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Online monitoring activism: civic surveillance practices as a reaction to the rise of the far-right in the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The rise of far-right movements during the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a new form of individual digital activism: online monitoring activism (OMA). During the pandemic, online monitoring activists systematically collected, processed and published information from far-right Telegram channels and groups. Against the theoretical background of concepts like the monitory democracy and surveillance culture, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with German online monitoring activists, investigating their motivations, roles, and the intricacies of their monitoring practices. Our findings reveal that online monitoring activists are driven by a sense of duty to counteract anti-democratic tendencies, which they perceive as inadequately addressed by institutional power. They gain localized and thematically specialized expertise that they share within loose networks of like-minded others. We highlight the activists' liminal identity oscillating between virtuous citizenship and vigilantism, as well as the broader societal implications of their actions. On the one hand, they fulfill the role of active citizenship in monitory democracy; on the other, they also reinforce the transparency imperative and the wish for far-reaching security and control inherent to surveillance culture. The transparency potential afforded by their adversaries' online connective action and mobilizing efforts legitimizes their surveillance and demands surveillance. Further normative work is needed to critically examine the extent and desirability of increased social control introduced to liberal democracy by online monitoring activism.

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, massive anti-government protests have resurged in Germany. The initially broad coalition of ideologically diverse COVID-19

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protestors was soon dominated by conspiracy ideologists and far-right groups (Almodt, 2023). Conspiracy ideologist anti-government influences were often taken from QAnon and related conspiracy ideologist communities such as the Reich Citizens (original 'Reichsbürger,' similar to the Sovereign Citizen movement in the US). COVID-19 protestors tried to storm the German parliament building, the Reichstag, in August 2020 – a similar event took place in the USA later with the January 6 Capitol attack in 2021. As Primig (2024) shows, the protests constructed themselves as a 'counter-knowledge order' that is in resistant opposition to the established order that aimed at mitigating the pandemic effects. These COVID-19 protest groups mainly mobilized and shared their counter-knowledge via the messenger app Telegram (Schwaiger et al., 2022). The Telegram sphere of the COVID-19 protests has thus been thoroughly studied (Almodt, 2023; Buehling & Heft, 2023; Primig, 2024; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023).

In addition to researchers, this Telegram protest sphere has been under continuous surveillance also by digital counter-activists, a phenomenon that has yet to receive scholarly attention. These activists frequently shared screenshots from protestors' Telegram channels and other platforms on X (formerly Twitter). It is this monitorial practice of counterprotest that we focus on here. We are interested in this ambivalent and novel tactic of infiltration and exposition empowered by digital infrastructure, expected in monitory democracy (Keane, 2011) and normalized by surveillance culture (Lyon, 2017). Such practices could previously be observed, for instance, in organized counter-speech activism targeting incivility and hate speech or far-right extremism (Hatakka, 2020; Ziegele et al., 2020), but also in misogynist and counter-feminist activist spaces (Megarry, 2018). Most notably, law enforcement (Owen, 2017) and, of course, researchers frequently use digital trace data to observe social movements. Still, it remains unclear what monitoring activism involves beyond republishing content previously shared by those being watched and whether it differs from coordinated counter-speech efforts observed before. In other words, we do not know what the *online monitoring activism* (OMA) we've encountered in our specific context is and what it means to engage in it.

We, therefore, conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with German monitoring activist accounts who posted about far-right Corona-protest online activities on X. We were mainly driven by the research interest to understand *who* these online monitoring activists are, *why* they are doing what they are doing and *how* they are doing it. Hence, we ask what their perceived roles, goals, motivations, and justifications for practicing online monitoring are (RQ1), and how they are engaging in the practice of monitoring, that is, what the practices besides the visible publication of observed material entail (RQ2). We add twofold to the existing scholarship on digital activism and counterprotest: By conceptualizing OMA as *the continued systematic collection, processing, and publishing of information on adversary observable others online,* we define the distinct practice in an operationalizable way, opening the phenomenon for further research. In addition, we analyze and discuss the normative implications of OMA, drawing attention to their contentious practices and activist identity oscillating between virtuous citizenship and vigilantism that reinforce the imperative of surveillance in the digital society.

On digitalization and surveillance culture

Social media sites and chat applications have enabled citizens to perceive themselves as speakers (Baym & boyd, 2012) and raise awareness over issues of mutual concern. However, the digital traces left by online communities also make them vulnerable to counteraction and surveillance by individuals and coordinated campaigns (Milan, 2015). In a culture of constant remixing and recontextualization where the publication of content marks yet the beginning of ever new adaptation (e.g., Neuberger et al., 2023), users lose control over their information and its interpretations. Being visible online also means being targetable by others online – a threat unequally imposed qua social identity of the visible users (e.g., marginalized communities, but also researchers studying those who harass others online; Massanari, 2018).

Users oscillate between more or less sophisticated folk theories of data generation and collection through algorithmic platform curation (e.g., Bucher, 2017; Bishop, 2019) and almost carefree 'dataism' (van Dijck, 2014). Encrypted chat programs such as Telegram or Signal leave users under the impression of relative data security. Against that background, exposing content from a chat group elsewhere is particularly interesting as it is a public violation of this implicit promise and users' apparent dataistic belief of limited publicity. Users observe others, they are observed, and they seem to care about being observed to varying degrees. Lyon's (2017) surveillance culture provides an insightful theoretical perspective that makes sense of this puzzle. Accordingly, 'subjects are involved, not merely as the targets or bearers of surveillance, but as more-and-more knowledgeable and active participants. This occurs most obviously through social media and Internet use in general and has arguably intensified an everyday adoption of varied surveillance mentalities and practices' (p. 828). In Han's (2022) more pessimistic terms, we are even imprisoned by the 'transparency imperative' (p. 10) that has freed information but not its knowers. In Lyon's (2017) view, besides fear and fun as drivers for compliance, surveillance has simply been normalized to an extent where utter familiarity with surveillance practices is so strong that it is now a regular part of everyday life. As Godler et al. (2020) aptly put it, 'when a technology enables subjects to conduct certain inquiries that would be impossible otherwise, they may reasonably be expected to perform them in order to reach knowledge' (p. 222). In this not-so-trivial sense, social media platforms have expanded the scope of potential speakers (Baym & boyd, 2012) and intensified the normative expectations about scrutinizing information of and about these speakers.

The conditions of digital knowledge society have, for instance, emphasized the 'critical-monitorial function' (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 154) of journalism, which is now in contrast to its former gatekeeper role tasked with monitoring and verification of already disseminated content (e.g., Neuberger et al., 2023). Notably, the monitorial and investigative effort is aimed not just at the accountability of powerful decision-makers directly but also at discourse itself. Furthermore, it has transgressed institutionalized efforts and increased demand for civic monitoring engagement. Previously, the monitorial citizen was an idealized – and always contested (e.g., Zaller, 2003) – concept of informed citizenship, always scouting the media infoscapes for important information. However, as the observable arenas of democracy expand online, so does the observation imperative for citizens. Keane (2011), therefore, speaks of monitory democracy, a broader social

theoretical conceptualization of contemporary democracy as characterized by a myriad of 'extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinizing mechanisms' (p. 212). In monitory democracy, citizens get a much more active role in scrutinizing public and political life's arenas and dragging issues into the public eye through digitally networked interactions. Digital activists play an essential role in that.

Monitorial users as digital counter-activists

Digital activism as 'the practice of using digital technology to increase the effectiveness of a social or political change campaign' (Joyce, 2010, p. 218), has often been conceptualized under the paradigm of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In contrast to collective action, in connective action, the collective subscription to fundamental beliefs is less critical, while personalized action templates exploit the social media logic to promote a common cause (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). New forms of activism have emerged, utilizing platform affordances to quickly form ad hoc publics around issues (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), and invent novel and creative forms of connective movement identity expression and advocacy for a common cause (e.g., Cervi & Divon, 2023). However, while the conditions of digital publics allow for new forms of expression of social movements' identities, countermovements, that is, movements that make 'contrary claims simultaneously to those of the original movement' (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996, p. 1631), can appropriate and recontextualize the mobilization and identity-building efforts of their adversaries (for instance, by hashtag hijacking; Poole et al., 2019). van Haperen et al. (2023) find in their study of networks of the BlackLivesMatter movement and countermovements on X (formerly Twitter) that the affordances of the platform facilitate countermovements because they 'allow for quick, highly synchronized attacks on adversaries' (p. 172). The digitally networked self-expression of the original movement on platforms like X allows for easier "loosely coordinated criticisms and attacks" (van Haperen et al., 2023, p. 175). Particularly in their early stages, when countermovements focus on the disruption of the original movement (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), the opportunities for counteraction provided by platform affordances are attractive for them.

On the movement research side, the datafication logic of social media invites the analysis of expressive social media activism. Treré (2020), however, criticizes that 'current literature is characterized by an excessive attention to dynamics of public, external communication, at the expense of internal dynamics and daily communicative exchanges through which activists organize, create, and nurture collective identities' (p. 11). In Treré's eyes, movement studies need to dig deeper than a 'quasi-religious reliance on quantitative 'big data' analysis' (p. 5) would afford and refocus the contextual dynamics of digital activism beyond its immediate use of social media and the trace data generated by it. In the case of the present study, the expressive immediately observable digital action is to expose adversaries' online communication.

Research on exposure as an activist tactic has, so far, mainly focused on activism, not counter-activism. For instance, George and Leidner (2019) describe exposure as the 'unauthorized dissemination of confidential information, also known as a leak' (p. 10). Based on Milbrath and Goel's (1965/1982) hierarchy of political participation, they conceptualize exposure as a gladiatorial activity of digital activism, that is, as an activity that

requires the highest level of effort and commitment for political participation and is hence done by very few activists. In this line of research, on hacktivism, leaking, or whistleblowing, the focus lies on activism against mostly institutions or organizations and powerful individuals and the infiltration and exposing of their spaces (e.g., Jordan & Taylor, 2004). The inherent value-judgment and societal threat perception of such infiltration and exposing activism is reflected in the scarce conceptualizations of the practice. Hatakka (2020) defines civic monitoring as 'individuals' or groups' voluntary pursuit of critically challenging and scrutinizing manifestations of online action they evaluate as societally harmful' (p. 1322). Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés (2014, p. 2451) accordingly typologize four types of civic monitoring as (1) watchdogs, (2) information extraction and filtration (whistleblowing), (3) alternative journalism and (4) extra-parliamentary representation, e.g., with online-petitions, positioning the phenomenon closely within the initial conceptualization of monitory democracy (Keane, 2011). Another strand of research focuses on exposure in the form of platformed toxic behavior, mainly within the far-right and manosphere online, where exposure in the form of doxing (Douglas, 2016) and leaked intimate material is used to devalue and harass women and minorities (Farrell et al., 2019; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Schoenebeck et al., 2023).

However, the counter-activist monitoring of the COVID-19 protests visibly entailed (visible pre-interviews) the exposure of in-group communication of adversary protestors. Research on this particular exposing practice is scarce. It suggests that reposting and exposing adversaries' communication can happen spontaneously or with a considerable degree of coordinated effort. On Reddit, for instance, controversial and misogynist posts from manosphere subreddits such as r/MGTOW are frequently posted in monitorial groups such as r/inceltears. On the other hand, feminist content is often the subject of discussion in the manosphere itself (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Megarry, 2018). On Facebook, regional #Iamhere groups monitored the comment sections of the platform for hateful or uncivil content to counteract together (Ziegele et al., 2020). In a study on online monitorial counter-action to the radical right in Finland, Hatakka (2020) points out the wide range of monitoring styles from deliberation to hate speech and notes the conundrum of monitoring counterprotest exposing the activists to reversed counter-surveillance. Finally, in what Halperin (2022) describes as 'counter-populist algorithmic activism' activists focused on comment sections of particular reach or pages that crossed partisan borders to place their counter-populist messages. In all these cases, the focus is on the intervention in the monitored space. The actual monitoring practices remain understudied.

Method

To understand online monitoring activism, we conducted semi-structured interviews, an established approach for inductive research that is generally well suited to gaining an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, especially how people make sense of their social reality that emerges in interpersonal processes of interpretation. Semi-structured interviews and subsequent thematic analysis allow us to 'elicit information, feelings, and opinions from the interviewee using questions and interactive dialogue' (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 219) and to find patterns in the data obtained this way (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The focus is on the interpretative reconstruction or understanding of subjective interpretations of meaning in their respective context.

For the scope of our study, we focused on online activists who have engaged in monitoring coronavirus protest movements in Germany. Since we assume a close connection between the activities and their societal context with its (historical and political) opportunity structures, it seems reasonable to focus the investigation on one national context to understand best the emergence and development of OMA against the background of a specific social reality. In the 2020 pandemic context, in which far-right ideologies continuously permeated the COVID-19 protests, monitoring activism as digital counteractivism could emerge (1) without violating government measurements to fight against the pandemic and (2) without putting activists in immediate danger through direct confrontation with an increasingly aggressive protest movement on the street.

Besides the national scope, our interest focuses on OMA that explicitly seeks publicity via social media, mainly via X. That excludes people who monitor and collect information but do not post it on social networks but, for example, report directly to the police or registration offices for internet hate. Also, monitoring organizations with a higher form of institutionalization and professionalization, e.g., research institutions on far-right extremism that use websites/blogs/newsletters for their primary distribution media, were not considered for our sampling. We concentrated on X for the platform's inherent focus on making information public and reaching a wider (and more diffuse) audience as compared to, for example, members in Facebook groups or thematic subreddits.

Recruiting interviewees proved difficult as most activists prefer to run their accounts as anonymously as possible. Identifying relevant accounts involved in online monitoring of the coronavirus protests was the first step in finding interviewees. Starting with German accounts on X that the authors had known, we snowballed by checking the lists of accounts they followed and their followers. We also checked reposted posts from other accounts with a similar approach. We identified 14 accounts on X that posted about the Corona protest movement's online communication. We recruited the interviewees on X or other communication channels if they provided them (e.g., e-mail) by sending a standardized text about us, our research interest, and an invitation to participate. We contacted 14 accounts between August and September 2023 and conducted eight interviews with 10 account holders (one account was run by three people). The accounts differ in outreach from about 220 to about 19.000 followers. The number of posts ranges from about 1.000–250.000. The accounts focused on different sub-communities or regions of the movement they monitored.

Further, through ongoing reflexive discussions after each interview, we determined that our sample offers sufficient 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016) or 'meaning sufficiency' (Braun & Clarke, 2022) – in other terms 'saturation' for the case we analyzed here. As in qualitative research, 'meaning is generated through interpretation of, not excavated from, data' (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 201), determining whether a sample is sufficient is inevitably bound to the context studied in-situ. It is crucial to keep in mind that our study focuses on an extremely small field that engages in a very specific form of visible digital activism.

The interviews took 74 minutes on average. All interviews were conducted in German. We used the video conference platform Webex to carry out the interviews for all but one interview. One interview was conducted in written form. We obtained written informed consent from all interviewees in accordance with GDPR regulations to record, transcribe,

analyze, and publish the data obtained under the condition of guaranteed anonymity. Almost all interviewees have been subjected to concrete right-wing extremist threats before, which is why we have decided that we cannot justify disclosing any information that would make specific accounts or their holders identifiable.[1]

Instrument and instrument development

Our interview guide[2] was developed in multiple steps. First, we checked which theoretical aspects would directly translate into relevant categories. For these categories, we identified subcategories as more specific concepts of interest. Each subcategory was further refined and divided into more concrete aspects that could be more directly transformed into the questions we would ask in our interviews. If such aspects were not directly included in the interviewees' answers, we provided follow-up questions that could go into detail to obtain the relevant information.

We derived three main categories from our theoretical considerations, which helped us structure thematic blocks in our interviews. The first category was titled 'monitorial citizen' and targeted information on the individual level, e.g., the personal history of their monitoring activism and broader political involvement (if any). With our second category, 'monitory democracy,' we focused on the interviewees' broader perceptions concerning their societal impact, e.g., the perceived necessity of their work, their motivation in terms of socio-political motives, their goals in terms of desired outcomes, as well as desired outreach. Within this category, we also covered the friction between democracy and surveillance culture, asking interviewees directly how they justify their work against the assumption that monitorial activism will probably not function without ethical challenges such as violating personal rights. Our last thematic category was 'digital activism' where we focused on the activists' practices and, specifically, their counter-activist tactics of finding, collecting, processing, and publishing information from the political opponent. To better understand their work, we prepared three posts by each of our interviewees for a walk-through of creating a social media post. We also covered interviewees' ethical considerations, networks, and forms of feedback on their work within this category.

Before diving into the thematic blocks of the interview, we started by giving a short introduction about the interview procedure. The first questions we asked concerned the interviewees' personal backgrounds, e.g., their education and training, their sociocultural embedding (e.g., their geographical location in Germany), and how widespread COVID-19 protests were in their region. We closed the interview by asking a personal question about how interviewees cope with what they see and read during their work. We also asked for any further thoughts on aspects they found meaningful, but that were not covered.

Results

Motivations for online monitoring activism

All our interviewees emphasized their long-standing political interests, occasionally joining protests. None were political party members; only two had previously engaged in

organized political actions such as group meetings, organizing demonstrations, or publishing political information. These two also collected data on far-right activities before the pandemic. Only one account was launched as late as October 2021 to cover their region they found not yet represented by existing monitoring activists. Most interviewees, however, sprung to action when they noticed early in 2020 that far-right extremists, known Anti-Semites, and conspiracy theorists were leading the coronavirus protests. One interviewee highlighted the attempted storming of the German Reichstag as a pivotal moment, realizing the, in their eyes, threat to democratic order. These awakening moments have spurred efforts to counteract anti-democratic developments despite pandemic restrictions. Sharing and gaining more knowledge about the coronavirus protests online became their logical responses.

A common approach to online monitoring activism

The interview data revealed a distinct and highly individualized form of activist engagement, with activists being not directly affiliated with structured groups or movements. Although interviewees viewed their approaches as individual efforts, their methods were notably similar. OMA is a time-intensive, data-driven task that requires significant flexibility, facilitated by suitable work arrangements that were more common in pandemic conditions (e.g., working from home). The general workflow of OM activists includes three main phases that can overlap due to the dynamic nature of monitoring activities. OM activists follow the core practice workflow of *continued systematic collection, processing, and publishing of information on adversary observable others online*.

After initial interest is sparked (see motivations above), activists ***collect*** information about their adversaries. Usually, singular protest events or video recordings/streams functioned as starting points for their research. Activists identified key figures and joined their Telegram channels, then following leads to other channels or right-wing organizations mostly in their geographical region. Thereby, activists build a reliable and manageable database from which to gather information. As aptly pointed out by one interviewee:

> 'I also don't have the time to browse 1200 groups daily […]. So, of course, I have a fixed network. On the one hand, there are channels where I know exactly what I'm going to find there that I can report. On the other hand, there are, let's say, 50 or 60 channels where you can find certain highlights of a funny or questionable nature.'[3]

After infiltrating chat groups or channels, OM activists save data as screenshots or chat-history exports, sometimes automated. At this stage, they assess the relevance of observed individuals and communications, also considering their primary reach (how important are they?). Contrary to van Haperen et al.'s (2023) findings on digital countermovements[4], OM activists develop highly specialized and localized expertise. They focus on local initiatives or actors and sometimes specific thematic clusters, such as esotericism or antisemitism.

In the second phase, collected information is ***processed***, involving critical decisions and substantial localized and specialized contextual knowledge. Activists curate, organize, and, at times, verify information by consulting other activists with specialized or locally relevant knowledge. They select information for posting, ensuring it meets legal and regulatory requirements (e.g., anonymization, blurring names/faces). Information is

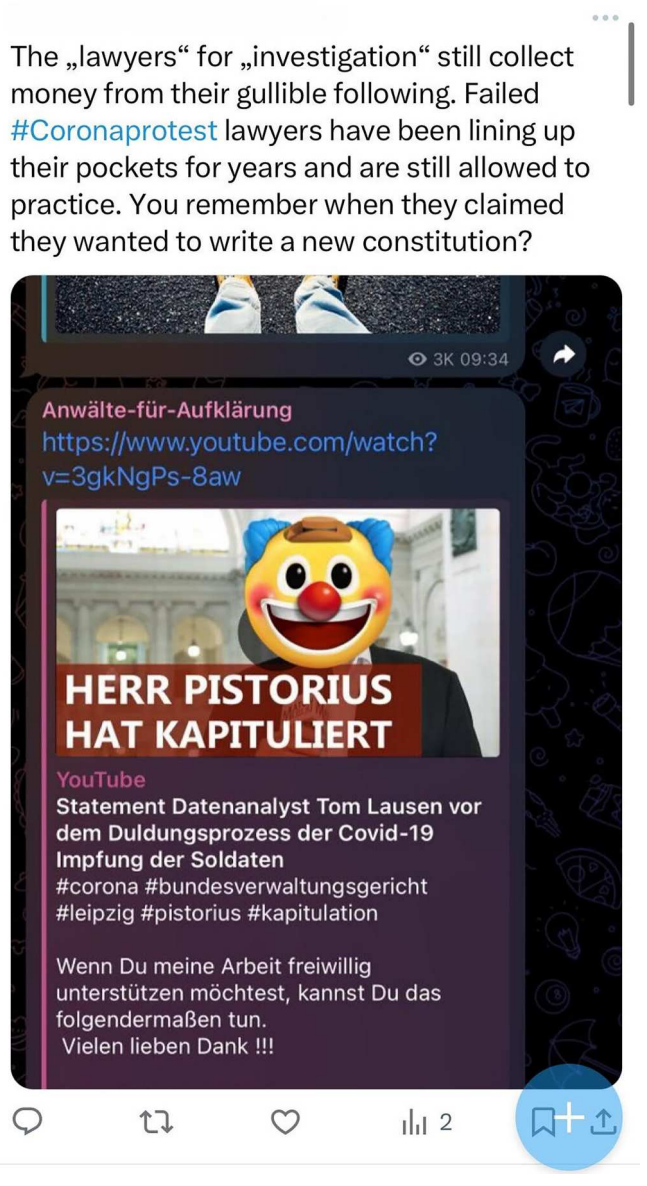

Figure 1. Typical example of OMA post on Twitter/X (post compiled by the authors; screenshot taken from Telegram channel “Anwälte-für-Aufklärung” on June 11, 2024).

edited to match their account’s style (e.g., sarcastic or informational) and tailored for the relevant audience (e.g., public vs. police report). Additionally, activists’ personal enjoyment and satisfaction are considered (do I still enjoy what I am doing?). Overall, this phase thus prepares the publication and guides future information collection.

In the third phase, the ***publishing*** stage, OM activists compile posts using a fraction of the processed material. Key considerations include legal and regulatory constraints, maintaining their own anonymity, and optimizing the potential reach of their content. Legal risks are weighed here, particularly as being subjected to criminal investigations,

such as personality rights violations, would put activists at risk of losing their anonymity. As one interviewee put it: 'It's the same as when you register a rally or when you organize a meeting, then it's just a matter of assembly law […] That's always such a grey area, and you should know that you don't write anything about these people that is justiciable'.

Platform affordances influence all three phases. Platform user policies facilitate and restrict OM activists' workflow, as is typical for digital activism (Youmans & York, 2012). Telegram allows easy large-scale data collection, making the infiltration aspect of their monitoring practice less pronounced for online monitoring activists here. However, concerns about content policies, GDPR regulations, and fear of retaliatory legal action compel activists to make complex posting decisions, with legal and regulatory awareness emerging as a core competence. While OM activists lack strict publication strategies, they consider platform vernacular (e.g., hashtags) and algorithmic affordances (e.g., using videos or images for wider reach). They also assess newsworthiness, ensuring content is interesting and novel to their audience and themselves, and estimate whether the information can gain unintended reach. Expanding on van Haperen et al.'s (2023) claim that 'countermovements may benefit from the affordances of social media in ways that allow for quick, highly synchronized attacks on adversaries' (p. 172), we can therefore conclude that simultaneously activists' algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) and other cautious considerations guide their use of platform affordances and their potential. Importantly, OM activists aim not merely to maximize reach but also to maintain the disruptive effect of their counter-actions, considering both personal consequences and unintended promotion of adversaries' messages. Figure 1 shows a typical OMA post with a screenshot from COVID-19 protestor chatgroups and a brief, sometimes humorous, contextual note (i.e., the potential outcome of the entire process).[5]

Key facets of online monitoring activism

Knowledge as a core practice: OMA as networks of connective knowledge sharing

Knowledge-sharing, always central to activists (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008), emerges as a critical compound of their relationship with other online monitoring activists. Knowledge-sharing among online monitoring activists is primarily necessitated by the affordances of digital activism, that is, the abundance and additivity of information online. OM activists, therefore, often specialized in thematic or local sub-groups of the COVID-19 protests they observed. Still, as they are outnumbered and their adversaries are well connected with each other, monitoring activism must be a socially shared practice, even if it is not coordinated firmly.

> We've exchanged information relatively often and also because not everyone is in all Telegram groups […] and we've given each other information about people behind the scenes […] without being asked
>
> […] when I had a question, for instance: Do you know these people? […]
>
> […] hints were given like here, beware, they are planning something in your region, or I have received information here.

While OM activists do not usually gather for coordinated efforts as other activists have previously done (Hatakka, 2020), they share information with each other ad-hoc where needed. Localized and specialized expertise thereby gets transferred within a loose network of like-minded without the formation of a collective activist identity. The reach of leverageable social control extends and transcends local and special-interest boundaries, with the mere availability of socially shared activists' expertise benefitting both the individual and the loose collective of activists.

As OM activists spin a web of transparency about their adversaries, knowledge is not merely a tool but at the core of the practice. Those caught in the web lose control over what is known about them. At the same time, OM activists gain potential and leverage for social control by collecting and adding knowledge about their adversaries. This knowledge accumulation puts them, as explained below, in an empowered and enjoyable position as arbiters of knowledge about their adversaries. However, it is also a practical necessity to make informed decisions about who or what to expose.

OMA as corrective action: dissatisfaction with institutional performance

The perceived necessity of OMA in the face of insufficient institutional awareness and action emerges as a second core theme of OMA. Again, OMA as corrective action is multi-faceted, reflecting practical implications for the distinct activist action of OMA, identity constructive elements and a particular normative standpoint on surveillance culture.[6]

In our case, OMA operates in an ambiguous relationship with the state. For what Brayne et al. (2023) describe as 'surveillance deputies' state and civilian interests converge and hence they are willing to participate in denunciation behavior more or less facilitated and institutionalized by the state. However, this is not the case for OM activists. Their activism, albeit in some instances it can entail informing law enforcement, is not about becoming an accessory to the reporting and punishment of criminal behavior. Yet, they are also not necessarily to be understood as a form of counterpower (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014) against state institutionalized interests. Instead, OM activists hope to draw attention to a perceived lack of institutional reach and liberal democratic resistance to far-right mobilizing efforts. Direct reporting of illegal content or criminal behavior is scarce in their practice and seen as not particularly fruitful in the face of institutional incompetence and overburdening.

> As I said, I'm trying to be fair to the police here, but […] I also saw that the police were leaking information to the demonstrators (COVID-19 protestors). There was an incident recently where a police officer hugged a female demonstrator who was also playing a leading role during the demonstration, and of course, that's scary.

> I've been doing this for three years now, so I know how people think there [police], what they actually do, and I'm now also relatively legally fit to say whether it's worth reporting it or not. […] It's got better, no question. But sometimes there are still no professionals there.

On the surface level, they, therefore, do not compete with or contest the liberal democratic normative order and its institutions of media, politics, and law enforcement but claim a more active and vital role within the public as monitorial arbiters of information,

filling a gap in democracy's introspection afforded by monitorial civic duty. Analogous to Hatakka's (2020) findings on civic monitoring of the Finnish radical right on Facebook, the primary self-reported objective for the online monitoring activists here was to expose extremists' beliefs. On a deeper level, however, the discontent with the state sparking their monitoring and reporting action reveals the normative standpoint on *what a state ought to do*, for instance that law enforcement should take a greater interest in actively monitoring the protest spheres online, that grounds OMA in surveillance culture,

> In principle, we pave the way for these officials. Of course, I think they have relatively few opportunities to actively scan so many telegram channels in their time. They also have a lot of bureaucratic things to do. And we prepare everything by basically already starting the investigations.

OMA leverages and extends the scope of the transparency imperative (Han, 2022) in digital information society to a *surveillance imperative*: Because everything is available as information, it must be collected. This imperative reflects a normatively weighty and contradictory demand for far-reaching institutional and social control closer to the *digital panopticon* on the pessimistic spectrum of interpretations of surveillance culture. State control is seen as incompetent, overburdened, and at times complicit in the unfavorable growth of far-right threats. It is precisely the inactivity of the state *vis-à-vis* the availability of information that encourages OMA. Still, OM activists try to coax institutions into action where legislative frameworks are ambiguous, not reaching, or where they remain unresponsive, OM activists, therefore, employ tried and tested attention mechanisms. Notably, traditional media power, that is facilitating critical media reporting, is seen as a powerful tool to leverage social control and to increases pressure on politicians and coax them into action.

> I've already leaked things to several media outlets on my own initiative, some of which are things that I don't publish myself or don't do anything about. If I come across something really interesting, I pass it on to the media, and if they say no, it's not interesting, then I just do it myself. So, really tricky things, I would always do this route because I think it's more effective because they have the better reach, and of course, I have a completely dubious Twitter profile, so a dubious name.

> What we did a few times in the beginning was to send local politicians a little more information. But after a reasonable amount of time, we simply stopped doing that due to a lack of feedback.

> […] it's about the threshold is simply getting higher for them [politicians]. Shall we get involved with XY in [city/location]? Or could that be tricky for us?

The ethical normative framework of OMA

In their normative ethical orientation, OM activists navigate multi-faceted tensions and contradictions. The activists cultivate a liminal identity of protecting the normative order of liberal democracy against a far-right threat while always risking to breach norms themselves. Activists see their role as filling a gap left by, in their eyes, democratic institutions' inadequate defense against far-right threats. On the one hand, they fulfil the role of active citizenship in monitory democracy, but on the other, they also reinforce the transparency

imperative and the wish for far-reaching security and control inherent to surveillance culture. The transparency afforded by their adversaries' online connective action and mobilizing efforts legitimizes their surveillance and demands surveillance.

> They're all public channels for me, so I don't have any concerns about that now.
>
> I don't publish anything from private channels.
>
> […] As long as the groups are public, why should that be punishable? Taking a public posting from a public group and putting it somewhere else publicly …
>
> […] There is no right to Nazi propaganda, and that's why I have no moral scruples at all.

Despite their reinforcing of the transparency imperative, OM activists must evade surveillance themselves. The risk of counter-surveillance forms a boundary for their actions. Maintaining anonymity limits their ability to expose adversaries as they must refrain from actions that can, for instance, entail being subjected to criminal investigations and the risk of being exposed by that (e.g., GDPR violations). A right for anonymity in an otherwise transparent surveillance society is hence invoked selectively based on the threat/no-threat perception of the OM activists:

> If, in our opinion, they were clearly anti-constitutional or went against the established consensus in society. If swastika flags are posted there or swastikas made from corona syringes, or if anti-Semitic and racist comments are made there. Yes, we dragged that out into the open […] how else is society supposed to realize that right-wingers think they are safe again and publish such things publicly or partially publicly?

What is for them a mere practical need of evading retaliative action and the concrete threat of far-right actors, something that they have actual experiences with, however, also reflects the liminal identity of OM activists in a digital society in which being subjected to surveillance is an otherwise normal expectancy and where anonymity is fragile, unexpected yet necessitated by surveillance culture. In other words, online monitoring activists reinforce and subvert the transparency imperative of contemporary digital surveillance society simultaneously.

> There are a lot of people on Twitter who don't want to be public with their work. Women who are simply afraid of being hit on […] so if you work with clear names, you have to reckon with the fact that you'll be 'hunted' so to speak.
>
> It's about threats to life or destruction of cars, denunciation in the workplace, and things like that here, which is unfortunately a subculture, a culture that has emerged. And I can understand when people say: No, I want to remain absolutely anonymous because I'm simply afraid for my children, my job, and I don't know what.
>
> There's always a kind of wanted notice. Who is that? Who is doing it? Who is behind it? I don't necessarily advertise it to the world. I don't boast about what a cool Twitter account I have. That's not the case. That's not useful.

Finally, surveillance practices bear an element of enjoyment. Most prominent on surface-level, OM activists can find joy in digging deep into their adversaries' communicative structures, exposing them, making fun of them and filling in for a perceived lack of institutional surveillance – reflecting the established fun/pastime activity dimension in Lyon's (2017) surveillance culture. Importantly, however, the enjoyment of surveillance practices is not

to be found merely by infiltrating and exposing the other or feeling empowered as the surveillant by that. It is also found in the reflexive practice of what one could call *surveillance without exposition*. In Žižek's (2017) terms surplus-enjoyment, that is pleasure 'gained by the very form (procedure) of pursuing the goal' (p. 9), is gained throughout the process of OMA as the surveillant decides who or what is *not* worth or legitimate monitoring and/or exposing. To know yet to choose not to act for moral reasons or because the potentially monitored is not considered worth monitoring can be a pleasurable experience of power for online monitoring activists. Moreover, accumulating localized and specialized knowledge, even if it is never used, has a rewarding aspect.

Conclusion

In this study, we offer two main contributions. Firstly, by conceptualizing online monitoring activism as *the continued systematic collection, processing, and publishing of information on adversary observable others online,* we define OMA and make the phenomenon operationalizable for future research. Secondly, we situate OMA within the framework of digital activism and surveillance culture and critically discuss the normative implications of OMA, drawing attention to their contentious practices and activist identity that oscillates between virtuous citizenship and vigilantism, reinforcing the *imperative of transparency and surveillance* in the digital society.

OMA is a practice of civic monitoring (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014, p. 2451; Hatakka, 2020, p. 1322) enacted not necessarily as a form of counterpower but as counter-activism. Thereby, OMA comprises a form of individual digital activism that is not directly affiliated with organized protest movements or social movements yet contributes to their existence by furnishing essential information. This information serves a dual purpose: it can contribute to awareness-raising and consciousness-building efforts and simultaneously inform organized activists' or institutions' actions. This form of activism aims to disrupt, if not prevent, opposing social movements by making strategic use of the power of visibility but also of institutionalized power within an ambivalent framework of general belief in the normative institutionalized order and vigilante self-empowerment facilitated by a perceived disparity of far-right mobilization and institutionalized regulative power and control prohibiting that online. OM activists neither necessarily compete with institutionalized monitoring of threats to liberal democratic society nor employ themselves as surveillance deputies (Brayne et al., 2023) but, although aware of legislative and regulatory constraints, aim to coax them into action.

The goal of leveraging social control, also at times by proxy of state control, grounds the practice of OMA firmly in surveillance culture. Hence, OMA is facilitated by and, at the same time, reinforces surveillance culture. Online monitoring activists thereby invoke a surveillance imperative with far-reaching normative implications: Because everything is available as information, it must be collected and consequently leveraged for social control. Simultaneously, they subvert the surveillance imperative by elevating anonymity to an unexpected, rare, and necessary good that is selectively granted. Within this paradigm of general transparency, the surveillant takes an empowered position. Partially removed from the surveillance imperative by its own contradictions, the surveillant gains power and surplus-enjoyment by deciding on and directing the gaze of transparency, that is, by ruling over who will be made transparent and who will not.

Our observations on OMA certainly expand the existing framework of civic monitoring practices and counter-action (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), but they do not exclude existing or other forms of civic monitory action. For instance, in our study, the scrutinization and exposure of adversaries' communication was directed at the disruption of far-right movements. However, contexts are conceivable in which OMA is directed against progressive movements or institutionalized power. The whistleblower and watchdog function of civic monitoring can become more salient in OM activists infiltrating, for instance, political party chat groups or parliamentary communication channels of other sorts. Due to the specific relative openness of Telegram as a platform, the infiltration aspect was not as salient in our study. Still, infiltration could entail significantly more effort and risk in other cases.

That the OMA studied here was bound to Twitter/X likely stems from activists' desire to spread awareness about their observed to larger audience and elite target groups. OMA is, however, not necessarily bound to any one platform and we should continue to observe whether the practice emerges elsewhere. Platform rules and regulations might inform possible adaptations of OMA. While the practice of OMA as a form of digital counterprotest will likely prevail, the counter-activists we interviewed here were just in the earliest stages of forming a loosely coordinated countermovement (in van Haperen et al.'s 2023 words, a 'swarm') whose action repertoire was bound to the expressive activity of the primary movement, the COVID-19 protests. However, if these surveillance practices are normalized as expected in surveillance culture, they will transcend the particular phenomenon and increasingly transfer into the everyday action repertoire of digital activism. Expanding the present research to diverse other contexts should thus be an objective of future, more generalizable, research. Further, the digital/technical background and gender of activists could play a role in OMA. Therefore, a further promising direction can be to analyze the socio-genesis of online monitoring activists in more depth and with larger samples, if they are accessible. As OMA will likely be an emergent civic monitoring practice observed in manifold online contexts, broader theoretical reflections of the activists' role as intermediaries between divergent online (counter-)publics could be an interesting novel perspective. With an expansion of contexts in OMA research, one should also pay attention to the localized nature of OMA. Despite the digitality of the practice, physical space could profoundly influence the genesis of OMA and should be explicitly studied. Finally, we call for more normative work on OMA and its contentious practices in digital society and surveillance culture. While the normative positionality of OMA seems clear yet contradictive, it is imperative for scholars and policymakers to critically engage with the question of whether and to what extent more control and by whom is actually wishful for liberal democracy. In other words, we should further study the surveillance imperative at the core of online monitoring activism before judging its merit.

Notes

1. Personal data (age, gender, geographical region) could be shared voluntarily with the researchers. If the information seemed relevant, it was taken into account during the interpretation process. However, publishing even aggregated data would violate our assurance of complete anonymity.
2. The full interview guide may be found in the online supplement.

3. Quotes from the interviews were translated from German to English by the authors.
4. Important to note is, however, that (a) the primary movement in our case was already structured in highly localized efforts and that (b) the OM activists were not yet converging to a collective identity of a countermovement.
5. For our example, we selected an original source from the COVID-19 protest Telegram sphere. The post features a screenshot from a group of lawyers ("Anwälte für Aufklärung"; lawyers for enlightenment / investigation) who sued government officials over COVID-19 decisions, promoting a YouTube video and asking for donations.
6. In Germany, free speech is based on the constitutionally guaranteed principle of human dignity, allowing broader state intervention against hate speech than in the USA, where free speech is rooted in liberty. The 2017 Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz) mandates transparent reporting systems for illegal content on large social media platforms and requires biannual reports but does not define new offenses (see more details https://verfassungsblog.de/the-german-netzdg-a-risk-worth-taking/). The EU Digital Services Act was not applicable during our interviewees' monitoring of COVID-19 protests. Ambiguities in online free speech and punishable offenses, such as hate speech or incivility, persist in Germany and Europe due to high legal hurdles and stakes.

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