Campaigning and contestation: Comments on politicians' Facebook pages during the 2011 Danish general election campaign

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Abstract

This article is a critical study of the Facebook pages of politicians as public spheres using Dahlberg's notion of contestation. A method is implemented inspired by qualitative content analysis and including focus groups in order to study citizen comments on eight main political candidates' Facebook pages during the 2011 Danish election campaign. An analytical framework is presented that conceptualizes the particular platform as a dinner party, with a dinner table, a host, and the invited guests. The dinner party exhibits the interplay between these elements and how they limit the option of contesting the dominating discourse in favor of a supportive marketing logic.

Keywords

election campaign, politics, Facebook, contestation, public sphere

Introduction

Politicians are experiencing a crisis of support in most Western democracies. The number of people who vote in national elections is in decline (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011), and so is the loyalty toward traditional political parties (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). The decline of loyal voters creates an incentive for new political marketing strategies in order to reconnect with citizens and win over voters during election campaigns. Politicians must seek out citizens in spaces that are traditionally associated with the private sphere because the citizens are withdrawing from the political sphere. Facebook pages are obvious tools for political marketing directly to the citizen, but they could simultaneously provide citizens with a new space to reconnect with politics through critical public debate.

Facebook has been widely adopted in most Western countries, including Denmark where more than 60% of the population now has an active profile (Statistics Denmark, 2014). This social media platform allows candidates to connect with citizens directly and circumvent traditional mass media gatekeepers. The relation enhances the focus on individual candidates over the political party, which corresponds with an overall personalization of politics (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013; Van Aelst, Scheafer, &

Stanyer, 2012). Politicians were clearly aware of the potential benefits of having a Facebook page during the Danish general election in 2011. It was by far the most popular social media platform, if not the most popular online presence of political candidates (Hoff, Linaa Jensen, Klastrup, Schwartz, & Brügger, 2013; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). The mainstream media in Denmark monitored political activity on Facebook closely. For example, the Danish Broadcasting Organization (DR) had a daily TV slot and a webpage dedicated to social media activity by politicians.

Facebook has gained a central position in the overall Danish media ecology, especially during elections. For politicians, this platform is a way to circumvent the traditional media gatekeepers, and for the mass media, it is an easy source to gather political statements and vox populi. The interactive nature of the Facebook page allows citizens to engage with politicians through public comments. It is clear that Facebook has an impact on the transformation of public

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space by the attention from mass media and politicians alone. However, few studies have looked at the comment section of these pages in order to understand the significance of this content. In this article, I present an analysis inspired by public sphere theory that critically examines comments on Facebook pages. In particular, I examine whether there is room for political contestation on public pages of Danish top politicians during the general election of 2011.

The Public Sphere and the Importance of Contestation

The convergence of institutional politics with the personal sphere on Facebook is problematic from a critical theoretical perspective, as it is an example of the system colonizing the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984). According to Habermas, the market and state (system) are increasingly interfering with the private sphere (lifeworld), which results in depoliticization of and control over citizens. Although this is a critical interpretation, there is no denying that the main incentive for candidates to enter Facebook is strategic, especially during election campaigns. Although the presence of political candidates on Facebook has a democratic potential (Utz, 2009), the interactive features are often rather *interaction-as-product* than *interaction-as-process* (Stromer-Galley, 2004). According to Stromer-Galley, the early presence of politicians online was mostly exhibiting a *facade of interaction* (Stromer-Galley, 2000), rather than a genuine attempt to use citizen interaction in further democratic process. New studies of social media campaigns are mostly leaning toward politics as usual, despite a wide adoption of social media platforms, such as Facebook, by the politicians (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013; Strandberg, 2013).

The public sphere theory by Habermas (1992) has been a popular way to evaluate political debate online (Dahlberg, 2001). However, many have criticized the public sphere theory based on its early conception without taking into account how the theory has adapted over the years (Dahlberg, 2014; Lunt & Livingstone, 2013). Dahlberg suggests that we need an academic re-radicalization of the public sphere theory in line with the original intention. He suggests that scholars interested in public sphere theory should focus less on rational debate and consensus, but instead focus on discourse and contestation (Dahlberg, 2007). Dahlberg introduces post-Marxist theory by Mouffe. Mouffe (2005) argues that the focus on consensus in discussion is downplaying the power relations that will always be a part of social interactions. In her view, contestation of the dominating discourse needs to be incorporated into any healthy, democratic environment. This ensures the representation of marginalized groups and opinions. Cass Sunstein (2009) argues that the importance of contestation is even more apparent in an online context because it is easier than ever before to seek out niche

groups where people already agree with you, so-called echo chambers or digital enclaves.

Research so far on online political debate suggests that people are not trying to avoid opposing opinions online (Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Even so, discursive hegemony is a general issue in any cultural context, and political partisans in particular are more likely to interact with likeminded peers (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2007; Hindman, 2008; Mutz, 2006).

What Is a Social Media Platform?

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 52)

Hannah Arendt's table metaphor provides us with a useful reminder that human interaction is always mediated by something *in-between*, something that enables us to connect and communicate in a particular way, while it also creates a distance between us by being *in-the-way*. We should consider this duality when we study mediated platforms for debate and keep in mind that any context will always afford and constrain our ability to connect, communicate, and deliberate. It is wrong to assume that online technology is constraining the social, in contrast to an offline world where people can interact and speak freely. Arendt's metaphor reminds us that mutual discourse between people always contains, and in fact requires, *a table*. In my analysis, I chose to view the social media platform Facebook as such a metaphorical table.

A platform is defined as a flat and raised surface,[1] suggesting neutrality, access, and openness. Alternatively, a platform can be understood as something separate, remote, and disconnected. In much the same way, one could argue that Facebook is one connected semi-public network, or one could argue that it is instead multiple, semi-private, and gated communities.[2] The reality is that Facebook has developed into a myriad of spaces or sub-platforms, which makes it increasingly important for researchers to analyze the space as multiple and particular contexts.

The word *platform* itself has been used to define anything from concrete architectural constructions, digital systems, to figurative political spaces (Gillespie, 2010). According to Braun and Gillespie, social media companies are using this word to obscure the complicated power relation between the user and the provider of social media (Braun & Gillespie, 2011). Describing social media as platforms suggests that it is an open space, where anyone can bring *anything to the table*, so to speak. In reality, social media platforms are highly political spaces with multiple stakeholders and a strong tension between commercial interests and the interests of private users. The tension between various stakeholders eventually requires the service provider to actively moderate a platform

regardless of whether they, in fact, want to or not. Rules for moderation are stated in terms-of-service documents, which strive for objectivity, but are often contested in practice (consider the issues regarding artistic nudity and breastfeeding on Facebook). The service providers inevitably become active and political *curators*, instead of providing a neutral and open space for user-generated content. In fact, they are required to moderate for legal purposes.

The technical architecture of the platform itself, however, is also based on a particular logic and a set of values that can be defined as *curation* (see Hogan, 2010). José Van Dijck (2013a, 2013b) argues that a *culture of connectivity* based on commercial logic shapes our identity performance and social interaction on social network sites such as Facebook. It is likely that similar issues take place in relation to how Facebook curates interaction on public pages. As Facebook expands to accommodate the commercial and public institutions, the structure of public pages may favor a marketing logic for the paying customers rather than the private citizens.

In this short overview, I have presented how curation of social media usually takes place on two levels: in form of the service provider who censors content and in form of the technological architecture of the platform design that favors certain actions. This article argues that Facebook pages introduce a third important curator in the shape of the explicitly associated page owner. The page owners moderate content and may choose to create individual terms-of-service documents for their particular page, on top of the one provided by Facebook as the service provider. The page owner has a big influence on the public interactions: directly in the ability to post updates, reply to comments, delete comments and so on, but also indirectly by political association and authority. Another person may be the moderator of a page in practice, but the politician is associated with the moderator role through the personalized design of public pages.

Employees from Facebook did not censor anything directly during the Danish Election of 2011, to the knowledge of this author.[3] The two levels of curation, the service provider and the technological architecture, are therefore conflated into one, as the metaphorical dinner table in my analysis. Although Facebook does not play an active role in a given instance, the passive role of designer is important, like the role of the carpenter that constructed the table. For instance, the algorithm that structures visibility of information on Facebook's news feed is an important factor that shapes our interactions (for a discussion of Facebook algorithms, see Bucher, 2012). Technical glitches and server issues may also interfere. However, these issues are difficult to study in Facebook comments or in focus groups because the technology is largely hidden from the users.

Without claiming to present an exhaustive list of all issues and constraints, this article develops an analytical framework that illustrates how three levels of the platform specifically limit the potential for radical contestation. The framework is constructed as an analogy of a dinner party. The analysis is divided into three parts: (1) *The table*, about Facebook as technical platform; (2) *The host*, regarding the role of the moderator and page owner; and finally, (3) *The invited guests*, about defining the intended audience. There are prior conceptions of social media (for instance, Schmidt, 2007), but instead of a generalized framework for social media, this article presents a contextual analysis during an election campaign based on the interplay between the Facebook page owner, citizens and platform design.

The Interpretive Flexibility of Technology

One could argue that digital technology is purely a social construct like any other non-digital social discourse. But technology seems to have a quality that makes it distinct due to its materialization and the social perception of technology as a tool or a mean to an end (Introna, 2007). Feenberg (2010) argues that technology is a less conscious discourse than a non-technical discourse:

> The legitimate effectiveness of technology depends on unconsciousness of the cultural horizon under which it was designed. A recontextualizing critique of technology can uncover that horizon, demystify the illusion of technical necessity, and expose the relativity of the prevailing technical choices. A politics of technology can demand changes reflecting the critique. (p. 18)

Feenberg is inspired by the ideas of Pinch and Bijker's (1987) historical account of the development of the bicycle. This famous case shows how technologies move from early phases of interpretive flexibility, where the development can still go in many different directions. But eventually most technologies reach a state of interpretive stability and closure. It is in this less reflexive stage of closure that a technology becomes more instrumental and use becomes less reflexive. Feenberg combines the social construction of technology (SCOT) with critical theory inspired by Marxism to form his *critical theory of technology*. He argues that we should make room for critical analysis of technology instead of leaving the issues in a socially relative state.

Studying new technology in early development is like studying a moving target (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). But it is important to study new technology as it reaches a large critical mass of users and may still retain large interpretive flexibility. In this early state, the value and purpose of a technology are still negotiated and not simply used as an instrument to obtain something. The Danish election campaign of 2011 was the first election where Facebook was widely adopted by citizens and politicians alike. Although early adopters and a few politicians used the platform back in 2007, it was in 2011 that the large mainstream audience engaged with the platform.

Table 1. Activity on the Facebook Pages of the Eight Politicians During the Election Campaign (26 August to 15 September 2011).[7]

Initials	Name	Party	Politician update	User comments
JSN	Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen	The Red Green Alliance	108	8631
VS	Villy Søvndal	Socialist People's Party	68	8305
HTS	Helle Thorning-Schmidt	Social Democrats	30	5802
MV	Margrethe Vestager	Social Liberal Party	71	2841
LLR	Lars Løkke Rasmussen	Left, Liberal Party of Denmark	160	12282
LB	Lars Barfod	Conservative People's Party	22	326
AS	Anders Samuelsen	Liberal Alliance	39	1171
PK	Pia Kjærsgaard	Danish People's Party	58	2101

Method and Sample

The data in this study are part of a broader study of political communication on Facebook, but focus on selected themes and the analogy presented in this article. The complete data set consists of all updates and comments on the Facebook pages of the eight main candidates from each of the viable parties running for election during the short campaign of the Danish general election 2011.[4] The short campaigning period stretches from the day the Prime Minister announces the election to the Election Day. In 2011, the election campaign ran from 26 August to the Election Day on 15 September. Updates and user comments were collected using a custom-made scraper[5] communicating with the Facebook Application Programming Interface (API).[6] Table 1 gives an overview of the overall activity generated by the eight politicians and the users on the Facebook pages.

The data were analyzed thematically inspired by qualitative content analysis where the researcher uses a step-by-step model of inductive category development, developing codes using multiple feedback loops (Mayring, 2000). Qualitative content analysis is "an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytic rules and step-by-step models, without rash quantification" (Mayring, 2000). Initially, all comments were read through and open codes were created until saturation point (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). After the open coding phase, codes were reduced from open codes to themes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The data were revisited to ensure that relevant examples were included. A small group of analytical themes were defined, and finally, three were selected for this article that concerned the aspects of contestation. These are as follows: *Likes and support*, *Negotiating space*, and *Critics and contestation*. The analysis is structured around the three-part analogy of a dinner party, but the themes are in play throughout the analysis.

I conducted four small-scale focus group interviews with 14 people in 2014. This was done to triangulate my data and revisit the Facebook data for relevant examples. The interviews also provided accounts of subjective meanings ascribed to Facebook activity, group normative understandings, and allowed for discussions of reasons for not engaging (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). The participants were selected from a list of users who commented more than once and less than 15 times on the pages in the study. These were selected in order to identify a group of deliberate but casual commentators. All participants were aged between 18 and 56 years and divided into groups according to age and political orientation. The participants had no professional relation to politics or to any party. All real names have been changed in this article and the content translated from Danish.

It is important to stress that the conclusions in this article generally do not rely on or gain from "rash quantifiable claims" (Mayring, 2000). The purpose of this article and the qualitative approach is to highlight particular issues that would not be obvious in a purely quantitative study. The qualitative approach in this article does not ask how often issues occur, but rather studies how they occur and how the interplay between platform, page owner and citizens shapes the room for contestation.

Analysis

In the following, I will account for key issues relating to discursive contestation on the Facebook pages of the eight political candidates. The analysis is constructed around the analogy of a dinner party. It is divided into three parts: *The table* analyzes how Facebook technologically curates the debate, *the host* is about the role of the moderator and page owner, and *the invited guests* analyzes who the intended audience is and how supporters react to uninvited guests.

The Table

Facebook pages contain interactive features that allow communication between the people who post and comment. But it may be misleading to think of the relationship between politician and citizens as a responsive dialogue, which others have argued before me (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). Especially during an election campaign, the politician and the public relations staff are very short on time. Responsive use of social media can be very time consuming and not necessarily the highest priority. Social media is only a small part of the campaign (Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). Traditional mass media still reaches more people, and television is still considered the most trustworthy medium according to a

general Danish study of the 2011 election campaign (Hoff et al., 2013).

A dialogue is a symmetrical exchange between two people, but it is unrealistic to expect that a politician will engage with all citizens. This is particularly true during election campaigns where each update by a top candidate often generates hundreds of comments. Using the analogy of a dinner party, we can imagine that the host is busy running in and out of the kitchen all night and only present for polite conversation a few times during the evening. The guests continue the conversation in the absence of the host, although the host may return occasionally to guide discussions and make formal announcements. In my focus groups, people acknowledged that the politician could not be present on Facebook all the time:

> (Focus group 3)
> *Susanna:*　He [LLR] posted but also commented every once in a while
> *Karen:*　I don't think it is really him
> *Susanne:*　Maybe but that is irrelevant
> *Karen:*　He does not have the time
> *Susanna:*　It is irrelevant
> *Jack:*　But HTS does not have the time either, somebody is sitting in her place as an admin.
> *Karen:*　Of course! She is also busier than he is, and that is just how it is.
> *Susanna:*　Sure, but I also noticed that LLR actually, though this was before the election, that he posted a status: I am online the next hour, so bring me some questions. He has replied many times.

Replies from politicians are generally appreciated but not expected on a daily basis and even less so when the politician is busy with campaigns or other political events. Citizens understand that the politician is not necessarily the daily moderator but they expect them to be aware of the ongoing activity on their own Facebook page. The analysis showed that most politicians (or moderators) did occasionally respond to comments during the election, and only two candidates did not engage with the comments at all (AS and notably HTS, who took over the seat as prime minister after LLR). In any case, it is much more likely that citizens will engage in debates with each other through the comment section due to strategic priority of politicians and the large number of comments. Interaction on social media platforms is often conceptualized as a two-way symmetrical dialogue, while in fact there are multiple forms of interaction, such as one-way monologues, feedback, or even three-way discussion (see model by Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007).

Comments on Facebook pages are constructed in a long chronological thread most reminiscent of a public, one-way feedback session: it is often directed toward the page owner but without an expectation of response, that is, dialogue.

Contrary to what the comment section is good for, there are many examples of exchange between the citizens, although mostly single comments. Metaphorically, we can picture this setting as an extensive long table with thousand of sitting guests. Although everyone is sitting at the same table, they are most likely to have meaningful conversation with the people right next to themselves. The comment section on Facebook pages in 2011 was presented chronologically as one long list, which had consequences for the quality of the discussion. It was not immediately possible to follow an entire debate. Only a certain amount of comments were visible at the time, and the huge mass of comments could be discouraging. In this context, substantial posts could easily disappear in the mass of supportive comments.

Although collections of data from the Facebook API can vary, this study estimates that about 41,500 comments in total were generated by around 20,000 unique profiles during the campaign. In all, 65% of the citizens (unique profiles) only commented once on any of the eight politician pages seen as a whole, which made this the most common engagement. One of my focus group participants explained how a large amount of comments on public pages influenced her engagement:

> Well if 419 people already commented, I might just comment on the main status update and say something short like "totally agree" or "exactly" or something, but I wouldn't want to read 400 comments [. . .] I have never experienced that my friends get 419 comments. But if they have 57 comments I might read them through and comment. (Susanna in focus group 3)

The sheer volume of comments on public pages of popular politicians can make substantial contributions seem pointless because another comment is just another drop in the sea.[8] However, many people did comment during the campaign, although not necessarily for the sake of debate or political contribution. Most comments fall into the category of *verbal likes* because they are short messages with the primary purpose of showing support, for example, "Good luck with the campaign" or "We believe in you." These comments did not contribute anything new in terms of substance. Instead, they were semi-personalized messages of support that establish an explicit *us/them* discourse and create a sense of shared identity (Baym, 2010), for example, "We need to stand united in order to get a new government on the 15th of September!" Verbal likes are not intended to generate dialogue or discussion but are more clearly phatic communication (Miller, 2008) by individuals joining the mass of supporters.

Tim gives another account of why he may not return to a debate on the public pages of politicians:

> I am sure that someone will come at one point and defend him. And I don't think I would follow up on that. It is probably one of the big differences between when I write internally and externally. When I write externally, it is to express my opinion,

and when I write internally, in closed groups with friends, it is to have a debate. And that is because it can get very stormy, when debating on Facebook, if people are trying to win and just be right. (Tim from focus group 1)

In later development of Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action, he stresses the importance of "actions coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching understanding" (pp. 285-286). The concept is an idealized communicative interaction, but the focus group participants seemed to agree that it is less likely to occur on public Facebook pages of politicians. In the private networks, they at least have a social obligation and a desire to treat people they know respectfully. In sum, political content is shared often during the campaign but most often in the form of singular expressions of opinions. Facebook provided a platform for feedback but was poorly organized for larger quantities of information with the purpose of ongoing debate.

The participatory ideal inherent in social media platforms often favors quantity based on the parole *the more the merrier*. But quantity may be detrimental to quality because the large mass of content will muddle the debate. Coleman and Blumler (2009) write that digital online environments could potentially mitigate offline democratic issues of time, space, and scale. The time and space dimension is mitigated most clearly by Facebook, but the debates on Facebook pages are still constrained by the issue of scale. This is not just a technical issue that needs to be resolved, but it is also about prioritizing mass contribution over individual in-depth discussion. Facebook has an incentive to encourage quantity of comments from many people rather than prolonged debates between the few. Quantities of comments can be used as yet another measure of engagement in the same way as likes, followers and so on. This is in line with a marketing logic that pages are most clearly designed for. Several focus group participants criticize the quantifiable logic of Facebook:

I remember once reading an article about, which politician gets the most likes and stuff like that on Facebook. [. . .] And it just seems they still believe that everything is about the number of friends and likes, in relation to what you are distributing. (Nicole from focus group 1)

From a marketing perspective, aggregated engagement scores are important and more valuable especially if they can be defined as positive gestures. But private users may see their contributions through comments as something individual and unique. The question is whether Facebook has an interest in changing the priority of quantity over quality. Ultimately, this depends on what type of logic they choose to adhere to.[9]

The Host

During the 2011 election, many political candidates defined explicit rules like LLR's "Codex for using my page" (see Picture 1). Just as Facebook have terms of services that users have to adhere to, the page owner can make another set of rules for their page. The main purpose of this document is to legitimize the active role of the moderator, who reserves the right to delete comments that does not adhere to the pre-defined rules.

Although these rules are often defined neutrally as "normal good conduct" (see Picture 1), the political bias of the moderator is criticized many times in the comment section. Gillespie (2010) argues that no moderator is ever neutral, and all moderation requires a value-based judgment. But in this case, the explicit political association of the moderator makes any interference appear like strategic control rather than aiding the public discourse. The political association of the moderator is thus an issue that impacts the expectation and experience of fair moderation.[10] It may be easier to present the concept of a neutral moderator in a forum where the person is not associated with a particular political view.

On the other hand, interactive features are required on Facebook pages, and the public interactions contribute to a loss of control over the political message. The tension is clear on the Facebook pages of politicians, and the moderator role is controversial and occasionally debated in the comments. Many people express anger but also surprise when their comment(s) are deleted. They often condemn the act as a violation of free speech:

At least in here you are allowed to comment (so far). I was so bold as to post critical questions on Villy [VS] and Helle's [HTS] Facebook pages, which means I am now blocked. IS THAT FREEDOM OF SPEECH………. [. . .] (Comment from Jenna on LB's page)

In the above, Jenna argues that some pages are more tolerating than others. But in reality, citizens are complaining about censorship on most of the pages (including the page of LB). Different moderators undoubtedly have different approaches to censorship on these pages, but it is a recurring issue that citizens complain about being deleted. Citizens likely cross the line all the time regarding what should be considered *normal good conduct*, but the politicians are also expected to tolerate heated debates, to some extent:

If you choose to be out in the public space and say that you want to help us with this and that issue in society, you also have to accept the attacks on your arguments. That is why I think it is only logical that we have a sharp tone in politics. (Lisa in focus group 2)

If the politicians want to encourage attention of citizens on Facebook, they also need to show that they can "take a beating" (as one of the other focus group participants puts it) and handle criticism. Therefore, they cannot delete too many of the critical comments they receive. That would make them appear spineless and insecure. Turning the other cheek by welcoming, criticism can also earn the respect of the audience.
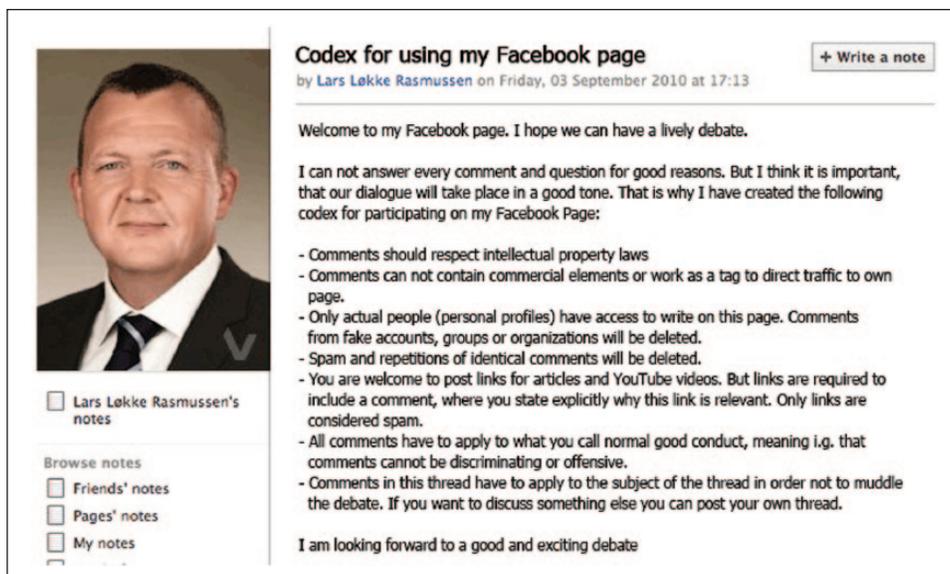
Picture 1. LLR "Codex for using my Facebook page" (Retrieved, translated and cropped from www.facebook.com/larsloekke, 1 September 2011).

It is important to stress that moderation is absolutely required on any social media platform. The issue on the Facebook pages is that many users appear surprised that they are deleted, and the explicit political position of the moderator appears to create a sense of injustice. Many people who are deleted or banned attribute this to the political bias of the moderator instead of the codes of conduct of the page (or Facebook's terms of service for that matter). Many critical comments challenge the moderator by explicitly writing meta-notes presumably based on prior experience, such as "this will probably be deleted, but . . ." Or people post a second comment after being deleted starting with, "my first comment was just deleted, but . . ." It is obvious from these examples that the process of moderation, or what constitutes appropriate behavior, is not transparent.

This analysis does not distinguish the actual moderator from the politician associated with the page because it seems most citizens do not make this distinction clearly. In any case, the moderator represents an extension of the actual politician, and people expect the politician to be accountable for the activity on the page. The role of Facebook as technical curator is not explicitly criticized in the comments or focus groups, although in practice the technology of Facebook may play an important role through automated spam filters or simply server glitches. Instead the politician is the most concrete actor and thus the most problematic in the minds of the citizens.

It is possible that moderation will tighten in future campaigns as the pages are incorporated into a professionalized marketing plan. This may discourage some critical voices. For example, some critical users exhibited a sense of hopelessness and fatigue during the campaign. As Martin writes, "It is tempting to correct all the pinheads in here but it will just get censored. What remain are muddled thinkers and yes-men" (Comment from Martin on LLR's page).

The Invited Guests

While contestation is possible on the platforms of the politicians studied here, the kind of criticism that is encouraged socially, technically, and politically may differ. The explicit political position of a citizen is relevant in the discussion. If not stated clearly, a comment can be interpreted as radical critique, which is why some critical questions have disclaimers like "I support your cause but . . ." Explicitly or implicitly supporting the general discourse is one example of how criticism is tolerated and more likely to generate constructive response from other citizens. Radical criticism from people who clearly belong on the opposite side of the political spectrum often turns the comment section into a meta-debate about the legitimate audience of the pages. This is most often a debate between the citizens, but the politician also plays an important role by explicitly inviting or discouraging opposing views (Picture 2).

LLR explicitly welcomed the critics, but he also uses a *friend* discourse. This is inspired by the Facebook discourse that defines connections between private profiles. Using the friend discourse, he still suggests that the main audience may be supporters. But even if LLR invites criticism, to some extent, his supporters may discourage it and see themselves as the legitimate audience of the page or even *fans*. In the following quote is an example of a supporter (Larry) who questions the right of a critic (Dan) to even be there in the first place. He does this by enforcing an outdated *fan* discourse that was changed by Facebook about a year before this: "Dan, if you are against Løkke [LLR], then why are you
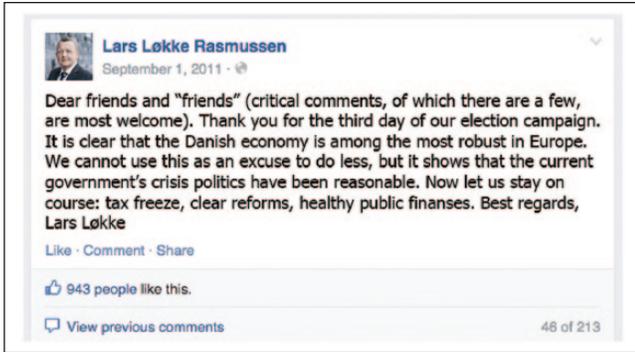
Picture 2. LLR explicitly addresses and welcomes critical comments (Retrieved and translated from https://www.facebook.com/larsloekke, 24 October 2014).

Picture 3. PK addresses her followers as fans (Retrieved and translated from www.facebook.com/pages/Pia-Kjærsgaard, 24 October 2014).

a *fan* of his page on Facebook?" (Comment from Larry, on LLR's page).

In 2010, you had to *become a fan* to follow a public page, but Facebook changed this to *Like*, which is a more moderate gesture of support. Supporters used the fan discourse actively on several occasions as a way to define illegitimate members, although the fan discourse was outdated in 2011. The head of the Danish People's Party also used the fan definition to make a joke about the critics who followed her page (Picture 3).

PK interferes in the debate about who rightfully belongs on her page. According to her, the critics who follow her page are politically confused and do not belong here. As the owner of the page, she is an authority on the definition of the legitimate audience. But a citizen argues that she has a democratic right to be here, as a critic, because the page is a public space:

> Pia, I follow you on this site, because I think it is interesting to read, what you have on your mind, and what your supporters think, and how they speak in public. I cannot see why it should be a problem to participate in the debate on your page, even though you disagree. This is a democracy, and your page is public. (Comment from Sally on PK's page)

Note that the user defends her right to receive the information by defining her relation to the page as *following*. One

could argue that the term *follow* is closer to the pure technical function (other platforms, such as Twitter, use this discourse). Sally also brings up the public nature of the page as an argument for her right to be there. The page is technically available to everyone equally, but this negotiation is not only about what is possible and democratic but also about what is appropriate. Sally may be in violation of the dominating normative expectations, whether or not she thinks that is how a public political space should ideally be.

Several politicians addressed their audience as Facebook *friends* during the campaign (see LLR in Picture 2 but also JSN, VS, and HTS). This definition is somewhat misleading since the page structure is not technically a mutual friend connection such as between private profiles. By calling the audience friends, the politician enforces the supportive discourse initiated by Facebook, which goes in line with their political campaign strategy, instead of encouraging a diverse audience. The result is that people with opposing political values may have to defend their right to even receive the updates in the first place, let alone post a comment. It is of course possible to disregard the discourse, much the same way that a *friend* on Facebook does not have to be a friend in real life (boyd, 2006). The action of *liking* a page and a politician does not seem to have a stable definition according to my focus groups:

(Focus group 4)

Lasse: I don't relate *like* to something - I know many others do - to something that I have to like. It is really just a way to get the information in my news feed. The fact that it just so happens to be politicians, with the same ideology as me, makes it the same. But in principle *liking* to me is just getting information from them [. . .]

Cindy: Well to me it means follow and really liking something. Meaning I support it.

Michael: That is also how I feel, if I *like* something, I am showing my support, be that a politician or the national football team . . .

Cindy: Yeah

Martin: I feel we need a button, like he says, *liking* something could just as well mean receiving information, but if I *like* The Danish Cancer Society, it is to support them. That makes it difficult to see what is what, right? Uhm, whereas if I *like* a status update, it means I like it. You kind of need an alternative function here.

The indication and interpretation of *liking* a page have not reached closure to borrow from SCOT terminology. It is still a floating signifier although it appears to be leaning strongly toward the intended supportive gesture. The fact that pages used to be called *fan pages* just confuse the perceived relation even more. It is thus not entirely clear who are the legitimate members of a page or to put it differently, who is

invited to the table. Facebook plays an important role in this. The company softened the supportive discourse when they changed it from *become a fan* to *like*. Thereby, they broadened the scope of the potential audience of pages while maintaining the importance of the supportive gesture. Some citizens try to challenge the discourse in the Facebook design, but a majority of supporters and politicians are generally reinforcing this supportive norm.

Conclusion

This article presents a limited space for critical discussion on Facebook pages of main politicians during the Danish general election of 2011. I present an analogy of a dinner party inspired by Hannah Arendt's (1958/1998) concept of a metaphorical table that mutually connects and separates us. But Arendt also idealized a pluralistic public space where each person became an individual by virtue of public political engagement. Instead I present how the Facebook pages of eight politicians generally favored a marketing logic based on mass, supportive interaction rather than individual, critical contributions.

The Facebook pages of the politicians did serve a democratic goal by connecting the politicians with citizens and enabled public feedback. These public interactions forced the politicians to give up some control over the strategic political communication. The Facebook pages were good for mobilizing supporters and to create a strong us/them discourse. Potentially this could lead to stronger partisanship and loyalty of citizens directed toward particular candidates. But during the 2011 election campaign, the Facebook pages were first and foremost designed for and used as marketing platforms, with interactive features intended mostly for supporters, who literally *liked* the politician. Radical contestation was often disregarded as inappropriate behavior, and citizens who voiced criticism were often not accepted as the legitimate members of the page. Citizens who wished to engage in a critical debate with the associated politician or other citizens on the platform had to consider Facebook as platform and the politician as the associated page owner and the main audience of supporters. All these three aspects seemed to work against the potential for a pluralism of contestation outside of the dominating and strategic political discourse.

This article presents a qualitative argument and not a study of comments by the numbers. The issues are not technological deterministic, and it is important to stress that explicit critique was possible and present. But radical critique was, in many ways, technically and socially discouraged. Most critics were aware that they were not the desired audience. Many of them consequently acted like drive-by shooters, rather than invited guest, that is, loud, aggressive, provoking, and with no intention of staying at the table for a second serving.

Facebook pages represent a public space in transformation. It is relevant to question whether these pages should be analyzed as potentially open platforms for public critical discussion or whether we should rather understand them as new campaign tools for politicians. It is also possible that elements of both exist on the same time. In any case, scholars should continue to study the tension between the two and how it develops over time. During the Danish election campaign in 2011, some citizens did challenge the conclusion that the pages were simply campaign tools for support. It was not clear whether these spaces were *only* for supporters or what constituted inappropriate criticism (although some pages had written codes of conduct). The tension could reduce if more people accept the platform as a campaign tool, and the interpretation of the technology stabilizes further. A critical analysis can highlight issues with power relations in certain spaces, but the citizens ultimately decide how they want to use the spaces and for what.

I presented my analysis of the Facebook pages during the campaign as an analogy of a dinner party with a dinner table, a host, and the invited guests. Although this is a crude framework, the purpose was to demonstrate how the social and the technological elements shaped certain expectations of the appropriate behavior. The Facebook pages favored mass supportive behavior over individual criticism in line with the strategic goals of the politicians during the 2011 election campaign. This made these spaces unsuitable as an open and critical public sphere for citizens based on the notion of contestation presented by Dahlberg (2007). This study looks at generalized issues shared between the pages of top politicians in the particular context of the 2011 Danish election campaign. There is potential for studies that look into the differences between political pages and also consider the context outside of election campaigns. Finally, there is also a potential for further studies that examine how these spaces exist in a broader media environment of multiple networked public spheres.

Notes

1. According to http://www.merriam-webster.com/
2. On a technical level, Facebook is criticized as an information silo. See W3 Foundation's critique of social networking sites (Yeung, Liccardi, Lu, Seneviratne, & Berners-Lee, 2009).
3. There are former examples where Facebook played an active role and disabled Danish political candidate pages. Facebook quarantined a Danish political candidate (Morten Messerschmidt) in 2013 for racist statements, although his Facebook page was back online shortly after.

4. One main political candidate, Per Ørum from the Christian Democrats, is not represented because he did not have a public page during the election.

5. Data collection from Facebook pages is also possible through the free program Netvizz by Rieder (2013).

6. Wall posts were not included in this study for two reasons: you cannot collect this activity by the Facebook API, and it was only allowed by all of the politicians. Looking into wall posts could provide new insights but does not change the issues presented in this article.

7. The final celebratory update was excluded from the winning left wing (JSN, VS, HTS, and MV) in the overall study. These single updates contained a large mass of highly context-specific comments (*verbal likes*). This was particularly obvious on the page of HTS who was elected for Prime Minister.

8. See also Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews (2004) about why lurkers lurk in online communities

9. Facebook has made some important changes since the Danish general election of 2011. They added a possibility to reply to individual comments and introduced *top comments* on the top of a thread. The importance of these changes should be explored in future studies.

10. Whether the moderation is, in fact, political in practice is not part of this study.

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