

Participation in Times of War: The Ambivalence of Digital Media

Olga Zvonareva 

Care and Public Health Research Institute, Maastricht University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Olga Zvonareva (o.zvonareva@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

Submitted: 1 August 2024 **Accepted:** 9 October 2024 **Published:** 6 February 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Public Participation Amidst Hostility: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern” edited by Olga Zvonareva (Maastricht University) and Claudia Egger (Utrecht University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i419>

Abstract

Do digital media support or undermine democracy and freedom? Building on recent scholarship that highlights the diversity of digital media’s effects, this article begins with the premise that digital media do not clearly shape political life in contemporary societies one way or another but are instead ambivalent. The article seeks to explicate how exactly the ambivalence of digital media emerges and to arrive at a suitable conceptualisation of their role. Empirically, to capture how digital media become embroiled in very different kinds of political action, I draw on a prolonged ethnographic engagement with two war-time volunteer initiatives in Russia. Both initiatives participate in politics by assisting Ukrainian war refugees who fled in the direction of Russia, and both rely on the messaging app Telegram. However, the participation of one amounts to resisting the imperative of supporting the aggression foisted by the state on Russian citizens, while the participation of another heightens this very imperative. I engage with these two contrasting digitally mediated initiatives doing similar activities but acting on vastly different commitments to illuminate the digital media’s ambivalence. I show how digital media contribute to the creation of and cracking down on democratic openings by becoming actors in the collective action networks that strive to resist oppressive political strategies and, simultaneously, in the networks that strive to further strengthen the very same strategies.

Keywords

authoritarianism; collective action; democracy; digital media; digital participation; participation amidst hostility; public participation; Russia; Telegram

1. Introduction

1.1. *Introducing the Puzzle*

One of the most heated contemporary debates revolves around the political role of digital media (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Kreiss, 2021; Persily & Tucker, 2020; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015). Do they support or undermine democracy and freedom? On the one hand, studies have shown how digital media open novel opportunities for political engagement. For example, in 2011, the Occupy movement started in the US and within a month sparked protest activities against socioeconomic inequalities in more than 80 countries through images and personal stories shared on digital media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, X (then Twitter), and Tumblr. By making it easier for citizens to connect, articulate their concerns, and act on their commitments, digital media appear to be conducive to the democratisation and broadening of public participation in politics (Bang & Halupka, 2019; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Theocharis, 2015).

On the other hand, there is evidence of polarising and divisive effects of digital media. These negative effects can be brought about through, for instance, the creation of insulated “echo chambers” with citizens being exposed largely to the news and perspectives that align with their own (Sunstein, 2018). They can also be brought about through digital media facilitating exposure to opposing views reduced to their caricature versions. These developments endanger mutual understanding paramount to solving collective problems in highly diverse societies. The attack on the US Capitol in 2021 is one example of how digital media-facilitated circulation of misinformation and extreme views within insular networks incited radicalisation and violence against democracy itself (Jeppesen et al., 2022).

Recent reviews that focus on the relationship between digital media and politics highlight that multiple studies conducted on the topic to date have produced conflicting and incoherent results (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). It appears that digital media are inherently neither supportive nor corrosive of democracy and freedom; rather they are ambivalent. This article delves into this ambivalence and seeks to understand how it emerges. How are the contrasting effects of digital media produced? And if digital media do not clearly shape political life in contemporary societies one way or another, how can we productively theorise their political role?

1.2. *Introducing the Study*

Empirically, to capture how exactly digital media become embroiled in very different kinds of political action, I draw on a prolonged ethnographic engagement with war-time volunteer initiatives in Russia. Many of these initiatives emerged nearly overnight, following the escalation of Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 as an attempt to resist the imperative of supporting the aggression foisted by the state on Russian citizens. Following a period of haphazard digitally mediated searching, thousands of people previously unknown to one another became connected and engaged in exploring what could be done. The mode of action that these newly connected volunteers have mostly settled into focuses on assisting people from Ukraine while in Russia.

People from Ukrainian territories that are occupied or have become zones of active warfare often can only flee in the direction of Russia. Consequently, the backbone of the new ecology of dispersed grassroots volunteer collectives is a host of collectives that ferry Ukrainian people across Russia toward the European Union (EU).

This backbone is surrounded by smaller initiatives that have coalesced around arranging medical assistance and various other types of support for these EU-bound people, as well as for those who, for the time being, remain in Russia. Importantly, the overall ability of the newly emerged volunteer initiatives to assist hinges on the messaging app Telegram, as I show below.

What allows this study of new war-time volunteer initiatives to engage with the ambivalence of digital media is that while the ecology of these initiatives is largely contentious, there also exist other collectives. Such collectives are similarly dedicated to assisting people from Ukraine, but their assistance activities do not mount resistance to the war-waging authoritarian state. Instead, through their activities, these initiatives—commonly referred to as “patriotic”—aspire to extend the reach of that very same state. In this article, I zoom into two initiatives—one contentious and one patriotic—to accomplish two things. First, I trace the morphing of scattered individuals into efficient and stably functioning grassroots collectives, highlighting how Telegram has centrally featured in the process, and argue that volunteering becomes a means of participation in war-time Russia. Second, I engage with two contrasting digitally mediated participatory initiatives doing similar activities but acting on vastly different commitments to illuminate the ambivalence of digital media. I show how digital media contribute to the creation of and cracking down on democratic openings by *becoming actors in the collective action networks* that strive to resist oppressive political strategies and, simultaneously, in the networks that strive to further strengthen those very same strategies. I would like to stress here that this article is not about (digital) volunteering as such. Rather it is about how in the specific situation this article focuses on, volunteering becomes a means of political participation and how digital media are involved in making this participation happen and producing highly divergent results.

2. Participation by Other Means

Before outlining the methodology of this study, I pause here to consider the notion of participation because in what follows I propose understanding the work of the volunteer initiatives described in this article as a form of participation in politics.

Traditionally, participation has been conceived as focused on electing or otherwise influencing state officials (De Moor, 2017; Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018). This thinking is noticeable in classic definitions of participation, such as the one offered in 1972 by Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, who considered participation to be “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba & Nie, 1972). Political theorists have never denied that citizens influence societal life in many ways, including those not directed at the state. However, they have tended to draw a line between activities that target the state and thus are deemed to be “political” participation and those that do not and are correspondingly termed “civic” or “non-political” participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

More recently, scholarly concerns about accurately diagnosing the state of participation in contemporary societies—Are people withdrawing from politics? Are they increasingly engaging in politics but on their own terms?—have inspired efforts to redefine participation. One popular line of reasoning has been to suggest that recent technoscientific advances and novel risks and concerns associated with these advances have stimulated the expansion of participation beyond state political institutions and formal avenues for exerting influence on them. In the words of the authors of a recent review article, “a rich stream of research has since

applied the political participation concept to unconventional political acts, such as protesting, and even various forms of civic engagement that are not obviously political in nature” (Ruess et al., 2023, p. 1497).

There is also another way of looking at participation. It involves decentering the state, its officials and their decisions more radically, and instead focusing on issues (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2016; Marres, 2007). An issue could be, for example, the installation of 5G masts in a community as Noortje Marres described (Marres, 2023). The issue of 5G masts entangles mobile phone users, residents, nature lovers and business owners whose concerns are in conflict. It throws into stark relief shared dependencies on the same atmosphere, land and infrastructure; diverse threats to livelihoods posed by mutually challenging ways of living; and associated societal divisions. If we look at participation in an issue-centred way instead of state-centred, we can see the continuous and shifting co-existence of different interrelated participatory activities that adopt varying formats and varying degrees of contentiousness, explicitness, and orientation towards the state (Baim-Lance et al., 2019; Jansky & Langstrup, 2022; Marres, 2015; Stewart, 2021; Tironi, 2015). For example, Chilvers et al. (2021) showed that in the UK, the issue of energy transitions has generated engagements as diverse as protests, participatory dance and performance, energy cooperatives, everyday energy-conscious practices such as heating and commuting, media engagement, and government-sponsored consultations and behaviour-change initiatives. By starting to explore participation from issues, it is possible to notice forms of participation that are rare or even unique to the issue in question and to avoid being locked on to more familiar forms, also leaving aside the often-criticised distinction between political and civic participation. Therefore, I approach the volunteer activities described in this article from an issue-centred perspective, viewing them as one of the ways in which citizens strive to affect the issue of their concern—the war—despite mostly being explicitly disinvited from doing so.

3. Methodology

In this article, I report some of the results of a prolonged ethnographic engagement with novel war-time volunteer initiatives in Russia. Here, the operation of two such initiatives is analysed; however, I have followed the work of many more (Zvonareva, 2024). Both initiatives examined here rely on Telegram, which is one of the most popular messaging apps in former Soviet locations with 900 million monthly active users as of March 2024 (Murphy, 2024). It was created by Russian entrepreneurs Pavel and Nikolai Durov in 2013 and has a reputation of a tool capable of protecting communication amidst political persecution. This reputation has been supported by Pavel’s confrontations with Russian authorities, his subsequent exile, and Telegram’s stated adherence to privacy, security, and freedom of expression (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

My analysis in this article draws on several types of data. First, I have followed open chats of both initiatives. I started following the chats of the contentious initiative, which I have named here *On the Move*, in May 2022, read back to the first available messages from April 2022, and have continued to follow them until now. I started following the chat of the patriotic initiative, which I have named here *The Circle*, in December 2023, read back to the first available messages from March 2022, and have continued to follow it until now. *On the Move* and *The Circle* are not the real names of the initiatives. Reading chats from both initiatives, I took notes, wrote analytical memos and selectively saved posts without posters’ usernames and other identifying details. Second, I conducted 52 online semi-structured interviews (Green & Thorogood, 2018, pp. 115–146) with contentious volunteers, some of whom were active only in *On the Move*, others contributed to the functioning of several initiatives, including *On the Move*, and others did not work with *On the Move* directly,

but were aware of it and sometimes collaborated with this initiative or recommended it to those who could benefit from its assistance. I did not talk to anyone from The Circle, assuming animosity from their side. This asymmetry was compensated by a search of media which generated the third type of data I rely on in my analysis here. I collected all media appearances of The Circle found using the name of the initiative and/or its leaders and/or versions of the word “volunteer” in Yandex.ru. On the Move, as described below, operates in a depublicised manner, therefore there is very little data of this kind about this initiative. The Circle, on the other hand, strives to attract attention, with its leaders giving multiple interviews to regional media and bloggers, and its work featuring in numerous news reports.

Analysis of these data has proceeded simultaneously with their generation and as a part of a larger inquiry into the ecology of the new war-time volunteer initiatives in Russia. I analysed interview and media data thematically (Green & Thorogood, 2018, pp. 249–284), looking for salient themes coming from the data and considering them in light of the theoretical literature on public participation and the societal effects of digital media. I used these data in combination with the insights gained by reading the chats to create a timeline of developments for each initiative and to sketch their operation processes internally and externally, in connection to other initiatives and collectives. Finally, I relied on the analysis of the chat data to understand the nuts and bolts of the initiatives’ daily work. My thinking throughout the analysis process has been checked and aided by regular discussions with my research team members; at a more advanced stage, preliminary results and the process of arriving at these were presented to colleagues at the Department of Health, Ethics and Society and participants of the workshop “Participation and STS Sensibilities.” I critically reexamined themes, patterns and conclusions identified as shaky and reinforced or corrected these. I also continuously reflected on my own positionality in this research and noted my reactions, emotions, and concerns alongside the research process and how these related to my fieldwork decisions and analysis. In contemporary qualitative social sciences, there is little expectation of researchers engaging with their fields of study from a position of absolute neutrality and detachment (Nikulkin & Zvonareva, 2024). However, there is an expectation of being transparent and accountable and I took care in being both in my analysis and my thinking throughout as documented in this article.

This research presented ethical challenges, chiefly related to not compromising the safety of endangered volunteers—in this article, On the Move volunteers. The situation of The Circle volunteers is different because they are currently far from being endangered and this research is unlikely to make them any more vulnerable in the future, given their extensive publicity and outspokenness. To protect On the Move volunteers, I kept collection of identifying information to a minimum, anonymised the data—including deleting original interview recordings after transcribing them myself—and stored the data securely. I also anonymised all information concerning The Circle volunteers in my publications, including this article, for symmetry. I involved the endangered research participants in the process of minimising risks. I wrote down the results of my analysis in Russian in the fall of 2023 and shared them with those who had spoken with me. This text also circulated within the wider volunteer community, being forwarded from volunteer to volunteer. Sharing the results first with the volunteers served two purposes: First, I was able to check my interpretations and receive critiques and additional insights. Second, volunteers themselves checked already anonymised results for potential safety issues. This research was reviewed and approved by the FHML Research Ethics Committee at Maastricht University (the approval number FHML-REC/2022/110).

4. Results

In this section, I introduce two volunteer initiatives, On the Move and The Circle. Both assist war refugees from Ukraine in Russia and centrally rely on Telegram for their work. They are also vastly different. Conversations with the On the Move volunteers revealed a sense of desperation caused by association with the war-waging country. Typically, stories of how one became a volunteer would sound like this story shared with me: “When the war started, it was devastating, you cannot do anything, you can just sit around and watch. And some three weeks later, I heard that somebody, somewhere is somehow helping, that refugees are coming”. My interviewees would then proceed to join the volunteer collective in an effort to act on their disagreement with the war. The Circle, in contrast, champions the war. Below, I delineate the mechanisms and processes of the two initiatives’ operations and highlight the divergent roles Telegram plays therein.

4.1. Contentious Volunteer Collective: On the Move

On the Move, the first volunteer collective I focus on in this article, is hard to define as it has no specific location, leader or official representatives. The most concrete manifestations of this initiative are several group chats on Telegram. These group chats are open, which means that anyone can join without the approval of the chat admins. But first, one needs to find these chats, which is not straightforward considering that links to them are not shared publicly on social media. Online searches do not typically lead directly to them, and very few journalistic publications cover On the Move’s work. Instead, links to the chats are passed from person to person: From those who have already relied on the initiative’s assistance to those who may benefit from it and from those who contribute to the initiative’s work to those who are searching for ways to act on their opposition to the war.

Upon opening any of the On the Move chats, one would notice that it is mostly filled with messages marked as “tasks,” such as the message below:

Volunteer 1 [July 2024]

#task

Please help me cover the costs involved in two requests:

1. Costs of meals and accommodation for a family with three children in transit 5000 + 2900 already covered 🙏🙏🙏
2. Costs of vaccinations and travel documents for two cats 5800 + 2000

If one lingers for a bit, one would then notice that within several hours after posting, the hashtag #task on top of such messages usually changes to the hashtag #completed. A note was also added to the message above: “Both requests are addressed, families and their animals are safe.”

What would be impossible to observe directly though, is the distributed system of flexibly organised interactions of which the open chats and tasks posted in these chats are only a small part. Requests for

assistance are continuously collected, cases are distributed between volunteers, various resources from tickets and contacts of volunteers abroad to wheelchairs and medical care are secured, and progress is tracked. In the absence of formal hierarchies, chains of command and external funding, On the Move functions like clockwork. To understand how such a collective action of thousands of people has become possible, let us first trace the emergence of this volunteer initiative.

On the Move started with a small group of acquaintances living in Russia; mostly women, mostly with kids. At the end of March 2022, upon realising that people fleeing from Ukraine would sometimes find themselves in Russia, they began thinking about how they could assist. One of them, Natalia, created a Telegram chat to ease the discussion and called it Unite. It was not clear how to contact people from Ukraine, where they were, what was needed, and how to self-organise. Chat participants began by gathering information and organising it into sharable instructions, such as guidelines for leaving Russia for the EU.

As the Unite chat was open, a link for joining it, as well as links to newly created instructions, began being forwarded from person to person beyond the initial participants. In a matter of days, the chat grew beyond the initial small group of acquaintances to several hundred members who were mostly strangers to each other. Inevitably, a question arose about how to connect those who would like to assist with those who would like to receive assistance without openly sharing information about either. To address this, about a week after the birth of the initial Unite chat, three new Telegram chats were created. These new chats would later become the heart of On the Move. While the initial chat aimed to connect those eager to provide help with each other, the new chats aimed to connect people from Ukraine in Russia with those who wanted to help. The new chats were arranged according to three different scenarios: The first chat was for those who were in transit towards the EU via city A; the second chat was for those in transit towards the EU via city B; and the third chat was for those staying put for the time being. These chats were open and the link for joining was forwarded personally to all relevant contacts the chat participants could think of in an effort to reach those they intended to support.

Suddenly, the chats On the Move A and On the Move B started growing quickly, mostly due to the people in cities A and B joining. On the day these chats were created, messages such as the ones below poured in continuously:

Person 1: I can provide food and necessary stuff, pay for taxi, can bring food to the train or bus. Probably can do something else, I just do not know yet what exactly [18:40]

Person 2: Hi! I live in the city B. I can help with anything [19:03]

Person 3: Hello, I live in the city B, can help with food, clothes, pack necessary things to go, transport to a train, pass something, pay for a taxi [19:09]

Person 3: + there is a spare room (can accommodate 2 people). There is a dog at home [19:15]

Person 4: We can accommodate 2 people (queen size bed) in a spare room, city centre, not far away from the railway and bus stations. Will provide everything necessary. We do not have a car, but can order a taxi [19:24]

Concurrently, ways to add more structure to the assistance provision began to be explored as it became abundantly clear that, otherwise, “[i]n a couple of days the chat will turn into an endless stream of messages where it is impossible to find anything,” as one volunteer put it in On the Move B in April 2022. As a result, about two weeks after its inception, the initiative—now collectively known as On the Move (though it also assists those who are not on the move)—had developed into a system comprising a number of components: a Telegram bot for receiving requests; bot operators for communicating with request authors; online tables for recording requests and progress in addressing them, accessible only to a limited number of volunteers, including bot operators and individuals known as coordinators; and thousands of other volunteers who take on discrete tasks assigned by coordinators in the open chats.

The bot operator and coordinator roles have become defining for the On the Move initiative. The involvement of bot operators has been necessary because the diversity of the situations and the needs of those requesting assistance prevented the standardisation and, hence, automation of request collection. Instead, when a request for assistance was sent in via bot, an operator would ask the author a variety of questions to figure out a suitable way to assist in any specific case and would forward the request with its details accordingly. Coordinators are volunteers who take on specific requests and take care of addressing them fully, securing necessary resources, making all the arrangements, and maintaining continuous contact with those whose requests they took up. Volunteers who were ready to be coordinators were asked to fill in a dedicated form and were allowed to coordinate and have access to all internal data and processes only if they were known personally by somebody from the initial group or after a lengthy check and interview. Subsequently, coordinators came to specialise in either assisting those leaving Russia and/or assisting those who stay for the time being.

In a matter of days, a donations-fed ticket fund was attached, and new specialised chats emerged to support the initiative’s operation, such as chats of car owners who took on transportation tasks forwarded to them by coordinators. An internal knowledge database began to be assembled, containing information helpful for assisting in different situations and detailed instructions for volunteers. Safety rules were also developed, including a strict rule enforced by moderators to avoid discussing anything unrelated to assistance provision in the three open chats.

This speedy growth and extensive self-organisation came as a surprise to Natalia and her friends who joined her in the initial Unite chat. They did not foresee their little group becoming the seed that, planted in the digital environment of open Telegram chats and Google Forms, would produce a network with thousands of volunteers working together. Two and a half weeks after she created the Unite chat, Natalia closed it because it had fulfilled its purpose. After the Unite chat was closed, Natalia remained involved in the operation of the On the Move initiative for several months, subsequently withdrawing from it. As the assembled volunteer collective settled into its distributed and nonhierarchical way of operating, it proceeded with its work.

4.1.1. Digital Media and Depublicised Contentious Participation

As can be gleaned from the previous section, digital media, specifically Telegram, featured significantly in the emergence of On the Move. Let us now examine the initiative’s current steady functioning and, specifically, the involvement of Telegram therein. To this end, below I describe an episode that highlights several digitally mediated characteristics important for understanding how On the Move operates.

One day, this message was posted in On the Move B chat:

#Task from coordinator. A family from [city in the occupied Ukrainian territory] is now in [a village in a Russian region close to Ukrainian border]. Husband, wife, child, and an immobile grandmother of 90 years old. They need food and also the grandmother needs adult diapers, size XL. If anyone is willing to assist, send me a PM [10:04, October 2022]

I read this message and sent a personal message to the author, let us call her Amina, about 1.5 hours after she posted:

Me: Hi! Is assistance for the family in [the village] still needed? [11:44]

Amina: Hello, yes [11:45]

Me: How should it be organised? Is there delivery or is it better to just transfer money? [11:46]

Amina: We don't transfer money. There is Ozon [large online store with delivery service], unfortunately this is the only thing present there. [11:49]

Amina: Look, there are several people who volunteered to contribute financially. But I need somebody who would make the order. I do not have time. Can you [11:49]

Me: yes, I can do it in the evening. Will sit down at 9 and order everything [11:50]

Amina: ok. Then I send everyone willing to contribute financially to you? [11:51]

Me: ok. I also need a pickup point address and food preferences. Will report back in the evening [11:52]

Meanwhile, Amina shared my Telegram username with others who wanted to chip in. I received messages from four people one after another, all saying that they wanted to contribute and asking how it should be done. I gave each of them my phone number, which could be used as an identifier for transferring money to my bank account. In the evening, I opened the Ozon website. After the order was placed, I messaged everyone who contributed with a screenshot of the order. I sent this screenshot to Amina as well, followed by barcodes the recipients would need to collect the packages from their pickup point. Amina passed the barcodes to the family, who collected the packages within the next few days.

In this episode, we can notice several digitally mediated characteristics of the operation of On the Move. The first is *connectivity*. I get in touch with Amina; four other people get in touch with me; we cooperate and end up remotely arranging the delivery of several packages to a family. We have never met or heard of one another. We are not near each other. Yet, we are connected and are doing something together.

Our connection and cooperation take place in a matter of minutes, which points to the second characteristic of the operation of On the Move—*instantaneity*. I exchange just a couple of phrases with Amina and others and financial contributions arrive in my account. I am placing an order without leaving my table.

Immediately, everyone involved is notified that the task is completed, and pickup information is forwarded to the recipients.

While our cooperation looks entirely spontaneous, it is also organised: Recipients of the packages I end up ordering requested assistance via the bot operator who recorded their situation in a standardised table; Amina is designated to manage the assistance provision; there is an established Telegram chat with a large membership where Amina can easily find resources; and she is going to follow up on the family and work to assist with other needs as well. The organisation is not too fixed though. Formally, it does not exist as there is no legal entity, registered name or leader. There are no hierarchical chains of command, not even clear boundary separating the collective from others: I am just a person about to donate some money but suddenly, I am coordinating other donations and their usage. Such organisation can be called fluid. It is also largely hidden because all that is visible to most people is the open chat and the task posted there, while everything else, including how requests arrive, are taken and followed up on, is not. The phone numbers and faces of the volunteers are also invisible: Most use the option of hiding their numbers and do not use their photos as profile pictures. So, in addition to connectivity and instantaneity, *fluid and largely invisible organisation* is the third characteristic of the volunteer initiative's operation. All three characteristics are digitally mediated, with Telegram being central for the mode of operation (and participation) thus shaped.

It is important to note that On the Move as a whole strives to remain hidden as well. A widespread practice of charging those critical of the Russian invasion of Ukraine with “discrediting Russian armed forces” and “spreading misinformation” enabled by the new laws in force since March 2022 places the collective in a precarious position. For instance, On the Move acquires resources internally without overt public appeals. Thousands of volunteers connected through the On the Move open chats participate, with different intensity, in the initiative's operations. These volunteers routinely take on various tasks that coordinators post in the open chats, such as meeting and hosting people, finding and transporting wheelchairs and suitcases, and ordering packages with necessities. Volunteer members of the On the Move chats also respond to fundraisers the initiative announces from time to time to collect additional funds for such purposes as supporting the transportation of people with complex health conditions. These fundraisers are only announced internally, in the chats, and are normally closed within a day. Thus, since its emergence, On the Move has assisted thousands of people, while barely leaving public traces anywhere beyond the chats themselves. These measures do not make the initiative completely invisible; with some effort, open chats can still be found by anyone. At the same time, On the Move leans heavily towards remaining hidden in a sense of limiting outward signs of its constant activity.

Drawing on the issue-centred view of participation (Marres, 2007), in the above we can see that the war has become an issue of collective concern and that by taking it upon themselves to act on this issue, volunteers of On the Move and other related initiatives have emerged as a contentious public. This public participates in politics under hostile circumstances not so much by talking, but by digitally mediated and de-publicised doing. The participation proceeds persistently through countless decentered and mundane acts like arranging transportation and necessities that together contribute to the possibility of a more peaceful future.

4.2. Patriotic Volunteer Collective: The Circle

The Circle, the second collective I focus on in this article, at first appears to be very similar to On the Move: It is a volunteer initiative that focuses on assisting people from Ukraine in Russia and its existence is most

immediately noticeable on Telegram, where it exists in the form of a single open chat. However, it is very different. Let me begin this section with an illustration of this difference.

I came across The Circle while mapping the landscape of the newly emerged war-time volunteer initiatives in Russia. While On the Move works across internationally recognised Russian territory, many other initiatives work in smaller locales. At the moment, I was focusing on a region close to the border with Ukraine; let us call it the Border region. Upon assembling a short list of links to volunteer initiatives I had seen being shared with those searching for assistance in the Border region, I opened the first link on my list. It led me to The Circle's group chat on Telegram. The chat description simply said:

The main Border chat for refugee assistance. Here help can be requested or offered. We also invite volunteers and concerned citizens.

I proceeded to read pinned posts. The first stated that the assistance provided consisted of distributing packages with food and other necessities. To receive a package, individuals and families needed to fill in a Google Form, thus entering an electronic waiting list. Other pinned posts showed that The Circle also collected and systematised a lot of information in the form of instructions with titles like "Staying in Russia" (including information about registering one's place of residency and translating documents), "Applying for Russian citizenship," "Daily life" (including information about health care and currency exchange), and "Car" (including information on how to obtain a Russian driving license). Scanning the instructions, I noted that the information offered was mostly relevant to staying in Russia.

Then I proceeded to read the chat itself, starting from the earliest posts in the spring of 2022, in which people requested and offered free items like drying racks, blankets, children's clothes, and strollers. Other posts were from families searching for places to live in the Border region, often inquiring about houses in the countryside to accommodate pets they had taken with them. Some people posted information about job vacancies, mostly for cleaners, cashiers, car mechanics, and gardeners. The Circle admins posted pictures of boxes filled with preserves, cereals, vegetable oil, and all kinds of food with long shelf life. A short exchange at the end of October 2022 caught my eye:

Nina: Peace to everyone

I want to express my gratitude to Ivan for responding and helping!

Ivan, you helped us a lot and my father also thanks you! [21:02]

Ivan: May god grant you peaceful sky!!! We are one people. Will survive the difficult times and all will become well. And then we will join at one table. There will be Ukrainian dumplings. And Ossetian pies. And Belorussian potato pancakes. And Russian mushrooms. There will be everything. The country is big. But the people are one!!! [21:08]

Ivan in the exchange above was The Circle's creator, often referred to as such or as "the head" of the initiative in the chat. The post mentions peace but Ivan also goes on to elaborate that, apparently, the condition for peace is a unity of Ukrainian people, as well as of Belarusians, Ossetians, and various unnamed others, with Russian people in one single country. This is when it dawned on me that The Circle was different.

Up until that moment, I was tracing the work of volunteers who assisted Ukrainian people in Russia, feeling devastated by their country's attack on its neighbour and attempting to resist the state-imposed imperative to support the war. Those volunteers did tell me about "others"—often called patriotic volunteers—who also provided assistance but pursued entirely different aims. The two did not collaborate, I was told. Further in The Circle's chat, I saw an indication as to why, in Ivan's response to someone asking about how to find volunteers who transport people from Ukraine to the EU countries:

We do not transport, and we do not welcome this decision. The EU wages a war against everything slaviv. Meaning against you and us!! We are one people. And must overcome and stop this together. Place the west in its place and build our peaceful life!!

I offer you to stay in PVR [state-run temporary residence centre]. It will be much easier for you.

The Circle was different from On the Move in that this initiative assisted people from Ukraine in Russia as their fellow countrymen who suffered in the process of "being freed." For The Circle, assistance was certainly not resistance. Instead, it was more of a contribution to a cause of reuniting the people who were, somehow, meant to be one.

4.2.1. Digital Media and Highly Visible State-Aiding Participation

Ivan created The Circle Telegram chat in the spring of 2022 and originally invited several people he knew to join. He has lived in the Border region since the 1990s, worked as a small business owner and wrote a fiction book, which led to him becoming a member of the Union of Writers of Russia. The detail about the Union of Writers membership is important because, before the intensification of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 and before the emergence of The Circle, Ivan had participated in multiple visits arranged by the Union to the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia in the Donetsk region. He did so because, by that time, he had come to firmly subscribe to the idea of the so-called all-Russian nation, which proclaims that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Later on, this idea became central to the operation of The Circle.

In the period between the spring and fall of 2022, The Circle's chat grew considerably, not least due to actively "going public" in regional media. In contrast to the anonymous and reserved On the Move, The Circle had a public face—primarily Ivan, associated with it and sought to be in the spotlight, promoting its work and ideals. In September 2022, following a highly public confrontation that concerned credit attribution and personalities of different volunteers, The Circle saw a group of volunteers leaving and subsequently starting a state-supporting NGO with a mission of supporting refugees arriving in the Border region. Upon this departure, the ideological formula of Russians and Ukrainians being "one people" became a refrain incessantly repeated in The Circle's Telegram chat communication, in messages like this one from November 2022:

Ivan: In a large family there are three men. They have one single warm jacket. We are giving one more, but jackets are needed for all. We are one people. Peaceful sky to everyone!

Importantly, in the context of volunteer assistance provision, this regular invocation of "one people" achieves more than a simple repetition. Attached to specific activities—sharing a jacket, delivering food

packages, providing diapers, blankets, and other necessities—the “one people” formula ceases to be mere abstract rhetoric and instead becomes more *alive and tangible*.

Posts with information about assistance provided, written in the form of an acknowledgement by those who received it or in the form of a report by the volunteers, are simply followed by a brief interpretation of the assistance as an expression of “we are one people.” Regular rehearsal accords this pairing stability and a sense of self-evidence: Assistance is a visible and tangible indication of the trueness of the “one people” formula, whereas “one people” is the ultimate “higher” meaning of various acts of assistance. Following Ivan, other participants of The Circle’s chat have also started using “one people” in a similar way, animating it by attaching it to concrete acts of assistance.

For a time, The Circle’s chat only occasionally mentioned the existence of those who are against the “one people”—the enemy. However, since the summer of 2023, the initiative’s chat has exhibited explicit indications that The Circle has embraced a new type of assistance provision, which has allowed a more direct engagement with the idea of the existence of the enemy. This is a provision of assistance to the Russian military. From that moment on, photos of humanitarian aid started being interspersed with photos of car trunks packed with supplies for military personnel, as well as photos of satisfied recipients accompanied by text such as: “Delivery from [a city in Russia]. Sorting and sending to the front line for our fighters. Everything for a good cause. Everything to help the guys. Everything for the victory!!!” (June 2023). In July 2023, the following message was posted in the chat to inform the chat participants of The Circle’s shift in focus:

Friends (especially those who joined us recently), apart from providing food packages, household cleaning products and other stuff to refugees, self-organisation [The Circle] works on the following:

- ☑ help with making camouflage netting for the front lines,
- ☑ production of trench candles,
- ☑ knitting socks for soldiers,
- ☑ collecting donations for purchasing and producing “dry showers” – for hygiene purposes in the field environment,
- ☑ collecting donations, purchasing and transporting aid for the territories freed from nazis.

These are food, household cleaning products, children’s books, textbooks, movies, bed linen, crockery and appliances. Everything that is desperately needed by people who went through the horrors of war in basements 🙏

We very much need all help from all not indifferent people!

Join in and we together will help our soldiers bring victory and peace to our Motherland sooner!

By 2024, The Circle’s deliveries to the Russian military units in or close to the Border region have become regular and include a much broader assortment of items than mentioned in the post above, such as tents,

accumulators, thermowear, sleeping bags, and cooking appliances. The deliveries are regularly reported in the chat with descriptions of the difference they make and highlights of the importance of supporting “our guys.”

By providing assistance to the military and showcasing it through its Telegram chat, *The Circle* helps to reinforce the notion of “the enemy” presented in the official rhetoric, making the fight against this enemy more tangible and urgent. As a result, “the enemy” remains vague, referred to variously as “the west,” “nazis,” or more broadly as those who oppose “the Russian world.” However, “the enemy” does gain a sense of materiality by being linked in the chat to concrete examples of “our” soldiers, who wear socks provided by volunteers, sleep in bags provided by volunteers, and eat food cooked in pots provided by volunteers. Through this connection, those who these concrete soldiers resist become more real, animating and grounding the abstract “enemy” proclaimed by the official ideological discourse. Moreover, by pairing assistance provision to refugees with assistance provision to military personnel, the operation of *The Circle* initiative adds coherence to a heap of officially produced ideological formulas. It conjures up “one people” united together against “the enemy,” with this entire construction concretised and grounded in specific observable activities, or, in other terms, *animated* and, thus, powerfully reinforced.

Thus, we can observe how specific digitally mediated characteristics emerge in the operation of *The Circle*. These characteristics differ from those identified in the operation of *On the Move*, despite both collectives using the same digital medium, Telegram. I do not mean to suggest that there is no *connectivity*, *instantaneity*, and a *flexible, partly hidden organisation*—the characteristics that I highlighted in the case of *On the Move*—in how *The Circle* operates. These are present in the case of *The Circle* too, but their comparative importance is much less than the importance of what can be termed, following my analysis above, *animation and tangibility*.

The issue-centred approach to participation (Marres, 2023) allows us to view volunteer collectives, exemplified in this article by the *On the Move* and *The Circle* initiatives, as a deeply divided public. They are similarly concerned about the war and even act on their concerns in a somewhat similar manner—by providing assistance. Yet, their conflicting commitments create a split between them and their respective digitally mediated participatory practices are only widening this split. That the activities of the incompatible groupings within this newly emerged public are driven by concerns over the same issue does not compel them to engage with each other, explicate points of conflict, or stage a contestation. Unable to completely escape each other, they remain tied together, not least by their Russianness, yet proceed to participate in building mutually exclusive futures.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout the sections above, it is possible to notice that while both *On the Move* and *The Circle* are volunteer initiatives dedicated largely to assisting people from Ukraine while in Russia, what they end up doing is actually quite different. For *On the Move*, this volunteer assistance provision becomes a way to practice contentious public participation. This initiative operates in a non-democratic situation, where law enforcement and security agencies have a wide array of oppressive laws and other means at their disposal to effectively crack down on attempts at explicitly contentious engagement with politics. Correspondingly, public participation, in this case through volunteer activities, is largely depublished: Volunteers do not attempt to engage directly with state officials, stage public debates, or influence media agendas with the intention of attracting attention to their cause. Instead, they assemble a large, previously non-existent,

flexible network capable of efficient collective action. In essence, this network is quietly and relentlessly creating the possibility of an alternative to a world where they are citizens of the war-waging country.

The Circle's activities can also be defined as public participation practised via means of assistance provision. Like contentious *On the Move*, this initiative attempts to deal with the issue of collective concern—the war—in ways that are unscripted and configured spontaneously, as this patriotic initiative is not organised by the state and its activities are not ordered by the officials. But in contrast to *On the Move*, which pursues resistance, The Circle is certainly not contentious towards the state or state-initiated actions. Instead, it creatively adds to, develops, and co-shapes the dominant meanings, political strategies and the state itself. And public participation The Circle enables through its volunteer activities is highly visible. What The Circle engages in, then, can be called the co-construction of the imperative for the Russian citizens to support the war.

Both patriotic and contentious volunteer initiatives discussed in this article rely heavily on digital technologies to connect members within their disparate groups and to take action. That both use Telegram in their operation makes the ambivalence of the digital media particularly vivid. Digital media are ambivalent in terms of their liberating and oppressive potential: The previous section documented how some digitally mediated volunteer practices mount resistance to the authoritarian state, while others deepen the authoritarian state's reach and oppressive capacities. They are also ambivalent in the sense of their connective and divisive effects: The previous section highlighted how Telegram helped piecing scattered and disheartened individuals together into the networked antiwar collective *On the Move* capable of taking a large-scale action that contributes to the possibility of a more peaceful future. This same digital medium laid bare and perhaps heightened irreconcilable divisions between the commitments of this collective and what appears to be its polar opposite twin, The Circle.

This picture where digital media could have any number of effects and be involved in collective efforts to address any number of concerns may give an impression of digital media's instrumentality. Digital media may look like tools that are simply being employed by users to pursue their diverse ends, something that has been termed "dual-use" in scholarship (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). I want to stress, though, that this is not the most productive way of thinking about digital media. While digital media do not determine how they are used, the opposite is also true: Collective goals do not solely dictate what is achievable through digital media involvement. To make sense of the ambiguity sketched above, we would do well to remember that digital media themselves do matter but how exactly they matter is always configured (and reconfigured) in interactions between specific digital media and their users in specific situations.

From the previous section, we could see that *On the Move*'s operation is aided by Telegram-mediated connectivity, instantaneity and flexible, partly hidden organisation, while The Circle relies on animation and tangibility, to an equal extent mediated by the same Telegram app. So Telegram, its architecture, functionalities, and constraints do matter in terms of what both participatory collectives are capable of doing. Importantly, neither of the characteristics above belongs to Telegram itself. Instead, they are co-produced by Telegram and its situated uses in wartime volunteer work in Russia. Among others, Elisabetta Costa offered to think about such digital media affordances in relational terms to highlight the process of their locally specific configuration in practice (Costa, 2018). However, most discussions on the political role of digital media to date have leaned towards viewing digital media and their effects in more

deterministic tones with media either expected to have relatively stable properties that produce similar effects or viewed as fully amenable to human intention.

Taking the above reflection into account, within the study reported here we can think of Telegram as an actor in the networks that arrange transportation, facilitate medical help and provide other types of assistance. As doing all these constitutes participation in addressing collective concerns over the issue of the war, *Telegram also is an actor involved both in mounting resistance to the authoritarian state and in extending the aggressive expansionist politics of the very same state*. Its political role, consequently, is highly ambivalent, and what exactly networks that involve it end up being capable of doing (or, in other terms, what Telegram “affords”) is co-shaped by the app and its users, all interacting in specific situations. This theoretical understanding of Telegram’s ambivalence can be taken as heuristics for thinking about the political role of other digital media in other situations.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the volunteers who spoke to me and invited me to join their chats. At the moment, their names cannot be revealed but there will be a time when they come forward and tell their stories themselves. I am grateful to the team of the InPart project for the many fruitful and critical conversations we have had. In particular, I am indebted to Vlas Nikulkin, not only for reading multiple versions and pieces of the argument presented here but also for keeping track of my whereabouts during the in-person part of my fieldwork associated with the study. I also would like to acknowledge all those involved in the workshop “Participation and STS Sensibilities” (2024) and in the two conference panels, “Invisibility and Public Participation: Engaging With Disregarded, Discarded, and Hidden Practices” (EASST-4S 2024) and “Unseen Participation: When the Uninvited Shape Matters of Collective Concern” (EASST 2022), whose comments helped me think about the kind of public participation I am delineating here. Finally, I am grateful to the authors in this thematic issue for the opportunity to together show the diversity of participatory activities that take place despite adversity and to the editorial team of the *Social Inclusion* journal for the opportunity to share the resulting picture with others.

Funding

This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement No 948073). This article reflects only the author’s views and the Agency and the Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Conflict of Interests

I have made contributions to support the work of the contentious volunteer initiative described here. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Data Availability

To protect research participants’ identities, data will not be made available.

References

Baim-Lance, A., Tietz, D., Lever, H., Swart, M., & Agins, B. (2019). Everyday and unavoidable coproduction: Exploring patient participation in the delivery of healthcare services. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 41(1), 128–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.12801>

- Bang, H., & Halupka, M. (2019). Contentious connective action: A new kind of life-political association for problematizing how expert systems operate. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(1), 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1355402>
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>
- Chilvers, J., Bellamy, R., Pallett, H., & Hargreaves, T. (2021). A systemic approach to mapping participation with low-carbon energy transitions. *Nature Energy*, 6(3), 250–259. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-020-00762-w>
- Chilvers, J., & Kearnes, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Remaking participation: Science, environment and emergent publics*. Routledge.
- Costa, E. (2018). Affordances-in-practice: An ethnographic critique of social media logic and context collapse. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3641–3656. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818756290>
- De Moor, J. (2017). Lifestyle politics and the concept of political participation. *Acta Politica*, 52(2), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2015.27>
- Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs*, 22(3), 283–300. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>
- Green, J., & Thorogood, N. (2018). *Qualitative methods for health research* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Jansky, B., & Langstrup, H. (2022). Device activism and material participation in healthcare: Retracing forms of engagement in the #WeAreNotWaiting movement for open-source closed-loop systems in type 1 diabetes self-care. *BioSocieties*, 18, 498–522. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41292-022-00278-4>
- Jeppesen, S., Hoechsmann, M., Ulthiin, I. H., VanDyke, D., McKee, M., Giroux, H., & Kumanyika, C. (2022). *The Capitol riots: Digital media, disinformation, and democracy under attack* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003246862>
- Koc-Michalska, K., Lilleker, D. G., & Vedel, T. (2016). Civic political engagement and social change in the new digital age. *New Media & Society*, 18(9), 1807–1816. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815616218>
- Kreiss, D. (2021). “Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform,” edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(2), 505–512. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220985078>
- Lorenz-Spreen, P., Oswald, L., Lewandowsky, S., & Hertwig, R. (2022). A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(1), 74–101. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>
- Marres, N. (2007). The issues deserve more credit. Pragmatist contributions to the study of public involvement in controversy. *Social Studies of Science*, 37(5), 759–780.
- Marres, N. (2015). *Material participation: Technology, the environment, and everyday publics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marres, N. (2023). How to turn politics around: Things, the earth, ecology. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 48(5), 973–998. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01622439231190884>
- Murphy, H. (2024, March 11). Telegram hits 900mn users and nears profitability as founder considers IPO. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/8d6ceb0d-4cdb-4165-bdfa-4b95b3e07b2a>
- Nikulkin, V., & Zvonareva, O. (2024). Entangled positionality: Researchers’ everyday practices amidst coronavirus, war, and parenting. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(3), 734–746. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.6479>
- Persily, N., & Tucker, J. A. (Eds.). (2020). *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960>

- Ruess, C., Hoffmann, C. P., Boulianne, S., & Heger, K. (2023). Online political participation: The evolution of a concept. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(8), 1495–1512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.2013919>
- Stewart, E. (2021). Fugitive coproduction: Conceptualising informal community practices in Scotland's hospitals. *Social Policy & Administration*, 55(7), 1310–1324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12727>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2018). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8xnhtd>
- Theocharis, Y. (2015). The conceptualization of digitally networked participation. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), Article 205630511561014. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115610140>
- Theocharis, Y., & Van Deth, J. W. (2018). The continuous expansion of citizen participation: A new taxonomy. *European Political Science Review*, 10(1), 139–163. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230>
- Tironi, M. (2015). Disastrous publics: Counter-enactments in participatory experiments. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40(4), 564–587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162243914560649>
- Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2015). Social media and the transformation of public space. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), Article 205630511562248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622482>
- Verba, S., & Nie, N. H. (1972). *Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality*. Harper & Row.
- Wijermars, M., & Lokot, T. (2022). Is Telegram a “harbinger of freedom”? The performance, practices, and perception of platforms as political actors in authoritarian states. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(1/2), 125–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2030645>
- Zvonareva, O. (2024). *Ambivalence: Digital media and public participation in wartime Russia*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

About the Author



Olga Zvonareva is an assistant professor at the Department of Health, Ethics and Society, Maastricht University, the Netherlands. Situated in the field of science and technology studies, her primary research line concerns relations between scientific knowledge, technologies, and politics. She is especially invested in studying instances of participation in situations when members of the public are discouraged from doing so.