

Active spectating in the digital public sphere

A qualitative exploration

ELIZABETH SOLVERSON

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, NORD UNIVERSITY, NORWAY

ABSTRACT

Through an interpretive, user-centred approach, in this article I investigate a frequently overlooked dimension of online political engagement: spectating. Drawing on mini focus groups with Norwegian young adults, I challenge depictions of so-called lurking as antisocial and unproductive by advocating a more nuanced view of silent social media use. The findings demonstrate that spectating is viewed as a socially acceptable and meaningful activity within the participants' broader expectations for civic behaviour. The analysis also presents active and normatively desirable activities encompassed in spectating – such as monitoring, critically consuming, and consciously curating political content – which can support citizens to maintain public connection and develop informed opinions. Ultimately, the study elevates the discussion on digital citizenship by illustrating how active spectating can serve as a meaningful and cooperative form of participation within a distributed understanding of civic engagement in an era of communicative plenty.

KEYWORDS: social media, lurking, spectating, political participation, young adults, youth

Introduction

This article addresses a critical yet underexplored aspect of online political participation: spectating. Often pejoratively dubbed “lurking” (Edelmann, 2015; Hong et al., 2023; Kushner, 2016), spectating encompasses silent, receptive online behaviours involved in seeking and interpreting information. Despite the rich landscape of online political behaviour, previous research has predominantly focused on expressive activities, often overlooking the nuanced role of the far

more common activities involved in spectating (Ruess et al., 2023; Theocharis et al., 2021). This oversight has led to a limited understanding of how receptive activities may contribute to political discourse and democratic engagement, prompting calls for research exploring their potential relevance (Crawford, 2011; Holst & Moe, 2021; Jensen & Schwartz, 2021).

Through an interpretive, user-centred approach, I seek to reframe spectating as a potentially active and significant form of political participation. The research is grounded in data from seven mini focus groups with young adults, aged 18–25, in Norway. The primary research aim is to explore how participants portray spectating as political participation. This is investigated through two sub-questions: 1) How do participants perceive and articulate the appropriateness and significance of spectating as political participation? 2) What normatively desirable political behaviours are involved in spectating?

I begin by problematising the bias toward expression over silence within research on online political participation, particularly in light of current conditions of information abundance (Cotter & Thorson, 2022; Ercan et al., 2019). Subsequently, I outline theoretical notions underpinning the study, including positive interpretations of political spectating (Felicetti, 2022; Green, 2010) and a distributed approach to deliberative engagement (Goodin, 2003; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Moe, 2020, 2023). This is followed by a description of the study methodology and presentation of the findings. The findings demonstrate the productive role spectating can play in the distribution and uptake of knowledge, expertise, and ideas across the citizenry, potentially promoting informed opinion formation and further engagement. Based on these findings, I introduce the concept of active spectating, which involves participatory approaches to seeking, viewing, and interpreting political content on social media that align with the expectations that citizens hold for themselves and others. In the final section, I consider the findings in the context of previous literature and theory, emphasising how active spectating meaningfully contributes to a systemic understanding of deliberative democracy.

Voice and silence in political participation

Political participation, described as “the *elixir of life* for democracy” (van Deth, 2014: 350), is of perpetual interest to social scientists. However, defining what “counts” as participation is a topic of ongoing debate (Kim & Hoewe, 2023; Ruess et al., 2023). While scholars generally agree that political participation involves political activity voluntarily undertaken by citizens (Theocharis & van Deth, 2017; van Deth, 2014), there is disagreement regarding how active or overtly political such activity must be to qualify as genuine participation – particularly within the online realm (Dennis, 2019; Kim & Hoewe, 2023; Ruess et al., 2023).

Discussions about political participation often evoke the notion of voice as a metaphor for civic empowerment (Barber, 2003; Green, 2010). Political expression is, therefore, often depicted as a uniformly positive political act, something society inevitably benefits from increasing (James & Lee, 2017;

Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021). Spectating, characterised by a distinct *lack* of voice, is typically excluded from political participation, serving as a counterpart against which genuine acts of participation are compared and defined (Felicetti, 2022). The notion of citizen-as-spectator is often invoked as the antithesis of “good citizenship”, depicting a passive, disinterested, and alienated citizenry (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). This outlook is particularly influential today, as broad support for participatory and deliberative democratic models – expecting active and frequent citizen engagement – has displaced the previously dominant minimalistic models, which demanded comparatively little from citizens.

This perspective also permeates discourse on political behaviour on social media. Research has primarily emphasised visible, expressive activities like content creation and sharing (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; James & Lee, 2017; Ruess et al., 2023). Silent, receptive modes of social media use are often overlooked, characterised as passive, a “lack of” participation, or even as posing a threat to online communities (Edelmann, 2015; Kushner, 2016; Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021). Indeed, the most common moniker for silent usage, lurking, is borrowed from the offline verb meaning “to lie in wait in a place of concealment especially for an evil purpose” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), clearly denoting an antisocial and unwelcome presence.

However, so-called lurking is and always has been the most prevalent mode of Internet usage (Hong et al., 2023; Nielsen, 2006). Moreover, although distinctions are often made between “lurkers” and more visible participants, virtually all users – active contributors included – read, view, and reflect on content published by others. Concerning political topics specifically, studies show that only a minority of citizens regularly contribute political content, while a far larger number encounter such posts and comments in their newsfeeds (Moe et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2023; Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021).

The narrow focus on voice-as-participation, coupled with the neglect of silent behaviours, has shaped expectations of good citizenship that are disconnected from the everyday experiences of the average citizen. This is true offline as well as online, since, as Green (2010: 4) has pointed out, in general, apart from casting the occasional vote, most citizens engage with “the political” primarily by watching and listening to others who are taking action, rather than speaking up themselves. The ranking of speech above silence becomes increasingly dubious within current conditions of “communicative plenty” (Ercau et al., 2019), where many citizens feel overwhelmed and fatigued by the amount of information they encounter in their daily lives (Cotter & Thorson, 2022). The prevalence of “dark participation” (Quandt, 2018) online, such as spreading disinformation and so-called trolling, provides further challenges to the positioning of political expression as inherently positive.

Online political expression is often assumed to hold particular significance for younger cohorts, who are avid users of digital technologies and less inclined to engage in conventional political participation activities, such as joining a political party or voting (Bennett, 2008; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). However, empirical research has complicated this narrative. Even within younger

generations, most users rarely or never contribute political content online (Moe et al., 2019; Sakariassen & Meijer, 2021). Moreover, young people's perceptions of online political talk are often nuanced and critical (Gagrčin, 2023; Sveningsson, 2014; Thorson et al., 2014). And, most young people consider other political activities, such as voting, developing opinions, and aiding those less fortunate, as more important for good citizenship than online expression (Lane, 2020; Oser et al., 2023).

Recent research indicates that navigating the often overwhelming online “information cacophony” (Cotter & Thorson, 2022) has produced new norms for good citizenship among users in digital spaces, which emphasise silent, receptive behaviours over speaking up. Gagrčin and colleagues (2022) found that young Germans endorse “discursive citizenship norms”, expecting citizens to practice “individual information care” by intentionally selecting credible sources and critically evaluating information, and “discourse care” by thoughtfully considering their contributions and avoiding polluting the discourse with misleading or otherwise unhelpful information. These findings align with broader trends that highlight algorithmic awareness and conscientious curation as increasingly essential civic skills (Gran et al., 2021; Greene et al., 2022). This research underscores the importance of developing an understanding of the silent political behaviours encompassed in spectating.

Distributed citizenship: Complicating the active versus passive binary

Observing the marked disparity between dominant normative democratic theories, which expect citizens to regularly participate in political processes and discussions, and empirical reality, some scholars have questioned the relevance of such expectations for contemporary societies (Christiano, 2015; Holst & Moe, 2021; Moe, 2023). Researchers have delineated “alternative” models of citizenship that align more closely with the attitudes and behaviours of contemporary citizens (see Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017) and account for the often-overlooked majority who fall somewhere between “disengaged” and “activist” (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Lieberkind & Bruun, 2021; Norris, 1999; Schudson, 1998).

Schudson (1998), for instance, introduced the “monitorial citizen”, who makes a rational choice to not actively engage in politics, but nonetheless maintains a watchful eye on political processes from a distance. In a similar vein, Amnå and Ekman (2014) proposed “standby citizens” to describe the majority of Swedish youth who, though generally passive, are politically interested and prepared to become active as situations demand – for instance, if a cause they care about enters the agenda (Manning, 2013). Observing similar trends, Lieberkind and Bruun (2021: 37) described young Scandinavians as “reserved citizens” who are “neither simply active nor simply passive” but rather “*actively passive*”.

This broadening of the purview of good citizenship takes into account the inescapable reality that “people have varying resources, time, and energy to spend on public issues, and they spend it differently” (Moe, 2023: 113). It also

challenges the assumption that individuals are consistently either “active” or “passive”, acknowledging that citizens can shift between various *modes* of citizenship. Recognising the co-existence of diverse citizenship styles and modes (see also Ohme, 2019; Thorson, 2015) prompts consideration of a broader variety of political activities, as well as the relationships that may exist between different actors and processes within the public sphere.

Deliberative systems theory, which conceptualises the public sphere as a system where different parts work together to form a cohesive whole (see Mansbridge et al., 2012), offers a strong foothold for exploring these relationships. Collectively, proponents of this perspective argue that the deliberative system should fulfil three main functions: producing well-informed democratic decisions (epistemic function), fostering mutual respect among citizens (ethical function), and ensuring inclusivity in the political process (participatory function) (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Holst & Moe, 2021). But, significantly, not every component of the system needs to excel in all functions; the strengths in one deliberative site can offset weaknesses in another.

When applied to citizenship, this perspective shifts our focus from individual citizens acting in isolation to citizens’ *collective* role (Moe, 2023). According to Christiano (2015), this collective role consists of choosing the aims or values which society ought to pursue and ensuring that society is pursuing the chosen aims. But, importantly, citizens need not pursue these aims in identical ways or with consistent intensity. Rather, the systemic perspective perceives democratic legitimacy as best served through functional differentiation, with different actors fulfilling different roles and relating to one another according to a division of labour (Chambers, 2013; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

A foundational component of civic engagement within a systemic understanding of the public sphere is public connection (Moe, 2020, 2023). Public connection refers to citizens’ orientation toward matters of public concern, which can be transformed into attention (Couldry et al., 2007). Public connection represents a fundamental level of engagement essential for citizens to collectively fulfil their shared civic duties and serves as a necessary precursor to more concerted forms of participation (Moe, 2023).

Moe (2020, 2023) has argued that the work involved in building and maintaining public connection is *distributed* among actors, with citizens supporting and relying on one another to gather, select, analyse, and evaluate information for decision-making. In this way, knowledge travels within and across social networks “between people with more or less expertise in different topics and varying degrees of interest in certain issues and developments” (Moe, 2020: 218). This perspective simultaneously lowers the threshold of good citizenship, recognising that citizens may engage with politics in differing ways and intensities, while still expecting all citizens to maintain at least minimal connection to public issues and be ready to act if necessary (Moe, 2020).

As social media enable citizens to contribute, distribute, and access information, these platforms have the potential to serve as key arenas for the distribution of public connection and expertise (Holst & Moe, 2021). To illustrate this point, in

the forthcoming analysis I evoke the notion of the digital epistemic commons (see also Collins et al., 2020). With this concept, I position the online discourse as a shared, jointly managed assortment of intellectual resources – ideas, knowledge, and information – which can inform citizens’ political thinking and opinion formation (Nieminen, 2014). Unfortunately, the widespread accessibility and lack of gatekeepers leave this shared resource pool susceptible to a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), in the form of overcrowding and discourse pollution (Collins et al., 2020). I argue that the dual forces at play – social media’s potential epistemic function and the pathologies that threaten this function – shape citizens’ perceptions and define their approaches to appropriate and meaningful online political behaviour.

Casting a positive light on spectating

Spectating, in this context, encompasses receptive online processes, including seeking, selecting, viewing, and interpreting political content, as well as non-contributory actions, such as “liking” or “hiding” content, which can subtly influence content curation. It does not include creating, contributing, or sharing content. It is important to note that, like expression, spectating is not inherently positive nor meaningful. Nonetheless, as the forthcoming analysis demonstrates, it can, at times, encompass active and normatively desirable political behaviours.

In examining the positive dimensions of spectating, I interweave various theoretical perspectives. Along with the notions of “actively passive” citizenship (Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Lieberkind & Bruun, 2021; Schudson, 1998) and distributed citizenship (Chambers, 2013; Moe, 2020, 2023) addressed above, I draw on positive portrayals of political spectatorship (Felicetti, 2022; Green, 2010) and deliberative listening (Dobson, 2014; Goodin, 2003) from political theory. Additionally, I build on conceptualisations of silent social media usage as listening (Crawford, 2011; Lacey, 2013), theories of audiences as active (Livingstone, 2015; Schrøder, 2018), and active curation (Greene et al., 2022; Thorson & Wells, 2016) from communication studies. In this section, I briefly introduce each of these threads to provide context for the subsequent exploration of online spectating.

Green (2010) and Felicetti (2022) have each challenged the conventional characterisation of spectating as an inherently negative and disempowered mode of citizenship. In his pioneering work on the topic, Green (2010) highlighted the key role spectators play in the public sphere: watching, listening, and judging the merit of interlocutors’ words and deeds. Felicetti (2022) emphasised that spectatorship becomes empowering and positive when it involves active consideration and creation of meanings, with interpretive labour serving as a key differentiating feature from its more passive and disinterested forms.

This aligns with insights from reception studies, which highlight how audiences do not passively absorb information but, rather, actively make sense of media texts, decoding their meanings in the context of their personal experiences, interests, and knowledge to derive meaning and value (Livingstone, 2015; Schrøder, 2018). On social media, these assessments play a role in content cura-

tion processes: the production, selection, and filtering of content (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Along with other actors, including content creators, newsmakers, algorithms, and other users, users' choices of what to watch, like, and so on subtly "nudge" algorithms, thereby influencing the content they may be shown in the future (Mathieu & Pavlíčková, 2017). Notably, due to the social element of curation – where user engagement influences the visibility of content for other users – these processes not only shape individual users' future consumption but also exert a subtle force on the collective discourse (Thorson & Wells, 2016). In encompassing users' curational choices and actions within spectating, I build on recent research which positions users' intentional strategies for navigating online spaces and constructing their newsfeeds as proactive participation (Greene et al., 2022; Mathieu & Pavlíčková, 2017).

A key aspect of spectating is listening. Political theorists generally agree that listening is an essential component of effective deliberation (Dobson, 2014; Mansbridge, 2015). Listening enables citizens to better understand why individuals hold the views they do, thereby fostering respect (Goodin, 2003). Typically, listening and speaking are expected to happen concurrently, with all actors involved taking turns to speak and listen. However, the deliberative systems approach allows for a disaggregation of deliberative processes, meaning the expressive and reflective functions need not happen to the same degree in all persons or in every space (Ercan et al., 2019), and the insights gained from listening in one setting may inform and inspire participation in other settings (Holst & Moe, 2021). Goodin (2003) highlighted how deliberative processes occurring within the heads of individual citizens, where they weigh and evaluate different viewpoints, become relevant to the political process when those citizens develop opinions and, ultimately, cast votes that are informed by their internal-reflective "deliberation within".

The notion of listening has also been productively used to reframe silent social media usage more positively (Adjin-Tettey & Garman, 2023; Crawford, 2011; Lacey, 2013). Crawford (2011: 64) defined such "listening" as encapsulating "ways of receiving and attending to the manifold discussions, ideas, and forms of content online". The notion of online listening takes important steps toward the goals of this article. Nevertheless, considering the predominantly visual nature of contemporary social media, I propose spectating as a more fitting verb. Spectating also suggests a collective, attentive audience to which contributors direct their public performances, thereby reinforcing the integral role spectating users play within online communication flows. In what follows, I delve into the different activities encompassed in spectating, and the meanings they hold, in more detail.

Methodology

Study context and participants

The research took place in Norway, a highly digitalised, stable democracy, where 97 per cent of young adults regularly use social media (Statistics Norway, 2023).

While use of social media for news is widespread in Norway (Newman et al., 2023), only a minority of citizens regularly contribute political content online (Moe et al., 2019).

To recruit participants, I circulated announcements throughout local institutions, often with the help of relevant gatekeepers. The sample included twenty individuals, eleven women and nine men, aged 18–25 (for an overview of participant characteristics, see Appendix A). The sample reflected diversity across several dimensions, including age within the target demographic, geographic origin within Norway, and political interest. However, the participants also shared certain characteristics. A significant portion of the sample was involved in higher education: six at master's level and eight at bachelor's level. Among these, four were first-year students who had yet to complete a semester of university. Additionally, the representation of minority ethnic groups was limited, with only three participants identifying as belonging to these groups. The relatively homogenous make-up of the group undoubtedly shaped the nature and diversity of the perspectives shared during discussions, which formed the basis of the analysis. The presented findings should be interpreted as arising within the specific context of the study.

Mini focus groups

Data were generated through seven mini focus groups, including two to four participants in each, conducted during 2021 and 2022. Mini focus groups were chosen over more traditional focus groups to enable the sharing and comparing of experiences inherent in group settings whilst also fostering in-depth and balanced contribution across participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014). As this study forms part of a wider research project, the discussion guide (see Appendix B) covered themes beyond the immediate focus of this article. Pertinent topics included participants' cross-platform social media habits and their perceptions and experiences of political behaviours both online and offline. Participants also collectively discussed posts from different social media platforms (see Appendix C).

Each discussion lasted between 90 and 130 minutes. Anticipating that this would provide better conditions for participants to communicate in their more typical mode of expression (Fern, 2001), the discussions were moderated by a Norwegian research assistant falling within the target age range for the study. I was also present, observing and asking clarifying questions. We conducted two pilot focus groups to refine questions for clarity and relevance. Participants are identified in this article by pseudonyms. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Data analysis procedure

I conducted an interpretive thematic analysis (Pugh, 2013), systematically identifying patterns through an iterative coding process. The video-recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim in Norwegian, translated to English, annotated with observational notes, and thoroughly checked for accuracy. First, I coded holisti-

cally, to detect broad themes and narratives (Saldaña, 2021). Through this step, I identified three directions for future inquiry, including online political activities.

Having narrowed the empirical focus, I collated segments of the dataset pertinent to the topic, especially participants' reflections on political participation and citizenship – both offline and online, and their articulated assessments of specific examples. I proceeded to code this reduced dataset inductively. Along with the participants' recorded utterances, I paid heed to non-verbal responses, tones, and actions logged during the focus groups and double-checked these in the video recordings. I noted instances where participants appeared tense, embarrassed, defiant, alarmed, or impressed throughout the discussions, which, at times, aided in interpreting underlying norms and values (Pugh, 2013). For instance, certain media examples evoked physical reactions from participants, such as grimacing or covering their faces, indicating marked discomfort and embarrassment in response to an observed norm transgression.

This analysis highlighted participants' nuanced understandings of appropriate online behaviour, including their emphasis on silent, receptive behaviours. Responding to this unexpected trend, I refined my focus to specifically investigate spectating. Through an iterative process of coding, categorising, refining research questions, and consulting theory, I identified themes relating to participants' perceptions of spectating as a meaningful and socially appropriate mode of participation, as well as specific behaviours involved.

It is important to emphasise that the forthcoming analysis does not aim to provide statistically generalisable, definitive, or exhaustive accounts of spectating practices. Rather, the themes presented are interpretive constructs, offering insights into the constructive aspects of spectating as perceived by young citizens.

Spectating as cooperative discursive participation

The participants generally portrayed social media as playing an important role in their relationship with politics, particularly as tools for staying updated about political affairs, encountering different perspectives, and grounding their opinion formation. Their perceptions of appropriate and meaningful political behaviours were related to these aims. In what follows, I delve into these perceptions and behaviours. First, I address sub-question 1: How do participants perceive and articulate the appropriateness and significance of spectating as political participation? This is addressed by first exploring how spectating aligns with generalised norms and understandings of social media, and thereafter situating spectating within participants' broader expectations for cooperative civic behaviour. The subsequent section addresses sub-question 2: What normatively desirable political behaviours are involved in spectating? Three interrelated activities – monitoring, critically consuming, and consciously curating – are presented, exploring the meanings they hold for citizens. Finally, before proceeding to the discussion, the concept of active spectating is defined and elucidated.

Spectating as socially appropriate

Participants portrayed social media platforms primarily as sources of personalised entertainment and information, as opposed to highly participatory spaces. While most also contributed in various ways, typically via more private channels, most of their online time was spent consuming content posted by others. Capturing this general tendency, Eirik (20) explained, “I’m a recipient, I follow, and I watch, I’m not active in the way that I share”.

The participants’ political usage habits were grounded in this broader participatory framework. Only a small minority described contributing political content in various forms and frequency. Even frequent contributors reported spending far more time consuming content posted by others than contributing their own.

Unsurprisingly, given its ubiquity, the participants did not portray spectating as socially inappropriate, as it has often been framed (Edelmann, 2015; Hong et al., 2023). Instead, they considered spectators as the assumed audience for contributions and thus as valid participants in online communication flows, rather than outsiders peering in. Espen (18), for instance, expressed that “Comment threads aren’t a good arena to convince those you discuss with [...] people don’t come there to be convinced by anyone else”. He nonetheless commented frequently, because, he reasoned, “You might be able to influence the opinions of spectators”.

Spectating as cooperative

In line with their broader perception of social media as sources of entertainment and information, the participants generally understood the online political discourse as shared goods for public consumption: a digital epistemic commons. As the quote from Espen indicates, political contributions were seen as inputs for spectators to “take up, think about, and assess” (Chambers, 2013: 206) to inform themselves and their opinions. This understanding influenced their expectations for appropriate behaviour and their own approaches to discursive participation.

While most participants valued this collective resource, they also expressed downsides. Echoing results from other recent studies, many were wary of the overwhelming quantity and inconsistent quality of information circulating around them in their daily lives (Cotter & Thorson, 2022; Gagrcin et al., 2022). The blending of content genres and topics could also be off-putting. Linn (20), for instance, shared: “It’s nice to keep updated on things, really, but sometimes you just want to have fun [...] when political stuff suddenly comes up [on TikTok] it can be a bit like ‘I didn’t sign up for this today!’” Several participants also expressed concern regarding misinformation, hate speech, and other uncooperative dark participation (Quandt, 2018) circulating online.

Grounded in these perspectives and experiences, while advocating for freedom of expression as a right, the participants also disapproved of contributions which stood to harm or burden others. Capturing this sentiment, Tobias (19) stated:

I feel you have to find a balance, you have freedom of speech of course, but then you also have fake news about vaccines and different things that can

be pretty dangerous, so people have a responsibility to check up and really think about what they share.

The participants endorsed discursive citizenship norms (Gagrčin et al., 2022), valuing discernment and restraint. They adopted a “quality over quantity” approach to political expression, prioritising content that meaningfully contributes to the collective discourse while criticising uncooperative output. Crucially, they often considered not contributing preferable to sharing repetitive, inauthentic, unsubstantiated, or otherwise unhelpful information, thereby rendering spectating a cooperative mode of participation in the public sphere.

The participants also repeatedly emphasised the value of listening to others and thinking before speaking. As Benjamin (22) put it, “it’s best not to get involved in expressing yourself or fronting your opinions but in listening to what other people have to say and moving on from there”. Indeed, listening was a central theme within the participants’ notions of appropriate political engagement. For instance, when asked about the requirements for good citizenship, Eirik (20) responded, “at the very least you should listen to what people say and actually try to see their point of view [...] and you must actually be open to change your views too!”

In line with distributed understandings of engagement (Chambers, 2013; Moe, 2020, 2023), many participants seemed to tacitly endorse a cognitive division of labour in the public sphere. Participants acknowledged that individuals’ differing interests, resources, and levels of engagement with political issues influenced their suitability to contribute useful content. Participants considered both speaking up and spectating as legitimate modes of participation but saw these as ideally distributed among users according to their varying levels of experience and expertise on the topics being discussed.

When evaluating particular examples, participants often focused on the source as a first step in their assessment processes – judging the contributor’s authority on the topic at hand. This also influenced their own behaviours. In an approach reminiscent of standby citizenship (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), Anders (23), for example, explained:

I almost never participate in discussions, but I think about what others write and try to form my opinion based on that [...] With most issues I don’t know enough to say anything, I either have to read more or those who can will just handle it [...] I study the EU, so I know that well, if that comes up I can say things that others maybe don’t know.

This section has illuminated the position that spectating holds as a socially appropriate and valid form of participation within the cooperative framework of online discursive engagement endorsed by the participants. Next, I consider the normatively desirable political activities encompassed in spectating in more detail.

Positive spectating behaviours

Participants depicted spectating as multifaceted, involving various politically relevant activities that are interconnected and often occur simultaneously. For simplicity, these activities are presented in three categories: monitoring, critical consumption, and conscious curating.

Monitoring

Spectating involves and enables monitoring. Monitoring can be thought of as public connection in action – the means through which citizens stay oriented toward matters of public concern and discern which issues require their attention or action (Couldry et al., 2007; Moe, 2020). This watchful surveillance of the public agenda, intrinsic to monitorial citizenship (Schudson, 1998), is a necessary precursor to more active engagement.

The participants positioned monitoring as an important aspect of citizenship. While most participants regularly consumed news, they did not consider it necessary to do so consistently. Good citizens were, however, expected to maintain at least a minimal level of awareness of the public agenda and to tune in more concertedly before elections and at other critical moments.

Participants portrayed social media as playing an important role within their broader, dispersed public connection practice. Although the frequency varied considerably, all participants described encountering political information within their feeds. Among highly interested individuals, political content constituted a significant portion of what they consumed. Others reported seeing it rarely, but with increasing frequency around elections and other significant political events. Such content took varied forms, including online activism, memes, campaign messages, and more traditional news stories. It arose from various sources, including private individuals (both known and unknown), news outlets, politicians, and specialised political content creators.

For a few participants, social media provided an “alarm” (Christiano, 2015; Zaller, 2003), alerting them to especially urgent or significant issues, while alleviating the need for a regular news habit. Markus (20), for instance, reflected:

Around the election and like peak Covid I was more into checking, but otherwise I don't follow all the small political cases that come up in the news.
If something big happens it will pop up on social media!

Other more politically interested participants reported taking occasional breaks from the news, confident that social media would alert them to urgent developments.

Participants also valued the access social media provided to diverse topics and forms of communication not covered in mainstream news, which could enrich and diversify their public connection. This included international and local news, updates from grassroots movements, satire, and, most importantly, perspectives from other citizens. Discussing TikTok videos from Ukraine during the early days of the Russian invasion, Kristin (24) reflected: “Those who post the videos are

mostly our age. So, it's very interesting. I notice I get insights into how people feel, how they are affected, and that's not something I get in the news really".

Participants also described gauging the climate of public opinion through spectating, especially by perusing discussion forums such as subreddits and Facebook groups dedicated to political topics, as well as comment threads on politically themed posts across platforms. Susanna (24), who often found political news challenging, shared:

I love looking at comments! It's fascinating to see how different people think about issues, all the different opinions that are out there. I never comment myself [...] I just hang on. I think it helps me understand things better.

Although monitoring is not an especially active form of engagement, it is nonetheless an important process. Monitoring can mark the difference between total disengagement and a minimal level of public connection – meaning it holds particular relevance to less politically interested individuals. Moreover, it is crucial as a necessary precursor to all other forms of participation (Moe, 2023). However, whether spectating enables effective monitoring and the value this monitoring brings depend largely on the information one is exposed to and the extent to which this exposure stimulates more focused attention and processing. I explore these aspects next.

Critical consumption

One reason spectating has received negligible attention as a mode of online political participation is that, compared with expression, it appears passive. However, participants often portrayed interpreting political messages as an active process. Throughout their discussions, participants indicated that encounters with political information often prompt thoughtful deliberative listening and reflection, helping them to better understand their own viewpoints.

When responding to political posts, participants engaged in thoughtful negotiations about the meaning, value, and appropriateness of contributions. In patterned ways, they directed attention toward different aspects – such as the perceived authority and intention of the contributor, relevance of the topic, and the depth of information presented – weighing these against one another, and in light of their personal interests and values (see Solverson, 2023). In line with insights from reception theory (Livingstone, 2015; Schröder, 2018), the participants portrayed these sense-making activities as cognitively demanding and active.

Moreover, the participants appeared to consider this critical assessment as a key aspect of responsible social media use. In response to one example, Daniel (24), for instance, expressed:

I mean, we don't know what isn't being said, right? Like, people can post only one side, one point of view... But there are always two sides to a case! I would search up what different people say about it, you can't just take the first thing you hear and make a decision after that.

Meanwhile, Amalie (25) reflected, “you learn the form of how people write in such a way that you sort of weed out what is unreasonable [...] and can know whether to believe what you see or not”.

This negotiation of meaning involved active listening and reflecting on others’ perspectives, which scholars have emphasised as a crucial but often lacking aspect of effective deliberation (Andersen, 2022; Ercan et al., 2019). Participants described how seeing others’ articulated perspectives stimulated their own internal-reflective deliberation, helping them better understand their viewpoints on issues. Linn (20), for instance, reflected on her experience:

When I was younger, my friends had quite extreme right-wing beliefs, [grimaces], and I guess I thought “hmm, I guess it’s ‘cool’ to think this way” so I went along with them. But now I don’t think that way! Partly from getting older probably, but also social media, like seeing different things people say, hearing different opinions and ideas helped me see “Ah! I can actually have different opinions than my friends have” [...] Often [gestures scrolling on phone] I’ll see something and think “oh here, this I think is right”. And then, see something else and think “Okay, I know at least I am not that!” [laughs], so I’ve come to know where I stand a bit like that!

Ida (22) described browsing posts and comments in two Facebook groups devoted to opposing views on climate change. She explained:

I like to be updated on all sides even if I don’t agree... to see what different people think, what they argue for [...] Maybe just to see for myself “this here I strongly disagree with!” Also, so when I talk with people about it, I won’t be blindsided by what they say!

As Ida alluded to, the participants often reflected that they draw upon insights gained from spectating when discussing political issues in offline settings. As these quotes highlight, spectating can facilitate “hearing the other side”, enabling citizens to understand the reasons behind differing opinions while also supporting their own opinion development.

A fundamental requirement for effective deliberative listening and reflection is exposure to a wide range of viewpoints. The interplay of social media algorithms and the natural inclination towards homophily – the tendency to connect with similar others – has often been cited as a significant hurdle to accessing diverse opinions online. Although empirical research suggests that these factors may be exaggerated in public discourse (see Geiß et al., 2021), the challenge they present in ensuring a variety of perspectives is still a critical concern for many. I now shift my focus to the insights provided by participants regarding the perceived responsibilities of citizens to actively pursue diverse information and thoughtfully curate their newsfeed – and their reported strategies for doing so. Such actions are essential to foster the conditions necessary for the kind of monitorial and listening engagement previously outlined.

Conscious curation

Many participants showed significant awareness of algorithmic filtering on social media. Through their daily interactions, they developed an understanding of how their choices of where to focus their attention, whom to follow, and which content to engage with influence future content in their feeds. As Kristin (24) put it:

You become very conscious of the algorithm, how it works, and how you tend to get shown things you agree with... if you want to get other opinions presented, you must actively seek it, because the algorithms give you what you are interested in.

In line with other recent studies (Greene et al., 2022; Mathieu & Pavlíčková, 2017), the participants described utilising platform features to “train the algorithm” (Tobias, 19) to bring them content which suited their preferences and goals. Moreover, aligning with previous research (Gagrčin et al., 2022), the participants framed conscious algorithmic resistance and intentional selection of information as a key aspect of being a good citizen.

As mentioned, the participants considered it important that spectators critically evaluate the credibility of messages they encounter. These assessments influenced their curational tactics. For instance, in response to one of the examples shown, Hilde (23) remarked: “It’s a bit brain-dead, she doesn’t even present any arguments or anything [...] I would just skip this or press ‘not interested’ so I don’t see things like that”.

Participants generally perceived it as good practice to actively seek cross-cutting opinions, and many described their strategies for doing so. Ruben (21), for instance, claimed:

I follow like everything possible, so I have an overview. I don’t want to end up with only one view and not be open to other possible, uhh, interpretations of the same problem... that way I won’t get emotional if I see something I don’t agree with.

As in previous studies (Greene et al., 2022; Kruse et al., 2018), a few participants admitted to avoiding content that conflicted with their values and beliefs to foster a more comfortable experience. But some of these participants also described seeking out opposing viewpoints on a more ad hoc basis. Espen (18), for instance, related:

If I want to figure out a political opinion or set myself with or against a particular point of view then I might seek out their part of the Internet, their echo-chamber [laughs], like subreddits for different ideologies or issues, or Facebook pages of different parties, and look through posts and comments there.

In these ways, participants identified, within the ecosystem of social media, diverse informational sources which could provide inputs for their internal-reflective deliberation-within.

Users' curational choices not only shape their own media consumption but also subtly influence which topics and perspectives gain visibility online (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Several participants acknowledged this, with some liking comments or posts to "pass it on" (Annette, 20) or "so others see it" (Ida, 22). Users' interactions create a feedback loop, informing content creators of audience preferences and potentially influencing future output (Schröder, 2017). Such collective behaviour can also impact the broader media landscape, as news organisations increasingly integrate trending social media topics into their reporting. Thus, whether intentional or not, spectators' collective actions actively, if subtly, contribute to the public discourse.

Articulating active spectating

Grounded in these findings, I present the concept of active spectating as an intentional, effortful, and normatively desirable mode of online political participation encompassing monitoring, consciously curating, and critically consuming political content on social media. Positioning spectating as *active* aligns with insights from reception studies, highlighting that audiences do not simply absorb messages they encounter but actively make sense of them (Livingstone, 2015; Schröder, 2018). Spectating enables deliberative listening, supporting citizens in developing more informed and considered opinions (Crawford, 2011; Goodin, 2003; Lacey, 2013). Aligning with Felicetti's (2022) understanding of positive spectating, active spectating can involve considerable interpretive labour and allow users to better understand and engage with public issues. Active spectating also highlights the role of users as participatory agents in the digital space, who contribute to shaping public discourse through their engagement choices (Greene et al., 2022; Mathieu & Pavličková, 2017).

Discussion

Drawing insights from mini focus groups among Norwegian young adults, this study addressed calls for heightened focus on silent behaviours within online deliberative processes (Holst & Moe, 2021; Jensen & Schwartz, 2021) by exploring spectating as a mode of online political participation.

The analysis established how spectating was positioned as socially appropriate and justifiable within the participants' broader expectations for civic behaviour. It also outlined normatively desirable activities involved in spectating, including monitoring, critically consuming, and consciously curating political content. The findings suggest that silent online presence does not necessarily signify disengagement. Rather, it can involve active, intentional, and cooperative discursive participation, enabling citizens to maintain public connection, develop more considered opinions, and participate in other arenas. The study challenges the ranking of speaking above listening within theoretical and empirical studies of political behaviour, suggesting that the blanket expectation for users to express their opinions is misaligned with contemporary social media norms and understandings of good citizenship.

In line with other studies (Gagrčin et al., 2022; Sveningsson, 2015), the participants described their online political experiences, and their broader usage, primarily in terms of accessing information posted by others, rather than contributing or commenting themselves. The participants portrayed social media as a digital epistemic commons – a collaborative collection of information resources facilitating the exchange of ideas, news, expertise, and opinions among citizens and other actors. This shared resource was valued as a key tenet of their distributed public connection practice (Couldry et al., 2007; Moe, 2020, 2023). But unfortunately, the digital epistemic commons is vulnerable to overcrowding, distortion, and pollution (Collins et al., 2020; Ercan et al., 2019; Quandt, 2018), which can degrade it into what Cotter and Thorson (2022) described as an “information cacophony”.

The participants’ understandings of the social media discourse as a commons – shared, valuable, yet vulnerable – influenced their views regarding the appropriateness of different political behaviours. Rather than indiscriminately advocating for public expression, participants endorsed discursive citizenship norms (Gagrčin et al., 2022), valuing conscientious consideration of content contributed and consumed online.

This approach emphasises the epistemic function of the public sphere (Habermas, 2006; Mansbridge et al., 2012), advocating for discourse informed by diverse perspectives, rational argumentation, and expertise. In this cooperative understanding of the public sphere, the deliberative ideal of inclusion requires “getting all the positions on the table, as distinct from all the persons on the podium” (Goodin, 2003: 170). Choosing to not contribute can be a constructive, cooperative act, facilitating a richer exchange of perspectives while reducing others’ burden of navigating and finding reliable information (Gagrčin et al., 2022).

The findings contribute to a broader shift from identifying a singular model of good citizenship to recognising the diversity and interrelatedness of citizenship modes co-occurring within the public sphere (Chambers, 2013; Ohme, 2019; Thorson, 2015). The concept of active spectating underscores a more inclusive understanding of political participation, particularly illuminating online behaviours involved in monitorial (Schudson, 1998), standby (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), and reserved (Lieberkind & Bruun, 2021) modes of citizenship, as well as the ways these relate to more commonly studied expressive participation.

Conceptualising spectating as cooperative, discursive participation complements deliberative systems theory, which envisions deliberation as a collaborative process among diverse participants playing different roles within a broad, complex system (Chambers, 2013; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Moe, 2020). In this view, citizenship is a team effort: Everyone must learn the basic rules of the game, more interested or skilful players may specialise in certain roles, and not all players need to be – nor should be – actively playing at all times. From this perspective, the expectation to contribute or spectate is best understood as ideally distributed across citizens, topics, and time (Moe, 2023).

This study’s methodology and its inherent limitations shape the insights offered. The research took part within a specific geographic and temporal

context, and involved a small, relatively homogenous sample of individuals. While the qualitative research design facilitated an in-depth exploration of citizens' subjective understandings of spectating, it did not allow for analysis of how frequently participants engage in these behaviours, nor does it address the generalisability of the reported behaviours. Furthermore, a broader sample would likely have revealed other aspects of spectating that may have been overlooked.

It is crucial to continue to explore how citizens navigate and discern political content, assessing whether these activities align with constructive, active spectating practices, and understanding how they might perpetuate or challenge prevailing power structures (Gagrčin, 2023). Future research should examine these processes further, paying particular attention to how tacit skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for effective source critique and conscious curation are distributed across the population.

This study's primary contribution is the illumination of normatively desirable, non-expressive behaviours that citizens can reasonably be expected to engage in and strive for when using social media. This study elevates the discussion on digital citizenship by illustrating how active spectating, characterised by monitoring, critical consumption, and conscious curation, can serve as a meaningful and cooperative form of participation in an era of information abundance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to TJ Billard, Hallvard Moe, Astrid Marie Holand, Lisbeth Morlandstø, and Melanie Magin for their invaluable encouragement and insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. I am also deeply appreciative of the constructive comments provided by the anonymous reviewers, which were instrumental in improving the quality and clarity of this manuscript.

References

- Ackerman, B. A., & Fishkin, J. S. (2004). *Deliberation day*. Yale University Press.
- Adjin-Tettey, T. D., & Garman, A. (2023). Lurking as a mode of listening in social media: Motivations-based typologies. *Digital Transformation and Society*, 2(1), 11–26. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DTS-07-2022-0028>
- Amnå, E., & Ekman, J. (2014). Standby citizens: Diverse faces of political passivity. *European Political Science Review*, 6(2), 261–281. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175577391300009X>
- Andersen, I. (2022). 'Well, that's just my opinion': The principle of expression and the public debate. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 18(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.16997/10.16997/jdd.958>
- Barber, B. (2003). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. University of California Press.
- Bennett, W. L. (2008). *Changing citizenship in the digital age*. MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Initiative.
- Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318814190>

- Chambers, S. (2013). The many faces of good citizenship. *Critical Review*, 25(2), 199–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2013.843874>
- Christiano, T. (2015). Voter ignorance is not necessarily a problem. *Critical Review*, 27(3-4), 253–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2015.1111669>
- Collins, B., Marichal, J., & Neve, R. (2020). The social media commons: Public sphere, agonism, and algorithmic obligation. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 17(4), 409–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2020.1742266>
- Cotter, K., & Thorson, K. (2022). Judging value in a time of information cacophony: Young adults, social media, and the messiness of do-it-yourself expertise. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 629–647. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221082>
- Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (2007). *Media consumption and public engagement: Beyond the presumption of attention*. Springer.
- Crawford, K. (2011). Listening, not lurking: The neglected form of participation. In H. Greif, L. Hjorth, A. Lasén, & C. Lobet-Maris (Eds.), *Cultures of participation* (pp. 63–74). Pter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-01238-5>
- Dennis, J. (2019). *Beyond slacktivism*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00844-4>
- Dobson, A. (2014). *Listening for democracy: Recognition, representation, reconciliation*. Oxford University Press.
- Edelmann, N. (2015). What is lurking? A literature review of research on lurking. In G. Riva, B. K. Wiederhold, & P. Cipresso (Eds.), *The psychology of social networking vol. 1: Personal experience in online communities* (pp. 159–174). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110473780>
- Ercan, S. A., Hendriks, C. M., & Dryzek, J. S. (2019). Public deliberation in an era of communicative plenty. *Policy & Politics*, 47(1), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557318X15200933925405>
- Felicietti, A. (2022). Casting a new light on the democratic spectator. *Democratization*, 29(7), 1291–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2048818>
- Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. Sage.
- Gagrčin, E. (2023). ‘Who, if not me?’ How political self-categorizations shape the meaning of political self-expression on social media as a citizenship norm. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(1), 109–125. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2174792>
- Gagrčin, E., Porten-Cheé, P., Leißner, L., Emmer, M., & Jørring, L. (2022). What makes a good citizen online? The emergence of discursive citizenship norms in social media environments. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1), 20563051221084297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221084297>
- Geiß, S., Magin, M., Jürgens, P., & Stark, B. (2021). Loopholes in the echo chambers: How the echo chamber metaphor oversimplifies the effects of information gateways on opinion expression. *Digital Journalism*, 9(5), 660–686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1873811>
- Goodin, R. E. (2003). *Reflective democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Gran, A., Booth, P., & Bucher, T. (2021). To be or not to be algorithm aware: A question of a new digital divide? *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(12), 1779–1796. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1736124>
- Green, J. E. (2010). *The eyes of the people: Democracy in an age of spectatorship*. Oxford University Press.
- Greene, A. K., Maloul, E., Kelly, D. A., Norling, H. N., & Brownstone, L. M. (2022). “An immaculate keeper of my social media feed”: Social media usage in body justice communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Social Media + Society*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221077024>
- 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>
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons. *Science*, 162(3859), 1243–1248. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.162.3859.1243>
- Holst, C., & Moe, H. (2021). Deliberative systems theory and citizens’ use of online media: Testing a critical theory of democracy on a high achiever. *Political Studies*, 69(1), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719890809>
- Hong, Y., Hu, J., & Zhao, Y. (2023). Would you go invisible on social media? An empirical study on the antecedents of users’ lurking behavior. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 187, 122237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2022.122237>
- James, C., & Lee, A. (2017). Speaking up online: Civic identity and expression in the digital age. In J. Earl, & D. A. Rohlinger (Eds.), *Social movements and media* (pp. 119–146). Emerald. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2050-206020170000014003>

- Jensen, J. L., & Schwartz, S. A. (2021). The return of the “lurker”: A longitudinal study of citizens’ use of social media in Danish elections 2011, 2015, and 2019. *Social Media + Society*, 7(4), 20563051211063463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063463>
- Kim, B., & Hoewe, J. (2023). Developing contemporary factors of political participation. *The Social Science Journal*, 60(4), 862–876. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03623319.2020.1782641>
- 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>
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage.
- Kruse, L. M., Norris, D. R., & Flinchum, J. R. (2018). Social media as a public sphere? Politics on social media. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 59(1), 62–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2017.1383143>
- Kushner, S. (2016). Read only: The persistence of lurking in Web 2.0. *First Monday*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i6.6789>
- Lacey, K. (2013). *Listening publics: The politics and experience of listening in the media age*. John Wiley & Sons.
- 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>
- Lieberkind, J., & Bruun, J. (2021). The reserved young citizens of the Nordic countries. *Northern Lights on Civic and Citizenship Education: A Cross-National Comparison of Nordic Data from ICCS*, 19–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66788-7_2
- Livingstone, S. (2015). Active audiences? The debate progresses but is far from resolved. *Communication Theory*, 25(4), 439–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12078>
- Manning, N. (2013). ‘I mainly look at things on an issue by issue basis’: Reflexivity and phronêsis in young people’s political engagements. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16(1), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.693586>
- Mansbridge, J. (2015). A minimalist definition of deliberation. In P. Heller, & V. Rao (Eds.), *Deliberation and development: Rethinking the role of voice and collective action in unequal societies* (pp. 27–50). World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-0501-1_ch2
- Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Christiano, T., Fung, A., Parkinson, J., Thompson, D. F., & Warren, M. E. (2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In J. Parkinson, & J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale*, (pp. 1–26). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139178914.002>
- Mathieu, D., & Pavlíčková, T. (2017). Cross-media within the Facebook newsfeed: The role of the reader in cross-media uses. *Convergence*, 23(4), 425–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517700383>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Lurk. In *Merriam-webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lurk>
- Moe, H. (2020). Distributed readiness citizenship: A realistic, normative concept for citizens’ public connection. *Communication Theory*, 30(2), 205–225. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/ct/qtz016>
- Moe, H. (2023). Operationalizing distribution as a key concept for public sphere theory: A call for ethnographic sensibility of different social worlds. *Communication Theory*, 33(2-3), 112–121. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad008>
- Moe, H., Hovden, J. F., Ytre-Arne, B., Figenschou, T., Nærland, T. U., Sakariassen, H., & Thorbjørnsrud, K. (2019). *Informerte borgere? Offentlig tilknytning, mediebruk og demokrati [Informed citizens? Public connection, media use, and democracy]*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2023*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023>
- Nielsen, J. (2006). *The 90-9-1 rule for participation inequality in social media and online communities*. Nielsen Norman Group. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/participation-inequality/>
- Nieminen, H. (2014). A short history of the epistemic commons: Critical intellectuals, Europe and the small nations. *Javnost – The Public*, 21(3), 55–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2014.11073413>
- Norris, P. (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government*. Oxford University Press.
- 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>

- Oser, J., Hooghe, M., Bakk, Z., & Di Mari, R. (2023). Changing citizenship norms among adolescents, 1999–2009–2016: A two-step latent class approach with measurement equivalence testing. *Quality & Quantity*, 57(5), 4915–4933. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01585-5>
- Pugh, A. J. (2013). What good are interviews for thinking about culture? Demystifying interpretive analysis. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 1, 42–68. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajcs.2012.4>
- Quandt, T. (2018). Dark participation. *Media and Communication*, 6(4), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519>
- Ruess, C., Hoffmann, C. P., Boulianne, S., & Heger, K. (2023). Online political participation: The evolution of a concept. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(8), 1495–1512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.2013919>
- Sakariassen, H., & Meijer, I. C. (2021). Why so quiet? Exploring inhibition in digital public spaces. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(5), 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211017346>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Schröder, K. C. (2017). Towards the “audiencization” of mediatization research? Audience dynamics as co-constitutive of mediatization processes. In O. Driessens, G. Bolin, A. Hepp, & S. Hjarvard (Eds.), *Dynamics of mediatization: Institutional change and everyday transformations in a digital age* (pp. 85–115). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62983-4_5
- Schröder, K. C. (2018). Audience reception. In P. M. Napoli (Ed.), *Mediated communication* (pp. 105–128). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110481129>
- Schudson, M. (1998). *The good citizen: A history of American civic life*. Free Press.
- Solverson, E. (2023). Assessing worthwhileness of political contributions on social media: A study of young adults in Norway. *Mediální studia*, 17(2), 184–208.
- Statistics Norway. (2023). *Ni av ti nordmenn bruker sosiale medier [Nine out of ten Norwegians use social media]*. <https://www.ssb.no/teknologi-og-innovasjon/informasjons-og-kommunikasjonsteknologi-ikt/statistikk/bruk-av-ikt-i-husholdningene/artikler/ni-av-ti-nordmenn-bruker-sosiale-medier>
- Sveningsson, M. (2014). I don’t like it and I think it’s useless, people discussing politics on Facebook”: Young Swedes’ understandings of social media use for political discussion. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(3), 106–120. <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2014-3-8>
- Sveningsson, M. (2015). “It’s only a pastime, really”: Young people’s experiences of social media as a source of news about public affairs. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 2056305115604855. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604855>
- Theocharis, Y., de Moor, J., & Van Deth, J. W. (2021). Digitally networked participation and life-style politics as new modes of political participation. *Policy & Internet*, 13(1), 30–53. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.231>
- Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J. W. (2017). *Political participation in a changing world: Conceptual and empirical challenges in the study of citizen engagement*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203728673>
- Thorson, K. (2015). Sampling from the civic buffet: Youth, new media, and do-it-yourself citizenship. In H. G. de Zuniga Navajas (Ed.), *New technologies and civic engagement: New agendas in communication* (pp. 3–22). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315750927>
- Thorson, K., Vraga, E. K., & Klinger-Vilenchik, N. (2014). Don’t push your opinions on me: Young citizens and political etiquette on Facebook. In J. A. Hendricks, & D. Schill (Eds.), *Presidential campaigning and social media: An analysis of the 2012 campaign* (pp. 74–93). Oxford University Press.
- Thorson, K., & Wells, C. (2016). Curated flows: A framework for mapping media exposure in the digital age. *Communication Theory*, 26(3), 309–328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12087>
- van Deth, J. W. (2014). A conceptual map of political participation. *Acta Politica*, 49, 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.6>
- Zaller, J. (2003). A new standard of news quality: Burglar alarms for the monitorial citizen. *Political Communication*, 20(2), 109–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390211136>

Appendix A

TABLE A1 Overview of study participants

Group number	Parti- cipant number	Age	Gender	Region of Norway	Job or field of study	Political interest level
1	1	22	Female	Town, Mid	Undergraduate student, biotechnology	Medium
	2	24	Male	City, East	Master's student, management	Low
2	3	22	Female	City, Mid	Graphic design intern	Low
	4	21	Female	Town, Mid	Administrative assistant	Low
	5	20	Male	City, North	Chemical process apprentice	Medium
3	6	19	Male	Village, Mid	Call centre employee	High
	7	23	Female	City, North	Master's student, media studies	High
	8	20	Female	Village, East	Undergraduate student, political science	High
4	9	24	Male	Village, West	Master's student, political science	High
	10	18	Male	City, East	High school student	High
	11	22	Male	Village, South	Master's student, physics	High
5	12	20	Female	Town, Mid	Undergraduate student, game design	Medium
	13	20	Male	Town, West	Undergraduate student, game design	Low
6	14	25	Female	Town, East	Bartender	Medium
	15	20	Female	City, East	Undergraduate student, architecture	Low
	16	21	Male	City, East	Undergraduate student, physics	Medium
	17	25	Female	Village, West	Undergraduate student, geology	Low
7	18	24	Female	Town, North	Master's student, organisational studies	High
	19	24	Female	Town, North	Undergraduate student, drama	Low
	20	23	Male	City, West	Master's studies, European studies	Medium

Appendix B

Discussion guide

Welcome/Introduction: Moderator and researcher introduce selves, describe the project, data handling, anonymising procedures, consent forms, and ground rules for discussion.

Area of interest	Questions asked (sometimes the conversation flowed in such a way that certain questions needed not be asked)
Warming up	Tell us a bit about yourselves: How old are you, which city do you live in, what do you study/work with? Do any of you know one another from before today? (And if so, how?)
Social media	Talk a little about your social media habits: What social media platforms do you use? How do you use them? Have you ever posted something online and regretted it? Do you think using social media has had an impact on who you are as a person?
Identity	Participants did a ranking task, where they ordered items in terms of how important they were for their own self-image. Items included political views, religious beliefs, gender, hobbies, talents and abilities, etc.
Experiences with politics	What is your relationship to news? Do you take in news (absolutely fine if not)? What do you think of when you hear the word “politics”? (after discussing their takes, encourage to keep broad notion of “the political” in mind) Would you say you are interested in politics? (What makes you say yes/no?) How has your relationship to politics changed over time? Do you ever “act political” / participate in politics? Please raise your hand if you consider yourself to be (each raise-hands round was followed by discussion): “on the left side”, “on the right side”, “a feminist”, “conservative”, “a socialist”, “an activist”, “woke” What does being a “good citizen” mean, to you? (and “bad” citizen?)
Social media and politics	Does social media play a role in your relationship to politics? How often would you say you see political content on social media? And what kind of political content, from what kind of users? How do you feel about people posting about politics on social media? Are there better and worse ways to do it? Do you show your political views on social media? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Photo-elicitation examples	Moderator introduces the PPT with the following, and prompts throughout: We will show the examples in the PPT and discuss them in different ways Have you seen something like this before? What is your impression? E.g., How would you interpret/respond if an influencer, politician, friend, acquaintance, etc. shares this? Could you “react” using any technological functions (like, save, etc.)?
Finishing up	Do you have anything you feel like saying that we did not come across? Do you have any questions? Thank you so much for your time. Please feel free to contact me anytime if there is something you would like to know or add.

Appendix C

TABLE C1 Overview of media examples shown to participants

Examples	Description of post	User	Platform
Example 1: Donation Instagram post	Post displaying the message: “Thank you for donating to UN Refugee Agency. Your donation will help displaced Afghans in need”	User hidden	Instagram
Example 2: Influencer Tik Tok meme	Influencer shows preference for left-wing parties in 10-second video with a comedic viral audio-track (“You Get a Cupcake”)	Norwegian reality TV star/ influencer	TikTok
Example 3: Petition campaign video	30-second video post in which a Sámi artist explains, in English, that mining companies are polluting fjords in northern Norway. Includes a call to sign and share a petition.	User hidden	Instagram
Example 4: Vaccine-sceptic meme	Cartoon-style meme depicting the year 2030 with a man receiving his twentieth Covid-19 vaccine from a doctor who says, “Just one more, trust us, we’re the government”	User hidden	Facebook

Example 5: Manipulated advert satire + comment thread	Manipulated image of a campaign advertisement from a political party, the post is marked humour; plus the top-20 comments attached	Users hidden	Reddit
Example 6: #BlackOut- Tuesday	Black square posted to Instagram along with “#BlackOutTuesday”, part of a popular campaign connected to the Black Lives Matter movement	David Beck- ham	Instagram
Example 7: Politician Facebook post	Facebook post with link to news story about patient neglect in hospitals, contributor claims this is due to excessive funding for foreign aid and climate policy	Leader of right-wing political party in Norway	Facebook
Example 8: Tweet against JK Rowling	Tweet calls for a boycott of all Harry Potter merchandise, accusing JK Rowling of hateful behaviour	User hidden	Twitter
Example 9: “I voted” profile frame	Facebook profile picture with “I voted MDG” (Green party)	User hidden	Facebook
Example 10: Ukraine profile frame	Facebook profile picture with Ukraine flag frame (Only shown to 2022 groups; 3 of 7)	User hidden	Facebook

© 2024 Respective authors. This is an Open Access work licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of the licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>