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Comment Sections as Targets of Dark Participation? Journalists' Evaluation and Moderation of Deviant User Comments

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ABSTRACT

User comments, as the most prominent form of participation in online journalism, offer multiple options for so-called *dark participation*, comments that transgress norms of politeness or honesty with partially sinister motives. Strategic forms of dark participation such as political trolling in user comments have both raised attention and global concern. Community managers are expected to guard the gates of their comment sections, carefully disentangling valid opinions from manipulated statements—with the obvious danger of either censoring genuine speech or letting potentially damaging content slip through. So far, empirical studies on how media actors perceive this challenge and how they respond to it, especially in light of strategic attempts at manipulation, are scarce. The current study aims to fill this gap. Based on a series of guided interviews ($N=25$), we explored community managers' experiences with dark participation in German newspaper sites. The qualitative analysis of the content of the interviews identified four types of comment section managers, ranging from *unconcerned gatekeepers* to *relaxed gate-watchers*, *alarmed guards*, and *struggling fighters*.


KEYWORDS

Journalism; participation;
online media; user
comments; moderation; dark
participation

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive online environment, news organizations must find new ways to attract and maintain their users. Enabling user participation in comment sections or on social media is a frequent strategy employed in this context. User comments can have positive effects, yet such positive effects are discussed mainly in relation to constructive participation (Ksiazek 2018). However, user comments are also an attractive playground for *dark participation* (Quandt 2018, 1), content spread by “wicked actors” with “sinister motives” in “nefarious processes” (ibid. 6). Dark participation can harm a news brand (Anderson et al. 2014; Meltzer 2015), impair other users' participation (Weber 2014), and allow strategic manipulators to “piggy-back” on the reach and credibility of journalistic outlets (Quandt 2018). Journalists are faced with the challenge of carefully disentangling valid opinions from such manipulated statements—with the obvious danger of

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either censoring genuine speech or letting noxious forms of user engagement slip through.

This challenge is not new (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011; Hermida and Thurmman 2008) but recent evidence of troll factories (Özsoy 2015), right-leaning counter-publics (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015), or extremists' strategic abuse of journalists' reach (Neumann and Baugut 2016) all point toward an increased relevance of *strategic* dark participation in online outlets featuring journalists' work. So far, strategic dark participation has gained little academic attention in the literature on journalists' perceptions of deviant user comments and how journalists are managing them.

This study aimed at filling this gap by presenting insights from 25 qualitative interviews with community managers from different German newspapers, addressing (a) their perception and evaluation of (strategic) norm-transgressing user comments and (b) their strategies to maintain the quality of their discussion forums.

The Rise and Fall of Participatory Journalism

At the beginning of the last decade, participatory forms of journalism and the inclusion of user-generated content became strongly hyped innovations. Partially driven by democratic hopes for a more open and inclusive journalism that involves "the people" (Gillmor 2004) and partially driven by media managers' economic fantasies (Vujnovic et al. 2010), online news media experimented with various forms of user participation (Domingo et al. 2008). In parallel with these developments, there was an atmosphere of departure and enthusiasm in journalism research, calling for a re-conceptualization of public communication and journalism studies itself. It is no coincidence that within that spirit of change, John Hartley famously coined the concept of the *redactional society* (2000).

Research showed rapidly that the initial enthusiasm did not lead to a total democratic reconstruction of (online) journalism. Instead, journalists defended their control over the production process, opening only small "walled gardens" for participation (Hanitzsch et al. 2012). As of today, most online news sites primarily offer participation "below the lines" (Graham and Wright 2015) in the form of comment sections and other low-involvement forms. Even more disappointingly, only a small share of users actively comment online (Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger 2015).

Nonetheless, user comments can have a direct impact on the public (readers of the comments), as well as an indirect effect via multipliers (like journalists) and relevant public actors (like politicians). Comment sections are not only read by users themselves but also by journalists and third parties, who perceive them as a *vox populi* (Lewis and Molyneux 2018, 16). It is thus not surprising that dark participation has raised global concerns (Hofseth 2017).

Facets of Dark Participation

Following Quandt (2018), dark participation refers to different forms of deviant user engagement stemming from (a) wicked actors (such as individuals, groups, or states), driven by (b) sinister strategical, tactical, or "pure evil" (p. 41) motives, attacking (c) despised objects/targets either directly or indirectly with the aim of (d) manipulating

different audience(s). The spectrum ranges from hateful attacks on journalists up to the spreading of false information via fake accounts.

On a more abstract level, dark participation can be understood as participation that transgresses certain norms (see also Muddiman 2017; Papacharissi 2004) — *injunctive norms* about “what users should do” (such as those formulated in a newspapers’ “netiquette” policy), as well as *descriptive norms*, emerging from what most users do, behave in an earnest manner (Hedrick, Karpf, and Kreiss 2018).

Such transgressions can relate to politeness norms (Papacharissi 2004). Accordant transgressions are found in communicative attacks that have been extensively studied in the literature on *incivility* (Coe, Kenski, and Rains 2014; Muddiman and Stroud 2017; Rösner, Winter, and Krämer 2016), *hate speech* (Gagliardone et al. 2016; Hsueh, Yogeewaran, and Malinen 2015), *trolling* (Wolfgang 2018), and *flaming* (O’Sullivan and Flanagan 2003). Often, these studies insinuate spontaneous and emotionally driven forms of rage or anger on the part of the deviant users.

However, these transgressions can also relate to the norms of honesty and facticity. Debates about the spreading of *fake news* (Lazer et al. 2018), *disinformation* (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), and *conspiracy theories* (Kaiser 2017) in user-generated content exemplify these kinds of deviances. In addition, reports about malicious “pseudo-users” such as *astroturfers* (Ratkiewicz et al. 2011), *troll armies* (Benedictus 2016), and *social bots* (Woolley and Howard 2017) have jarred confidence in even the fundamental assumption that user interaction is interaction with users (Hedrick, Karpf, and Kreiss 2018).

Although norm-transgressing content can spread unintentionally, evidence for strategic dark participation in comment sections is accumulating. In 2014, *the Guardian* revealed that they found numerous conspicuous user comments throughout the initial period of the Ukrainian crisis, indicative of a much larger, strategically planned campaign to influence Western publics (Elliot 2014/05/04). Numerous other dark participation cases have been reported, such as fake accounts producing comments according to a political agenda (Zelenkauskaitė and Balduccini 2017; Erjavec and Poler Kovačič 2012).

Increasing the Quality of User Participation

Dark participation is not a new phenomenon. In parallel to digitalization, journalists lost a significant amount of their former power to “keep the gates” (Neuberger, Lehmann, and Schetsche 2005), often finding themselves stuck in a gate-watching position instead (Bruns 2005). Early studies on online-journalism already showed that journalists were concerned about the emerging potential of abuse (Domingo et al. 2008). An early study on journalists at the *Guardian* showed that they feel a “duty to readers related to the quality of both the content and the [online] discourse about it” (Singer and Ashman 2009, 16).

In response to such concerns, most media organizations developed some form of community management. Mostly done by a “specialized minority of journalists” (Neuberger, Langenohl, and Nuernbergk 2014, 47), community management was intended to increase the quality of online debates (Ksiazek 2015), maintain the health of discussion forums, and avoid legal liability, while preserving the media brand and conforming to journalistic ideals (Braun and Gillespie 2011).

Three main strategies of community management have been described in the literature: (1) shutting down comment sections for certain topics or entirely *closing the gates* (Nielsen 2012; Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert 2016); (2) pre-moderating comments (*guarding the gates* in a more traditional sense, Hermida and Thurmman 2008); and (3) moderating comments after publication or *patrolling behind the gates* (Ksiazek 2015).

These main strategies can lead to different moderation behaviors, such as deleting certain comments or blocking some users entirely as specific expressions of closing the gates. We posit that these specific behaviors can be described along two underlying dimensions: *interactive* versus *uni-directional* and *authoritative* versus *participative* moderation.

For the first dimension, *interactivity*, we draw on theories that understand interactivity as a *bi-directional communication process* (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997). Interactivity, as used herein, refers to the extent to which messages by users and community managers happen in a bi-directional sequence and the extent to which they can relate to each other. As such, *closing one's gates*, including blocking users, is a *non-interactive* strategy, whereas correcting misperceptions is an interactive strategy ("collaborative moderation" as Ziegele and Jost 2016, suggested).

Yet, not all interactive strategies are equally welcomed by users. Ziegele and Jost (2016) found that users evaluated satirical responses by moderators as more negative than constructive responses. We suggest that this is due to the second dimension: *authority*. Traditional non-interactive gate-keeping has always been an authoritative process (White 1950), but authority can also shine through interactive strategies, for example when journalists satirically mock deviant commenters, thereby installing a hierarchy of superiority (Meyer 2000). *Participatory* moderation, in contrast, is exerted by letting users exchange their ideas (*laissez faire*) or understanding *journalism as conversation* (Marchionni 2015).

Irrespective of its normative value, interactive, participatory moderation is not standard. Neuberger, Langenohl, and Nuernbergk (2014) found that the vast majority of German journalists reported non-interactive, hierarchical strategies, but only a third rewarded high-quality comments, and less than half of the journalists actively participated in discussions (ibid. 54).

So far, little research has addressed the question of *why* community managers select certain moderation strategies over others. Based on the hierarchy of influences model developed by Shoemaker and Reese (2014), different factors on the micro-meso-macro levels might be relevant. The current paper focuses particularly on the micro-level, on journalists' interpretation of their "symbolic reality" (Reese and Shoemaker 2016, 396), their subjective theories of dark participation. Nonetheless, we also consider certain elements on the meso- and macro levels as relevant parts of the picture, making it necessary to interview a sample that accounts for their variability. We will describe these factors in the following.

Hierarchical Influences on Community Management

The most macro level in the hierarchy of influences approach addresses cultural differences, which is not of interest in our German-only sample; therefore, we focused on influences on the meso- and micro levels.

The hierarchy of influences model postulates three sources of influence on the meso-level. The first, *societal institutions*, describes influences from larger, trans-organizational media fields and the expectations and power structures related to them (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). In our study, we focused on online newspapers. Newspapers have a historical longevity and a longstanding tradition of adapting to changing technologies and different forms of user participation (e.g., letters to the editor) while preserving newsroom culture (Singer et al. 2011).

The second level, *media organizations*, describes inter-organizational differences. Although multiple differences might play a role here, we focused particularly on newspapers' reach and editorial line (the general political tendency of the newspaper) as potential influences (Stroud et al. 2015).

Finally, the hierarchy of influences describes different *routines* or "patterns of practice" that define the everyday work in newsrooms. Such routines can relate to news values and occupational norms as well as to influences through digitalization, for instance, monitoring user responses (Lee and Tandoc 2017; Reese and Shoemaker 2016). In our study, we asked for formalized organizational routines for comment moderation (e.g., a newspaper's netiquette policy).

Micro-level influences were the focal point of our study. Individual characteristics such as personality traits, professional roles, or demographic features (e.g., gender) most plausibly influence journalists' subjective theories and behavior. Based on the literature, we considered professional role, gender, and age in our study. Professional roles (e.g., editor, community manager) have been found to be associated with differences in the perception of dark participation (Erjavec and Poler-Kovačič 2013). Gender has been found to influence incivility ratings, with female raters judging comments on average as less norm-transgressing than male raters while simultaneously varying more strongly in their judgments (Binns et al. 2017). Age is associated with the perceived amount of dark participation. Preuß, Tetzlaff, and Zick (2017) found that journalists of middle age reported the highest increase in dark participation over recent years whereas the youngest (<35 years) and oldest group (>61 years) were less concerned.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review, we formulated two research questions, which guided our work:

RQ 1. Do community managers differ regarding their perceptions and evaluations of "dark participation"?

RQ 2. How are journalists' evaluations of dark participation associated with their moderation of user comments?

The Current Study

To examine our research questions, we conducted a series of guided interviews ($N = 25$) addressing community managers' perceptions of and actions for managing dark participation at German newspapers. In the following, we briefly describe our selection procedure, which followed the hierarchies of influence described above.

Participant Selection and Sample

Selection

We selected our interview partners via a purposeful multi-level procedure. On the level of *societal systems*, we considered journalism as a social system fulfilling a specific function by (a) observing different parts of society and (b) providing observation-based, new and relevant topics (Weischenberg, Malik, and Scholl 2006). Although this functional definition did not directly guide our selection, it served as the foundation for the next set of definitions.

As *societal institutions*, we focused on mainstream newspapers with their own website (hereafter: *online newspapers*). “Mainstream” herein refers to newspapers with more than 100,000 unique visitors in the first quarter of 2016 following the working group for online research (AGOF 2016), newspapers to media outlets that focused on socio-political news and textual content. The entire list is provided in Table 1.

To identify *media organizations* of interest within this population, we sought to include newspapers with different reach (indicated by number of unique users) and different editorial lines. The editorial line of national newspapers in Germany is well-researched, but less attention has been given to the editorial lines of local or regional media (Maurer and Reinemann 2006). Consequently, before selecting media organizations to participate in interviews, we identified the editorial lines of regional newspapers in a pre-study. In previous research, three approaches have been used to identify editorial lines: *content analysis* of comments (Eilders, Neidhardt, and Pfetsch 2004), *surveys of journalists* (Donsbach and Wolling 1995) or other experts, and evaluation of *reader expectations* (Schmitt-Beck 2000). All of these approaches “lead to identical results” (Maurer and Reinemann 2006, 180); thus, due to economic efficiency, we used *reader*, respectively *user*, *expectations* as the indicator of editorial line.

In an online survey, $N = 157$ participants (55 male, 87% students, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.04$, $SD = 7.95$) rated the online newspapers identified as being within the population of interest. Note, we relied on student raters as only a minority of Germans reads newspapers on a regular bases and Germans age 18–34 with higher formal education are most likely to do so (Hasebrink and Hölig 2017). As we were interested in reader or *user* expectations, only ratings of participants who self-identified as familiar with the newspaper were considered (for a detailed description, see supplementary material Table A). During the survey, participants evaluated the editorial leaning, influence, and trustworthiness of the newspapers in our population. Based on their rankings, we identified six clusters composed of 39 online newspapers (all $\eta^2 > 0.60$, 98% correct classification in a discriminant analysis).

National newspapers of record with different editorial lines formed the first two clusters: (1) centrist newspapers of record ($n = 5$, e.g., *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and (2) liberal newspapers of record ($n = 4$, e.g., *Spiegel*). The following two clusters were denoted as the (3) liberal regional ($n = 11$, e.g., *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*) and (4) conservative regional newspapers ($n = 12$, such as the *Rheinzeitung*). Finally, there was a cluster of (5) left-wing ($n = 4$, such as the *taz*) and (6) small regional newspapers ($n = 4$, e.g., *Hamburger Morgenpost*). The German yellow press-like media (*Bild*, *Express*, *Vice*) formed a separate group of outliers and was considered separately. To represent this variability in the media landscape, we interviewed 50% of the newspapers within each cluster, thus ensuring that different types of media organizations were represented in our sample.

Table 1. Mainstream online newspapers in Germany.

Index	Online medium	Mainstream?		Newspaper?	
		Unique visitors via AGOF (2016)	Circulation based on Schröder (2016)	Included in Buhl, Günther, and Quandt (2018)?	Included in Schütz (2012)?
1	<i>Bild</i>	15,710,000	330,704,989	yes	yes
2	<i>Focus</i>	14,530,000	170,824,337	no	no
3	<i>Spiegel</i>	10,570,000	234,202,109	yes	no
4	<i>Welt</i>	10,500,000	95,505,766	yes	yes
5	<i>Zeit</i>	6,290,000	57,959,980	yes	no
6	<i>Süddeutsch</i>	6,040,000	55,504,276	yes	yes
7	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)</i>	4,750,000	54,141,060	yes	yes
8	<i>Stern</i>	4,620,000	39,771,778	no	no
9	<i>Rheinische Post (RP)</i>	370,000	21,906,993	no	yes
10	<i>Handelsblatt</i>	3,690,000	21,952,671	yes	yes
11	<i>Huffington Post</i>	3,220,000	24,234,799	no	no
12	<i>Der Westen (WAZ, NRZ)</i>	2,870,000	19,727,427	yes	yes
13	<i>TZ München</i>	2,820,000	11,617,263	yes	yes
14	<i>Tagesspiegel</i>	2,640,000	14,288,304	no	yes
15	<i>Vice</i>	2,340,000		no	no
16	<i>Wirtschaftswoche</i>	2,010,000	5,906,199	no	no
17	<i>Kölner Express</i>	1,930,000	18,773,256	yes	yes
18	<i>Manager Magazin</i>	1,910,000	7,509,127	no	no
19	<i>Bento</i>	1,860,000		no	no
20	<i>Abendzeitung München</i>	1,840,000	6,109,820	yes	yes
21	<i>Hamburger Morgenpost</i>	1,540,000	11,828,418	yes	yes
22	<i>Augsburger Allgemeine</i>	1,490,000	8,034,971	yes	yes
23	<i>Münchener Merkur</i>	1,450,000	8,232,943	no	yes
24	<i>Stuttgarter Zeitung/ Stuttgarter Nachrichten</i>	1,400,000	9,796,032	no	yes
25	<i>Hamburger Abendblatt</i>	1,350,000	8,947,550	yes	yes
26	<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i>	1,320,000	5,839,326	yes	yes
27	<i>Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger</i>	1,180,000	8,739,359	yes	yes
28	<i>News</i>	1,180,000	6,140,476	no	no
29	<i>Neue Osnabücker Zeitung (NOZ)</i>	1,160,000	6,835,977	no	yes
30	<i>Berliner Morgenpost</i>	1,130,000	6,463,904	yes	yes
31	<i>BZ-Berlin</i>	1,130,000	6,385,456	yes	yes
32	<i>Badische Zeitung</i>	1,040,000	6,025,992	no	yes
33	<i>Südwest Presse</i>	990,000	4,178,524	no	no
34	<i>Berliner Zeitung</i>	920,000	4,168,193	yes	yes
35	<i>Flensburger Tageblatt</i>	870,000	4,665,908	no	yes
36	<i>Mitteldeutsche Zeitung</i>	790,000	5,272,249	yes	yes
37	<i>Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	790,000	4,574,560	no	yes
38	<i>Ruhr Nachrichten</i>	770,000	4,273,091	yes	yes
39	<i>Mediengruppe Thüringen</i>	710,000	4,657,050	no	no
40	<i>Leipziger Volkszeitung</i>	690,000	4,615,586	yes	yes
41	<i>Neue Westfälische (NW)</i>	670,000	4,191,155	no	yes
42	<i>Nordwest Zeitung (NWZ)</i>	670,000		no	yes
43	<i>Südkurier</i>	650,000		no	yes
44	<i>Hessisch/Niedersächsische Allgemeine</i>	640,000	6,509,012	no	yes
45	<i>Nordbayern</i>	640,000	5,595,873	no	yes
46	<i>Passauer Neue Press</i>	630,000	4,928,924	no	yes
47	<i>Oberbayrisches Volksblatt (OVB)</i>	60,000	5,826,016	no	no
48	<i>Berliner Kurier</i>	580,000		no	yes
49	<i>Sächsische Zeitung</i>	570,000	3,919,965	no	yes
50	<i>Rhein-Zeitung</i>	550,000		no	yes
51	<i>Freie Presse</i>	540,000		no	yes

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Index	Online medium	Mainstream?		Newspaper?	
		Unique visitors via AGOF (2016)	Circulation based on Schröder (2016)	Included in Buhl, Günther, and Quandt (2018)?	Included in Schütz (2012)?
52	<i>Westfälische Nachrichten</i>	510,000		no	yes
53	<i>Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	460,000		no	yes
54	<i>Westdeutsche Zeitung (WZ)</i>	430,000		no	yes
55	<i>Mainpost</i>	380,000		no	yes
56	<i>taz</i>	370,000	6,137,594	yes	no
57	<i>Braunschweiger Zeitung</i>	350,000		no	yes
58	<i>Ostsee-Zeitung</i>	350,000		no	yes
59	<i>Rheinpfalz</i>	290,000		no	yes
60	<i>Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	100,000		no	yes

Notes. We determined the German mainstream online newspaper landscape by combining different sources: (1) statistics about unique users of German websites provided by the working group online research (AGOF 2016) and the information society of advertising media (Schröder, 2016) considering newspapers with more than 100,000 unique users in the second quarter of 2016 as “mainstream”. (2) We used scientific papers about the online news ecosystem in Germany (Buhl, Günther, and Quandt 2018) and daily newspapers more generally (Schütz 2012) to exclude non-news media and TV broadcasting stations (such as television stations, e.g., N24).

Sample

Within each selected newspaper, we approached the person responsible for community management, that is, the digital/social media editor or community manager. Students and apprentices/interns were not included. A total of $N = 25$ (10 females) interviews were carried out, distributed across the clusters. Table 2 provides an overview of our interview partners and their *individual characteristics*.

Data Collection. All interviews were conducted between January and March 2017 at the editorial offices of the respective media outlets. The interviews had an average length of 42 min (range, 31–70 min) and were audio-recorded. Interviews were transcribed following the extended simple rules of Dresing and Pehl (2013) and pseudo-anonymized as dark participation could open interview partners to harassment (Marwick, Blackwell, and Lo 2016).

The interviews followed a pilot-tested, semi-structured guideline. Two experienced interviewers asked interviewees about (a) “challenges associated with user participation,” experiences with (b) “insults, threats, and offenses” and with (c) “with hoaxes, misinformation, and ‘fake news’,” about (d) “strategic user-generated content”, and (e) how interviewees “manage user-generated content that transgresses ‘the rules’”. An analysis of statements addressing unrelated questions (e.g., interview partners’ professional career) is reported elsewhere.

Data Analysis. The interview transcripts were analyzed using *qualitative content analysis*, following Mayring (2010). This analysis combines deductively determined pre-set categories and inductively developed categories that emerged during the initial coding of a subsample. The analysis focused on all statements related to interviewees’ experiences with dark participation and community management. Single sentences served as coding unit, the entire statements in response to a prompt as context unit. Two coders coded the

Table 2. Interview partners.

Type	Age	Gender	Professional training	Position	Journalistic role	Unique users (in millions)	Cluster
<i>Unconcerned gatekeeper</i>	33	Male	Journalistic*	Leading	Community & digital	1–5	Liberal regional
	49	Male	Non-journalistic*	Leading	Digital	1–5	Liberal regional
	30	Male	Non-journalistic		Digital	<1	Conservative regional
	36	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	1–5	Conservative regional
	45	Male	Non-journalistic	Leading	Digital	<1	Conservative regional
	48	Male	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	1–5	Left-wing
	42	Male	Journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	<1	Small regional
<i>Relaxed gate watcher</i>	33	Male	Journalistic*	Leading	Digital	>10	Yellow press
	34	Male	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	1–5	Yellow press
	36	Male	Journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	>10	Centrist newspaper of record
	36	Female	Journalistic		Community	5–10	Centrist newspaper of record
	38	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	>10	Liberal newspaper of record
	34	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	1–5	Liberal regional
	35	Male	Unknown	Leading	Community & digital	<1	Conservative regional
	38	Male	Non-journalistic		Community & digital	<1	Left-wing
	33	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	<1	Conservative regional
<i>Alarmed guard</i>	38	Male	Non-journalistic	Leading	Community	5–10	Centrist newspaper of record
	45	Female	Non-journalistic		Community	1–5	Liberal regional
	28	Female	Non-journalistic	Leading	Community	1–5	Liberal regional
	44	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	<1	Liberal regional/ small regional
<i>Struggling fighter</i>	41	Female	journalistic	Leading	digital	1–5	Liberal newspaper of record
	31	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	1–5	Centrist newspaper of record
	46	Female	Non-journalistic	Leading	Community & digital	1–5	Liberal newspaper of record
	30	Female	Non-journalistic	Leading	Digital	<1	Liberal regional
	32	Female	Journalistic	Leading	Digital	<1	Conservative regional

Notes. Unique users were based on the AGOF (2016) statistics for the first quarter of 2016. *Professional training was not discussed during the interviews but was researched via the interview partners' personal blogs. Interview codes are not reported with the demographics to prevent de-anonymization.

initial subsample of eight interviews to develop the inductive categories (step 1) and allow for reliability checks (step 2) via MaxQDA12. The coders agreed on 83–89% of the assigned codes and on 70–79% of the frequencies for each code. Disagreements were solved via discussion. The final category system entailed two main topics of interest: dark participation and managing it. The dark participation topic included six subcategories, addressing the (a) frequency, (b) presumed agents, (c) type, and (d) effects of dark

participation, as well as (e) interviewees' overall perception of the phenomenon. Regarding management of dark participation, we coded (i) why comments were moderated, (ii) what happened to them, and how interviewees (iii) evaluated the efficacy of their work (see supplementary material Table B). In a final step, we used the coded interviews to identify underlying types among the comment moderators.

Results

During the analyses, four types emerged that differed in their perceptions and evaluations of dark participation (RQ1) as well as in their approach to moderation (RQ2). The following section describes our findings for each of these types.

The Unconcerned Gatekeepers

The first type was the "unconcerned gatekeeper" ($n = 7$). Interviewees of this type mostly worked at regional newspapers with both conservative and liberal editorial lines. One worked for a regionally oriented left-wing medium. All interviewees worked as digital/social media (chief) editors and additionally fulfilled some community management-related tasks. With an average age of 40.42 years ($SD = 7.5$), they were the oldest group of interviewees. Six of seven were males.

The "unconcerned gatekeepers" perceived dark participation as the "smallest share" of user engagement (#12, male, liberal regional). They reported that dark participation would happen only as a response to sensitive topics, leading to a manageable number of perhaps "30 comments" per day (#21, female, conservative regional) that needed moderation. Although interviewees did see political forms of dark participation (especially by those they identified as right-wingers), they deemed strategic attempts for manipulation as implausible as the following two quotes show:

There are trolls that show up on a regular basis, but that is only in some weeks, and afterwards they disappear. [...] I do not see any strategy in that. There is no "network" focusing on contaminating our Facebook posts [...]. (#22, male, conservative regional)¹

There are enough people that are crazy on their own. They don't need someone to direct them. (#13, male, small regional)

Overall, the interviewees perceived dark participation as being relatively unproblematic:

I do not feel that we should fear such things the whole day. We have to fulfill our duty of care, but in general, we are already doing that. (#21, female, conservative regional)

Interviewees in this group mostly engaged in authoritative, non-interactive moderation, corresponding to a more traditional gate-keeping approach. Comments that transgressed the norms were hidden, and if the transgression reoccurred, the user was blocked (#3 male, liberal regional). One interviewee reported that they had changed to strict pre-moderation (#12, male liberal regional); another reported that they simply tried to avoid publishing sensitive topics at certain times:

The biggest challenge is to avoid posting something controversial at the wrong time. (#26, male, left wing)

For non-political topics, interviewees also employed participatory moderation; whereby the routines they described were mostly non-interactive. Most of the time, they simply monitored comments and reacted only when things got “too wild” (#26, male, left wing) and blocking became necessary. Although two interviewees reported that they would plan for embedding rewards systems for constructive comments in the future, faith in interactive exchange was overall low:

You cannot argue with these people, they just believe it. It is like a religion. You cannot reach them with facts. (#15, male editor, conservative regional)

The Relaxed Gate-Watchers

The second and largest group of interviewees were “the relaxed gate-watchers” ($n = 9$). They worked at all kinds of newspaper organizations except the small regional ones. With an average age of 35.22 years ($SD = 1.92$), they were the youngest group. Seven had a leading position within their organization. One worked exclusively as the community manager, and the others had additional tasks, such as digital/social media editors. Four were female, and the other five were male.

Although interviewees in this group perceived the volume of (deviant) user comments to be high, they considered this a normal aspect of human communication, and deviant users as a minor challenge:

People also complain more [...] when their holidays went wrong than when they had a wonderful trip. Those who claim on Facebook that refugees have stolen their burger—they are just people that want attention. (#4, female, liberal newspaper of record)

Interviewees of this type were familiar with strategic dark participation. Particularly, during the annexing of the Crimea, they experienced many “Putin trolls” (#6, female, central newspaper of record), but they also reported recent cases referring to right-wing populists or animal rights activists. Nonetheless, they remained relaxed:

Opinions are manipulated online. That has been the case with humans and now bots are there too. (#19, male, left-wing newspaper)

Overall, interviewees in this group had a positive impression of their users’ participation:

The overwhelming majority of Facebook posts are not hateful [...] and comments are always a partial seismograph of public opinion, [showing] how people think about an issue. (#16, male, yellow press)

This extended to perceiving users as a huge support, “doing a great deal of the work” (#IV17, male, yellow press) in community management:

If there is a comment on Facebook with a false claim [...] another user will comment shortly afterwards and explain and debunk the false claim. (#6, female, centrist newspaper or record)

Consequently, their community management was relatively participatory. They often let their users discuss issues with each other without interfering—even when comments were controversial.

We do experience that someone within a comment thread will counter, that the community regulates itself. [...] We do not want readers to believe that we patronize them and force our opinion on them. (#16, male, yellow press)

Interviewees in this group employed a variety of interactive strategies, ranging from friendly exhortations up to thinking about potential user questions before blocking comments (#5, female chief editor, conservative regional). Interviewees also believed in the value of journalism as conversation (Marchionni 2015):

We want to give people that feeling that we really want to meet them on an equal footing, not just claiming to do so. (#4, female, liberal newspaper of record)

It would help if we as a brand would be present [in a more content-related manner], if we not only post our links, comments, and news but also signal the users that we read and register their comments [...] to have a real exchange. (#20, male, conservative regional)

That is not to say that interviewees did not exclude malicious participants. When legal lines were crossed, they deleted rigorously:

That is part of the community management, to react harshly, to block users [...] irrespective of political attitude. (#14, male editor, central newspaper of record)

The Alarmed Guards

Interviewees of “the alarmed guard” type ($n=4$) mostly worked at liberal regional media; only one worked for a centrist newspaper of record. They were on average 38.75 years old ($SD=7.81$). Three had a leading position and three of four of the interviewees worked predominantly as community managers. Only one had a degree in journalism, the highest share of career jumpers among all four groups. Three were female one was male.

Interviewees in this group reported high frequencies of dark participation. For instance, false information was spread “by at least one email per day” (#7, male, centrist newspaper of record), and some were “nearly exclusively” engaged with eliminating deviant comments (#8, female, liberal regional). Thus, dark participation overshadowed user participation overall:

We do have positive discussions quite often, but 80% are hateful, negative discussions, or postings. [...] (#8, female, liberal regional)

Only two of the four interviewees mentioned positive user discussions, whereby one stated “the last good discussion” happened “last year” indicating that dark participation clearly dominated (#8, female, liberal regional).

From the interviewees’ point of view, malicious single users, political groups, and nefarious states spread dark participation.

That is what Facebook is for, those people who think they will lose their job because of refugees [...], or that their wife will be raped. They dare to [comment] on Facebook [...] and spread their hate. [Alternatively, it is about] a right-wing group or left-wing group who says “now we’ll show it to that “Lügenpresse” [lying press]”. (#18, female liberal regional and small regional newspaper)

Three of the four interviewees also reported personal victimization, ranging from a “stalker” showing up in their comment sections now and then (#7, male, centrist newspaper of record), to right-wing populists groups following the interviewees private Twitter accounts in a coordinated manner (#18, female liberal regional and small regional

newspaper). All of them felt the urge to defend against widespread “lying press” accusations and a climate of distrust. As one interviewee summarized:

You as a journalist no longer say something and people believe it [...]. Even when you said, it is raining. You were the liar and no longer the one conveying the truth. (#25, female editor, liberal regional)

Overall, interviewees perceived dark participation as having a small but noxious effect:

Everything that happened last year with Trump [...] will not work the same way in Germany. But I do believe that social media will play its part because the general sentiment is similar. (#7, male chief editor, centrist newspaper of record)

The moderation patterns in this group differed from those of their more relaxed counterparts. Non-interactive, hierarchical strategies dominated. Interviewees were mostly engaged in “patrolling their gates,” deleting unwanted content and sometimes even reporting users to authorities. Their deletion rules were strict, tackling not only illegal statements but also user comments with unchecked facts (#8, female, liberal regional), comments that linked to well-known right-wing or left-wing alternative media (#25, female, liberal regional), or comments that were redundant (#7, male, centrist newspaper of record).

When interactive strategies were mentioned, they were described as hierarchical, such as urging the users, like in a “kindergarten” (#8, female chief editor, liberal regional). In addition, user interaction was perceived to increase the risk for personal victimization (#7, male, centrist newspaper of record), leading some to employ “ironic provocation” (#18, female liberal and small regional), or publishing particularly noxious comments as a defense (#25, female, liberal regional). Only one interviewee reported that supporting “the 1% of users [...] that improve everything” was also part of his job (#7, male, centrist newspaper of record).

Overall, the interviewees ascribed limited efficacy to interactive strategies:

Even when it would be possible [to discuss with them], it would make no sense. The one who comments [...], the one who writes that you are posting only crap or that you are telling lies is not interested in getting convinced. [...] As such, I can save my breath. (#25, female, liberal regional)

The Struggling Fighters

The last group of interviewees, “the struggling fighters” ($n = 5$), worked at both national and regional newspapers across editorial lines. They were on average 36 years old ($SD = 7.11$), and all of them were chief editors responsible for digital/social media editing; two additionally worked as community managers. Three had completed a journalism degree. All five were females.

Interviewees in this group reported high frequencies of dark user participation, leading to situations where it became difficult to follow the “flood of comments” (#2, female, liberal regional newspaper), especially the “pure negative critique” (#10, female, conservative regional). Like the alarmed guards, they rated user engagement as predominantly norm-transgressing:

We are threatened on a regular basis, depending on the topic [...]. I cannot say it in percentages, [but I] feel that it is scarily much. I do still think it might be the smaller share, but it is so

salient that [...] it really sticks. [Moreover,] people who do not want to say anything negative do not comment [...], likely because they are afraid that they will be attacked, too. (#1, female, centrist newspaper of record)

From the interviewees point of view, strategic agents were constantly lurking, even “when the topic [was] only slightly political” (#2, female, conservative regional). As such, they worked in a threatening atmosphere, particularly due to right-wingers, as this interviewee explained: “[Since Trump,] they feel like ‘now we made it’ and ‘we will show it to you’ at the elections” (#23, female, liberal newspaper of record).

In contrast to the other three types, the “struggling fighters” ascribed a quite large effect to online dark participation:

I think that it is notable that a movement like that [on social media] will likely swap over to real life in the long run. [...] It has [already] become acceptable to [have a Nazi comment in your WhatsApp account]. (#1, female, centrist newspaper of record)

This threatening atmosphere affected their moderation routines. Their moderation was predominantly non-interactive and hierarchical. Sensitive topics were avoided and deviant comments were blocked (#1, female, centrist newspaper of record).

Although interviewees said that users were sometimes helpful in reporting transgressions, they did not believe in users’ ability to counter dark participation.

Those single voices against it, that start discussing, they surrender after a while. (#10, female, conservative regional)

For this type, participatory strategies played a marginal role and were restricted to publishing the netiquette policy and urging users to adhere to the rules. Interactive exchange was rare and perceived as inefficient. Sometimes, the best they could do was to try to keep their sense of humor, as this interviewee told us:

These are that kind of people that respond to factual arguments with five other arguments [...]. That’s when you must keep your humor. (#1, female, centrist newspaper of record).

Discussion

The rise of participatory journalism has been accompanied by democratic hopes for user participation. Yet, from the beginning, comment sections have also been a beloved target of dark participation, leading to the development of different community management routines. Numerous studies have addressed non-strategic forms of dark participation such as the “spontaneous rage” associated with insults; yet, little research has addressed how recent evidence for strategic forms of dark participation have changed community managers’ perceptions of and responses to dark participation. The current study sought to fill this gap.

Based on a series of 25 interviews with German community managers, we identified four types, ranged along the interviewees’ problematization of dark participation and their strategies for managing it: the “unconcerned gatekeepers”, the “relaxed gate-watchers”, the “alarmed guards” and the “struggling fighters”.

Answering our research questions, our study showed that it was less community managers’ experiences with but more so their subjective theories about (strategic) dark

participation that shaped their moderation practices. Those who perceived dark participation as a normal part of human behavior and who trusted in their users' positive engagement were less concerned and more willing to engage in participatory, interactive moderation, strategies more closely resembling the democratic hopes accompanying early participatory journalism (Domingo et al. 2011). Although the relaxed gate-watchers were the largest group in our sample, the majority of comment sections was far away from democratic ideals such as reciprocity (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014) or conversation (Marchionni 2015), most interview partners reported rather uni-directional, authoritative moderation routines.

We also explored hierarchical influences of interviewees' perception and moderation practices. Although our interviews are not suitable to confirm or reject hypotheses about the relationships between these meso- or micro-level factors, we will discuss some of the characteristics among our different types to identify fruitful venues for future research.

On the meso-level of *media organizations*, we recruited our sample such that different media organizations in terms of reach and editorial line were included. There were some hints that newspapers with a larger reach could be associated with more dark participation and attempts at strategic manipulation. However, reach was not directly related to participants' community management approach: Interviewees working at the three largest newspapers in our sample all belonged to the relaxed gate watcher type. Although we did not find a clear pattern linking experiences with dark participation and editorial line, there was a relatively high share of alarmed guards and struggling fighter types working for liberal newspapers, whereas the relative share of relaxed and unconcerned interviewees was larger for centrist, conservative, and yellow press media. Nonetheless, newspapers of all editorial lines were found across types. As such, future research is needed examining the link between editorial line and dark participation in more detail.

On the micro-level of *individuals* (see also Table 2), there were interesting patterns regarding age and gender. The unconcerned gatekeepers were the oldest group in our sample, whereas the relaxed gate-watchers were the youngest. Although our sample was much too small for statistical examination of this pattern, and the age differences were small, an earlier survey by Preuß, Tetzlaff, and Zick (2017) found a similar U-shaped pattern for the association between age and perceptions of dark participation. Regarding gender, the interviewees of the alarmed guards and struggling fighter types were mostly women (eight out of nine). On the other end of the spectrum, only one woman was categorized as an unconcerned gatekeeper. Prior research has found that women evaluate norm-transgressing content as less severe than do their male counterparts, but women also show larger variability in their judgement (Binns et al. 2017). Partially, our findings are compatible with this, as women were found across all four types, but men were not. However, as we found a particularly high proportion of women in the two 'problematizing' groups, future research into the role of gender in evaluating norm-transgressing user comments is necessary.

Notwithstanding, our study has some limitations. First, we interviewed only German journalists. As such, the results might not be generalizable to other cultures and media systems (Hanitzsch et al. 2010). Second, we focused only on larger "mainstream" media. Extending our study to local or alternative newspapers might provide further insights.

Finally, we examined subjective interpretations and based our analysis only on qualitative data. Although our typology points toward the relevance of journalists' subjective theories in shaping their moderation practices, future research using larger samples and additional objective measures (e.g., observation of content moderation or actual experiments) are necessary to put our findings on solid ground. Nonetheless, our study allows initial insights into community managers' perceptions and handling of dark participation in an age where strategic manipulation appears to be increasing.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, LF. The data are not publicly available due to concerns that the information could compromise the anonymity of interviewpartners.

Note

1. To enhance readability, translated quotes have been lightly edited for publication.

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