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“What Is Truly Scandinavian?”—A SAS Commercial and the Document Complex Surrounding It

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“What Is Truly Scandinavian?”—A SAS Commercial and the Document Complex Surrounding It

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the participants of this year's online DOCAM'20 for useful comments on the topic.

1. Introduction

Scandinavian airlines (SAS) published a video (2:43 minutes long) under the title "What is truly Scandinavian?" on February 11, 2020, on the company's social media sites.¹ The answer to the question asked in the title of the commercial was a provoking "Absolutely nothing". The reactions in the form of comments and "likes"² were many and mostly negative, and SAS chose to remove the video from its channels the same day. In a press release the day after, they justified this with the following explanation:

When analyzing the pattern and volume of reactions we have reason to suspect an online attack and that the campaign has been hijacked. We do not want to risk being a platform for views that we do not share. We have therefore temporarily removed the film from our channels and we are currently evaluating the next step.³

But removing the film was not enough to silence critical (some may say racist and nationalistic) comments; angry people were using other posts on the company's Facebook-page to express their opinions, and the video was still available on YouTube where people continued to express their anger. In the afternoon of February 12th, SAS published a shorter version of the video accompanied with the following text: "We are proud of our Scandinavian heritage. Many of the things we call Scandinavian today were brought here and refined by curious, open-minded and innovative Scandinavians. Travelers bring home great ideas."

The following day the Danish advertising agency got a bomb threat, and all the Scandinavian media reported about the video and the reactions. A couple of weeks later the media storm had quieted down, but the Facebook-post was still commented on and there were other documents created that centered around the commercial and its topic.

This paper takes a closer look at the video and the reactions on it. By focusing on the official Facebook-page of Scandinavian airlines and a range of documents that

¹ The original video is available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShfsBPrNcTI>, accessed 11.08.2020.

² While YouTube has the choice between "like" (thumb up) and "dislike" (thumb down), Facebook has six different types of "like" functionalities: "like", "love", "haha", "wow", "sad", and "angry".

³ <https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2020/sas-commercial-what-is-truly-scandinavian/>, accessed 22.06.2020.

were published by SAS and others, I discuss the document complex⁴ surrounding the film in terms of connectivity and transformation.

2. The Video

As mentioned above, the question “What is truly Scandinavian?” is answered by a female voice saying, “Absolutely nothing. Everything is copied.” The following scenes are filled with examples to verify that answer. The audience is told that things many of us would think of as typically Scandinavian like Midsummer celebration, democracy, bicycles, windmills, paper clips, and food like meatballs, rug bread or Danish pastry are not Scandinavian, but German, Greek, Turkish, American etc., thereby reframing the story of Scandinavian heritage and identity.

While parts of the audience are confronted with a different story about their own history and about themselves, other parts of the audience might just be surprised about what they just have learned by watching the film. The viewers’ own background, education and experience will be important in how the video is conceived. Many viewers obviously experienced the facts presented by the film as challenging, something they reacted to by commenting or using emojis. That the video got 50 times as many “thumbs down” as “thumbs up” reactions during the first day can be an indication that large parts of the audience felt insulted and scared.⁵ It is safe to say that SAS’s message of globalism did not succeed in convincing large parts of the film’s audience.⁶ At the same time SAS seemed not prepared to handle the criticism and to react to the comments on social media by discussing the matter. Removing the film and replacing it with a shorter version indicates, at least, that things did not work as planned, independent of whether the negative comments and “thumbs down” were a coordinated attack or not.

3. The Facebook Post by SAS

SAS has, as most airlines and companies, a brand page on Facebook to market its business and to provide content to the public. Posts may consist of texts, pictures,

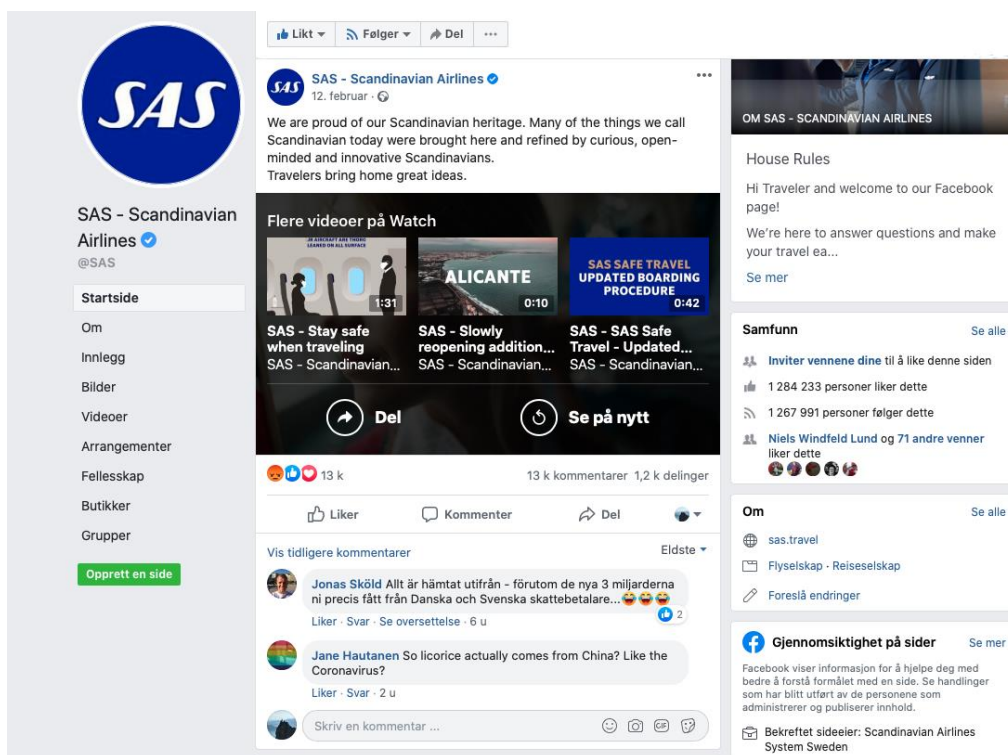
⁴ The term «document complex» was coined by Niels W. Lund to discuss the connections between different documents that nevertheless belong together because of their theme or producer. See for instance Skare 2004 for an example.

⁵ About six months after the video was released, the numbers on YouTube differ less: 15K thumb up and 125k thumb down. The comments were turned off by SAS.

⁶ I will not discuss the video in detail here. What is interesting to mention is a SAS slogan from about 20 years ago actually stated “It’s Scandinavian”.

and/or videos and are visible on the company's Facebook page and published on the news feed of users who are following the page. Users cannot create posts but comment on posts created and published by the company. This might be one reason for why comments posted by users are not necessarily related to the content of the post. Users have obviously the need to express their opinion and to make it public not only for the company, but also for the other users. The company cannot control what comments are posted by the users unless they disable the commenting functionality. In addition to comments – both verbal and pictorial – users can express their opinion by clicking the “like” button that has six different types of expression since February 2016.

As mentioned above, SAS removed the post from February 11th, 2020 that contained the original video. The next day SAS published a new post that contained an introduction contextualizing the film's message and a “shorter and clearer” version of the commercial.⁷



Screenshot of SAS' Facebook page 23.06.2020

⁷ <https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2020/sas-continues-the-campaign-what-is-truly-scandinavian/>, accessed 23.06.2020.

By the end of June 2020 this post had been commented on 13.000 times, shared 1200 times and reacted on with emojis 13.000 times. Whether these are all different individual users or not is not possible to know, but there is a certain possibility that users both comment and click an emoji and/or share the content. The last comment by that time was only 2 weeks old and connected a statement about licorice coming from China from the commercial with the current Covid-19-situation.

The comments are made in many different languages, some get comments or an emoji from other users, only a few get a bot-generated answer from SAS.⁸ Not all comments to the post are related to the content of it or the other comments about the commercial. It seems that some customers just use the comment-function to get in touch with the company.⁹ A look on the distribution of emojis reveals that the positive and negative reactions is approximately equal by the end of June:¹⁰

Alle 13 k 🤔 6 k 👍 4,6 k ❤️ 2,3 k 😂 429 😞 136 😱 44

While some of the most negative comments give expression of being insulted by the content, some even call out on boycotting the company, other more positive comments can't understand all the noise or support the idea that we are all travelers and learn from each other.

Both the post and the comments of course relate to the SAS commercial and peoples' reactions to it. Due to the stop of air traffic only a couple of weeks later, it is impossible to say whether these campaigns and posts had any influence on ticket sale, but SAS obviously got a lot of attention, both in social media and in in several countries' news.

⁸ Bots have become more and more usual in SAS' customer contact during the last years. During the "ash crisis" in 2010 Facebook was used by SAS in a one-to-one communication that was expensive for the company but also resulted in an "emotional temperature in the Facebook postings" that "was overwhelmingly positive" (Bygstad & Presthus, 2013, 14).

⁹ The same happens to other posts later on and especially during the Covid-19-lockdown. People do not care about the content of the post or about other people's comments, they are just trying to get an answer from SAS.

¹⁰ The numbers of likes (1 k) and dislikes (123k) on YouTube are much more in favor of negative voices (accessed 23.06.2020).

4. Facebook as Part of a Digital Public Sphere

Even if advertisements sometimes use provoking messages to obtain attention and make people talk about the ad and thus about the company and the product, SAS probably did not expect this storm of public protest. Not only did they remove the film after a few hours, they also chose to post a new version the next day. The film's new cut does not only use less time before the audience is presented with the core message – "We are travelers" – but has also removed some of the scenes that were discussed on social media as the most provoking like a black person talking about his Viking ancestors. Also, the text accompanying the new film tried to explain its purpose:

We are proud of our Scandinavian heritage. Many of the things we call Scandinavian today were brought here and refined by curious, open-minded and innovative Scandinavians. Travelers bring home great ideas.¹¹

Like it or not, SAS obviously considered some of the public's reactions important, even if they claimed that the campaign "was subject to an attack".¹²

The number of comments, sharing, and likes and dislikes to this and other posts on Facebook give us an impression on how much the public was engaged. While some of the users participated in a rather serious way with longer comments, other users only expressed their anger by posting an emoji or a short comment.

Even if all user engagement contributes to the virality of a post, we have to keep in mind that many of the reactions like clicking the like/dislike-button or posting an emoji is not equivalent to user commitment. Even if SAS's perception of the comments to the ad was that of a massive storm, a closer look of the numbers reveals that 13k comments and 13k emojis (by the end of June 2020) is a small part of the 1,2 million people who like the Facebook page of SAS. In addition to that, not all the posts were, as mentioned above, actually about the commercial. Nevertheless, the numbers of user reactions were outstanding compared to most of the company's other posts on the page. This is in line with findings from other Facebook studies that only a small part of the users actually engage actively, the so-called "1% rule", "the idea that only 1% of users will actively engage and 9% engage a little, while the remaining 90% simply lurk" (Kalogeropoulos, Negredo, Picone & Nielsen, 2017, 2). Only posts with very engaging and/or provoking

¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/SAS/?epa=SEARCH_BOX, accessed 23.06.2020.

¹² <https://www.sasgroup.net/newsroom/press-releases/2020/sas-continues-the-campaign-what-is-truly-scandinavian/>, accessed 23.06.2020.

content engage larger numbers of individuals. Also, the outrage of some comments might have provoked other comments, either to agree or to disagree. Even if we do not know anything about the identity of the individuals behind the comments posted on SAS' Facebook page, we can imagine that persons with very strong political motives, both on the right and on the left side of the scale, are “more likely to share and comment” (Kalogeropoulos, Negredo, Picone & Nielsen, 2017, 2) on topics about national identity and globalism.

That SAS was overwhelmed by the huge number of reactions and not prepared to answer each single one is understandable and also in line with the findings by Capriotti & Losada-Díaz: Facebook is often used in “a traditional off-line one-way perspective [...], considering it as a mere tool that can be used to disseminate information about the institution and its activities, but not to stimulate interaction and two-way communication with their publics” (2018, 648).

Discussions about the Internet and especially about Web 2.0 and social media platforms often stress their democratic potential, providing meeting places where user contribution, collective intelligence, reuse and remix (Jenkins, 2006), but also empowerment and ownership have become buzzwords since the mid-2000s. Participation in terms of individuals becoming “creators and primary subjects” who communicate “effectively into the public sphere” (Benkler, 2006, 213) is discussed as the Internet's democratizing potential leading to the emergence of a network public sphere (Benkler, 2006, 272). While this might be true for user generated content on for instance wikis, blogs or on YouTube, Facebook is obviously not the place for many of these activities. Most of the users on Facebook are, as discussed above, more or less passive consumers of the content presented by an institution or company. A small percentage of users is actively reacting to a Facebook post by clicking an emoji or writing a comment. But even writing a comment does need to mean much commitment from the user. While some comments are very short or use an image or GIF to express one's opinion, other comments are not about the content of the post at all but are just trying to get an answer from the company. Only in very rare cases the comment function is used to communicate with other users.

5. The Connectivity of Documents

As mentioned above, the different versions of the video and the videos used in different contexts are connected to each other because of their content and/or because of their reference to the title of the ad. The SAS commercial also got a lot of attention in the news, not so much because of its content, but because of its removal and the bomb threat the next day. In Norway alone 63 news items were

published during the first 48 hours after the release of the video, both from traditional media like the Norwegian public broadcaster (NRK) and newspaper like *Dagbladet* and *VG*, but also alternative news sites like *resett.no* and *document.no*.¹³ All these documents can form one or several document complexes, depended on whether we chose the content or the content plus producer as the criteria to include or exclude a document. As for other digital documents, this connectivity makes it difficult to define the exact boundaries of a document and to decide what documents should be included in the document complex for an analysis. As time passes by the amount of comments to the social media posts can become huge and also the number of other documents related to the video can increase significantly. One example of a related document is a post on the Facebook page of Norwegian, another competing airline company. The same day as SAS reposted the new version of the video, Norwegian posted an image with an accompanying text: "Fortunately, nobody can take away from us the cheese slicer."



Screenshot of Norwegian's Facebook page 12.02.2020

¹³ Cf.

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1pDhfFAuLoTGia3wx4j7HJIAyfNYhl9p ehZM3TeD_pPc/edit?usp=sharing, accessed 23.06.2020.

To understand the message of this post, you have to know about the SAS commercial, the many negative reactions to it and also the fact that Norwegians usually are proud of two inventions: the paper clip and the cheese slicer. While SAS claimed that the paper clip actually was an American invention, the cheese slicer was not mentioned by SAS.

This Facebook post can be understood as another comment to the Facebook posts by SAS the day before and the same day. Most of the comments made to Norwegian are actually about SAS and their commercial, often announcing their support for Norwegian because of the SAS video's message. A closer look at the comments reveals several similarities between the Facebook posts of SAS and Norwegian: real user-user interaction happens only in rare cases, especially if one disagrees with the content of the comment. Arguments are not often used and reacted on; comments can be reduced to short announcements of either agreement or disagreement, emojis are often used, and the use of images or GIFs in the commentary field might express the need for entertainment or humor,¹⁴ not so much the need to participate in a conversation about national identity or the advertising strategy of an airline company. The comments are written in different languages, but comments in Scandinavian languages seem to be the majority. Some people also use the comment function to complain about Norwegian's services.

6. Fixity and Transformation

A document's fixity is often discussed in connection with its materiality. While we often consider 'traditional' documents like printed books (independent of genre) or films (either in cinema, on television or on DVD) as self-contained, complete units that are fixed for most of the document's lifetime, new media,¹⁵ often a shorthand for digital documents, on the other hand are more often discussed in terms of their complicated materiality and their unstable existence. David Levy challenged the assertion of paper documents' fixity and digital documents' fluidity already in the early 1990s. He argues instead "that all documents, regardless of technology, are fixed *and* fluid" (Levy, 1994, 26) at the same time. Levy continues: "Indeed, they exist in perpetual tension between these two poles – fixing content for periods of

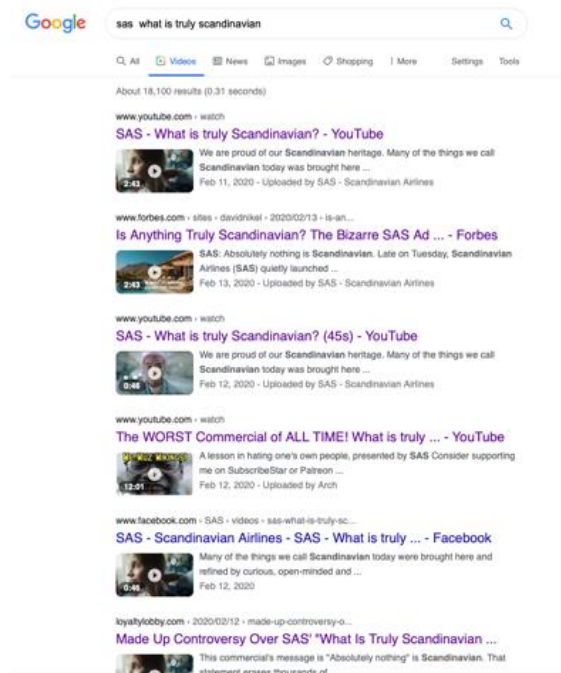
¹⁴ Humor or irony are also used in some of the comments, as for instance a person called Pablo Martinez who asks if the cheese slicer could have been invented by "a Dutch cheese maker living in Norway".

¹⁵ For a discussion of the use of terms like old and new media cf. Pingree & Gitelman, 2003, pp. xi-xxii. As they point out, old media "were not always old", "[a]ll media were once 'new media'" (xi).

time to serve particular human needs, and changing as necessary to remain in synch with the changing circumstances of the world.” (Levy, 1994, 26)

By pointing to the document’s genre and thus its purpose, Levy argues that “the rate at which documents change and the ways in which they change are largely governed by the purposes they serve” (Levy, 1994, 26). Discussing the SAS video, one might focus on the short lifetime of the original version and consider the shorter version as a completely new document that serves its purpose much better than the old one. But at the same time, we can compare the two versions and find that all scenes of the new film already existed in the old one. In addition to this, the old version has not disappeared because of its replacement, but is still available for those searching for it (and in the memories of those who saw it.)

A google search for “sas what is truly scandinavian” results in about 18.100 hits for videos only. While the first hit is the original and ‘removed’ video, number three is a “shorter and clearer” version (see screenshot taken 12.08.2020), published by SAS the day after. Both videos can still be found on YouTube published by SAS (with comments turned off) and published by others than SAS on other pages.



There are also other videos using the SAS ad or parts of it to discuss the content of the ad.¹⁶ All videos, either published on YouTube or inserted in news reports on different web pages, are surrounded by different amounts of text, thus providing different contexts for our viewing. YouTube and some of the other pages also allow for comments from the audience and also the possibility to express likes and dislikes by clicking on emojis. One might therefore argue that there are not only two versions of the video – 2:43 and 0:46 minutes long – but a wide range and that every comment might work as an entrance into the video, influencing the expectations of the potential viewer. Even the information that SAS had turned off the commentary function for their videos on YouTube and the missing comments will send an important signal to the viewer, depending whether he or she already knows about the mostly negative comments on other social media or not. Paratextual elements¹⁷ surrounding the video like for instance the accompanying text published by SAS or the comments by users can be considered an anchoring technique “intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs” (Barthes, 1980, 274), working together or against the linguistic message – both spoken and written – inside the video. The same goes for news articles about the commercial and both the audiences and SAS’s reaction on it. We therefore do not have one or two versions of the video, but many. But at the same time as the video is more or less slightly transformed each time someone comments on it or makes its own document about the video’s content, the video commented on and distributed in different channels has nevertheless to be stable in a way that viewers can assume that they all are watching the ‘same’ film. “Floating fixity” (Latham, 2016), a notion that “depends on agreed upon fixed points (socially, extrinsic) and perceived fixed points (adtrinsic)” (Latham, 2016, 5) fits well for the document discussed herein.

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¹⁶ Liu, 2003 talks about an “ease in duplication” (282) for digital media that is also connected to low costs for production.

¹⁷ Cf. Skare 2020 for the concept of paratext and its use in different fields.

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