Alternative Social Media and the Complexities of a More Participatory Culture: A View From Scuttlebutt

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Abstract
Recent research has highlighted the emergence of “alternative social media” platforms. Developed by open source communities with non-commercial goals, these platforms can offer more expansive participatory cultures than corporate platforms. However, such platforms also involve new kinds of participatory challenges, such as requiring high technological literacy. This article examines the complexity of enacting participatory cultures by drawing on an ethnographic study of Scuttlebutt, a decentralized social media platform being developed by an open source community. This examination focuses on three key features of participatory culture as enacted on Scuttlebutt: varying modes and sites of participation; reflexivity about who is participating and how; and an evaluation of limits to participation. It also considers the challenges that arise from Scuttlebutt’s approach and how these highlight the profound difficulty of trying to enact fuller models of participatory culture. From these findings, we argue that Scuttlebutt provides an important example of the experimentation that alternative social media platforms are conducting around open, democratic modes of socio-technical organizing, and note that this experimentation raises important questions about how we conceptualize participation and the future of social media.

Keywords
open source, decentralized, alternative social media, social media, participatory culture, participation, prefigurative politics, FLOSS

Introduction
When people first join Scuttlebutt—a decentralized, open source social media platform—they often remark that it reminds them of the early Internet. The pseudonymity, interest-based communities, text-heavy threads, and stripped back interface are all reminiscent of early bulletin boards. There are also ideological dimensions to this nostalgia: with its open source code, lack of algorithms or advertising, and decentralized structure, Scuttlebutt feels like an effort to return to the democratic ideals that underpinned early iterations and theorizations of the Internet (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009).

In this article, we consider how Scuttlebutt relates to a specific element of those early theorizations—the concept of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Now ubiquitous in Internet studies, this concept represented early hopes that networked information technologies would radically democratize cultural production. In a well-trodden narrative, these hopes were tempered by the rise of corporate social media which limit and shape online participation for commercial ends (Fuchs, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). This has led some scholars to argue that a “participatory internet can only be found . . . where activists and users engage in building and reproducing non-commercial, non-profit internet projects” (Fuchs, 2014, p. 61).

As non-commercial, non-profit, open source software, Scuttlebutt is an example of one such project. It is also an example of what Robert Gehl (2015b) has termed “alternative social media” (ASM), which are social media platforms that explicitly try to mitigate the problems of their corporate counterparts. In this article, we examine Scuttlebutt’s attempts to cultivate participatory culture. Drawing on an ethnography of the Scuttlebutt community, we ask how is participatory culture understood and enacted on Scuttlebutt?

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We begin by describing the Scuttlebutt platform and its development community. We then map the relationship between participatory culture and social media, outlining key critiques of participatory culture's conceptualization and enactment, and considering the role of ASM in addressing these critiques. Turning to our ethnographic study, we describe three key features of participatory culture as enacted on Scuttlebutt: varying modes and sites of participation; reflexivity about who is participating and how; and an evaluation of limits to participation. We also consider the challenges and limitations of Scuttlebutt's approaches. From these findings, we argue that Scuttlebutt provides an important example of the experimentation that ASM platforms are conducting around participatory culture and that this experimentation raises important questions about how we conceptualize participation and the future of social media.

**ASM and Participatory Culture**

**Conceptualizing and Evaluating Participatory Culture**

Initially developed in reference to television fandoms, Henry Jenkins' (1992, 2006) concept of participatory culture was popularized in the 2000s as shorthand for the Internet's potential to radically democratize cultural production. Jenkins' concept, like much theorization at the time, celebrated the shift from mass media to the forms of networked communication that could empower consumers to become creators and distributors (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009). Ultimately, scholars hoped that this redistribution of power would extend beyond cultural production to reshape society along more equitable lines.

The emergence of corporate social media complicated this narrative. Some scholars noted its ability to support peer-based systems of interaction and collaboration (e.g., Bruns, 2008; Burgess & Green, 2009) and allow users to influence content distribution (Jenkins et al., 2013). Others observed that these platforms co-opted participatory culture for financial gain, limiting and shaping user participation in ways that served corporate interests. Such critiques are focused on the exploitative elements of social media, whereby users contribute valuable content and data but are unable to meaningfully participate in platform design and governance (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2014; Scholz, 2013; Terranova, 2000).

These critiques of social media have occurred alongside critiques of the concept of participatory culture itself. In particular, scholars have argued that the concept needs to better account for the issue of power. Christian Fuchs (2014) argues that participation is best understood as people's right to be involved in the decisions and structures that affect them and thus any analysis of participation on social media needs to consider platform ownership and the distribution of revenue. On this basis, Fuchs argues that the asymmetric power relations between corporate-owned platforms and their users preclude the possibility of true participatory culture.

Similarly, Nico Carpentier (2011a, 2011b; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013) has called for approaches to participation that are grounded in democratic theory. He distinguishes between minimalist democratic models (where the role of citizens is limited to participation in elections) and maximalist models (which involve direct participation within and beyond institutional politics), and calls for theorizations of participatory culture that align with the latter maximalist model. He argues that doing so requires acknowledging that “[t]he key defining element of participation is power” (Carpentier, 2011a, p. 170). Reformulating participation along these lines also requires clearer distinctions between access, interaction, and participation. While access and interaction are necessary for participation, they cannot be conflated with participation which Carpentier (2011a, 2011b) defines as the equal position of all actors in a decision-making process. According to this definition, while corporate social media provides users with access to the platform, to content, and to other users and allows interaction with these elements, it does not provide opportunities for participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 274). We return to these conceptualizations in our discussion to analyze the participatory culture emerging on Scuttlebutt.

**Participatory Cultures on ASM**

Following these critiques of corporate social media, and of the concept of participatory culture, scholars have begun looking for other examples of participatory culture in practice. One promising arena is ASM. Gehl (2017, p. 300) describes ASM as “a response to the criticisms of corporate social media: namely, their surveillance practices, their appropriation of user data, their emphasis on marketing messages over other forms of connection, and their algorithmic shaping of sociality, to name a few.” Specific aims and features differ across platforms, but all ASM share a broad mission of trying to recreate the positive features of corporate social media while limiting the negative ones (Gehl, 2017, p. 337). For instance, ASM typically have familiar features such as posting, following, and sharing but reject the commercialization of user data, instead using decentralized data storage and volunteer-driven organization models. There is a small body of literature examining ASM platforms and how they differ from corporate social media. Much of this work draws on ethnographic and interview-based approaches (Cinque, 2021; Gehl, 2015a, 2016), and analyses of platform features and policies (Gehl, 2015a, 2016; Sevignani, 2013; van der Velden, 2013). Studies have focused on several platforms, including diaspora* (Sevignani, 2013), Mastodon (Cinque, 2021; Zulli et al., 2020), and Lorea (Cabello et al., 2013; van der Velden, 2013).

While these studies have not used participatory culture as a dedicated lens for analysis, some of their findings begin to
illustrate how ASM attempt to improve on the participatory culture of corporate platforms. In their analysis of the sociality of Mastodon, Diana Zulii and colleagues (2020) note that ASM are often characterized by reduced “abstraction,” whereby the internal details of the systems are made visible to users. One example is transparency around software. As several studies have observed, ASM are typically a part of the Open Source Software movement (Gehl, 2015b; Sevignani, 2013; Zulii et al., 2020), which is centered on the belief that information, including software, should be free for people to access, use, and alter (Stewart & Gosain, 2006).

As a result, the source code of many ASM is accessible. Zulii et al. (2020) note that the organizational structures of ASM also tend to be transparent. For example, Mastodon is structured around individual servers (called “instances”) that are run by administrators who control their own policies and processes. These policies are typically made public along with the administrators’ contact details. Users are free to join instances that align with their preferences and can often talk directly with administrators about issues that arise (Zulii et al., 2020).

Other studies have illustrated additional ways that ASM offer more expansive models of participatory culture than corporate platforms. Gehl (2015b) notes that most ASM platforms reject advertising and profit-driven mining of user data. While this might not change what user participation looks like on the surface, it does change the terms on which it occurs. For example, the act of liking becomes solely an affective exchange rather than also being a data point used to generate profit (Gehl, 2015b, p. 6). Relatedly, because ASM do not collect and mine user data, they have no need for centralized data storage and instead use decentralized or distributed structures (Gehl, 2015b). Several studies have examined how these structures change the terms of participation by giving users more control over where their data are stored (e.g., De Salve et al., 2018; Sevignani, 2013; Zulii et al., 2020). We note that many of these features of ASM, such as openness and cooperation, are common among open source software projects more generally (Stewart & Gosain, 2006) and likely stem in part from this cultural and intellectual heritage. A full examination of these links is beyond the scope of this article but worthy of further research.

While this literature has begun to demonstrate the distinct participatory cultures of ASM, there has not yet been a dedicated analysis of how participatory culture is conceptualized and enacted within an ASM platform. By providing such an analysis, this study is able to move beyond the areas noted above, such as open source code, accessible administrators, and decentralized data storage, to highlight other experiments in participatory culture.

In addition, while ASM offer new and perhaps increased “participatory intensities” (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013), they also involve new participatory challenges. Several studies of ASM have noted that using, or even accessing, these platforms can require high levels of technical expertise—a form of exclusion less common in corporate social media (Gehl, 2016, 2017; Zulii et al., 2020). In some cases, the technical inaccessibility of platforms is symptomatic of a broader techno-elitist culture and is used to limit participation to those who are seen as like-minded (Gehl, 2016).

Similarly, research on open source communities more broadly shows that while, in principle, anyone can participate, in practice they have struggled with issues around diversity and inclusion (Dunbar-Hester, 2019). Women, for example, are more underrepresented in open source projects than commercial software production or the field of computer science as a whole (Mendez et al., 2018; Nafus, 2012). When present, women can face active discrimination and additional barriers to participation (Mendez et al., 2018; Menking et al., 2019; Nafus, 2012). Non-White contributors are similarly underrepresented and can be subject to discrimination (Dembry, 2013; Nadri et al., 2022). These patterns of exclusion have many causes, including the principles of openness and freedom being used to rationalize lack of diversity as a matter of personal choice (Dunbar-Hester, 2019). It is likely that ASM are subject to these same dynamics given that they sit within the broader open source ecology.

Finally, ASM platforms aim to decentralize their own organizational structures (Gehl, 2015b; Zulii et al., 2020), yet power and participation can remain highly concentrated. On Mastodon, for example, 10% of instances host almost half of the platform’s users (Raman et al., 2019). Similar patterns of concentration have long been noted in other seemingly open systems. For instance, Wikipedia is well known to have a small pool of editors who produce most of its content (Ford & Wajcman, 2017; Oberhouse, 2017). Likewise, open source projects are premised on the philosophies of open collaboration, yet one of the most common organizational models in open source projects is a founder becoming a “benevolent dictator” (Ljungberg, 2000).

In summary, while ASM certainly improve on the restrictive models of participation offered by corporate platforms, they also involve new conditions that may prevent them from realizing the kind of maximalist participatory culture outlined by scholars such as Carpentier and Fuchs. These complexities are yet to be widely examined but are of critical importance as scholars, activists, users, and regulators face increasingly urgent questions about how to mitigate the negative impacts of corporate platforms. In this article, we contribute to these discussions and to existing analyses of ASM by considering how participation is understood and enacted on Scuttlebutt—a platform that has not yet been analyzed in the studies of ASM and that demonstrates experiments in participatory culture that are yet to be examined.

An Introduction to Scuttlebutt

The name “Scuttlebutt” is a slang term for gossip and refers to the novel “gossip protocol” that the platform is built
upon—the Secure Scuttlebutt Protocol for data transfer and storage (Kermarrec et al., 2020; Tarr et al., 2019). This protocol was initially developed in 2014 by Dominic Tarr, who was living on a sailboat in New Zealand and looking to develop an open source, offline-friendly protocol for social networking applications (Couture & Ernst, 2019). The Scuttlebutt social media platform that has since been built on this protocol has many superficial resemblances to Facebook, including features like user profiles, posts, likes, and hashtags. Unlike Facebook, Scuttlebutt does not require people to use real names and does not involve advertising, centralized servers, or algorithmically organized newsfeeds, and can function offline. To begin, users download a Scuttlebutt application and set up a user profile (see Figure 1). This allows data to be stored locally on a user’s device and backed up on the devices of friends they connect with through the Scuttlebutt gossip protocol. The process of replicating data for friends involves two or more users periodically syncing the data stored on their respective devices. Then, as each of those friends sync with other friends, these data are replicated across their unique networks of friends-of-friends. The result is a decentralized, “peer-to-peer” network of devices that share the responsibility for data storage. As each device is only connected to part of the network, it is impossible to count or monitor all activities on the platform (e.g., see Staltz, 2018). As a result, we cannot state the size of the platform’s user base. An alternative indicator of scale is the number of contributors listed on GitHub—for instance, 96 programmers contributed to the flagship social media application (Secure Scuttlebutt Consortium, 2021). However, as we discuss below, focusing solely on software programmers obscures other forms of participation.

The development processes behind Scuttlebutt are also distinct from corporate platforms. The protocol developed by Tarr is open source and has been built on in multiple directions by a large collection of contributors (Mota, 2019). This includes the social media platform, Scuttlebutt, which functions as a central space for discussing current and future Scuttlebutt-related developments. As a non-commercial project, the Scuttlebutt social media platform relies on volunteer labor, individual donations, and competitive grant funding. Donations are typically small amounts given by individuals (below US$300), with grants coming from non-commercial organizations interested in open source or decentralized technologies (e.g., €85,000 awarded by the Handshake Projects Free and Open Source Software Community Grant). Over time, the project’s organizational structure has become increasingly decentralized. For instance, the distribution of grant funding is now handled by multiple Open Collectives (including, Secure Scuttlebutt Consortium, the European Scuttlebutt Collective, Scuttlebutt Maintenance, and Scuttlebutt Grant Writing), each of which contributes to one or more technical projects relating to the core protocol, related applications, and community-building practices. Where dominant corporate platforms have largely been developed in the United States or China, Scuttlebutt...
began in New Zealand, and now involves a global network of contributors from regions including Europe, North America, South America, and Australasia. Finally, as discussed below, Scuttlebutt also differs from corporate social media by prioritizing socio-technical structures that incentivize pro-social behaviors, rather than corporate profit (SSB Principles, n.d.; Staltz, 2018).

Despite its youth, Scuttlebutt has been supported with significant grant funding, as discussed above, and has attracted the interest of notable people within the technology sector, such as Evan Henshaw-Plath (a founding member of Twitter) who has developed his own social media platform that runs on the Scuttlebutt protocol (Rabble, 2020/2021). These developments suggest that Scuttlebutt is already a notable platform within the ASM environment.

**Research Design**

Like many open source communities, Scuttlebutt contributors are geographically dispersed and seldom meet in person. However, one advantage of working with open source communities is that most of their collaboration is conducted via online platforms which, in keeping with open source approaches, are accessible to the public (Sigfridsson & Sheehan, 2011). These spaces provide rich sites for ethnographic research. Accordingly, our primary research method has been ethnographic participant-observation on the Scuttlebutt social media platform.

We became aware of Scuttlebutt when Eden was invited to join the platform to provide feedback on the early attempts to cultivate an inclusive socio-technical environment. Based on this invitation, we discussed the potential of studying Scuttlebutt together. From there, we sought permission to engage in participant-observation research from active Scuttlebutt contributors. We also clearly identified ourselves as researchers on our accounts—linking to information about our research methods (including how to opt-out of our data collection) and to update about our progress—so that participants could decide whether to continue contributing to our view of Scuttlebutt. We stayed on the platform as participant-observers for 3 years: maintaining consistent activity across 2 years (2018–2019) and continuing with intermittent engagement for an additional year (2020).

Our participant-observation on Scuttlebutt involved two kinds of activities. As on other social media platforms, we interacted and posted content based on our personal interests. We also contributed to the development-focused activities on the Scuttlebutt platform. These activities included giving feedback on ideas, celebrating the work of contributors, sharing our reflections about the platform, participating in decision-making groups, and volunteering labor on small tasks. While our ethnography was largely digital, we attended several in-person events, including the first “Scuttlecamp”—a multi-day gathering held in Wellington, NZ in 2019. We also examined public-facing materials about the platform, including websites, GitHub, media coverage, podcasts, blogs, and recorded talks.

This approach follows established methods for online ethnography (Hine, 2015). In particular, we take inspiration from studies where ethnographic approaches are used to examine online platforms with a focus on understanding interpersonal interactions, governance processes, technical architecture, and the connections between these elements (Davis, 2010; Gehl, 2016; Lovink, 2003). While some studies of ASM have focused on interviewing developers, we chose a broader ethnographic approach to better understand the wider culture of the platform rather than just core contributors. In addition, by participating in the platform and observing it, our approach was aligned with the community’s cooperative ethics in a way that a more extractive interview-based method would not have been.

The decentralized nature of Scuttlebutt created several challenges. There is no single authoritative body that can define the project or its aims as views on these matters differ across the community. Given the decentralized structure of the Scuttlebutt platform on which the community mostly communicates, no single user (including us) can see the entire membership of the platform. With this in mind, we want to be explicit that our understanding of Scuttlebutt is shaped by the people who were most visible to us during the period of our participant-observation, and that this does not necessarily represent the views of everyone involved. We also want to note that while people often use pseudonyms on Scuttlebutt, we avoid naming individuals to provide additional privacy.

**Findings: Participatory Culture on Scuttlebutt**

**Varying Sites and Modes of Participation**

Like all social media, Scuttlebutt users can participate at the level of the interface by posting, sharing, and interacting on the platform. Like other ASM, users are also able to participate at the level of code by contributing to the platform’s programming. Beyond this, the Scuttlebutt community and platform encourage substantive participation across many other areas.

One area is platform design. People who lack the skills to contribute through coding are still encouraged to participate in platform development by discussing and giving feedback on design issues. For example, there have been long-running conversations about adding a “private groups” feature. Participation in these conversations varies widely. Some people offer sociological or philosophical reflections about human behavior, some offer personal accounts of their experiences with private groups on other platforms, and some offer ideas about the technical means of implementing groups. The fact that these diverse forms of knowledge and input are valued as part of the development process reflects a broader
view among contributors that building humane, pro-social behaviors is as important as (and part of) building good technology. This value is articulated in Scuttlebutt’s core principles, which were developed collaboratively during 2018–2019 and state that Scuttlebutt “aims to harmonize four perspectives of life: Environment reflecting Technology reflecting Community reflecting Society” (SSB Principles, n.d.).

Another area of participation involves community building. Again, contributions are widely varied. In one example, community members were provided with internal grant funding to produce art for Scuttlebutt-specific emoji. Another contributor developed a podcast and encouraged other users to make their own episodes. Someone else started a weekly newsletter that summarizes happenings on the platform. In a further example, onboarding new users is considered a collective responsibility, with contributors responding to new people by answering their questions, making welcoming comments, and suggesting discussions and people they may like to follow.

A third area of participation is organization and governance, where again people participate in diverse ways that suit their interests and abilities. Some contributors publicize the platform through speaking at events and conferences, others seek funding through grant writing, and others manage bank accounts or coordinate groups of developers who are working on particular technical projects. While a degree of trust is required for some of these activities, such as managing funding, anyone who joins the Scuttlebutt platform can earn that trust and participate in its administration and governance. These open practices are exemplified by the varied approaches taken to distributing grant funding. For instance, when a founding contributor received the project’s first large grant (US$200k), they posted about their concern that distributing the money themselves would “make our decentralized community less decentralized.” To avoid this, they proposed splitting the grant into smaller amounts that the community could distribute through a more open and participatory process. Through deliberation, the community decided on a process that involved at least nine rounds of internal grant funding. In each round, different teams of volunteers filled a set of administrative and decision-making roles. Everyone on the platform was welcome to contribute by volunteering for a specific role or by engaging in public discussion about the proposals submitted for funding. We were comparatively new to the platform when this occurred but were welcomed into the process. We gave feedback on proposals and Eden served as an administrator for one round. Once the funding was distributed, there was open deliberation about how the process could be altered or improved. The community then used these reflections to design a different process for managing the next large grant, as discussed below.

**Reflexivity: Who Is Participating How?**

Within Scuttlebutt, the community openly discusses and examines what kinds of participation are happening, by whom, and with what outcomes. There is a continual investment in working toward a broad participatory culture whereby different kinds of people can participate in different ways, and those divergent forms of participation are recognized and valued.

One example is that the community is explicit about trying to develop awareness of, and appreciation for, different kinds of contributions. Within open source projects, technical skills are typically highly valued and contributing code is key to developing social standing within what is essentially a gift economy (Stewart & Gosain, 2006). Coding contributions are also easy to recognize and track as GitHub provides a visual dashboard of people’s outputs (GitHub, 2013). These same conditions apply within the Scuttlebutt community; however, there has also been a concerted effort to develop systems for recognizing and valuing non-technical contributions. In some cases, this involves social systems of recognition and reward—essentially, ensuring that different forms of participation are recognized and celebrated through social exchanges on the platform. For example, some contributors invest significant administrative and emotional labor in supporting the community through actions, such as mediating disagreements, welcoming new users, and hosting vulnerable or sensitive discussions. Similarly, several contributors sought to help orient new users by writing FAQs and linking new posts to the related discussions.

The term “community gardening” was coined to describe these kinds of efforts, so that they could be more easily recognized and valued. Labeling these actions represents a concerted effort to expand the platforms’ relational economy beyond coding contributions. Other systems of recognition involve financial reimbursement. This is seen, for example, in the previously mentioned case where artistic community members were paid to develop GIFs and emoji. Extending financial reimbursement to these kinds of non-programming activities highlights how Scuttlebutt’s approach to participation includes reflective efforts to acknowledge and support different kinds of contributions.

A second example of Scuttlebutt’s reflexive approach to participatory culture is the community’s attempts to recognize and mitigate barriers to participation. The Scuttlebutt community has, for instance, tried to actively support people who want to participate in programming but lack the experience to do so independently. For example, the redesign of Scuttlebutt’s public-facing website in 2019 was used as an opportunity to develop the programming skills of two community members by allowing them to lead the website redesign with support from more experienced developers. Another example of this informal technical mentoring is a version of “pair-programming,” where two programmers collaborate on a task with the more experienced person offering support to the other as needed.

Other attempts to mitigate barriers to participation have centered on the issues of marginalization. The Scuttlebutt community often explicitly positions itself as welcoming of
diversity. For example, one of the early introduction videos on Scuttlebutt’s website explained the human-centered design of the platform through a love story between two women (Zach, 2018). However, while some core contributors bring perspectives that are typically underrepresented in open source communities, they remain a minority. For example, while contributors do not always disclose their gender, among those who do there is a persistently high proportion of men. Recognizing these limitations, many Scuttlebutt contributors have made efforts to explicitly encourage and support participation from people who are from marginalized groups. To give one example, when the project received another large grant, the community decided to elect a representative “council” who would distribute those funds and then be disbanded once the funding had been distributed. Everyone on the Scuttlebutt platform was encouraged to nominate themselves for a council position; however, people with historically marginalized experiences in open source communities were explicitly encouraged to apply, including people of color, Indigenous people, and women. Similarly, candidates were allowed to nominate themselves in pairs for a single position so that people who needed a support person to participate could still contribute. Elected council members were then paid for their time in an attempt to recognize that volunteering for these kinds of roles is otherwise only accessible to people with sufficient financial resources (those who did not need the payment could return it as an anonymous donation). Continuing with the reflexive cycle, the advantages and disadvantages of this process were openly discussed in the context of further experiments in managing future grants.

Debating Necessary Limits on Participation: Issues of Scale and Speech

Scuttlebutt’s reflexive approach to participatory culture extends to considering what limits should be set on participation. This issue is often raised in relation to scale. Should Scuttlebutt aim to grow as large as possible? At what point would growth undermine the participatory culture outlined above? A related set of questions have emerged around controlling speech. For Scuttlebutt to be a safe and inclusive platform, what kinds of speech need to be prohibited? What tools and processes are needed to monitor and limit unwanted participation? These questions have become more pressing as the platform has begun attracting a wider range of users, bringing an increased risk of racism, sexual harassment, trolling, and other disruptive or harmful behaviors. There have also been occasional attempts by alt-right communities to use Scuttlebutt after being deplatformed elsewhere.

Through ongoing deliberations, two main perspectives have emerged in response to these questions. One sector of the community feels that Scuttlebutt should be as widely used as possible. Their priority is to perfect Scuttlebutt’s key technological contributions, such as cryptographic security and decentralized data storage, and maximize the number of people who can access them. This sector recognizes that a large user base will mean that there will be conflicting groups on the platform, and so focus on developing features, such as private groups, that will allow incompatible groups to co-exist on the platform by limiting who can participate in specific spaces. For this sector, features for limiting the participation of others are only needed to the extent that they support the development of a large, diverse user base.

Another sector of the community de-prioritizes (or even rejects) participant growth as a goal. This sector has focused on developing Scuttlebutt as an example of a safe and inclusive platform for a highly engaged community of collaborators, rather than a service that attracts the broadest possible user base of passive consumers. Central to this aim is the need for tools to limit harmful or disruptive participation; without these, contributors from marginalized groups would not be inclined to join the platform. This has proven to be a complex goal. This sector of the community has actively sought marginalized perspectives to inform the development of features (such as blocking) that can be used to set boundaries on participation. However, this involves bringing people from marginalized groups onto a platform that does not yet have adequate processes for limiting harmful speech. This sector also acknowledges that setting boundaries on participation is not simply a technical project but also a social one that involves cultivating pro-social behaviors within the community—a practice that cannot be scaled quickly.

These debates encapsulate a range of concerns but ultimately rest on the question of whether and how to limit participation, be it through social practices, technical features, or restricting growth. While unresolved, both sectors of the community share a commitment to the idea that some limits are necessary to preserve a meaningful participatory culture.

New Challenges to Full Participation

As will already be evident, Scuttlebutt’s efforts are imperfect, ongoing, and create new challenges even as they try to resolve old ones. Some of these new challenges involve practical, coordination issues that emerge from decentralizing the structure of organizations and technologies. For instance, while helping to equalize power relations, decentralized practices can make it difficult to know the state of different projects. This can be seen in efforts to develop multi-device identities. Because user data are stored locally, Scuttlebutt accounts were initially tied to specific devices. Over time, discussions emerged about how to make accounts accessible from multiple devices. However, these discussions were difficult to find and used different terms to refer to the issue and potential solutions. When solutions emerged, they were spread across multiple projects, each addressing different elements required for multi-device identities. Despite attempts to publicize such developments, Scuttlebutt’s decentralized technical and organizational structures continued to make it difficult to find
project updates and obscured potential connections between projects.

A related challenge involves reaching agreement on governance processes. Even while the community remains relatively small and broadly values-aligned, governance processes are inconsistent and disagreements can go unresolved. For example, by early 2018, contributors had begun discussing whether to form legal entities to assist with managing collectively owned resources. Following these discussions, one contributor took the initiative to form a French Association for Scuttlebutt and others began planning equivalent country-specific legal entities. However, disagreements emerged during Scuttlecamp in 2019 over a proposal to create an incorporated society in New Zealand. Those involved in the earlier discussions about other legal entities viewed this proposal as part of an already-underway process of the distributed governance. Others, however, were caught off-guard. They had not seen the prior discussions within their partial view of the Scuttlebutt network and were concerned that this legal entity would concentrate decision-making power in New Zealand. While many concerns were resolved during open deliberation, a few contributors remained firmly against forming a legal entity in New Zealand and so the decision was postponed.

Another challenge for Scuttlebutt has been increasing the diversity of perspectives within the community without reinforcing systems of marginalization, as already noted above. This challenge is further illustrated by one of the patterns that emerged among contributors from marginalized backgrounds. On first engaging with Scuttlebutt, these contributors tend to express excitement about the platform’s potential. Emboldened by explicit invitations to participate, they offer contributions that are informed by their experiences of marginalization. For example, women and people of color have been key advocates for the development of discussion-moderation features and have drawn on their experiences of abuse and harassment on other platforms to argue for the importance of such features. However, the discussions that follow from these contributions are often derailed by the debates over how much weight should be given to marginalized perspectives. In response, many of these participants stopped contributing. Some returned to the platform intermittently to see if the culture had changed; others left altogether. This pattern highlighted the need for different approaches to increasing diversity that would better support people who are invited to share marginalized experiences. There are ongoing debates about why such approaches might involve. In the meantime, many contributors have expressed hesitancy about inviting marginalized people to contribute until more is done to ensure they have a safe and positive experience.

**Discussion: Toward “a More Participatory Culture”**

Like all ASM, Scuttlebutt improves on the participatory culture offered by corporate platforms. Its open source protocol allows for the participation beyond the user interface and, as a non-commercial project, it avoids co-opting participation for profit, focusing instead on decentralized systems that give users more autonomy over their data. Beyond these already well-documented elements, Scuttlebutt demonstrates a range of other modes of participation that span project development, community building, and organizational functions, with opportunities that allow people to contribute in ways that best suit them. These practices are characterized by a reflexive and experimental approach whereby different processes are continually trialed, examined, dismantled, and (re)developed.

These experiments involve attempts to recognize and mitigate some of the participatory challenges common to ASM platforms. As prior studies have noted, ASM platforms can require high degrees of technical literacy (Gehl, 2016, 2017; Zulli et al., 2020). Within Scuttlebutt, we see various efforts to provide pathways for full participation (in Carpentier’s sense of equalized decision-making) that do not rest on technical expertise. Most notably, this includes finding ways to recognize and appreciate non-technical contributions. Acknowledging, labeling, and encouraging non-technical contributions, and rewarding them both socially and financially, can be understood as an attempt to achieve more equitable power relations in decision-making processes. It means that contributors do not need technical expertise to shape the design or governance of the platform. It also means that varied forms of expertise and experience are valued within decision-making processes, and contributors come to deliberations about the platform with some understanding of how other people are contributing to the community. At the same time, there are opportunities to learn programming skills through informal mentoring practices, which facilitates technical participation for those who are interested. While imperfect, these approaches demonstrate an awareness of the need to equalize relations between technical and non-technical contributors and to cultivate pathways to participation that do not rely on technical expertise.

Other forms of stratification and discrimination are also likely to limit ASM’s ability to enact maximalist models of participation (Demby, 2013; Mendez et al., 2018; Menking et al., 2019; Nadri et al., 2022; Nafus, 2012). Our findings indicate that Scuttlebutt has made concentrated, if imperfect, efforts to recognize and reduce forms of exclusion. While many open source projects are now commercially funded (Medappa & Srivastava, 2020), involvement in non-commercial projects, such as Scuttlebutt, requires the financial security and leisure time necessary for volunteering. Acknowledging this, Scuttlebutt uses grant funding to pay people for contributions, both technical and non-technical (such as the artwork development and contributing to the grant-distribution council). There are also explicit efforts to encourage participation by groups that have traditionally been marginalized in open source software projects and to establish limits to participation that will make the platform safer for these contributors.

A third issue among ASM, and open, collaborative projects more broadly, is that decision-making often becomes
centralized among a small proportion of users, leading to power asymmetries that fall short of maximalist models of participation. Our findings demonstrate that Scuttlebutt consciously employs a mix of deliberative, representative, and ad hoc decision-making processes in an effort to minimize such centralization. Processes, such as deciding how to distribute grants, involve a deliberative model where decisions are reached through open discussion. Other processes, such as the elected council set up to distribute a specific grant, involve representative models that, while hierarchical, are explicitly designed to be temporary, experimental, and equitable. A third set of processes involve “adhocracy” (Toffler, 1970), whereby individuals can initiate new projects without waiting on formal processes. Many of the community-building projects described above arose in this manner, including podcasts, newsletters, informal programming mentoring, and “community gardening” practices. Importantly, this mix of decision-making approaches maps onto Carpentier’s description of maximalist participation as a combination of representation and direct participation that attempts to equalize decision-making. Scuttlebutt provides a concrete example of how practices drawn from a range of maximalist democratic traditions and ideologies can be combined in practice. In doing so, it highlights the need for further research and theorization around the specific processes for participatory decision-making being enacted on ASM and elsewhere.

Our findings also highlight another under-theorized element of participatory culture—that it rests on a normative idea of participation. The ongoing debates within Scuttlebutt about how best to manage negative participation on the platform (including, as an extreme example, infiltration by extremist right-wing communities) illustrate that not all participation is positive and desirable. The nature of the participation matters, not just the fact of it. Furthermore, the efforts undertaken to incentivize positive participation on Scuttlebutt highlight that a productive and desirable participatory culture is not automatically an outcome of networked technologies. Participation on Scuttlebutt relies on mutual trust, shared values, and compassionate and respectful pro-social norms. This complicates Carpentier’s definition of participation as equal power relations in decision-making. Should bad actors be granted equal power relations? How should destructive participation be managed? On what grounds is the right to equal participation established and on what grounds might it be removed? Such normative dimensions are rarely mentioned in core works on participatory culture but are of critical importance as online platforms, both corporate and otherwise, face challenges from a range of destructive actors.

Overall, a key contribution of these findings is to illustrate the immense difficulty of enacting participatory culture and the value of persevering anyway. As our findings indicate, many of Scuttlebutt’s approaches to participatory culture are aimed at equalizing participation, including attempts to mitigate issues common in similar ASM and open source projects. Despite these efforts, old challenges persist and new ones arise, illustrating the immense complexity of trying to work toward participatory culture. Of course, even Henry Jenkins now acknowledges the idealism inherent in his concept. In a published conversation between he and Carpentier, Jenkins states that he increasingly talks in terms of achieving “a more participatory culture” in recognition that arriving at participatory culture is difficult, if not impossible (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 266). Carpentier likewise acknowledges that his vision of participation will probably only be realized in “temporary and unstable moment[s]” (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 267). Yet, both feel that the concept remains important as something to motivate and evaluate the incremental progress they feel is possible.

Scuttlebutt’s processes of experimentation, evaluation, and reflection provide a critical example of what this looks like in practice. More specifically, we suggest that it is an example of the value of “prefigurative politics” (Dixon, 2014; Törnberg, 2021). Drawn from activists and social movement scholars, prefigurative politics are collective attempts to change the present by constructing structures that anticipate a more just future. We argue that this idea applies to participatory culture—working toward it involves prefiguring more open and equalized forms of participation in and through media technologies. Like all prefigurative actions, this involves carving out space within the existing socio-political landscape where new forms of social organization can be enacted, albeit on small scales. Crucially, the concept and practice of prefigurative politics is, at its core, an explicit effort to grapple with the challenges of pursuing an ideal within the imperfect present. Prefiguration acknowledges the contradiction that “on the one hand, developing entirely liberatory social relations is never fully possible in a context of domination; on the other hand, developing such social relations is crucial to building visionary movements capable of transforming the world” (Dixon, 2014). In the context of participatory culture, this means that attempts by platforms such as Scuttlebutt are constrained by the broader social, economic, and cultural landscape in which they are located, as is evident in the complex, ongoing challenges that the community faces. Yet, crucially, these attempts are necessary for actively envisioning an alternative landscape that would better support the kinds of equalized relations critical to a truly participatory culture. Put simply “[p]refigurative activities, in sum, are always constrained and always necessary” (Dixon, 2014, p. 130). Viewing Scuttlebutt’s efforts through the lens of prefiguration thus reiterates their value, and the value of a concept like participatory culture, and begins to suggest a way forward for the broader project of reimagining social media.

**Conclusion**

This article has examined how participatory culture is understood and enacted on Scuttlebutt, a decentralized, open source social media platform. Like all ASM, Scuttlebutt endeavors to provide a more meaningful participatory culture than corporate platforms by allowing people to access...
and interact with its social and technical infrastructure. In addition, there is recognition that enabling participation requires an attempt at equalizing power relations. While fraught with challenges, these efforts offer an instructive example of the difficulty, and the potential, of pursuing more imaginative and maximalist approaches to participatory culture.

By offering empirical detail about Scuttlebutt, this article adds a previously unstudied platform to the literature on ASM and, in doing so, contributes to this literature’s aim of highlighting the possibilities suggested by such platforms. More specifically, this article enables a better understanding of the breadth of experimentation that is occurring on these platforms around enacting open, democratic modes of socio-technical organizing. In doing so, we add to scholarship that has critiqued and extended the concept of participatory culture. Within this context, critiques of corporate platforms often call for maximalist forms of participation in ways that belie the complexity of enacting just models of participation in everyday practices. By providing an example of these ideas being worked out in practice, this article demonstrates both the complexity and prefigurative potential of enacting “a more participatory culture” (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013, p. 266). Understanding new possibilities and anticipating new challenges is of increasing importance as the shortcomings of corporate platforms become more urgently apparent and scholars, activists, and regulators look to alternatives that might support fuller and more enriching participation.

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Notes

1. There are multiple interoperable applications that can be used to access the Scuttlebutt social media platform. We primarily used the application Patchwork, shown in Figure 1 (Secure Scuttlebutt Consortium, 2021), which we refer to as the “Scuttlebutt Platform” for simplicity.

2. There are other social media applications that are being developed with the Scuttlebutt protocol, further illustrating its influence. These include Sunrise Social and Manyverse (Piet Geursen et al., 2019/2022; Staltz, 2017/2022).

3. The study gained ethical approval from the University of Melbourne’s Human Ethics Advisory Group (Project ID: 1851515.1).

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