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# 'To activists: Please post and share your story': Renewing understandings on civic participation and the role of Facebook in the Indignados movement

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## Abstract

The global upsurge in protest, which has accompanied the current international financial crisis, has highlighted the extensive use of online social media in activism, leaving aside the extent to which citizenship is enacted, empowered and potentially transformed by social media use within these movements. Drawing on citizenship and communication theories, this study employs a cross-country analysis of the relationship between citizenship, civic practices and social media within the Indignados movement in Greece and France. By the use of semi-structured interviews, we attempt to discern the degree of involvement of actors with the political community in question and explore the complex layers of their motivations and goals around participation. Content analysis employed in the movement's Facebook groups allows us to critically evaluate the potential of social media in (re)defining the meaning and practice of civic participation. Findings indicate that the failure of traditional forms of civic participation to attain and resolve everyday political issues becomes its potential to transfer the political activity in other sites of struggle. The role of Facebook is double: it can reinforce civic talk and debate through activists' digital story telling (around shared feelings and personal stories) significant for meaningful activist participation online and offline. Second, it can support new forms of alternative politics inspired by more participatory modes of engagement.

## Keywords

Citizenship, Indignados, online participation, online protest, social media

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## Unpacking civic participation

The article addresses the notion of civic participation often connected to the vitality of democracy and the nature of its citizens. Scholars turned to citizenship in order to explain the current decline in political participation, which is often attributed to the changing meanings and norms of the citizenry within late modern societies (Dahlgren, 2013).

Citizenship is not a static concept; its meaning has changed over time. Civic participation has long been synonymous with how individuals participate within a particular community. Associated with rights, liberties and claims (Janoski and Gran, 2002), participation practices are often conceptualized as formal and bounded to the civic status of individuals within the polis that permits classification and recognition (Isin and Turner, 2002). Marshalls (1950) argued for a rather unbounded version of modern citizenship more closely linked to class struggles of a political community not necessarily bound to a nation state. Although Marshalls' class-centred account can help to highlight some features of the evolution of citizenship, notably the expansion of social and political rights, it can hardly capture the changing nature of contemporary civic participation.

A shift in academic focus from class- and nation-based struggles to collective identity, transnational protest and global citizenship occurred as a response to the rise of the 'new social movements'. This was seen as an expansion of citizenship often considered the outcome of globalization politics and referred as 'unbounded'. These transformations are often considered a deconstruction or a 'displacement' of the notion of civic participation in favour of other forms of collective affiliations (Bosniak, 2000). Social movements can be seen as sites where collective interests and identities can be discovered, forged and solidified; this is particularly evident in cases of subaltern subjectivities.

Therefore, the current debate on civic participation has used the declining levels of citizens' participation and involvement as a central argument to tackle the ongoing changes of the citizenry, but also the recent forms and degrees of democratic participation. Previous research focused on the loss of traditional indicators for civic participation, arguing that participation is decreasing considerably especially in formal practices (e.g. voting) which weakens the foundations of democracy (Putnam, 2000). Scholars today maintain that participation goes to a large extent beyond traditional electoral politics valuable for strengthening civic participation (Dalton, 2008).

To this end, the 'civic participation' has been operationalized, often using a dichotomy of institutional versus non-institutional activities (Van Der Meer and Van Ingen, 2009). Verba and Nie (1972) argued that a wide range of activities can be seen as civic practices: voting, campaign activity, recruiting, debating, lobbying, demonstrating and so on. Ekman and Amnan (2012) emphasize the different modes and forms of formal and informal participation pointing out the different degree of citizens involvement (e.g. active/passive) within the nation state, their motivations and objectives, in order to categorize discourses. The formalistic view of participation often refers to routinized procedures (e.g. elections, voting, polls, referenda, taxpaying, social security, military service, etc.). Thus, they underline the significance of informal activities, where participation can be accomplished as it unfolds beyond the formal political terrain and enables the conceptualization of citizenship as an active informal practice (e.g. activist activities). In this terrain, citizens can pursue common political and social interests, which in turn can

prepare them for active civic participation. This perspective mainly refers to the 'active citizen' who acts within the given script of representative democracy.

Nuanced approaches to civic participation place emphasis on the indirect and symbolic resources that affect the construction of citizenship (Janoski and Gran, 2002). Janoski and Gran (2002: 39) identify six 'citizen-selves' based on two axes – the 'active or passive social motivation' and the 'allegiant or oppositional positions'. The motivation axis distinguishes between Active/Participant and Passive/Inactive citizens. Citizens are conceptualized through their practices in addition to their legal status.

The current study is concerned with the notion of civic participation, which is understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, including various civic practices, activities and discourses that are conceptually linked to agency (Dahlgren, 2013). These resources can be valuable for citizens' empowerment.

## Social movements, participation and online social media

The symbolic construction of participation compels us to consider new communication practices in social movements making explicit use of online resources. According to Dahlgren's (2009) civic cultures framework, political agency needs culturally based supportive anchoring predicated on a set of dimensions through which citizenship is accomplished. Online social media can play a role in this process.

Studies on the relation between participation and collective action have questioned the role of the Internet regarding participation. In terms of empirical evidence, it seems that the positive effects of online support for offline protest on individual political participation are more salient than negative effects. Several empirical studies confirm a positive correlation between the frequency of social media use and participation (Valenzuela, 2013), understood as actual participation in organized events. Facebook, for example, is evaluated as very effective in reaching and engaging masses of interested individuals and groups by providing a space for high-quality political discussions (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009). Facebook is undoubtedly one of the most popular social networks and, according to Boyd and Ellison (2007), it constitutes a 'networked public that supports sociability, just as unmediated public spaces do' (p. 221). In addition, young people's presence in these online public spaces has increased channels of interactivity and networking for disseminating a message and mobilizing participation. Overall, an evaluation of the existing literature advances the argument that online social networks can increase participation online and offline, and by that can offer alternative patterns of engagement (De Zúñiga et al., 2009). One basic assertion is that the Internet is an opportunity structure that opens up new possibilities for citizens in the domain of 'new politics' and can therefore help overcome the democratic deficit (Dahlgren, 2009).

In contrast, other empirical studies exploring the effectiveness of participation on the offline space have produced mixed results. Quintelier and Vissers (2008) find no support for the time-replacement hypothesis, which argues that more time spent on the Internet will allow for less time spent on offline political and public participation.

Therefore, it is evident that the Internet might be seen as a crucial cultural resource for the construction of citizenship, especially within the contours of contemporary social movements. The second research question of this study investigates the role of

social media in the formation or accomplishment of civic participation within the *Indignados* movement.

## The Indignados movement

Beginning in 2011, a series of month-long anti-austerity protests erupted across Europe. In response to the Greek government's austerity policies in the context of the Troika's memoranda, Greece witnessed widespread protests from 29 May, which ended abruptly due to excessive police repression. In October, demonstrations in France rallied in support of the Spanish and Greek *Indignados*. Both movements connected a diverse group of people, from unemployed youth to precarious workers and downwardly mobile civil servants. *Indignados* demanded the abolition of austerity and a change in the political system, in which they felt unrepresented. Despite organizational differences, the *Indignados* shared a common agenda in pursuing new possibilities for reinvigorating democracy.

The *Indignados* therefore provide an opportunity to adopt a dynamic analytical view of the process and degree of citizens' participation with their political community, the narratives around their civic practices and the feelings and motivational sources individuals ascribe to 'their' activities online. The participatory practices of citizens constitute one key dimension, which could help the accomplishment of citizenship; others include suitable knowledge about the political world and one's place in it, democratic values to guide one's actions and appropriate levels of trust. Thus, defining the making of citizens by their acts, experiences and everyday activities allows us to focus not only on the acts themselves but also on how involved actors interpret and make sense of these acts. In this regard, online spaces can facilitate or hinder individuals from acting as agents. However, we must not lose sight of the offline contexts; indeed, there are real dangers to limiting participation exclusively to media activities.

## Methodology

### *Sampling and recruitment*

The selected Facebook groups/pages were identified using Facebook's search function that contained the following words in their title, in French and Greek respectively: 'Indignées' and 'Αγανακτισμένοι' (Indignants); 'Democratie Réelle Maintenant' and 'Πραγματική Δημοκρατία Τώρα' (Real Democracy Now). To select a sample of the groups that were returned by the search engine, we applied five criteria. Facebook groups/pages were selected when they (a) had more than 50 members or likes, (b) were public, (c) contained a written description of the group, (d) contained more than 50 posts and (e) were active during the periods selected for data collection. The final sample consisted of 13 Greek and 10 French Facebook *Indignados* groups. The total analysed posts from Greece were 11,803 and from France 5834.

One-to-one interviews were conducted with Facebook-using *Indignados* activists in France and Greece. Interviewees were recruited from two categories: First, active members of Facebook groups, namely, members who posted, uploaded material, shared links,

created events and liked the group; second, passive followers, namely, those who visited the groups but did not post any messages. A total of 80 invitations were sent through Facebook (40 in French and 40 in Greek to *Indignados* members) to active members of Indignados, containing a description of the study and an invitation to participate in a teleconference interview. The passive followers of *Indignados* Facebook groups were reached through the internal communication network of *Indignados* associations. A descriptive email explaining the objectives of the study was communicated to 40 associations and organizations of *Indignados* (10 in France and 30 in Greece). A total of 40 in-depth interviews (20 with French and 20 with Greek *Indignados* activists) were conducted. To ensure diversity, participants of various demographic characteristics (e.g. age, class, nationality) and different positions in the movement were selected. The final sample included four 'core members' of the *Indignados* movement from each country (two between 20 and 40 years old and two between 40 and 55 years old). Among the 36 non-leaders, 20 were 20–40 years old, ten 40–55 years old and six 60–75 years old). The final sample is representative of the larger movement of Indignados in terms of opinions and views expressed by activists and typical of other new social movements that emerged during the anti-austerity crisis in Europe.

## *Data collection*

An important task before the collection of Facebook posts was the delimitation of protest events in time (dates) and space (countries of interest). This was accomplished by mapping the various protest events in France and in Greece, to select the major events between May 2011 and January 2013. These were selected following three criteria: (a) the number of participants, (b) the form of action (only demonstrations and occupations were selected) and (c) the mass media coverage. The posts were collected only in these periods, excluding other content found online. Although the data do not cover all protest events of the *Indignados* movement, we are confident that the sample corresponds with their major activities in France and Greece. The collection of posts employed a data mining technique based on NodeXL, an open source network analysis and visualization software used primarily for network analysis, discovery and exploration of particular social media spaces (Smith et al., 2009). NodeXL has a modular architecture that allows for the extraction and importation of network data from specific dates and specific Facebook pages/groups.

## *Data analysis*

The posts were analysed via thematic content analysis (Ahuvia, 2001). Themes were identified through repeated readings, and posts were classified according to the theoretical components of civic participation. Through repeated readings, distinct lines of argumentation were identified. A similar interpretative method was applied to interviews. Each interview was transcribed, texts coded and categorized according to the emerging dimensions of civic participation. Extracts used in the analysis were selected rigorously, fulfilling the criteria of content, length, variety, structure, clear argumentation, ideas and meaning.

## Analysis: The meaning of civic participation offline and online

This section first discusses interview data related to the meaning *Indignados* assign to formal and informal participatory activities. The discussion is centred upon the civic activities and their meaning. Second, we discuss the role of Facebook in participatory activities, based on the content of the *Indignados* Facebook groups.

### *The manifest repertoires of formal and informal civic participation*

*Voting as an act of clustering against extreme right-wing parties.* The first category refers to citizens whose voting activity is represented in terms of an emotional action in order to reinforce a particular political party and, at the same, to neutralize the 'enemy' (the far-right here represented by the political party 'Golden Dawn'). This position is specified as a form of natural act and at the same time an act of contestation where the subjects are mobilizing their political passions (see Mouffe, 2013) around an alternative socio-political project, represented in the Greek case by the political party SYRIZA. Such arguments emphasize the degree of cynicism and confidence in the act of voting and, at the same time, are used to mobilize a more personalized contextual experience: the subjects do not vote because they believe that they can achieve their goal, but because they want to express a strong personal contestation related to the rise of extreme right-wing parties. Thus, they describe their civic participation as an act against a defined opponent. The rhetorical form in which the action is represented by the use of the expressions 'I don't' and 'I need'.

Subjects adopt this position about voting as the most effective form of participation and resistance as it is also a collective form of contestation. It is noteworthy that interviewees promoting such actions do so in rather intense forms using direct reference to 'the citizens'. This rhetorical formation accentuates the urgency at an individual level and the necessity of the proposed civic practice as an instrumental means to counter the extreme right. Resistance here is suggested to represent an exit from the present situation where extreme right-wing political parties gain visibility. Although this is the predominant reason, subjects reject voting as civic obligation, but endorse it as a choice deployed to anticipate future undesirable developments:

> People expressed themselves with their vote. And the vote included an expression of despondency towards the extreme right. […] And this is the most interesting part. (François, Indignados Paris)

This line of argumentation echoes the actors' feelings around formal participation. This manifest form of participation can be described as an act of collective contestation, clustering subjects against the extreme Right and not as a collective act of active citizenship shared among citizens of a particular nation state. To this end, political involvement in formal activities, such as voting, is not seen as a civic duty anymore bounded to the formal activities of a nation state but rather as something instrumental – especially in the context of political crisis.

*Radical forms of active citizen:Abstention as an act of creating rupture.* The second category refers to citizens' more radical activities (e.g. abstention). Abstention here is considered

as an active form of political participation. The unifying element of individuals' narratives is identified in relation to two attributes: first, that abstention must be recognized as a form of citizens' expression against political power, and second, as a natural political act which must be measured in national elections. These two central arguments become apparent in accounts such as 'abstention must be recognized' and 'this is the norm':

> Obviously at some point we wanted to fight so that abstention is recognized. Last spring, in a group in Lille and in Paris too, I think, we wanted to try it. Abstention must be counted. Thus, many people don't vote or they stopped voting, as a form of protest, and also as a disappointment, because they think that it is useless. Politicians only want to reach power. (Olivier, Indignados Lille)

Subjects are opposed to voting and represent abstention as an individual expression of active citizenry and the only available act of protest. Thus, abstention is constructed as an effective individual and collective behaviour, which conforms to the political norms within representative democracy. The political system and the act of voting are criticized in strong terms often using irony such as 'we are not voting for the thieves' and 'abstention is the only solution against the gang of politicians'. They point to the opponent as the reason for not voting. This is illuminated by frustration arising from the participants' political inclination; the sharing of same feelings around these issues seems to function as an effective form of providing emotional support. Abstention is thus represented not as an anti-democratic stance but as a liberating solution that would allow citizens to decide their own fate within democracy.

In sum, this category refers to citizens who are not uninterested in politics, but who actually disapprove of the political system and recognize a deficit in liberal democracy. They strongly believe that through their abstention, they can express their discontent with representative democracy. Here, the anti-voting attitude becomes a civic obligation and the only means to express feelings of belonging. This connotes clearly with the citizen figure who can be qualified as inactive, and who views voting as a personalized act of ineffectiveness in terms of participation.

*Inactive citizen:Voting as an individual act of ineffectiveness.* In this category, disappointment and frustration are expressed as a shared feeling regarding non-voting. Two lines of argumentation were encountered. The first constructs non-voting as an act of disappointment regarding the available institutional mechanisms and, specifically, the voting process. The disappointment is uttered in strong terms, as a feeling of being manipulated due to the concentration power in the hands of elites. Voting is thought of as an old and inadequate symbolic resource.

Through the interviews, the blame through personal narratives is directed against elites and politicians constituting an oligarchy that does not represent citizens' claims; instead, they are financially driven and self-serving. A key matter emerging from this analysis is that voting meshes with strong affective elements, embodied in the arguments of the activists. These feelings target mainly the elites and their elected representatives, who are perceived as enemies due to the implementation of austerity. Interviewees are arguing around a rather active dimension of citizenship where the subjects are conscious of the deficit and problems of representative democracy and are

searching for alternative paradigms through their non-participation (non-voting) in institutional practices. Civic participation can take a meaningful and active understanding only if it is anchored in other alternative informal practices, for instance, engagement in social movements.

*From the disassociated citizen to the activist citizen.* This category focuses on individual experience and on the way that it creates feelings of political bonding among citizens. Participating in activists' practices creates a feeling of inclusion of individuals who were previously feeling abandoned by institutional structures:

> The structures that should have been left-wing parties or left associations, acquired some very bad conservative instincts. Which means, it was more common to see organizations interested in continuing to exist i.e. to maintain their members, to maintain the correctness of their views – even if somehow they understood whether they were wrong or right – rather than being interested in the purpose they served: how can people, the workers, the youth live better? [The question was] whether they could finally serve this purpose. To serve it, to speak out, to give voice to those people. This means that even those organizations which should have been [real] examples of democracy were, unfortunately, exercising anti-democratic practices. The only solution left was the movement. (Costas, Indignados Patras)

Here, the movement takes a collective connotation for citizens which is expressed through individuals' will to fight together. The meaning of their collective actions originates from the feeling that citizens feel rewarded through their experience. The feeling of reward was evident at two levels: the feeling of individual reward and the feeling of collective reward. Through the activist experience, participation can be seen as a transformation of subjects within the collectivity and as an opportunity to express opinions in the general assemblies, enabling self-confidence. This particular experience created the ground for people to come together and enabled the discussion around politics without any pre-defined ideologies, on just a common identification of being together as Indignados.

This finding evokes the idea of bracketing of civic identity, which parallels a general political disenchantment, and thus emphasizes the figure of citizens who are in search of alternative paradigms within the frame of liberal democracy. This activist discourse suggests that extra-parliamentary activities (informal participation) can help subjects regain the active dimension of their citizenship (interiorization) and open the way to claim a more individualized civic identity. Thus, the motive behind these activities is that individuals can understand not only the new forms of political responses but also reject party politics, which for them represent the existing order. Therefore, the feeling of ineffectiveness of formal participation can be seen as an asset and not as a mode of passivity. This can be defined as a form of bracketing of civic identity which is extensively discussed by radical democracy theorists and is often related to the ongoing debate about the deconstruction of political identity. To sum up, the openness of the civic identity under the umbrella of 'the citizen' places the limits of the efficacy of politics in a particular site of struggle outside of the existing model of democracy.

## *Online discourses of activists: The role of Facebook*

*The citizen as 'victim' in search of other 'victims' to create civic bonds.* The first line of argumentation expressed by *Indignados* Facebook users refers to the ability of Facebook to construct resonant emotional conversations and transform personal indignation to a collective one. Activists attribute the effectiveness of their actions to the technological space. By exchanging personal stories, users constructed mutual feelings of trust and solidarity. One of the major arguments here is that although the 'enemy' violates users' values, activists need to continue the struggle for their personal freedom. As a result, the technological space is used to create bonding and mutual support among members, expressed through lexical choices such as 'let's fight together', 'we need to save our nation' or 'equality, justice and solidarity – the only way to tackle the enemy'. Personal feelings of members regarding injustice and inequality circulated online referring mostly to the personal financial situation of citizens as a result of austerity imposed by the Troika:

> My grandparents and my parents fought to give us a better future, a moral heritage, some democratic values and beliefs. Each has his or her own home, job and lots of love, without luxury, and we, our generation, we will fight together to not leave any debts to our children. This is my situation due to our elites who came with the austerity measures. (Indignants of France, 15–16 October 2011)

> Yes, I feel the same: i feel like I was violated by the politicians here, there, in Europe and everywhere. My bank calls me everyday. I truly suffer. I can't act or react. I'm a Greek indignant but also a desperate mother, a desperate worker and a desperate citizen. (Indignants of France, 15–16 October 2011)

Users' posts are often enthusiastic in expressing the strong belief that Facebook enables citizens to unite around a spontaneous call for mobilization through a series of politicized events, in order to prevent harmful decisions, such as the cuts in salaries and pensions. The call is addressed to everyone using an inclusive rhetoric. In other words, the goal is to bring all the people together to fight for a common cause that overcomes differences caused by partisan support and personal and practical issues (i.e. busy schedules, physical state). The relevant accounts are framed in rather dramatic tones, using a personal adjective (such as 'you' or 'your friend'), uttering the second person to make the call for action more direct and effective. Hundreds of posts stress the fact that the streets are a way to overcome passivity, isolation and demonstrate the real indignation of the 'people'. Such actions are qualified positively by the activists and contribute largely in the creation and diffusion of a collective feeling of exaltation and anger among activists:

> COME ON EVERYONE, COME TO THE SQUARE, FOR GOD'S SAKE STOP SITTING AT HOME. THEY WANT TO CHASE US AWAY. EVERY SINGLE PERSON COUNTS!!!! WE CAN. (Indignants of Syntagma, Greece, 15 June 2011)

Reporting increasing numbers of activists joining and liking Facebook groups to incite users to share or join the pages or groups of Indignados was a way to raise awareness regarding offline participation:

> A cordial appeal to all the participants of this group: promote texts and links related to our movement and, generally, not the one of politicians. (Indignants of Dramas, Greece, 25–27 May 2011)

There is a roughly shared starting point that claims that the present circumstances are intolerable, and that an effort is necessary to transcend them. It is a commonly held view that Greece and France should go their own way, free from constraints imposed from abroad and cemented domestically. At the same time, there is an awareness of how different personal stories – and the telling of those stories – have generated civic bonding among citizens. These shared horizons have to be dealt with in order to achieve a stronger degree of civic solidarity within the movement. Different discourses have been circulating, and there is a struggle to attain a shared way of seeing and speaking in order for their stories to be visible.

*The engaged citizen: 'Sharing' online material – a good start for civic participation.* This position is specified as an advantage for civic participation, where private and direct interaction between users involves posting comments, sharing photos and tagging other users through the Facebook groups of the movement. The activists describe these actions positively. To create greater interactivity and flexibility among activists, Facebook's structure and design can initiate participation offline:

> People, Facebook is a space of politics due to its physicality. This specificity is difficult to find in the physical world. This form of practice is more democratic than a dialog with 30 partisans of a political party. Lets meet outside Syntagma square and discuss together. (Greek Indignants, Greece, 30 June 2011)

What appears online is the idea that Facebook allows the sharing and exchanging of information in real time and it is rather flexible in adapting to specific circumstances. The way that arguments are constructed in this category is in line with the idea of Fenton and Barassi (2011) regarding the logic of these platforms that favour individual creativity more than a collective image. Very often, subjects used motivational resources by posting photos and videos to call for effective and direct action offline. Also, direct quotes and numbers were used to accentuate the urgency to engage in such actions (e.g. 'it was a good start, we were 100.000'):

> WE ARE HERE! Check this photo from the yesterday protest in front of Syntagma. Join us and experience this real democracy and your fundamental right to protest. (Real Democracy Now, France, 5 November 2011)

It is arguable that Facebook is seen as an effective means of creating reciprocity and interaction among users. The main reason is that it provides opportunities for private and direct communication between activists and their own personal networks, which lays the foundations for creating community around a shared feeling of togetherness. Thus, the new media environment offers here a terrain for the cultivation of civic participation that will then be expressed in the public space. This form of online social media facilitates the transformation of activists into active participants by allowing them to spread action-related

content quickly and effectively, especially through videos and photos. It is suggested that this type of communication increases people's motivation to engage within the group online and offline. Yet, the danger here is that one can be a Facebook active user without any real engagement in the physical world.

*The activist citizen: Creating an alternative civic sphere through debate and talk.* The Facebook page gives expression to often intense civic debate. A key practice within the groups included general as well as thematic discussion groups on topics such as the creation of a political party, austerity, the European Union (EU) and the role of political parties through the sharing of personal stories. These discussions were facilitated by the structure and form of Facebook, which allowed users to exchange opinions around their future participation:

> Let's create a party and choose direct democracy instead of parliamentary democracy. Let's put an end to the ridiculous political family chimneys. With the dynamics of the movement, we can achieve this. Let's put an end to indifference and take action through the existing legal institutions. (Indignants, 25–31 May 2011)

> The question is not whether a party should be created. The question is to create a serious party that will represent everyone. The system only wants indignant sheep and it trembles when it thinks that they can be organized and claim new elections. And since the Syntagma Square resonates with their bleating, it is time for the District to gain power. (Indignants, 25–31 May 2011)

Most of the individual posts that were supportive of other users were principally in disagreement with austerity and the memorandum:

> We don't know each other but we are struggling to survive just the same. You need to fix your mistakes, to struggle for the future of your kids or you will stay unemployed all your life. Calm and composed they lined up in silence to show Troika that they will never be able to break down this nation['s] spirit of defiance. (Indignants in Syntagma, Greece, 3 September 2011)

Similarly, these posts expressed opposition to extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing members in the group – debating mostly around issues concerning political identities:

> ANTARSYA supporters, Golden Dawn supporters please don't come to the movement–not even virtually. We don't want you! (Indignados Ekaterini, Greece, 28–29 June 2011)

> I come from the political party of ANTARSYA, and I would like to be part of this space. I have my individual beliefs but I think all these could be left outside this space. Let's overcome our differences. (Indignados Ekaterini, Greece, 28–29 June 2011)

> I don't know if I could do this. But let's start our discussion about your thoughts regarding the inactivity of your political party in this process? (Indignados Ekaterini, Greece, 28–29 June 2011)

Various discourses circulated and a struggle to attain a minimal shared way of seeing and speaking in order for the movement to gain momentum was evident. Most of the groups on Facebook struggled to find common ground on which to build solidarity; a key obstacle was (often varying) political identities, which exist online. Therefore, the key role of Facebook is the way that it de facto generates a partial civic sphere – a democratic communicative space where differences can be aired with the aim of achieving some degree of consensus. We note that even disagreements are dealt with in a largely civil manner. This civic counter-sphere is an alternative to hegemonic discourses – a discursive site whose fundamental premises contrast the prevailing ones, but one which has not yet fully created a unified political identity encompassing all movement participants.

To sum up, this kind of civic talk based on the construction of common emotion-based experiences can lead citizens to participate in alternative practices. The interaction and openness of online social media, and the affordances that enable the creation of personalized content, can create fertile ground for the construction or empowerment of active civic participation. Thus, the citizen emerges as a flexible and fluid category through online social media as the latter becomes a nodal point among dispersed and individualized interactions. At the same time, it seems that this flexibility is effective within online social media where the political is transformed from a predetermined bounded sphere in which political subjects acted upon to an indeterminate sphere of contestation related with more personalized and self-determined content. In this sense, online social media can be used as a vehicle for a different kind of civic identity, more networked and flexible, where citizens can generate personal content and share it with others through alternative citizenship practices.

## Conclusion

First, this study indicates that civic participation can be seen as an expressive category anchored in specific practices (e.g. voting), which in most cases is expected to overcome the opponent. In some cases, participation represents a shared motivation for individuals or a means to regain citizens' dignity, or resisting the actual political process. This form can transform individualities into active social and political agents. However, a certain degree of political interest must precede any form of political activity. This is the case of citizens who perceive voting as an act of clustering against extreme right-wing parties. Political interest goes along with a specific action and motivation. Second, civic participation is used as a more affective category, which unifies the subjects around the expression of their political disaffection. Here, this is seen as a civic reserve where citizens are not fully involved in politics but have the potential to do so when needed. This act can be considered as a deliberate active form of participation or a protest action against the status quo. However, the finding of inactive citizen reflects those who are disinterested in politics by attributing a negative role to the political system. Those citizens are in constant negotiation of the meaning of citizenry which reveals a strong sign of incapacity to act. This is attached to a weak personal sense of political efficacy, closely related to means of participation in civic life.

The solution is attached to the citizen who has been transformed to activist. This category reflects the 'bracketing' of formal civic practices along with a general political

disenchantment that de-emphasizes traditional citizenship values. Activism can be understood as a unifying element that brings subjects together around a common project of reconstruction and can provide an alternative venue for citizens' mobilization and political passions outside democratic institutions (Mouffe, 2013). This finding reflects subjects' participation expanded in the terrain of civil society as the new space of politics. This calls for a broader understanding of the sphere of the political where the contestation of power could take place in a specific space without depoliticizing other elements of the political (Rasmussen and Brown, 2002). These activities can help subjects regain the active dimension of their citizenship and open the way to claiming a more individualized civic identity centred around the material and cultural conditions of contemporary citizens. Under certain circumstances, collective experience can be seen as a constructive necessity for mobilization of political interests. Thus, the failure of citizenship to resolve everyday political issues becomes its potential to transfer the political activity outside the terrain of formal politics. Activism is seen as a new form of political response to the political and social challenges of our societies. Indignados activists open the site of identity politics to be mobilized in the streets.

Facebook findings reveal a kind of symbolic construction of action around emotions, feelings and personal stories, which allows the accomplishment of civic participation. Thus, the technical affordances offered by online social media could easily become the instruments of emotional narration, which in turn can reinforce civic bonds. Exchanging experiences and stories online can create the conditions for offline participation around shared motivations. The paradox though is that while Facebook reinforces mutuality, it did not help users to manage and organize their demands and claims in more concrete terms in the broader political terrain. Therefore, the sharing of content among Indignados activists seems significant. Getting into sharing material needs motivation and incentive to do so, and sharing is not as easy as just a 'like' button. This kind of practice can promote the subjective side of civic empowerment, and give the sense of civic agency through online practices significant for political participation (Dahlgren, 2013; Papa and Dahlgren, 2017). Such new practices can be established as civic resources where citizens can draw upon for their future offline participation. Also, similar actions can motivate citizens not only for engaging in offline participation but also for creating and circulating civic knowledge. Papacharissi (2010) argues that much of civic behaviour taking place in online settings and this can give rise to a new 'civic vernacular' or at least pose the conditions for the accomplishment of civic agency. Therefore, we must be careful and relativize ideas about the intrinsic capacity of Facebook to empower or create the conditions for political participation; instead, its affordances can equally discourage engagement and promote mechanisms of exclusion instead of inclusion (Papa and Milioni, 2016).

Also, Indignados Facebook groups manage to engender an alternative public sphere and the vision of a new civic culture, one beyond the delimited communication spaces controlled by the political power. Facebook can support new forms of alternative politics (Dahlgren, 2009) inspired by more participatory modes of engagement. In some cases, debates and talk with others can provide the resources to strengthen citizenship. This idea suggests that practices of civic participation are largely communicative – they involve modes of speech and are embedded in instrumental and expressive discourses.

With instrumental discourse, citizens are interested in actual political outcomes, while with expressive modes, the benefit is seen as residing in the act itself – that is, there is no anticipation or demand that the act will have consequences beyond the satisfaction it affords the citizen (it 'feels good'). Expressive participation can be important for the long-term processes of citizenship and mobilizing opinion around issues – and in the long term, opinion formation can have major impact. Talk and debate in cooperation with other individuals are an important prerequisite for the construction of alternative or even radical forms of civic identities and can provide the knowledge necessary to strengthen civic identities. In contrast, through online expression, citizens can gain a sense of empowerment, and therefore feel that expressing their opinions online does their job as good citizens. In this sense, they feel less pressured to participate in other forms of activities.

Certainly, more research is needed to shed light on processes of formation and accomplishment of civic participation within the transnational *Indignados* movement and the different individual trajectories the citizens have taken. For instance, a yet unanswered question concerns the political efficacy of individuals participating in Greek *Indignados* to produce concrete political outcomes. More importantly, there is evidence that the civic networks created by the *Indignados*, offline and online, remained active long after the movement had dissolved and gave rise to various civic innovations strengthening the notoriously weak Greek and French civic society and by that empowering the individuals.

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