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Agency and civic involvement in news production via Facebook commentary

Jannie Møller Hartley and Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst

Abstract:

Social media services such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube, where users create and share content, has become a large part of most peoples everyday digital life and equally media companies has realised that these services plays a great role in peoples news consumption pattern. On these services users can contribute to the publication process, in theory broadening the diversity of public debate. This paper explores user involvement on the Facebook pages of Danish mainstream online newspapers in November 2012 and investigate the hypotheses that user interactivity gives audiences greater power over influencing news making and in turn increases civic agency. Employing a content analysis of readers' comments the study examines whether the commenters assume any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production, in terms of setting the agenda, providing original information, and airing oppositional views on reported issues.

From a public sphere perspective, it also examines the degree of diversity of users' opinions within media outlets and we examine to what degree users provide an alternative criticism of either the media institutions or a criticism of the power elite.

The results indicate that although users challenge the journalistic core functions to some extent this type of audience participation does not mean that the audience increasingly become co-producers of news content original content or adopting important media functions such as critique of the political power elite.

Introduction

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, where users create and share content, has become a big part of most people's everyday digital life and media organizations have realized that these platforms increasingly play a major role in people's news consumption. More than 3,5 million Danes out of a population of around 6 million have got a Facebook profile.

According to newer quantitative studies on media usage social media has, as a consequence of their popularity become a kind of "digital intermediary" with great influence on the news agenda and part of the digital media landscape (Schrøder, 2012; Schrøder, Kim, Kleis, 2013). When media organizations publish news on social media and encourage users to participate in news production they add an extra dimension to the news publishing process. This, at least in theory, expand the variety of public debate.

In this paper we examine the interaction between users and news organisation on the Facebook pages of seven Danish mainstream online newspapers, and we examine the **hypothesis that user interactivity gives the audience a greater power to influence decision-making**, and that which may be termed "civic agency" have increasingly moved into the digital domain. Theoretically we follow Carpentier's (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011) argument, that it is important to distinguish between 'access', 'interaction' and 'participation' and in this article the main focus is on *interaction*.

Methodically we have surveyed using Regular Interval Content Capture (RICC) (Kautsky & Widholm, 2008) to catch debates from seven Danish online newspapers in real time. The data was collected in November 2012.

The paper examines whether the debaters are contributing to some of the key journalistic work areas related to news production. It can be in the form of setting the agenda, delivering new original information, or to publish new views on themes put on the agenda by the online newspaper as well as opposing views uttering critique on the media or the power elite.

Limited research on users and comments

In 2006 Time Magazine designated "You" as person of the year and following this came much discussion on both privacy, shifting roles of media production as well as scholarly interest in User Generated Content (UGC) on the platforms offered both by social media as well in forums both in and outside online newspapers (van Dijck, 2009).

It can be argued that participation and co-creation of UGC on so-called social or participatory media and Web 2.0 technologies can be functioning as the glue that holds the media and users together in an ever more complex and mediated society. One could say that participation in both the active and the less active sense is a foundation for what British media researchers have described as "public connection" (Couldry, Nick, Livingstone, Sonja, Markham, 2007)– the fact that the media is helping to shape various forms of citizenship. But citizenship is also a celebrated concept which is contested and not always clear how much of the research into these so called new participatory media define concepts such as 'interaction', 'USG' or participation.

Interestingly, much research shows that media and journalists have failed to take advantage of these interactive features and interactivity does not seem really to have won the ground inside news rooms (Domingo, D., Quandt, T., Heinonen, A., Paulussen, S., Singer, J., Vujnovic, 2008; Massey, 1999; Newman & Levy, 2013; Schultz, 1999; Van der Wulf, R. og Lauf, 2005). Empirical data has identified the "gap between the potential for co-production on the one hand and on the other hand, the actual use of interactive features" (Deuze, 2004, p. 22) Domingo (Domingo, 2008) shows how the professional culture of traditional journalism entails a strong inertia in the newsrooms that prevent journalists from developing most ideals of interactivity (Domingo, 2008; see also Thurman, 2008).

Bruns (Bruns, 2003) emphasizes that user involvement is required if the media wants to keep readers in the future, as many users are no longer dependent on the traditional news media to get daily information. The reader's role changes according to Bruns and the users are increasingly "producers", a contraction of the English word 'user' and 'producer' (Bruns, 2003). The reader can consume the news and also actively participate in the production of them, while the journalist and editors no longer guards the gate, but only monitors and can be described as "gate watchers" rather than gatekeepers (Bruns & Highfield, 2007; Bruns, 2011).

There are several studies on media and user involvement, they can broadly be divided into studies that look at instruments and possibilities for debate, studies that look at the actual debates and lastly studies that examine the moderation and the influence of for example pay-walls and anonymity on the debates. Reich (Reich, 2011, p. 104) examined journalists' attitudes to users comments from news organizations in 10 different countries. He discusses both the pros and cons of user comments and points to the fact that journalists themselves mention: "defamation, abuse of content, racism and hate speech" as a major inconvenience by asking customers for their views. Benefits include journalists to find sources that can provide ideas for stories or come up with new information that may lead to follow-up and more stories, and users can further identify errors and typos.

(Miloni, Vadratsikas, & Papa, 2012) investigated UGC on several Greek news outlets. Using immigration as a topic for selecting stories for their research, they only found limited involvement from users in terms of raising new questions and in general found, that user debate differentiated from core journalistic functions. But this study did not investigate comments and debate on social media or comments provided in more general context of news production outside immigration issues. In a less issue specific context and using Habermas' principles for democratic debate, (Ruiz et al., 2011) identified two models of debate on comments from five national newspapers from different political and journalistic contexts (UK, France, USA, Spain and Italy). They argue there are two models of participation among users. In one, it is a *community around the debate*, and herein is mostly respectful discussions between diverse points of view. In the second there is *homogenous communities*, where feelings about the events dominate and the debate it self is less argumentative. In this context it might again be fruitful in relation to both of the studies to talk about *access* and *interaction* rather than participation, as the study shows that the users might be able to comment in different ways, but actually co-deciding and co-producing journalistic content is extremely rare.

Other studies deal with how the media is trying to improve the quality of comments by moderating the comments. Some news media may even reject any comments on their news pages or decide to close the possibility to easily comment (in opposition to a more laborious of making comments) in sensitive or controversial news. Bakker (Bakker, Piet, 2009) shows in his study that the registration of users leads to fewer complaints about the comments, but also results in fewer comments. The news media may choose to moderate the comments before or afterwards being posted. Pre-moderation is laborious and therefore very costly. Reich (2011) concludes that this could be the reason that the big media companies are increasingly opting for post-moderation combined with registration. Santana (Santana, 2014) examines comments made both with and without registering using Facebook as a way of identifying the user to the media and the public, and find confirms “the expectations of newspapers that have eliminated anonymity: there is a dramatic improvement in the level of civility in online conversations when anonymity is removed” (Santana, 2014). This is important, as the debates and comments we are investigating are from the Facebook Pages of media offering no anonymity (unless users have registered on Facebook using a false name of course).

Overall the studies are concerned with the “civility” and the quality of the debate, but in this paper we are equally concerned with how the debates on social media might supplement journalistic core functions by taking over some of the journalistic roles previously assigned to professional journalism alone. Looking at social media, we know little about how user involvement in media postings work, as there is only a few studies of the actual commentary and debates. In the case of the largest social media of them all, Facebook, this is mainly due to the fact that the comments are mostly private, which hamper access to both commentators and the actual debates. For general privacy reasons Facebook does not offer an API¹ to automatically collect comments and debates, even if these are made public on the Facebook pages of newspapers, making it hard to gather the debates. Therefore few studies on UGC like Facebook-comments exist.

Jacobson (2013) finds that conversation amongst users on the Facebook Page of a television show may have influenced what topics were subsequently covered by that show and therefore suggests, that social media “may enable factors that influence both the media and the public agendas” (Jacobson, 2013). Returning to the moderation issue, but this time using Facebook, this has so far been a way to avoid the problems of anonymous speech. In Denmark, several national news media have shifted their debates over to their corresponding Facebook page, and we therefore find it interesting to investigate the nature of these debates. A similar study was conducted in the Netherlands, where researchers have examined the quality of debates on Facebook compared to the debates on Internet newspaper' own sites (Hille & Bakker, 2014). The study showed that people would rather not comment on the online newspaper' own pages than on Facebook, possibly because the comments should here be visible to all friends and family (Hille & Bakker, 2014). The researchers also found that the vast majority of users stuck to the topic and only few were using abusing language in their comments, although it may be due to the moderation taking place before the study was conducted (Hille & Bakker, 2014). A criticism of this study is that it only examined the debates in the context of two

¹ Application Protocol Interface: In this regard, a way for a computer to interact automatically with Facebook and gather comments without human interaction.

specific cases. These selected cases are both very emotional and are particularly debatable, and the conclusions can be said to be less generally applicable. This goes for many of the other studies mentioned in this section. Hille and Bakker in another study on Dutch media (Hille & Bakker, 2013) finds that Facebook is often used for distribution of news but as a mean for civic participation Facebook is in it's infancy, stating that "contribution to the reporting or interpretation of news is virtually non existent; on-topic discussions with journalists participating are absent", but also finds that media presence on Facebook can increase web-site traffic.

In this study, we want to look at the debates following the new production when this is distributed on Facebook generally, including the differences that exist between different types of online newspapers. How we aim to do this is explained in the methodological section.

Theoretical framework and research questions

When observing the UGC (van Dijck, 2009) argues, that it is important to distinguish between the users role as *content provider* and *data provider*. The latter primarily deals with the users capability to release information both knowingly and unknowingly in the process of generating UGC for instance when updating a profile or just via using a service giving usage and metadata to site owners. This study solely focus on the user as *content provider* analysing UGC created by users but not retaining to the metadata of any users nor analysing usage patterns or so.

The review of the relevant literature suggests that the question of how content produced by users on Facebook pages of online newspapers contribute to the depiction of the social world is underexplored. This study examines whether interactivity and participation expands the public debate and is able to provide media criticism, criticism of the power elite and interpretations not originally reported by mainstream media. We do this by conducting a content analysis of users' comments on journalistic articles posted by the online newspapers on Facebook. Thus we also aim to contribute to the theoretical discussion of how we can differentiate between the concepts 'access', 'interactivity' and 'participation' (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011).

We choose to focus on users comments, not only because they are generally the most common and popular form of audience participation (Reich, 2011, p. 11; Williams, A., Wardle, 2011, p. 88) but also because the other form of high-involvement user activity, the production of news stories, was offered by only a few online Danish media. Following the framework developed in the study of (Miloni et al., 2012) this study's main objectives are in a similar way to ascertain whether commenters assume textual agency by performing any of the core journalistic functions regarding news production, that is:

- (a) **Setting** the news agenda, **Intervening** in the gatekeeping function by providing original, unreported information
- (b) **Participating** in the debate and sticking to the subject of the debate, and how the tone or the posts might influence the level of civic engagement, influencing how debaters acting as critical media-connectors (Kaun, 2012)
- (c) **Interpreting** the news in alternative ways by airing oppositional views on reported issues, i.e. providing criticism of elite or media/both

Expanding on this, agenda-setting refers to the emphasis mass media place on certain issues, which is considered as a strong factor affecting the importance media audiences attribute to these issues (Scheufele, D.A. & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 13). Defining which issues make the (daily) agenda is among the most significant processes in news making, and one of the news production stages that are effectively sealed off from intervention by non-professionals (Hermida, 2011, p. 20) (In fact, for journalists 'good' comments are the ones that stay on topic and do not stray from the agenda established by the news organization (Robinson, 2010, p. 134, 140). This can be seen as an attempt to maintain control with the news production process, but the idea of a good debate staying on topic also has roots in a Habermasian understanding of deliberative democracy. The older work of Habermas on communicative rationality and the public sphere plays a key role in grounding deliberation in the intersubjective structures of communication where the "speakers' orientation toward mutual understanding entails a commitment to certain presuppositions rooted in the idea of unstrained argumentation or discourse" (Flynn, 2004: 436).

Following this we found it important to ask, not only to which extent the users and participants in the debate were staying on topic, but also to the tone of the debate, which in the theoretical perspective above might hinder or become a barrier for the online deliberation and civic agency, which is the ideal of the Habermasian theory of public sphere as well as the hinder the mutual understanding between the participants eroding the foundation for the deliberative democracy model (Habermas, 2009).

To explore whether readers engage in the agenda-setting process through their commenting activity, we asked whether they raised new issues in their comments, different from the topics that were introduced by the journalistic articles on which they commented. Since Danish online media offer very few opportunities for submitting original news stories (explained in more detail later), we assumed that users might utilize the space provided by the media to render visible issues that concern them and are not made salient by news media. Thus, we ask whether users raise new issues of public concern in their comments, broadening mass media agendas?

Journalism has been described with analogies adhering in the canine world before. The term watchdog is commonly used to describe the relationship between media and power elite and one of the core functions in modern democracy for media is to watch and question the power elite (Schudson, 2008). As we are investigating if user involvement is breaching into this function, we investigate into if users are expanding the agenda and interpreting it differently than the reporting media. Thus we ask, if users are giving critique to the power elite or indeed giving critique to the media doing the reporting.

Methodology

In order to analyse the nature of the debates and the level of user involvement in the news production and agenda-setting process, it was important not to choose selected cases and we wanted to catch the debates real-time, so to avoid any post-moderation. Equally we found it interesting to look at the relations between what stories the online media chooses to post in Facebook and to what extent this might influence the direction of the debate.

For this analysis we chose the seven largest online newspapers in terms of readers and geographical coverage. On the basis of a “most different approach” (Yin, 2014) we chose two tabloid newspapers (EB and BT) and three newspapers with more publicist (private public service approach) and idealistic goals (Politiken, Jyllands-Posten and Berlingske Tidende) and also two public service broadcasters with online presence (DR and TV2), where TV 2 is what we might label “private public service and advertising funded.

Media	Monthly Readership ²	Facebook-followers ³	Media-model
Ekstrabladet.dk	1.527.532	102.491	Tabloid print +online
Bt.dk	1.350.378	100.108	Tabloid print +online
Politiken.dk	1.274.351	109.931	Publicist print +online
Jp.dk	776.422	83.881	Publicist print +online
Berlingske.dk (b.dk)	748.171	37.848	Publicist
Dr.dk	1.750.140	75.540 ⁴	Public service broadcaster
Tv2.dk	1.296.253	133.843	Privatized public service broadcaster

Table 1 *Data from 2014

The debates are analysed by applying computer-aided quantitative content analysis in IBM SPSS. Quantitative content analysis can be defined as a method for reducing the complexity of vast bodies of qualitative data (most often, text) and making it useful for quantitative analyses such as statistics (Krippendorff, 1989).

The first step in the procedure of quantitative content analysis is sampling. The sampling took place in week 46 of November 2012 where the Facebook pages respectively were saved via screenshots and the coding took place in the months of April and May 2014. The debates comprised 149 post and 3800 comments on these posts.⁵

² Source: <http://www.fdim.dk>, data from May 2014

³ Source: Facebook, data from May 2014

⁴ As DR has many Facebook-profiles, data mentioned here is from DR Nyheder (DR News)

⁵ For purposes of transparency purposes, the statistical findings in html-format (but not raw data) are available in report form publicly on this link: [UPDATE TO JOURNALISMDATA](#)

The posts gave debate threads ranging from just a couple of comments to several hundreds, depending on the liveliness of the debates. Thus the sample consists of all articles and post made by the seven online newspapers during one week and is not concerned with how a specific subject is framed in the debate, but depicts the general level of debating and the relation between the ability to setting the agenda via Facebook and the result of the debate in terms of deliberation. In the following we describe the coding variables:

First we coded the posts that the online newspapers chose to post on Facebook. A variable here was whether the post was a question, using irony, was advertising for a product or event sold by the media and whether the post was encouraging users to act physically and engage in civic participation in any way (eg. participate in an event, sign petition, visit a place or so). We also examined if the post was written with any kind of emotional value eg. stating that users should feel “anger” or “joy” as opposed to being just a neutral stating of facts. This was done in order to later see, whether the formulation of the post has any influence on the actual debate on Facebook.

We also coded what day of the week the post was published to be able to investigate if there is drop in publishing level on any day of the week. The posts were also coded looking at the article, that the media associated with a given post, in terms of author as well as editorial section.

Each of the posts then had their subsequent debate coded. Each comment was first coded with regards to its content being in line with the post, the article or a previous comment in debate. This was to examine if the debate was a good or bad debate when looking at if people actually stuck to the subject of the debate in their comments.

To explore whether user involvement enriches mass media content by providing original, unreported in mainstream media information, a variable was introduced that inquired whether comments added original information to the topic in question. Given that mass media have been criticized for heavily relying on a limited range of official sources to communicate the facts, it is assumed that the inclusion of ‘ordinary people’ in the news production process could yield information usually overlooked or excluded by mass media – for instance, drawn from everyday experiences in the real life world (e.g. eyewitness accounts, information from interpersonal sources and communities, alternative media, unofficial online sources etc.). Thus we chose to code for whether the comment introduce a new point of view, whether it is provides an opinion towards the subject in question, and if the comment include a criticism of the media or what we label “power criticism”, meaning that they criticise people or companies who hold some kind of power, either politicians, directors of leaders of large organisations or companies.

Secondly, we were interested in the tone of the debate. It has often been criticised that the tone in online debate is derogatory, but many of the studies deal with specific themes such as immigration, where it can be expected that the tone might be “harder” than that in general news coverage. We were interested in how a number of completely different subjects were debated in a negative or positive way. Thus we introduced the coding variables, derogatory, positive or neutral. For coding these variables we looked for if the comment in any way directly announced a negative or positive view on the

media, the article, the post, the subject of the debate of previous comments. These variables were only coded in cases where there was little or no doubt, that there was a positive or derogatory slant in the comment. Given the nature of the debate on Facebook, where many comments are quite short spanning only a few lines or indeed sometimes only a few words it can be difficult to code with consistency. We took a “better safe” approach and only coded comments when there was absolutely no doubt, that there was an emotional value depicted in the comment else the comment was coded as neutral.

Uncertainty in coded material

Many of the variables mentioned in this scheme requires a high level of interpretation of the individual comments and therefore is both time consuming and hard to code with consistency. To ensure a minimum of uncertainty in coding initially a test code was carried out and the researchers discussed this coding with the coder to ensure that meanings of the different coding parameters were understood. Following the coding of the complete material a 10 % random sample of the comments were recoded by another coder to ensure interrealibility of the coding. Reliability tests were performed with satisfactory results.

PRESENTED AT ECREA 2014 - DRAFT - NO CIRCULATION

Results

The following is an analysis of the 149 posts and the 3800 comments associated. For ease of reading, the following commonly used terms are rephrased here:

- Post (the post made by an online newspaper on their own Facebook page)
- Article (An article on the news medias website associated with post)
- Comment (Comments on the post associated with either article or post)

The articles and posts

A total of 149 posts were analysed. Distribution of posts among the different medias varied quite a lot as seen in figure 1.

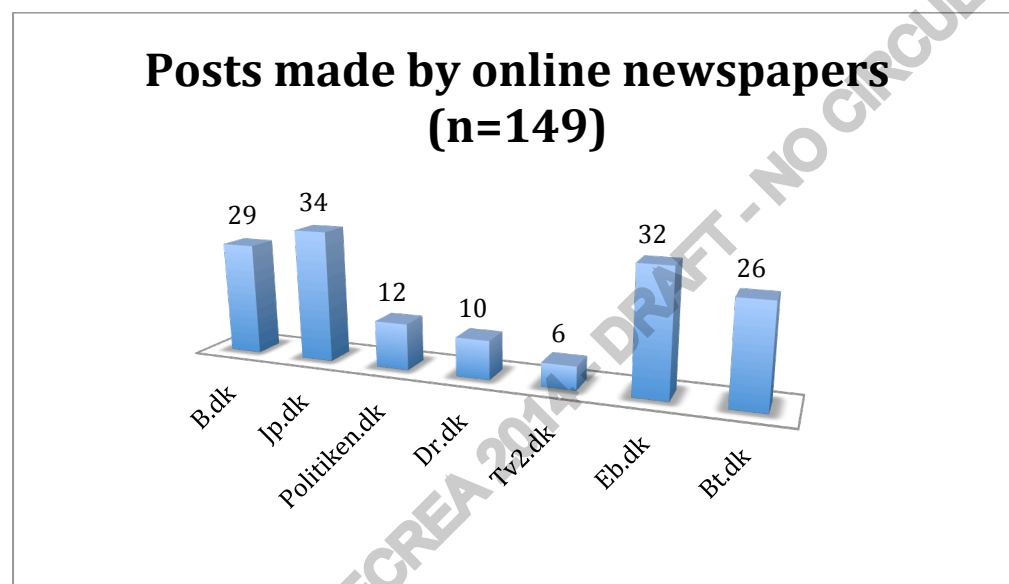


Figure 1 – n=149 posts

This discrepancy in posts volume is not factored in in the statistics mentioned in this analysis as there would be no way to properly weigh the data. We could have opted for weighing data possibly even with regards to either readership or Facebook followers, however this would not be more or less statistically right than leaving the numbers as is especially when looking at the relatively small sample (n=149) of posts.

In 21 (14,4 %) cases posts did not contain a link to an article. In the majority of cases (121 or 80,5 %) the posts linked to news items (in contrast to only 8 posts that were either debates, editorials or advertisements). Where articles are attached to posts, the content is in most cases "Politics" (33,8 %) followed closely by "National news" (29,3 %). Remaining categories (Foreign, Culture, Debate, Business, Crime, Sports and Others only amounts for a total of 36,9 %). This is in line with general news coverage that in many cases focuses on national politics in contrast to both other subjects and interna-

tional matters (Ørsten, 2006; Vreese, 2003; Waldahl, Bruun Andersen, & Rønning, 2009).

In a civic engagement perspective this is interesting, because it indicates a very political understanding of engagement, but one could argue that social media might be a place for a more playful civic engagement (Kaun, 2012).

The articles associated are mostly written by journalists or editors (76,7 %) however also news from news agencies can find their way to Facebook. The news agencies amount for 11,3 % of the news published. This could indicate that it is important to cover common issues regardless of the media being the author of the content posted eg. a race to cover everything as fast as the others, as previously observed by (Hartley, 2009, 2011) on Danish online newspapers.

The daytime publishing rate is fairly consistent over the coded days with a tendency to lower publishing rate in the weekend days. Most posts (20,8 %) were made by mid-week Thursday, fewest posts (8,1 %) were made Sunday. The publishing rate seems to be in line with the general news beat embodied both by staffing and Sunday being common national holiday.

The media publishing rate however vary a lot, as mentioned initially. It seems that there is a divide in two groups, where one group publish many posts a day and another group posts a lot fewer. In the first group we find B.dk, Jp.dk, Eb.dk and Bt.dk. The average posting rate for this group is 30,25 post/week. In the second group we find Politiken.dk, dr.dk and tv2.dk that has a significantly lower publishing rate of 9,3 posts/week. It is however worth noting, that the material coded was gathered in 2012 so the publishing rate could have increased significantly for both groups. The analysis shows no correlation between media type (tabloid, broadcast or publicistic media) in terms of publishing rate.

The strategy for engaging users in a debate

The majority of posts were simply neutral updates (49 %) briefly stating the content of the article posted. The second most popular post was asking users a question (30 %). Irony is also used a lot (11 %). Finishing last is calls for civic participation and advertisements each amounting for 5 % of the updates. Both asking the users and using irony in the post can be seen as encouraging users to civic participation on a textual level. The online newspapers thus ask the users to contribute to the debate, but there are no indications that this might lead to any physical political action on the part of users. This indicates that it might be theoretically useful to employ the concept of 'interaction' rather than 'participation' when characterizing what takes place in the debates on Facebook.

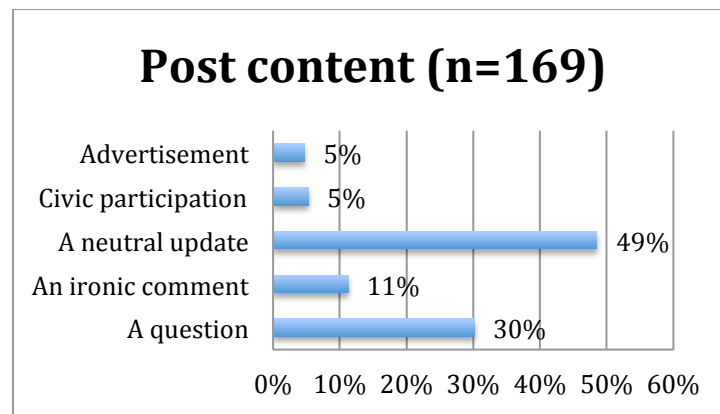


Figure 2 n=169 posts

Asking a question and using humour seems to be a viable strategy for engaging users in the subsequent debate. When the post is accompanied by a question the debates are longer and less prone to getting very few comments than the neutral update. Ironic comments and calls for civic participation fosters shorter debates with less than 50 comments. Advertisements foster relatively more short debates with less than 10 comments. When so many of the post are merely neutral updates, often the same as headline of the article it indicates, that the online newspapers see Facebook merely as a distribution channel for their articles and the article as an end product in itself. We see that with humour or irony and questions they are able to actually give the editorial content more life on Facebook, as the more people who participate seems to work as a spiral inviting even more people to contribute the debate.

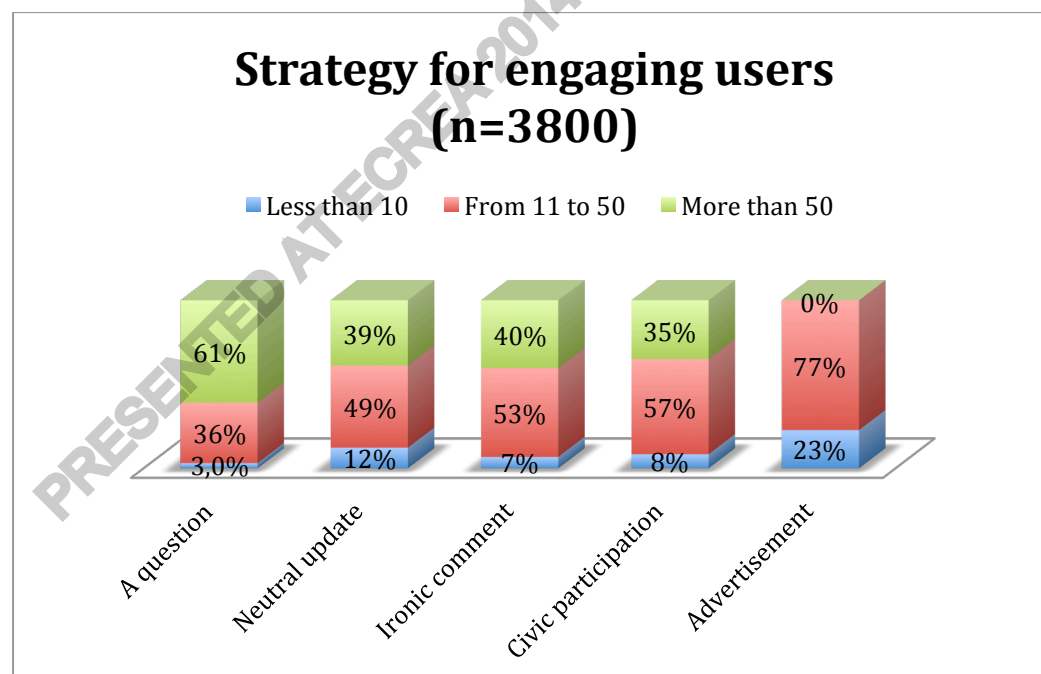


Figure 3 n=3800 debate-posts

The mean comment rate for all posts are 25,5 comments/post, so when comparing that to figure 3 above, picture in general is, that there is relatively few debates that get a lot of comments and quite a lot that does not get so many. This is supported by observations exploring the comment data, with a high of 217 comments on a single post but with a much lower median of 14 for comments on posts.

Tone of updates

Echoing the above the study also shows that the tone of the update made by media can be important to engaging users. In most cases (54 %), the update was just neutral in tone. In 17 % the user was asked to feel positive about the matter in the post or article and in 29 % the users was to feel anger. The two latter seems to be the best way to engage users in longer debates as neutrality in the post did not seem to generate as much debate and user engagement. We cannot see however, whether the explanations for longer and more vibrant debates is to be found in the formulation of the post or the tone of the post.

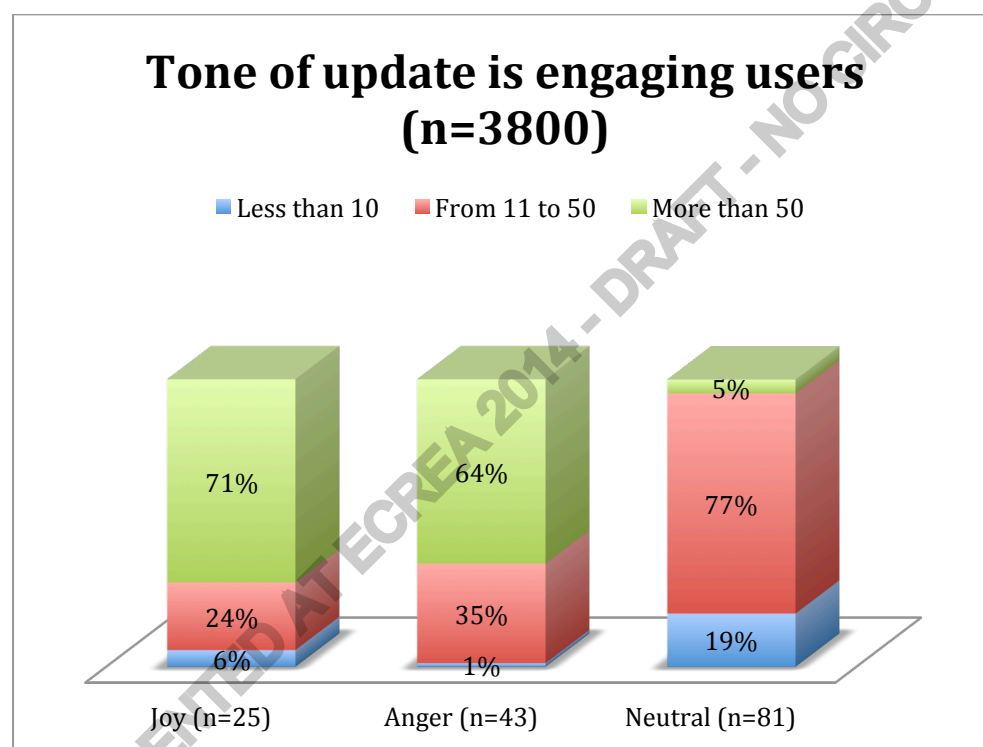


Figure 4 n=3800 debate-posts

When using joy or anger in the update, the subsequent debates are longer where neutral debates in a majority of cases foster debates shorter than 50 comments. It is worth noting, that anger as a strategy almost always (99 %) gives debates longer than 10 comments. It seems that Facebook as a media platform is more of a “feeling” channel, that aims for perhaps a more playful connectivity than a political connectivity (Kaun, 2012). This is interesting when we know from the section above, that most stories shared were political or national news stories, and thus news organizations might want to consider that different stories perform better on Facebook and these might not be same as the ones they prioritize on the top of their online newspaper site.

Debates – tone and quality

What we can see from the study is also that the tone of posts affects the subsequent debate. Derogatory comments are most likely to be found in updates that indicate that the user should be angry on the issue posted and the same goes for posts with joy that give a higher amount of positive comments. Neutral updates give a more evenly distribution on the tone of comments. The tone of the update is therefore assimilated in the subsequent debate in a matter of “what you reap is what you sow”.

Thus media organizations are – just with the tone of the post – able to set the agenda for a more positive or a more negative debate about certain issues. This also indicates that users are highly alert to what the news organizations are telling them and they follow that agenda, even in the tone of what they are debating.

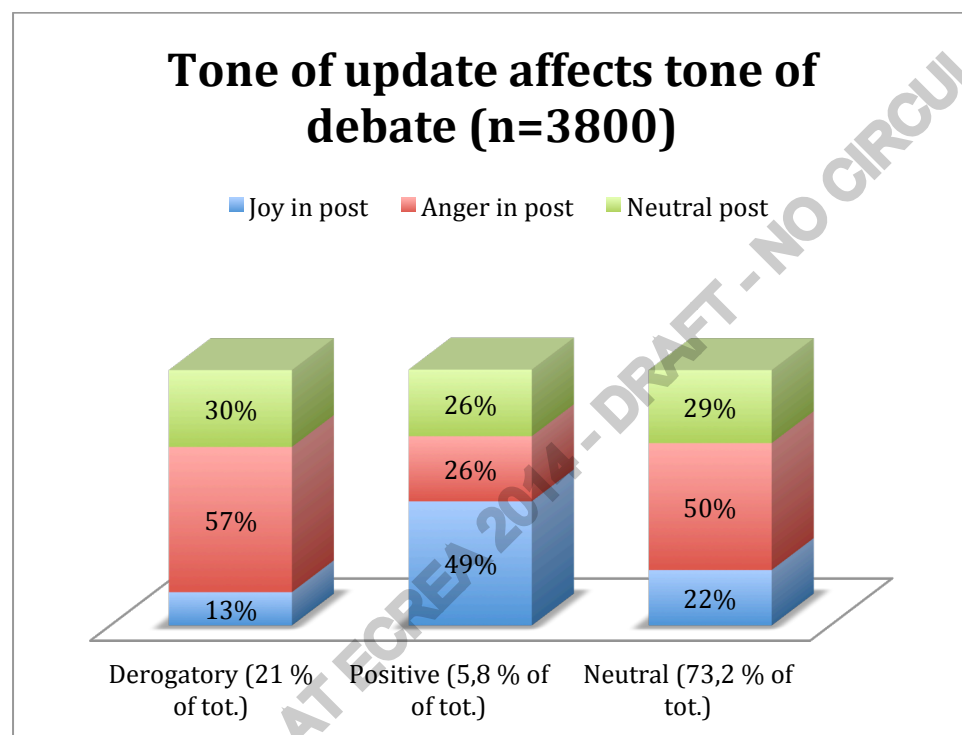


Figure 5 n=3800 debate-posts

It is, however, important to remark, that the majority of the comments (73,2 %) are coded as neutral. In all the debate must therefore be viewed as more neutral than emotionally biased. Should there be an emotional taint in the overall debate, it would be negative as 21 % of the total comments are coded as “derogatory” opposed to only 5,8 % being positive.⁶

Content of debate

Without doing a qualitative study on the content of the debate, it is of course impossible to say what the debates actually are on. It is however possible to indicate whether or not the debates retain to issues relevant to empowering users and if debates are relatively homogenous and stick to the subject of the debate.

⁶ It is worth noting that we coded the comment as derogatory if it was something that other users or the media organisation might react upon and possibly file charges.

When observing the overall quality of the debate, most of the comments (82,2 %) tend to stick to the subject either laid out by the original post, the article associated or what other participants in the debate have written. Only 17,8 % of the comments does not stick to the subject of the debate.

When observing the contents regarding power critique, media critique and if the debates present new viewpoints and reflects opinions, the area becomes gray and more troublesome to present hard facts about.

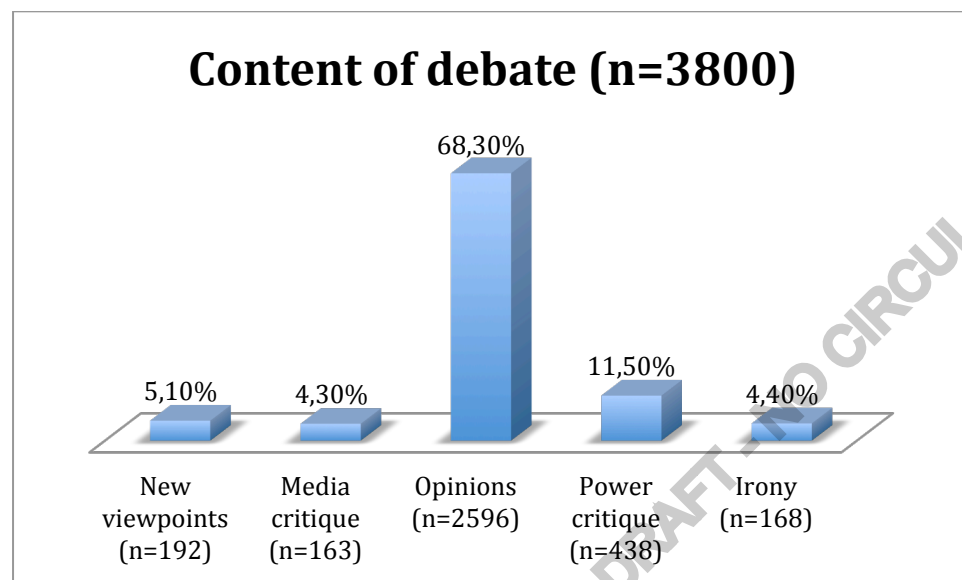


Figure 6 n=3800 debate-posts

In general the majority of comments contain opinions uttered by the posting user. Therefore it would be safe to say, that the debate is not pointless. But the debate is not on a course to adopting traditional journalistic core values. Very little power and media critique are displayed. Similarly few new viewpoints (as opposed to views expressed in the post or article) are conveyed. It is possible for a comment to be coded in several of these categories, but there does not seem to be any correlation within the categories themselves. There is however a tendency for some media to have more media and power critique in the debate.

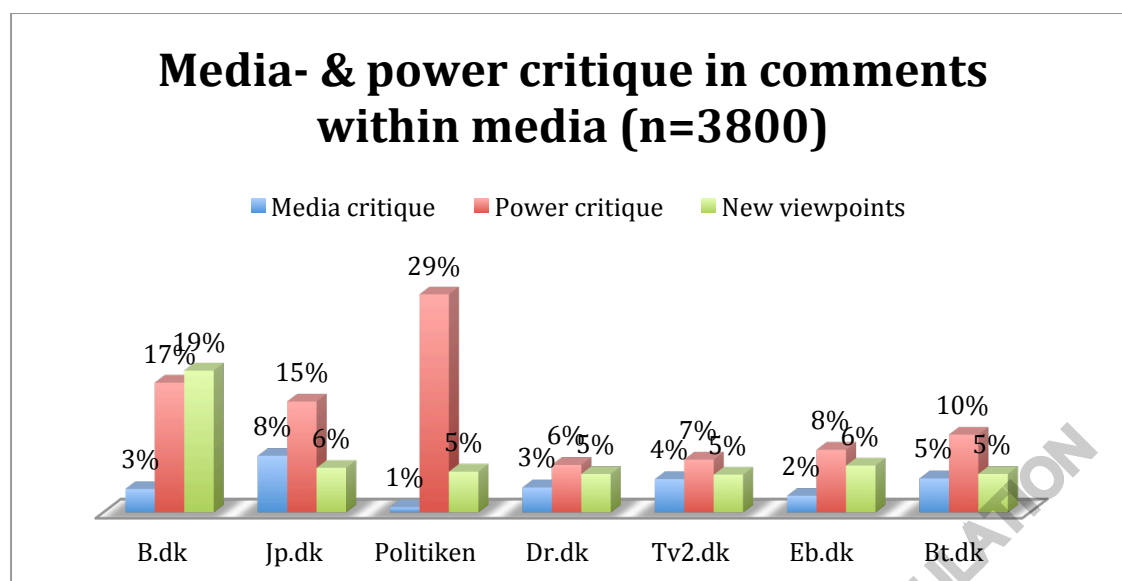


Figure 7 n=3800 debate-posts

When observing the traditional publicistic newspapers B.dk, Jp.dk and Politiken.dk we see a higher internal percentage of power critique than the broadcast and tabloid online papers. The media critique however is fairly constant on all of the media analysed. This could indicate, that the users in the debate distributes in regard to segmental values making the readers and debaters of traditional publicistic media more eager to display power critique and leaving the readers of the public service broadcasters and tabloids behind in terms of setting the agenda. When observing if new viewpoints are conveyed, this pattern is no longer present. Again this suggests that the users mostly follow the agenda set by the online mainstream media, which re-enforces the traditional production process...

Key findings

- Newspapers mostly post news items on their Facebook-pages. The news are most likely on domestic issues and on politics.
- Most articles are written by journalists and editors. News agencies also amount for some of the articles.
- On Weekdays there is more posts than weekends.
- There seems to be a divide in terms of the publishing rate of the online newspapers. Some use Facebook a lot, while others only post little and thus also limit the debate.
- Most posts are neutral, but asking users a question is also a popular strategy.
- Posts accompanied by a question get more comments than those with a simple neutral update or any other strategy for engaging users.
- Posts using joy or anger as tone get more comments than those that are neutral.
- Joy or anger in updates is adopted in the subsequent debate.
- Most comments are neutral, but if looking at the rest there is an emotional taint towards the negative (degrading) comments.
- Most comments stick to the subject of the debate.
- In general very little power- or media critique is uttered.

- Traditional public news outlets are more likely to foster debates that utter power critique.
- Distribution of new viewpoints conveyed is fairly even across medias and types of media.

Discussion and conclusions

We set out to examine the commentary on Facebook and the possible agenda-setting function by users and media-organizations. Firstly we were interested in how the online newspapers attempt and influence to set the agenda on Facebook, via the posts and the tone of the posts. Secondly we were interested in whether the users assume any of the core journalistic functions, i.e.:

- (d) **Setting** the news agenda, **Intervening** in the gatekeeping function by providing original, unreported information
- (e) **Participating** in the debate and sticking to the subject of the debate, and how the tone of the posts might influence the level of civic engagement, influencing how debaters act as critical media-connectors (Kaun, 2012)
- (f) **Interpreting** the news in alternative ways by airing oppositional views on reported issues, i.e. providing criticism of elite or media/both

Our findings suggest low user engagement on a general level, as only 5 % of the comments provide new original information. This is even lower than a previous study (Millioni et al 2012) where 9 % of the comments provided new, original information, thus contributing to the journalistic production process.

In line with Carpentier (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011) this might suggest that what is taking place should be identified as interaction rather than participation, where it is worth distinguishing between a minimalist and a maximalist form of media participation. In very minimalist forms, media professionals, such as journalists, retain strong control over the process and outcome, often restricting participation to mainly access and interaction (Carpentier & Dahlgren, 2011, p. 26). Participation remains articulated as a contribution to the public sphere, but merely serving the needs and interest of the mainstream media system itself, instrumentalizing and incorporating the activities of participating non-professionals (Ibid). This can be criticized as a media-centric logic and one could argue that it might lead to a homogenization of the audience and a disconnection from other fields and as Carpentier points out a "articulation of media participation as non-political". On the other hand the separation between on the one hand interaction and on the other participation might be theoretically fruitful, but empirically it becomes more blurred. Our study shows that the users are participating and co-deciding the direction of debate, even though they might not do this very often.

Our study shows that most of the commentators stick to the debate, and thus they do not divert in any significant degree from the agenda set by news sites. It can however be argued, that the users in many cases expand the agenda, and it seems important in future media research on production processes to look beyond the actual publication and to study what we might call the "afterlife" of an article on social media platforms. This is not to say that users do not become pro(d)users, the production process is (still) kept inside the media organization, and as much as it is likely that the news sites are able to

set the agenda, but that this agenda might change or lead to other agendas, set by users on platforms that the media organizations have little or limited control over. The interesting part is here how the users become engaged as critical media connectors or disconnectors (Kaun, 2012), but more research is needed into the reactions of the users more specifically. What we can say is that there are interesting differences between the different media outlets, the publicist online newspapers having more media critical debate than more commercial orientated online sites and the same goes for criticism of the power-elite.

We can also conclude, that there is no real evidence that supports users overtaking core functions of media, as the numbers of power- or media critique are low. Future studies could however expand on this, as we have no real baseline for measuring this. It can be argued, that any given news publication contains a certain mix of subjects and more or less critical articles. Therefore it is highly plausible, that this is depicted in the Facebook posts made. In this sense it would probably be easy to argue, that non-critical, soft stories would in general receive little or no debate with any basis for critique on either media or power elite. Future studies could therefor factor in, if a post contain possibilities for critical debate and use this in studying of user involvement could have a higher inherent possibility to assuming core functions in terms of criticising the power elite as well as the media.

A criticism and fear that is often uttered concerning this loss of control of the debates and the agenda-setting functions is the possible derogatory character of the comments. Contrary to what is often found when studying debates regarding immigration issues, we found that when all debates are studied the derogatory comments are few. Most comments are neutral in their tone, some are positive and around 20 % were derogatory. The study does not confirm the concerns about hate speech (Reich, 2011, p. 112; Richardson, J. & Stanyer, 2011) when debates are on all subjects and not just immigration issues are analysed. It might be fruitful for media organisations not to let a general fear for hate speech obstruct the general level of positive and vibrant debate on all other subjects. It would also seem, that our findings then are in line with those previously observed by (Hille & Bakker, 2014) finding that Facebook comments as opposed to anonymous comments are less derogatory. Worth noting here is also, that media has the opportunity to set the tone of the subsequent debate using the language in their own post, because post tone is reflected in the comments in the debate.

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