between normative and behavioral dimensions. The codes that did not prove productive for understanding citizens' normative behavior were excluded. The second-order themes were further distilled into core

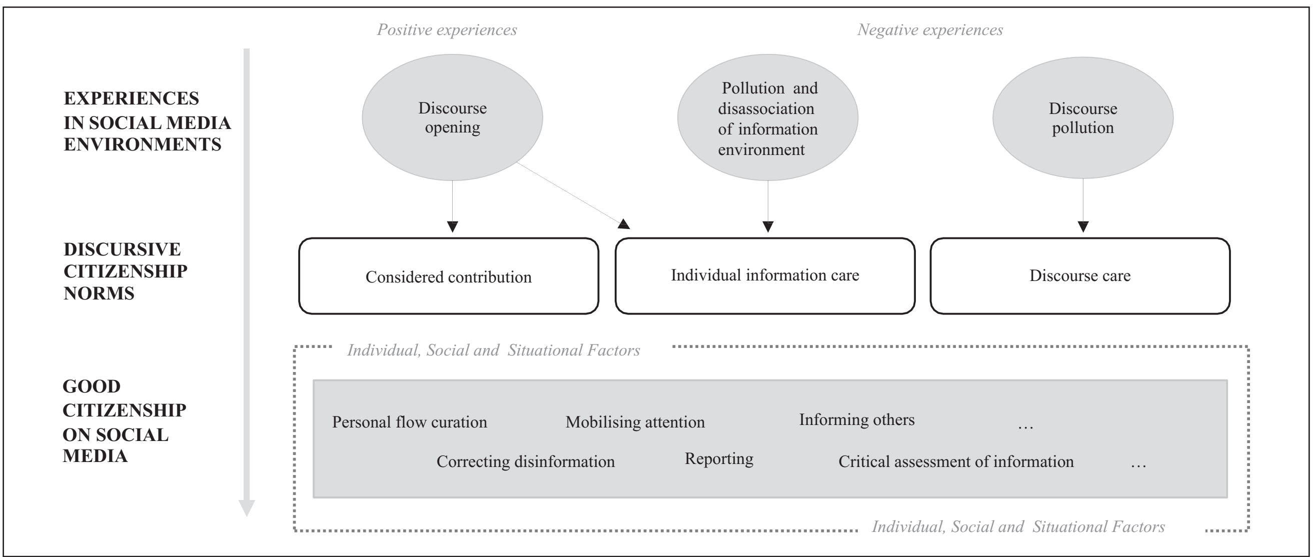

Figure 1. The emergence of citizenship norms in social media environments.

theoretical dimensions (referred to as aggregate dimensions) in an additional step of theoretical coding (Gioia et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2016). You can find our data structure in the supplementary materials.

Emergence and Actualization of Citizenship Norms in Social Media Environments

When asked about good citizenship online, participants were primarily concerned with practices that aimed at informing themselves and forming an opinion, and not, as we might have expected from the literature, contributing to social change and mobilizing around political issues (Bennett, 2008; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Lane, 2020). In this sense, the participants' notions of citizenship emphasized civic duties of information and opinion formation that could be achieved online, and this was central to how they assessed good citizenship regarding social media. Participants expressed a host of positive and negative experiences for realizing informed and opinionated citizenship, and these experiences then provided the ground for formulating relevant citizenship norms. As it is unlikely that all individuals support a norm or evaluate experiences similarly (Coleman, 1990), we present only themes that predominantly emerged in the interviews. The logic of norm emergence, as shown in our data, is presented in Figure 1.

Pollution and Disassociation of the Information Environment. Throughout the interviews, the most common negative experience was a sense of fatigue due to an abundance of information, coupled with what participants perceived as pollution of the information environment (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Concretely, participants were bothered by the typical click-bait content from dubious sources and the perceived tabloidization of traditional news outlets regarding sensationalist and misleading headlines that aim at generating clicks (Bradshaw et al., 2020). Moreover, the interviewees reported being worried about the uncontrollable and speedy proliferation of junk news. What made this alarming, some said, was their susceptibility to reading headlines swiftly and believing without much thinking. A few interviewees shared their irritation with their own inadequate reasoning and ability to (quickly) identify falsehoods:

> Sometimes, I catch myself when friends share something funny, something crazy; then, I look in the comments and see that it's just an altered image. Then, I'm surprised how quickly they had me on, and that adds to my skepticism, and I wonder why I fell for it. (Lars, aged 33)

However, participants largely considered themselves well equipped to face the challenge of environmental pollution and considered *misinformed others* to be far more problematic. These "infodemically vulnerable" group(s), as Nielsen et al. (2020) call them, are regarded as leading causes of the "pollution." Carmen (aged 25) angrily explained that

> These [falsehoods] wouldn't have any foundation if people wouldn't share them . . . people don't take the time to read articles in detail and to think a step further: *Where does this information come from? Where does the data basis come from?* And developing an understanding for the fact that some outlets work reputably, and others don't. But this just doesn't happen anymore.

Moreover, Agnes (aged 33) was convinced that some people "know [about misinformation], but simply don't care," adding that "such people, even if it sounds arrogant, have to be taken by the hand, because they just can't handle it."

Participants were aggravated by this perceived pollution of their information environment because it burdened their information practices, in that it forced them to invest more effort into informed citizenship.

Concurrently, many participants were concerned about losing a societal common ground due to human and algorithmic selectiveness. For instance, human selectiveness was understood as the preference for information sources that affirmed one's beliefs and as removing "friends" or unfollowing those whom one disagrees: "You often get caught up in little bubbles and only want to hear what you yourself stand behind" (Alex, aged 18). However, algorithmic selectiveness was considered more problematic and, for many, resulted in frustration over the content received or missed (Swart, 2021). For example, people complained that the algorithm "treats news like commercials" (Elisabeth, aged 26), always showing more of the same thing, which many believed could induce tunnel vision and filter bubbles. Participants experienced selectiveness as a disassociation from people and topics, which they perceived as harmful, as it hindered their access to diverse perspectives needed to form an informed opinion.

Discourse Pollution. Moreover, the participants were annoyed at the poor discussion culture on social media, characterized by the "right of the louder." Lars (aged 33) explained,

> I do frequently look at the comment section to learn how people discuss a topic. . . But somehow, I really don't think that the comment section reflects how most people would discuss a topic.

Participants also criticized a lack of constructiveness, benevolence, and politeness in user comments, all of which can be considered violations of communication norms (Bormann et al., 2021). Commonly, participants speculated that such communicative misbehaviors occur due to the anonymity and de-individuation that social media environments afford. Echoing previous qualitative research from a US context (Marwick, 2021; Penney, 2019), our participants often talked about battles of ideological camps, describing them as a "waste of time" (Hannes, aged 31) and criticizing them for discouraging free expression:

> Because, if I say something and right away there are 20 right-wing Twitter accounts shooting off racist insults . . . then this inhibits people from expressing themselves publicly. (Markus, aged 22)

Many believed that the visibility of such ideological battles altogether enhanced polarization. Overall, participants experienced discourse pollution as harmful because it discouraged discussion, both for those who wished to participate and for standby citizens (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), who followed online discussions as a way to obtain "authentic public opinion," like Lars, whom we quoted above.

Discourse Opening. Simultaneously, the participants experienced social media environments as an expansion of the discursive civic space. Given the centrality of informed and opinionated citizenship in our sample, discourse opening was seen as beneficial for one's civic practices. Most participants expressed their satisfaction with being able to benefit from others' informed contributions on social media and to access a plurality of perspectives easily. Cherished perspectives included the following:

> The people around [East-German city] apparently have no work but also have little to say in the mass media. And now, . . . you can really hear people in videos or via blogs, and you can really see . . . individuals who are concerned speaking for themselves. (Thea, aged 27)

Observing "authentic public opinion" was further enabled by the affordance of anonymity, which facilitated lurking (Crawford, 2009). It was quite common for participants to check out the Facebook pages or Twitter accounts of those with different political leanings. Munir (aged 31) told us that he regularly checked some right-wing accounts to "see what's new with the enemy."

Finally, while being critical of algorithmic curation, the participants enjoyed the affordances of network association (Fox & McEwan, 2017) and virality, as conveyed in their perceived amenity to algorithmic curation and content suggestions for informing themselves, adding to viral "news you can't avoid" (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). For example, Julian (aged 22) told us that he liked that some platforms "give you suggestions for other people and accounts that might be of interest that you otherwise wouldn't have stumbled upon."

Based on these positive and negative experiences of being part of the public discourse on social media, the interviewees expressed how people ought to handle these experiences and navigate social media environments in the sense of "good citizenship."

Discursive Citizenship Norms

Individual Information Care. People employ different strategies to handle information on social media (e.g., Koc-Michalska et al., 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2021). However, we found that people speak of some of these strategies in a normatively laden sense, seeing it as a civic duty not only to inform oneself but also to do so *properly*. The call for individual information care emerges from the perceived prevalence of information carelessness among fellow citizens, which induces the inflation of junk news online. For example, the participants considered that one must choose information sources that one consumes actively and thoughtfully, as opposed to giving in to algorithmic curation and political targeting. As Nora (aged 21) explained, "I can only be partly responsible for the things not shown to me [by the algorithm].

But you should actively try to shape [the part that you see].” Most of the participants also believed that social media feeds must not be the only sources of news and that they ought to seek professional journalistic news outside of social media by, for example, having news apps or actively visiting websites of news outlets. Participants’ practices implied active news feed curation, including following trustworthy people or sources, ensuring a diversity of information sources, and unfriending and unfollowing misinformed others.

In response to the perceived informational pollution online and to distinguish themselves from misinformed others, the participants insisted on adopting a skeptical attitude toward information on social media and reflecting on the information they consume. This finding speaks to a generalized skepticism in navigating “different sources and platforms for different purposes without having naive confidence in any one of them” (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018, p. 2).

Finally, although the pollution of the information environment posed a problem for most participants, and despite the agreement that junk news should somehow be countered, we could not identify a norm for correcting dis- and misinformation on social media, although many people in the sample said they did it. Noah (aged 23) tried to correct disinformation on many occasions by providing links to statistical facts: “[b]ut people are often unteachable, and you are talking to a wall. That’s why, at some point, you just stop talking to this wall . . . because it’s not working.” Several participants reported having similar experiences. Hence, they often impose sanctions by hiding, unfollowing, or deleting misinformed persons without engaging in a verbal argument.

As a reaction to the perceived lack of (and capacity for) agency of misinformed others, the participants emphasized their own agency in curating information. In sum, individual information care thus aims to tackle negative experiences of informational pollution by individual means.

Discourse Care. Based on their experiences and observations that incivility pollutes the discursive environment, the participants insisted on the indispensability of adhering to discussion norms online. Such norms included refraining from insulting people or treating others’ opinions with respect. The participants felt obliged to engage in sanctioning incivility by various means. This responsibility was anchored in the shared vocabulary of civil courage (e.g., Greitemeyer et al., 2007) and articulated in the imperative to “demand civility from others” (Hannes, aged 31). In this light, the participants saw reporting disruptive content, such as hate speech, incivility, or disinformation, in terms of duty to “alert the platform that something is wrong. . . then the ball is in their court” (Sophia, aged 26). However, the participants were not convinced of efficacy of such interventions. As Michael (aged 28) explained, “I don’t think it’s an effective remedy because Facebook is apparently not trying very hard . . . But I’m doing it anyway.”

Many participants shared ambivalence about proper ways of caring for the discourse. Philip (aged 29) explained,

> What I do when people get insulted or get bombarded with hate speech is to report their comments. I think of this as my duty, saying that, okay, well, this has gone too far . . . but I’d never write comments because that’s when you get torn apart.

While participants felt that “one must do something” and “one cannot remain a mere spectator,” the participants preferred soft, low-threshold interventions, such as reporting hate speech and affirming counter-comments through liking, over confrontational, high-threshold interventions, such as counter-speaking (cf. Porten-Cheé et al., 2020). A sizable minority in the sample strongly believed that counter-speaking is a way of safeguarding the plurality of positions in online discussions that can counter polarization. Anna (aged 33) said,

> I pay attention . . . if there are too many right-wing comments, I always try to bring in a positive, that is, a different view. Because if my comments get more likes, then the right-wing comments are not at the top. It may be a way for me to get involved, although I’m not the kind of person who likes to write in groups, but I cannot just stand by.

Anna’s account stands out in two ways. First, we see that the addressees of counter-speaking and counter-liking are not primarily the misbehaving others; instead, the aim is to help form observers’ opinions by showing them a different viewpoint. Second, those who counter-speak count on the support of like-minded citizens in the sense that “group-related problems can be solved by collective effort” (Bandura, 1995; van Zomeren et al., 2004, p. 651). As Elisabeth (aged 29) noted, “If somebody said something neutral and someone replies to it with hate speech, other people speak up and say that’s wrong. You see this more and more.” Furthermore, safeguarding the plurality of positions included engaging in discursive allyship, such as defending users who are treated unfairly or intervening when a minority group is misrepresented (Kalch & Naab, 2017). Elisabeth’s observation, which most participants shared, hinted at the normalization of certain sanctions in social media environments.

Considered Contribution. The participants all subscribed to a culture of sharing (John, 2017) in that they generally appreciated informed others’ sharing of information and knowledge. However, participants did not speak of sharing or political expression on social media regarding duty, although many reported contributing in various ways, ranging from opinion expression (Lane, 2020) to mobilizing around political issues. Instead, the participants repeatedly underlined that the pollution of the information and discourse environments is caused by “relentless” and “thoughtless” sharing and liking of content. Rather, the participants considered that

ensuring the quality of content was more of a civic duty than merely deciding to contribute or not:

> Expressing your political opinion, I don't know. . . many people are into it, fair enough, but it has to be very well differentiated, otherwise you should better not post it. There is enough garbage online already. (Max, aged 31)

Participants used words like "nuanced" and "well-argued" to describe how they wished people contributed online. Some participants were in favor of contributing only with expert opinions, and this was reportedly the logic behind many of their own contributions. Hannah (aged 26), who usually did not post much, became very active during the discussion about the European Union Copyright Directive. Having expert knowledge of the topic, she said, "I felt more and more that it was my duty to inform people because it would impact everyone, and no one was reporting about it." Concurrently, these calls for rational and objective contributions stood in tension with participants who cherished affective engagement as an expression of an "authentic public opinion" and did not consider it democratically or discursively illegitimate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

Moreover, even participants who enjoyed sharing and posting did not impose expectations onto other citizens. For example, when asked whether he believes that participating online was a part of the civic role nowadays, Alex (aged 18) believed it was optional. Kathrin's (aged 32) account is typical for this stance:

> I actually only share or write stuff when I really find something important. But I do it only with topics that matter to me, and it's true that I don't know if someone will actually read it at the end of the day or not. After all, I feel good about it—I'm letting others know what I think and at the same time I might even do something good for my friends [by informing them]. I find that acceptable [laughs], but I don't think that anyone needs to do it; in the end, it doesn't matter that much.

Finally, all participants agreed about the responsibility to communicate only authentic content—"if they really mean it" (Marwick & boyd, 2011)—and if one has validated a post's truthfulness beforehand. Inflationary contributions were routinely sanctioned by hiding or unfollowing.

Discussion

In this article, we argue that previous research on normative change in citizenship in the light of digital media has neglected that social media are both participation tools and communicative environments, where unexpected consequences of social interaction may yield new norms or require an actualization of existing norms under new conditions. Thereupon, we set out to explore what citizenship norms people express related to social media environments and how experiences shape these norms.

By examining citizenship norms in the specific context of socially mediated political practices on social media, we found that users share positive experiences, which we term discourse opening, and a host of negative experiences of political participation, including pollution and disassociation of information and discourse environments. These experiences comprise the background against which users reflect on what are appropriate and acceptable civic practices in social media environments, yielding what we conceptualize as discursive citizenship norms: individual information care, discourse care, and considered contribution.

Beyond the traditional understanding of informed citizenship as a duty to *be* informed about political affairs (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001), and based on their experiences on social media, our participants strongly focused on *seeking and processing* information. *Individual information care* as a citizenship norm speaks to the necessity of navigating the tiring complexity of polluted information environments online while making the best out of it. Good citizens navigate online information environments thoughtfully: to benefit from discourse opening, citizens must actively choose information sources while reducing the probability of being misinformed by maintaining a skeptical attitude and critically assessing information.

While individual information care emphasizes the responsibility for oneself as a citizen, discourse care hints at a shared responsibility for online public discourse. *Discourse care* as a normative demand emerges from the shared notion that public discourse is everyone's responsibility and that a functioning discourse is a precondition for opinion formation. Norms of discourse care resonate with the idea of establishing accessible and rational discourse conditions in the face of negative experiences, as demanded by deliberative democracy theory (Habermas, 2006). As a growing number of publications inquire about how and why citizens intervene against incivility (Kunst et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2019), we provide further empirical evidence that—at least some citizens—may intervene based on the feelings of responsibility for the public discourse (Bormann et al., 2021; Porten-Cheé et al., 2020; Ziegele et al., 2020).

Our study also helps to further theorize the concept of expressive citizenship. The findings corroborate recent research that showed that political expression is the least important part of good citizenship compared with other, more traditional ways of participating in society (Lane, 2020). Concurrently, our findings reveal another relevant dimension of political expression that has been neglected in the debates about digital citizenship: that political expression can in fact be considered *bad* citizenship if it violates communication norms and pollutes the discourse. In this light, it is the discursive quality that matters for political expression as a good civic practice, not the practice per se. If, however, citizens decide to engage in political self-expression, they expect that this contribution to public discourse is considerate and thoughtful.

We term these norms *discursive* citizenship norms for two reasons. First, our findings underline that citizens engage in what has been conceptualized as discursive participation (Vromen et al., 2015) and effectively perceive themselves as part of the public discourse. In social media environments, citizens perceive that even small acts of engagement, such as liking, unfriending, or information sharing, matter for public discourse regarding their symbolic and strategic value (Picone et al., 2019). With these enhanced participatory possibilities, citizens share a sense of ownership of public discourse and accordingly express their standards of good discursive participation. Second, although participants questioned the efficacy of their action to confront pollution, they expressed discourse-related norms when they reflected on why they took responsibility to intervene in disrupted discussions on social media: a firm belief that their counteracting in public discourses can indicate to other users that exchanging information and opinions is possible despite disruptions.

However, although discursive citizenship norms resonate with the ideal of a rational public discourse (Habermas, 2006), particularly in their endeavor to resist the "emotional architectures" of social media environments (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), they should not be read as tools to meet the ideal of a rational public sphere. The participants, so our interpretation, were not concerned with achieving a rational discourse as much as they expected from their fellow citizens to act considerately and develop strategies to protect themselves and each other from pollutions and disruptions. As such, discursive citizenship norms bring to the fore the socially mediated nature of political participation online; they sharpen our view of discursive citizenship as a communicative process (cf. Geber & Hefner, 2019).

Amid hybrid understandings of contemporary citizenship, discursive citizenship norms are dutiful, insofar as they elicit a sense of duty and responsibility toward the quality of the public discourse and other participants and spectators in the discourse. However, discursive citizenship norms also have a self-actualizing dimension, in that people are not bound by any externally mediated authority that prescribes what needs to be done; instead, people are free to choose whether they want to partake in the discourse on social media or not, and in relation to which topics. All the three norms, individual information care, discourse care, and considered contribution, have modal functions, as they provide standards to the how-dimension of citizenship (and not to the what-dimension). Accordingly, we conclude with a definition of discursive citizenship norms as a conceptual umbrella: *discursive citizenship norms are shared understandings of how citizens ought to participate in the public discourse shaped by social media*.

The approach to eliciting norms based on experiences in social media environments was fruitful, as it helped us illustrate what experiences shape certain normative demands. On a critical note, these norms can be read as elitist, in that they do not account for resources that people have at their disposal to be "good citizens" in the public discourse (Fraser, 1990). Considering that the experience of political participation on social media is shaped by various factors, including social identity and group membership (Brock, 2012; Lane et al., 2022), there are good reasons to believe that, for example, marginalized communities might have different experiences and derive norms of discursive participation differently. Future research should investigate citizenship norms in digital environments using a more socially embedded approach.

Moreover, going beyond the study of incivility, future research should delve deeper into how people perceive and sanction transgressions of discursive citizenship norms, and how both platform infrastructures and socially mediated publicness constrain or facilitate norm enforcement. For example, discursive citizenship norms as civic standards can also be used to stigmatize those who fail to live up to them by labeling them as "the misinformed." Also, Marwick's (2021) study on morally motivated harassment indicates how social sanctioning may turn into harassment.

Although our study is bound to a specific social and political context and a particular age group, it reveals that citizens extend established normative conceptions of citizenship by interpreting them through the lens of today's communication environments. Discursive citizenship norms contribute to the debate on hybrid and pluralizing citizenship norms (Ohme, 2019; Penney, 2019; Thorson, 2015) and add a novel perspective to the field of alternative citizenship (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017).

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the student assistants who contributed to this project: Sina Thäsler-Kordonouri and Florian Stiel. They also express their gratitude to many colleagues who provided valuable feedback on this project, including Ariadne Vromen, Nadja Schaetz, and Marlene Kunst, as well as the anonymous reviewers who helped to improve the manuscript significantly.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung 16DII114.

ORCID iDs

Emilija Gagrčin https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2953-1871
Martin Emmer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0722-132X

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

Amnå, E. (2013). Active, passive and standby citizens. In B. Küpper, A. Zick, P. Mompoint-Gaillard, E. Amnå, M. Byram, & A. B. Reinertsen (Eds.), *The EWC statement series* (pp. 17–21). The European Wergeland Centre.

Amnå, E., & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review, European Consortium for Political Research*, *6*(2), 261–281. https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577391300009X

Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & de Vreese, C. (2021). *Generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement. From baby boomers to Generation Z* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111498

Bandura, A. (1995). Exercise of personal and collective efficacy in changing societies. In A. Bandura (Ed.), *Self-efficacy in changing societies* (pp. 1–45). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527692.003

Baym, N. K., & boyd, D. (2012). Socially mediated publicness: An introduction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(3), 320–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705200

Bennett, W. L. (2008). Changing citizenship in the digital age. In W. L. Bennett (Ed.), *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth* (pp. 1–24). MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.1162/dmal.9780262524827.001

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Bennett, W. L., Wells, C., & Freelon, D. (2011). Communicating civic engagement: Contrasting models of citizenship in the youth web sphere. *Journal of Communication*, *61*(5), 835–856. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01588.x

Bicchieri, C. (2017). *Norms in the wild: How to diagnose, measure, and change social norms*. Oxford University Press.

Bode, L., Vraga, E. K., Borah, P., & Shah, D. V. (2014). A new space for political behavior: Political social networking and its democratic consequences. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*(3), 414–429. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12048

Bolzendahl, C., & Coffé, H. (2013). Are "good" citizens "good" participants? Testing citizenship norms and political participation across 25 nations. *Political Studies*, *61*(S1), 45–65. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12010

Bormann, M., Tranow, U., Vowe, G., & Ziegele, M. (2021). Incivility as a violation of communication norms—A typology based on normative expectations toward political communication. *Communication Theory*, qtab018, https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtab018

boyd, D., Golder, S., & Lotan, G. (2010). *Tweet, tweet, retweet: Conversational aspects of retweeting on twitter* [Conference]. 43rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 5–8 January 2010, IEEE, Honolulu, HI, USA. https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2010.412

Bradshaw, S., Howard, P. N., Kollanyi, B., & Neudert, L. M. (2020). Sourcing and automation of political news and information over social media in the United States, 2016–2018. *Political Communication*, *37*(2), 173–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1663322

Brock, A. (2012). From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 529–549. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732147

Cialdini, R. B., & Trost, C. (1998). Social influence: Social norms, conformity and compliance. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & L. Gardner (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (pp. 151–192). McGraw-Hill.

Cohen, C. J., & Kahne, J. (2012). *Participatory politics: New media and youth political action*. MacArthur Foundation.

Coleman, J. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Belknap Press.

Copeland, L., & Feezell, J. T. (2017). The influence of citizenship norms and media use on different modes of political participation in the US. *Political Studies*, *65*(4), 805–823. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717720374

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Crawford, K. (2009). Following you: Disciplines of listening in social media. *Continuum*, *23*(4), 525–535. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903003270

Dalton, R. J. (2008). Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation. *Political Studies*, *56*(1), 76–98. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00718.x

de Vreese, C. H., & Moeller, J. (2014). Communication and political socialization. In C. Reinemann (Ed.), *Political communication* (pp. 529–546). Walter de Gruyter.

Feezell, J. T., Conroy, M., & Guerrero, M. (2016). Internet use and political participation: Engaging citizenship norms through online activities. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, *13*(2), 95–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2016.1166994

Flanagin, A. J. (2020). The conduct and consequence of research on digital communication. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *25*(1), 23–31. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz019

Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). Generalised scepticism: How people navigate news on social media. *Information, Communication & Society*, *22*(12), 1751–1769. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1450887

Fox, J., & McEwan, B. (2017). Distinguishing technologies for social interaction: The perceived social affordances of communication channels scale. *Communication Monographs*, *84*(3), 298–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2017.1332418

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240

Geber, S., & Hefner, D. (2019). Social norms as communicative phenomena: A communication perspective on the theory of normative social behavior. *Studies in Communication & Media*, *8*(1), 6–28. https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2019-1-6

Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Diehl, T. (2019). News finds me perception and democracy: Effects on political knowledge, political interest, and voting. *New Media & Society*, *21*(6), 1253–1271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818817548

Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods*, *16*(1), 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151

Greitemeyer, T., Osswald, S., Fischer, P., & Frey, D. (2007). Civil courage: Implicit theories, related concepts, and measurement. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *2*(2), 115–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760701228789

Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory*, *16*(4), 411–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

John, N. A. (2017). *The age of sharing*. Polity.

Kalch, A., & Naab, T. K. (2017). Replying, disliking, flagging: How users engage with uncivil and impolite comments on news sites. *Studies in Communication & Media*, *6*(4), 395–419. https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2017-4-395

Kligler-Vilenchik, N. (2017). Alternative citizenship models: Contextualizing new media and the new "good citizen.". *New Media & Society*, *19*(11), 1887–1903. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817713742

Koc-Michalska, K., Bimber, B., Gomez, D., Jenkins, M., & Boulianne, S. (2020). Public beliefs about falsehoods in news. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *25*(3), 447–468. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220912693

Kunst, M., Porten-Cheé, P., Emmer, M., & Eilders, C. (2021). Do "Good Citizens" fight hate speech online? Effects of solidarity citizenship norms on user responses to hate comments. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, *18*(3), 258–273. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1871149

Lane, D. S. (2020). In search of the expressive citizen: Citizenship norms and youth political expression on social media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *84*(S1), 257–283. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaa018

Lane, D. S., Do, K., & Molina-Rogers, N. (2021). What is political expression on social media anyway?: A systematic review. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*. 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2021.1985031

Lane, D. S., Do, K., & Molina-Rogers, N. (2022). Testing inequality and identity accounts of racial gaps in political expression on social media. *Political Communication*, *39*, 79–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2021.1919808

Lane, D. S., Kim, D. H., Lee, S. S., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2017). From online disagreement to offline action: How diverse motivations for using social media can increase political information sharing and catalyze offline political participation. *Social Media + Society*, *3*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117716274

Leißner, L., Valentim, A., Porten-Cheé, P., & Emmer, M. (2019). *The selective catalyst: Internet use as a mediator of citizenship norms' effects on political participation* (Weizenbaum Series). https://doi.org/10.34669/wi.ws/1

Marwick, A. E. (2021). Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(2), Article 205630512110213. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021378

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313

Morgan, D. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412984287

Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined affordance: Reconstructing a keyword for communication theory. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603385

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andı, S., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

Nielsen, R. K., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Simon, F. M. (2020). *Communications in the coronavirus crisis: Lessons for the second wave*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Ohme, J. (2019). Updating citizenship? The effects of digital media use on citizenship understanding and political participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, *22*(13), 1903–1928. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1469657

Opp, K.-D. (2001). How do norms emerge? An outline of a theory. *Mind & Society*, *2*(1), 101–128. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02512077

Parviz, E., & Piercy, C. W. (2021). What will they think if I post this? Risks and returns for political expression across platforms. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(4), Article 20563051211055440. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211055439

Penney, J. (2019). "It's my duty to be like 'this is wrong'": Youth political social media practices in the Trump era." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *24*(6), 319–334. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmz017

Picone, I., Kleut, J., Pavlíčková, T., Romic, B., Møller Hartley, J., & De Ridder, S. (2019). Small acts of engagement: Reconnecting productive audience practices with everyday agency. *New Media & Society*, *21*(9), 2010–2028. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819837569

Poindexter, B. P. M., & McCombs, M. E. (2001). Revising the civic duty to keep informed in the new media environment. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *78*(1), 113–126.

Porten-Cheé, P., Kunst, M., & Emmer, M. (2020). Online civic intervention: A new form of political participation under conditions of a disruptive online discourse. *International Journal of Communication*, *14*(2020), 514–534.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Schnaudt, C., van Deth, J. W., Zorell, C., & Theocharis, Y. (2021). Revisiting norms of citizenship in times of democratic change. *Politics*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211031799

Shehata, A., Ekström, M., & Olsson, T. (2016). Developing self-actualizing and dutiful citizens: Testing the ac-dc model using panel data among adolescents. *Communication Research*, *43*(8), 1141–1169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215619988

Swart, J. (2021). Experiencing algorithms: How young people understand, feel about, and engage with algorithmic news selection on social media. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(2), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211008828

Swart, J., & Broersma, M. (2021). The trust gap: Young people's tactics for assessing the reliability of political news. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *27*(2), 396–416. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211006696

Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J. W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political*

Science Review, *10*(1), 139–163. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230

Thorson, K. (2015). Sampling from the civic buffet: Youth, new media and do-it-yourself citizenship. In H. Gil de Zúñiga (Ed.), *New technologies & civic engagement: New agendas in communication* (pp. 3–22). Routledge.

van Deth, J. W. (2007). Norms of citizenship. In R. J. Dalton & H.-D. Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political behaviour* (pp. 402–417). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199270125.003.0021.

van Zomeren, M., Spears, R., Fischer, A. H., & Leach, C. W. (2004). Put your money where your mouth is! Explaining collective action tendencies through group-based anger and group efficacy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*(5), 649–664. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.5.649

Vromen, A., Xenos, M. A., & Loader, B. (2015). Young people, social media and connective action: From organisational maintenance to everyday political talk. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *18*(1), 80–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.933198

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2019). Questioning the ideal of the public sphere: The emotional turn. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(3), 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119852175

Wang, R., Liu, W., & Gao, S. (2016). Hashtags and information virality in networked social movement. *Online Information Review*, *40*(7), 850–866. https://doi.org/10.1108/oir-12-2015-0378

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* (Council of Europe Report, DGI). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.breast.2014.04.002

Watson, B. R., Peng, Z., & Lewis, S. C. (2019). Who will intervene to save news comments? Deviance and social control in communities of news commenters. *New Media & Society*, *21*(8), 1840–1858. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819828328

Ziegele, M., Naab, T. K., & Jost, P. (2020). Lonely together? Identifying the determinants of collective corrective action against uncivil comments. *New Media & Society*, *22*(5), 731–751. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819870130

Author Biographies

Emilija Gagrčin (MA, Freie Universität Berlin) is a doctoral student at the Free University of Berlin and a Research Associate at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society. Her research interests include political communication and social and normative aspects of citizenship in digital environments.

Pablo Porten-Cheé (PhD, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf) is a Junior Professor of Communication Studies and Information Society in Ibero-America at Heidelberg University. His research interests include political communication, political participation, and media effects under digital conditions.

Laura Leißner (MA, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf) is a doctoral student at the Free University Berlin and a Research Associate at the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society. Her research revolves around new forms of political engagement and the changing patterns of citizenship in digitalized societies.

Martin Emmer (PhD, Ilmenau University of Technology) is a Professor for Media and Communication Studies at Freie Universität Berlin and founding director (2017–2019) of the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Berlin. His research interests include political online communication, digital citizenship, and digital methods.

Louise Jørring (MSc, University of Copenhagen) is a PhD fellow at Copenhagen Business School. Her research interests include qualitative methods, digitalization, and the transformation of work.