



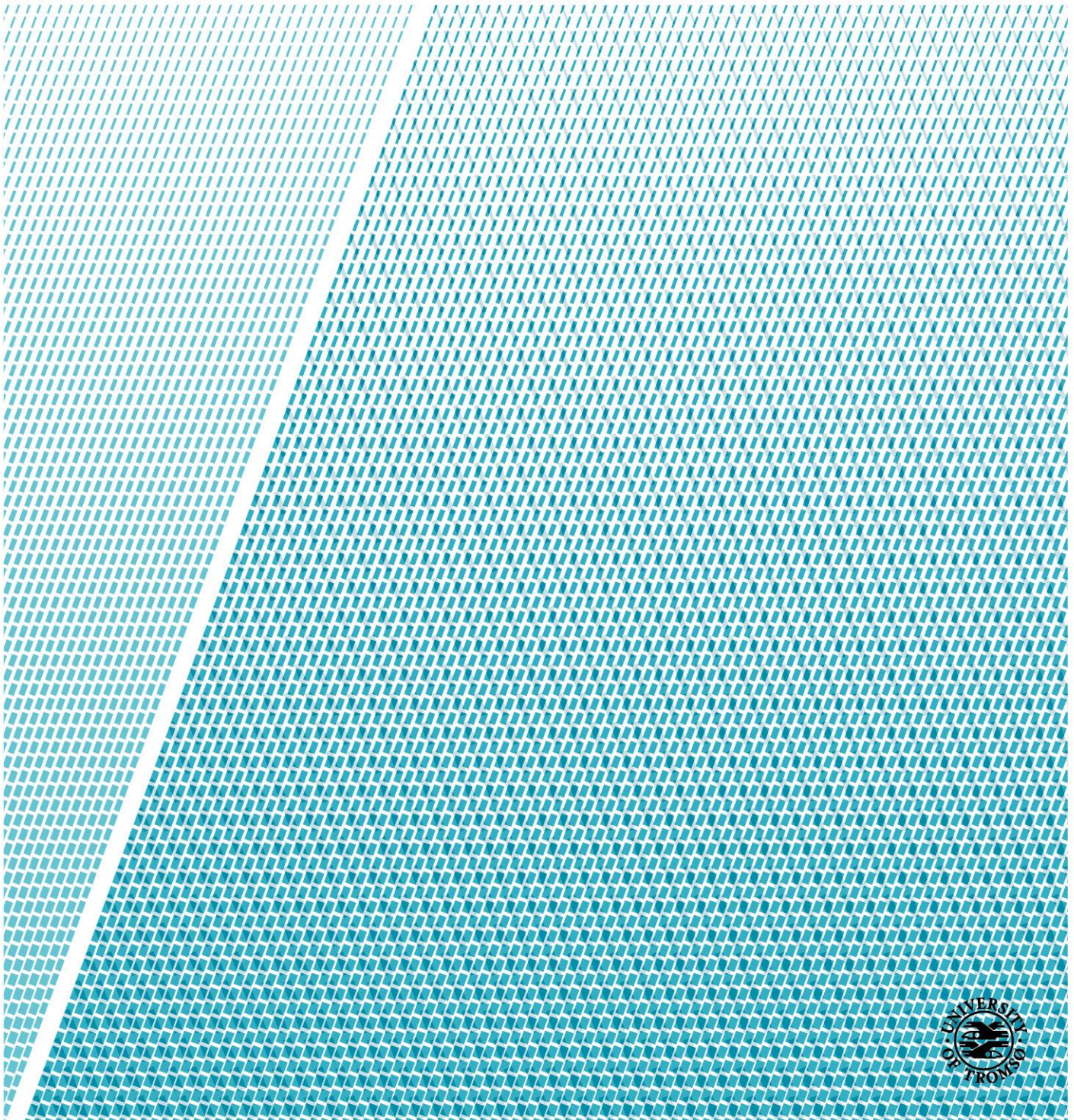
Department of Language and Culture

# Social media as Digital Public Sphere

*Social media, digital public sphere and community*

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## Foreword

This thesis began as a project specification on Digital Public Sphere as facilitating in democracy. As I started investigating existing research on the field, I soon found that it was a complex and rich area, which I would have liked to research in many different directions. I would like to thank Heidi Kristin Olsen who advised me after my project specification was accepted. She gave me much appreciated critical questions and offered critical questions on relevant parts of the work in progress. I offer thanks to Torhild Larsen Skillingstad for thoughtful comments during the last days in the revising process. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for showing interest when I felt like the nerdiest girl around, and for numerous read-throughs. Endless love to our children who were gracious with me as I sat in front of the computer non-stop the last weeks before due-date.

# 1. Social media, digital public sphere and community

## 1.1 Introduction

This thesis was built on a project specification originally submitted in 2017. The encompassing theoretical framework of this thesis is Habermas work on The Public Sphere and the premises on which we build a democratic society (Habermas, 2002, 2006 and Goode 2005) In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas discusses how democracy is dependent on an open public discussion to form public opinion that is necessary in a participatory democracy. In Bourdieu *The Forms of Capital* (1986) and *Social Space and Symbolic Power* (1989) some distinctions that reproduce social inequality and define groups are researched and interpreted. These works imply the main conflict in theme together with the increasingly digitalized informational flow that is potentially changing the way both social relations and public opinion formation is practiced. The research done by Bourdieu, highlights structural differences that are reproduced through taste, and further through not only economic capital, but also social and cultural capital. Habermas fronts the notion that a public sphere as part of a participatory democracy, and that such a public sphere should be open and independent from commercial interests. The internet and the large digital communities that social media now constitute can be viewed as part of a public sphere, yet on the other side most people utilize internet and social media as part of a digital social space with personal and private content sometimes intended for friends and family only. The practical workings of social and cultural capital as researched by Bourdieu are present in social media as a representation of other parts of society in a more or less representative way. Bourdieu (1996) defines the family as a social category in itself, and as such draws a line that is defining in what can be considered part of any public in that a public sphere has to at least be open to other than the proximate family.

An important distinction that must be made is that the public that will be discussed in this thesis is that which within different definitions applies to some kind of discursive, practical, ideological and pragmatic space that is open to the general population. Public institutions are not directly relevant in this context, at least not as subject of research, only indirectly as part of what contributes to and loosely constitutes a public sphere of information, culture and opinion formation. Public institutions and publicly available channels of information or other

resources are indirectly relevant as elements that are integral to the public sphere. The formation of public opinion as function of a democracy, including free speech and free organizations, is part of this research in the sense that public opinion is related to public sphere, and such discourse is now also practiced in a digitalized environment that is ruled by different premises than traditional media. This is being researched in the context of the social media Facebook.

In Norwegian the word “offentlig” which is translated to “public” can be used when addressing governmental institutions and subdivisions to the state apparatus. Yet both “public” and “offentlig” also denote information, cultural knowledge and discourse that is considered open to and embedded or potentially embedded in the general public. In this context, *the general public* denotes at least a considerable majority of the population in Norway.

According to *Norsk etymologisk ordbok* (De Caprona 2013) “offentlig”, the Norwegian word for *public*, is derived from German “offentlich” which again is derived from *offen*, “open”, and is related to the Norwegian word for open, “åpen”. Cultural and practical premises influence what is considered public in the sense that it is open to the whole population. How society is practiced and governed is also the subject of public debate and public opinion. In well-functioning democracies, groups and individuals that wish to partake in some sort of public debate should have the explicit and implicit opportunity to do so. This is a way those not employed by the government or elected as politicians can address issues that are otherwise not given attention, and such practice aids in progress and societal development. According to the website Online Etymology Dictionary the word public is directly derived from the Latin word *publicus*, meaning; “of the people; of the state; done for the state,”

(<https://www.etymonline.com/word/public> retrieved 03.07.18)

There has been an increase in news consume on internet and a part of this is from distribution of news articles through social media (Statistics Norway, <https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/stabil-andel-tv-seere-flere-leser-nettavisar>). Together with a pluralistic organisational and governmental activity of Facebook pages that publish content, this can be considered the makings of a possible social media based digital public sphere with all the traditional elements of mixing the private with the public, the subjective with the factual, and the absurd with the informative.

The practice of a public sphere is historically speaking connected to an emerging state that in varying degree is separate from the individual and private life. In the context of this thesis, the state is by law obliged to guarantee certain functions and institutions that facilitate and forward the well-being of its citizens and communication between individuals, groups and the power of the state. This is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy.

According to Engelstad, Larsen, Rogstad (2017) the public sphere can be defined as the five topoi of media, arts and culture production, voluntary organizations, research and higher education, and religion. In a context where the three estates of government were named executive, legislative and judicial, the Free Press is by Habermas (2002) described and discussed as mediating between individuals and state. In *The Public Sphere* (Habermas 2002) the media is argued to be part of a public sphere that can communicate information on events, changes and practices in the state apparatus.

Digitalization of the news media and other media together with very popularized and widely used social media such as Facebook, brings up issues as to how the use of internet in everyday media use affects the traditional news media that conveys news, political content, and information on commerce and state affairs. In *The Distinction*, Bourdieu (1986, 1989) documents how structural differences are expressed and practiced culturally and practically through habit and interpretation, and how the same mechanisms might reproduce social structures. As the internet gives a new arena for such mechanisms, the concept of social capital becomes important in determining the existence of digital public spheres. Social capital can be a defining criteria in the subtle borders between different digital public spheres and traditional distinctions might be blurred or reinforced in digital media such as modern social media.

Internet and social media in theory gives the opportunity for anyone to act as agenda-setters in a sphere that has the potential to reach far and can even influence mainstream media and political apparatuses. There is a new potential in which individuals can be public in a very private way and political in a personal way (Chan 2016; Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Karlsen 2014; Rogstad 2016 and Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen 2017) through mixing content from semi-personal social media sites with commentary and press coverage. Both the politician and the voter are human beings, subject to flaws and pressures, and as such can in the seemingly informal environment of social media both appeal to the relational aspects of familiarity with voters and excuse themselves as no more of a superhero than the neighbourhood nice-guy.

This is one of the ways utilising social media can achieve the opposite effect from alienation in case of politicians and other actors of social and societal engagement, and relies on a rhetoric that is demagogic and not based on facts or reliable information.

Some social media users are personal by indirect means through separate accounts in social media representing their role as a politician, self-employed celeb of all kinds, or as representative of a party or an organisation. In this way the internet and social media in particular constitute a new and very easily available digital reality. For some this digital reality seems to be experienced as removed from actual reality and as such without the same basic norms and values concerning responsibility and compassion.

Meaningful information can be exchanged between individuals and groups in different parts of the world without prior knowledge of each other, these transactions can proceed very time efficiently with few spatial restrictions. Available information concerning facts, culture, political change, natural disasters and weather conditions and climate change and so forth is essential in order to have views on possible societal practices. The possibilities of informational exchange and communication online gives a larger part of the population opportunities to a greater degree of knowledge sharing, socially significant practices and a more including and civilized society.

## **1.2 Background**

On an average day 89 % of the Norwegian population aged between 9-79 years use the internet according to Statistics Norway (<https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/statistikker/medie/aar> , retrieved 27.10.17)

According to Ipsos 3 448 000 (83,5 %) individuals in Norway have an account on Facebook, and 83 % of these are active on a daily basis. This means that approximately seven out of ten Norwegian citizens above 18 years will visit Facebook every day and in some way process content that is displayed in the Newsfeed or other Facebook pages. Of the Norwegian population 1144 000 (27,7 %) have a Twitter profile, three out of four of those are men. Twitter is the social media that the most significant gender bias amongst users (The numbers are from the downloadable pdf at <https://www.ipsos.com/nb-no/ipsos-tracker-om-sosiale->



[medier-q117](#) A.) More than 90 % of the Norwegian population has Internet connection in their home (Bock Seggaard 2017)

Based on the fact that such a large percentage of the population chooses to maintain an internet connection in their home one can assume that research on social media and how informational flow by means of news media and societal and political discourse proceeds in these contexts is very relevant to society in general.

An example that further supports this notion is that out of those that have an account on the social media or social network society Facebook, three out of five are following the Facebook account of one or more media corporations or newspapers (Ipsos, B <https://www.ipsos.com/nb-no/ipsos-tracker-om-sosiale-medier-q217> hentet den 21.10.17).

It is not clear if those that follow media corporations on Facebook do so in order to get updates from the source through Facebook or as a sentiment of support and display of general interest. Following pages on Facebook can signify group adherence in cultural and social capital, perhaps in addition to ordinary digital or physical subscriptions of newspapers. Facebook actually allows for making this distinction by adding both a “like” and a separate “follow” function to pages. Those of the respondents in the Ipsos data that do not follow any media corporations on Facebook might reflect and give indications as to how social media are utilized differently by different groups based on social, cultural and economic capital, or simply based on age or situation in life. One divide might be between those young enough to be considered “digital natives”, and those that established habits and cultural beliefs concerning news and information before the digital revolution (Prensky 2001 a and b) The difference in use drawn from the Ipsos report could also support the main *research question* in this thesis. There are indications that there are group differences in use of Facebook in that some use it as a more escapist and purely leisurely activity, while others also use it for more community-focused activities.

Independently of the possibility that a portion of those with user-accounts on social media such as Facebook are not very active users, they still have gone through the effort of registering an account, which on its own implies that they consider access to the digital space represented by social media. During an average day active users of Facebook can read news articles from local, national and global news sources via Facebook pages that they themselves are following or via sharing as stream in newsfeed by their network on Facebook that share

links from articles at the web pages of media corporations. According to Statistics Norway 72 % of the people that were online during an average day in 2016 been logged on to Facebook and 50 % had been visiting other social media sites. The portion of news consumers that read digitally published newspapers is increasing (<https://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/artikler-og-publikasjoner/stabil-andel-tv-seere-flere-leser-nettavisar>, hentet 21.11.17).

The World Wide Web has from its start in 1989 (<https://www.w3.org/History.html>) developed into a global network of information programmed to display in written language, sound, images and video (semantic web, Berners-Lee, Hendler and Lassila 2001). Meaningful information can be exchanged between individuals and groups in different parts of the world and without previous knowledge of each other. This can happen about as rapid as one before could make a phone call, or faster. Access to information on facts, culture, political change, natural disasters and economy is central to civil discourse.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas discusses how there through history has been a development in which over time larger portions of humanity has gotten more power over the formation of state and how concerns of the state are being practiced. There was disagreement upon on which criteria civil rights were granted by State and Juridical systems. The right to vote which was established for men around the 1850 (Habermas 2002) and not until around 1880 in West and Northern-Europe. The right to vote for women was an issue for many decades until 1971 when Switzerland as one of the last granted women the common right to vote

([https://snl.no/Kvinnens\\_kamp\\_for\\_stemmerett\\_internasjonalt](https://snl.no/Kvinnens_kamp_for_stemmerett_internasjonalt)) (More on this on [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_women%27s\\_suffrage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_women%27s_suffrage) or [http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/refuserserq.54.2.31.pdf?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/refuserserq.54.2.31.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents))

The common right to vote is one of the ways that citizens can make indirect statements on their views on how best to govern society, and partake in electing representatives that forward their favoured practices concerning society. The formation of those views are shaped in interaction between the family as category (Bourdieu 1996) and the State as government and juridical entity, with institutions such as the educational system as intermediating. As such The Public Sphere can be seen as the domain in which formation of public opinion is practiced and the practice of a Public Sphere surely has brought democratic discourse and juridical rights forward through history.

## 2 Social media as arena in society; a possible Digital Public Sphere?

The presented research on social media as public spheres began as a curiosity on the workings on formal and informal informational exchange and relations when both social relations, commercial businesses, organizations and governmental departments and institutions become to different degrees active and participatory in such digital media. I was curious on how digital social communication and the obvious increase in such interacted with face-to-face interaction and community fellowship. Idealistically, I imagined that it could function as some sort of digital common community that could aid in inclusion and participation on levels suited for each on their own premises. The Cambridge Analytical case was reported in the news while I was distributing the questionnaire. Naturally, I felt like I had hit the nail right on its head, so to speak. Cambridge Analytica is a company that specializes in analysis concerning marketing for commerce and political campaigns (<https://cambridgeanalytica.org/>) whom it was revealed that had collected personal information on millions of Facebook users (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathleenchaykowski/2018/03/21/mark-zuckerberg-addresses-breach-of-trust-in-facebook-user-data-crisis/#16cdaad53e36>). The case was heavily covered in traditional and online media, and the American senate had the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg stand before the senate to answer questions on the privacy concerns. For an overview of the case I recommend <https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files> and Kreiss and McGregor (2017)

Some of the research literature is on empiric grounds quite distinct in focusing on elective processes, and as such the focus of the literature on that focuses on the communication of the professional politician, not the participation and engaged citizen. In an interactionist and communicative aspect both the mechanisms leading to civil engagement and the makings of campaign will be relevant, as the public naturally is the main group for a campaign by the power of being the public, and as such the voters.

Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen og Karlsen (2014) conducted an analysis of the Norwegian election as presented by politicians and political parties in the social media Twitter. They front the view that social media can function as an inexpensive way to reach larger publics without the means of a well-funded organisation. This is part of the potentially democratizing aspects of

the internet and new media as represented by social media. Social media like Twitter represents a direct uncensored channel to audiences in a way that allow the politician to set the agenda without cooperating or planning with newsroom representatives. Citizen journalism can be a very positive form of alternative citizen action, yet it can also remove responsibility from editors that for the most part operate within ethical frames for journalistic integrity to the same standards relying alone on personal integrity. On the other hand there is the problem of filtering information when there is huge amounts of information, and the risk of losing the, for each subjectively valued, core information in a rapidly changing informational flow such as on Twitter. Facebook can be viewed as less elitist and less sharp, in many ways softer, compared to for instance Twitter (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen and Karlsen 2014). This makes Facebook more appropriate for studies of civic participation and civil engagement, and Twitter for analysis on professional politicians and other public personas.

I will make a differentiation between social media as arena for civil engagement and local community participation, and that which deals with the more professional aspects of political campaigning. Professional politicians are elected both on national and local elections. In local elections, the lines between civil society officials and politics appear less strictly defined. In Norway this differentiation might at times be unclear, as there is a history of relatively widespread collectivist participation in a multitude of volunteer activities connected to shaping and building community including within local politics.

The main focus in the present thesis will further be on the current and potential use of social media as a *digital public sphere* according to different parameters, and with particular focus on Facebook. The focus on Facebook will be if it can be or is in use as an arena for participatory community, political engagement and civil practice, both as informational channel and networking site. The use of Facebook as an arena for the practice of freedom of speech is an intrinsic part of such discourse. How professional politicians utilize social media as part of their campaigning and media presence is in this perspective not irrelevant, but peripheral to the main issues that will be researched and discussed.

In the first part I am drawing some introductory lines considering established research and theory in the field. In the second part I present the the original empirical material of this thesis, which consists of a set of answers from a web-based questionnaire on use and opinions concerning Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere. Then I discuss findings and draw conclusions.

The research question is “Can social media, with focus on Facebook, be considered a part of a *Digital Public Sphere*?”

The research question will be divided into different hypotheses that are presented in following paragraphs in the Method and Results section, which will follow after a discussion on some of the existing empirical research in the field.

## **2.1 Premises for a public debate**

A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974)

According to the Freedom of expression barometer in Norway there is a significant discrepancy between the ideal most people share on freedom of speech and to what degree they experience that they are free to practice this freedom of speech (TNS Gallup (2013): [http://ytringsfrihet.no/survey Ytringsfrihetsbarometeret 2013 A](http://ytringsfrihet.no/survey/Ytringsfrihetsbarometeret_2013_A)). According to the same survey it is considered quite acceptable that extreme views and statements should be allowed to be published in print or promoted in gatherings or demonstrations, but quite few think that social media has increased their opportunities to practice freedom of expression. A majority feel that it is safest to make statements or express their opinions in a smaller or local community than in large society (Ytringsfrihetsbarometeret 2013, B). In light of this, it appears as frightening for many to be active in a way that is political and promotes societal engagement in social media. The notion that Norwegian citizens feel limitations to their freedom of speech is somewhat surprising as Norway is considered a rather peaceful nation with a free press and grounded democratic processes (Engelstad, Larsen, Rogstad 2017)

The experienced limitations of freedom of speech can decrease political discourse in social media and social network societies, which again might lead to a more elitist and uniform digital public sphere. If this on the other hand motivates a more deliberate and tolerant discussion where the internet and social media is utilized productively, then the result can be a

more including environment that also gives room for other than the elitist politician. Online harassment and trolling in online commentary fields clearly has the potential to control the public debate by frightening individuals and groups to silence by brutalizing the digital environment (Midtbøen, 2017 og Landsverk og Hagen, 2015).

Conversely, some state that social media produces a self-referencing and self-enhancing positivity between those similarly opined rather than contribute to constructive exchange of ideas and opinions (Bangstad og Vetlesen 2011). To spend much time on social media can in such a perspective give a distorted view of reality where one believes that everyone uses these digital spaces while in reality it might be limited to specific groups that come across differently due to customized settings and dynamic algorithms. A different perspective is that a positive and implicitly community focused digital sphere will enable more differentiated opinions within a discourse that is based on some common basic principles adjusted to the topic at hand. In order to make possible a discourse on anything at all there has to be some sense of common understanding on the topic of discussion. A discourse that is by some considered “echo chambers” will by others be considered part of a larger public sphere. The emergence of social media and blogs give excellent opportunity for a pluralistic and nuanced societal discourse. The downside is that the same mechanisms that make the internet so dynamic and fit for sharing ideas and opinions are utilized to hide the identity of, and mask the reality of those that use threats and harassment to shut down this free discourse. Online bullying and harassment is another factor that explains the need to orient within groups also in social media and digitalised discursive participation. For there to be a public sphere of debate there is not only need for a sphere situated between private *lifeworld* and State, but also the experience of non-sanctioned opportunity to voice minority opinions and explanations. One of the premises intended to establish this is the free press and the juridical freedom of speech. The ideal *Public Sphere* acts as communicative, interpretative, mediating, and negotiating between the public and the government apparatus. As such it is in the common interest of both the state and the public (voters) that the premises on which such mediations and negotiations are practices function as inclusive and pluralist as possible.

## 2.2 News as distributed through social media

In a newspaper in physical format, all articles will be equally available and the factor of economic capital will be irrelevant to what is being read most thoroughly, remembered and discussed. This applies of course as long as there are not many people waiting to read the same exemplar of an issue as could be an imagined case in large families, work-place lunchrooms and so forth. Temporal aspects and personal interests and motivations will guide selection and what is being skimmed through or read in depth. News that achieve a high rate of distribution on the internet and in particular in social media has a higher probability of reaching large amounts of people. News that reach many people to a larger degree has the potential to be discussed in the work place, at dinner-tables and in other formal, semi-formal and informal situations where discourse in response, to and connected to forming public opinion is negotiated. Cases that are published in blogs or social media like Twitter and Facebook in addition to paper format and digital newspapers, might reach a high distribution more easily. Media professionals are active consumers of media through both traditional channels and social media and use their ideas and hunches from other sources to make new cases. Issues that are highlighted, and that have origin in personal updates or initiatives in social media or blogs, are at times furthered by journalists that bring the issue forward through traditional media. Updates on tweets that reached the traditional news media are distributed to Twitter users through mail unless one opts out. Online distribution of news and information has become powerful in defining agenda in the news world and as such in the Public Sphere.

The possibility to distribute generalized content in addition to more case focused issues through campaigns in social media in a way that also reaches traditional media such as television, newspapers and radio can be part of a practice of collectivist-digitalized discourse. One examples that illustrate this is the #metoo campaign. The #metoo phenomenon can be described as distributed online activism based on anonymous and identified self-reports and narratives that targeted and highlighted the issue of sexual harassment in media- and cultural industry (<https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/metoo-kampanjen-handler-forst-og-fremst-om-a-fa-menn-til-a-apne-oynene/68813910> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment> retrieved 24.10.17 ). There are many different versions of how and by whom the campaign was initially brought forward, and it has resulted in many different

news articles, cultural activism and social media segments, and new campaigns in national Norwegian newspapers and in other parts of the world, The USA in particular. The main point remains that the campaign is an excellent example of how the potential for effective distribution afforded by the internet is used to bring forth issues and create debate and community action.

News that reach a large amount of a population has the potential to create what is experienced and potentially practiced as true, real and important for a majority of a population, what surrounds us IS reality as far as we can grasp. Individuals also tend to trust information from sources we see as reliable. What we comprehend as reliable is most often what we know, that which is familiar to us, recognizable and from sources that claim affiliation with or authority by symbolic or factual phenomenon that we by cultural practice and experience have learned to acknowledge. Such sources can often be friends, family and colleagues, and also, symbols, iconicity or literal affiliation that signifies trustworthiness or quality. In this perspective, it gives sense that Facebook friends and the selection of information as shared in Facebook can increase implied legitimacy to news articles (Boulianne, 2016 and Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan 2012). Most people rely on the feedback and opinions of select others in addition to their own mind when filtering and interpreting ambiguous information and in deciding what information (in this specific context, news) is redundant and not in need of closer analysis. Such ways to sort information is part of what creates small-scale group identity and on a larger scale an implied sense of belonging to different groups, cultural, ethnical, religious national or political.

There are two central psychological factors that very broadly speaking guide our information literacy; the tendency to view information that is present in uniform and massive amount as universally true, and our tendency to validate sources through selected individuals (More on availability heuristics and representativeness in Tversky and Kahneman 1974). These factors together with the rate of distribution in combination with subjectively experienced reliable sources indicates that material that reaches a high degree of circulation and distribution in social media can bias a population in their view of the societal and political landscape. In other words, visibility is a powerful rhetoric. This further implies distribution and consume in a different way than news consume based on less dynamic and less personalised sources such as newspapers in physical format or news on national television. What is visible to us tends to be interpreted as dominating and as the majority and often is such in the at any time given setting. If there are specific characteristics of news that are for paying readers only that have



different qualities in information or knowledge than news that is published free of charge then a segment of the population that do not keep subscriptions of newspapers will miss out on certain kinds of cultural and societal discourse. There is a high probability that information such as news that is published openly and free of charge through a recognized source will be read and distributed more often, not necessarily because of its actuality, relevance or quality, but to a large degree because it is independent of economic capital. This notion further implies that the decisions governing what is published free of charge can have an impact on common informal knowledge creation and on practiced discourse.

### **2.3 Local democracy and national campaigning**

Bock Seggaard (2017) conducted a study on use of social media and engagement in a Norwegian local election. Those politically active in social media were also amongst the most active in offline situations, and there was a tendency of an effect of age in the direction that younger voters would use social media more than older. This is significant in that it can indicate that social media appears as less dependent on economic capital than social or cultural capital. The age effect can also be accounted for by effects such as described by Prensky (2001 a and b) in that younger citizens to a larger degree have grown up with internet and social media as an integrated part of every-day communication, and as integral in news consume, information gathering and in keeping up social relations.

Ytre-Arne, Hovden, Moe, Nærland, Sakariassen and Johannessen (2017) found a significant effect of age in patterns of usage in social media in their qualitative study that was based on interviews with participants that also logged media diaries. The age effect could possibly be directly connected to factors specific to different life situations. If this is the case the most active users of social media might change pattern of usage in time, while those reaching their age-segment might adopt the patterns of usage previously inhibited by those now in a more advanced age-segment. Another possibility is that because the Internet historically speaking is a very recent phenomenon the patterns of usage in the population will change in time and with evolving technology.

Local politics and local politicians are present and represented on Facebook often both as private person and separate in role as political representative. Much locally embedded activity

that is relevant for a trusting and well-functioning local community is also practiced on Facebook. Local sports teams, local cultural institutions, different institutions of children's after school activities, local hiking groups and so forth.

## **2.4 Taste as distinction in social capital**

Through the encompassing work presented in *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) shows how societal structures are displayed and re-established through taste and further might be so through the educational system. The different types and different usages of digital technology and social media can give a similar kind of predefined interpretation of individuals based on habits normally expected to covary with the displayed preferences. Such patterns of usage as utilized in advertising and customized content are perhaps the main source of economic capital in social media, where social and cultural capital is traded for free use of social media platforms that include customized advertising. How the individual chooses to represent itself is added to existing schemata and cognitive biases on expected group membership and categories (this is elaborated further on in the segment concerning psychometric data and metadata in social media). Individuals and groups position themselves and show affiliation in ways that are intended or arbitrary, probably most often a mix, by friend associations and other preferences in social media. What pages are followed, what they choose to give the thumbs up, group memberships, and importantly, what content they themselves choose to share. Interpretations of self-representations in social media are that they can appear very shallow and seemingly vain, but also with symbolic complexity and potential meaning that points to the actual individual or more than just the individual. Taste, civil status, demographics and socioeconomic variables are displayed explicitly or more implicitly by and for most users of social media such as Facebook.

One of the surveys in *The Distinction* (Bourdieu 1986) illustrates how interpretation of culture and taste can be associated with structural distinctions that facilitate or disturb social and cultural capital and economic mobility:

«Thus in the dominant class, the proportion who declare that a sunset can make a beautiful photo is greatest at the lowest educational level, declines at intermediate levels (some higher education, a minor engineering school), and grows strongly again among those who have completed several years of higher education and

who tend to consider that anything is suitable for beautiful photography. The statistics also show that women are much more likely than men to manifest their repugnance toward repugnant, horrible or distasteful objects: 44, 5 percent of them, as against 35 percent of the men, consider that there can only be an ugly photograph of a wounded man..." *Distinction* p. 39 (1986)

Such a display of interpretation and taste is a symbolic expression of a culturally and historically conditioned segregation in gender roles and tasks, where femininity is attached to the beautiful, the well preserved, the unharmed, that which is protected, the not grotesque and to caring and preserving. A well-functioning masculinity can historically speaking very well be both beautiful and grotesque brutality, as an elevation of the glory of physical power and displays of physical violence.

Concurrently, this serves as an example of the possible relativism latent in high education and intellect as habitus in the sense that that which is created and the skills used to evaluate and consider that which is created, is influenced by so open and within the given premises of higher education relative mechanisms, that almost anything goes given a certain context and if done in a certain way. The relative percentage of women and men with higher education is not reported in the mentioned chapter, however there probably was a larger percentage of men than women with higher education amongst the respondents of the study. Education both opens the interpretation and frames it so that the image and the situation is isolated as aesthetic object, this can be seen as a learned alienation to the subject, traditionally seen as a necessary interpretative distance. Such a relativism is on its own both elegant and potentially dehumanizing in that the focus is being taken away from the actual, that which in any relational context would have been the issue, in concrete, the imagery of physical damage and the following implied pain. This relativism can be seen as related to the at times dehumanizing nature of harassment in digital media and social media where those of different opinion can experience hate and severe bullying. Like a mirror image of society hate-groups revel in their own conviction and imagined human superiority by means of belittle those of different opinions. The evaluations of a wounded man can be interpreted as distance because of actual reality oriented view, analytic consciousness that embeds the fact that this is a image, the man is probably not hurt anymore. Similar distinctions in use and self-representation will probably be reflected in social media as reproductive in social and cultural capital, symbolic distinctions of taste and habitus can be made very visible through the varying privacy and publicness of social media.

A study by de Zúñiga, Barnidge and Sherman (2017) found that social capital as practiced in social media is overlapping, but not equal to social capital in life in general. More specifically, they found that online social capital was empirically different to face-to-face social capital in offline situations. Digital spheres can be analysed as social spheres in the tradition of Bourdieu (1986), yet the melting pot of realms relating to the personal, the societal, the political and to commerce makes the internet and social media well suited for studies on digital communication in modern society and new media. The empirical research is concerned with how the social networks, and the cultural capital that is a part of the digital public sphere as practiced in social media, is an expression of practice in life outside the internet, or to a larger degree a display of socially and culturally founded self-representations that are published in more or less open social circuits. Because of way the advanced algorithms behind informational selection in Facebook function, individuals can easily experience such digital realities as so customized and personalised that it does not invite to being interpreted as public in any other sense than the direct one to one relational communication between other individuals active in the same social media. On a personal level where confirmation and self-representation including feedback is experienced as both social and secure these personalised algorithms can lead to addiction to the ego-reinforcing aspects of the attention connected to sharing on Facebook. What is popular and thus gains positive attention is influenced by social and cultural capital, but also by the predefined popularity based criteria of the NewsFeed algorithm. This implies that not only people or system influence the digital public sphere, but also the workings of the algorithm. As such the internet and digitalized interaction, communication and flow of information entails a new actor that is designed by programmers, yet functions partly independently and interactionist, the algorithm.

### **3 Criteria defining a Public Sphere**

There is no well-defined agreement on what consists the elements of a Public Sphere, though Habermas' analytical discussion is both pragmatic and sets criteria that give a direction as to how a Public sphere in modern democratic society can function.

Habermas (2002) quite clearly separated a public sphere from the commercial sphere and argued the necessity of deliberation rather than publicity in the sense that is related to commerce and advertising. Publicity in this perspective points to that which is intentionally shaped as to give attention to something or to make other elements unclear and to bias valence in interpretation, publicity as such is also connected to commerce and acquisition of economic capital which Habermas argues should not dominate the motivations in a Public Sphere. A *public* is discussed in Habermas (2002) as the elevated concept pertaining to a concrete or abstractly connected group of individuals. Commerce in this perspective is discussed as in transactions concerned with increasing economic capital and where this motive is the main motive. In a more recent perspective, commerce is not only related to commercial and finance capital, manufacturing and industrial capital, but also with converting cultural or social capital into economic capital or the opposite. In such a perspective the empirically derived concepts from Bourdieu describe how the borders between a public sphere not pertaining to commerce and the commercial business pertaining to advertising and finance are not very well defined. As Habermas puts it; “One may speak of refeudalization of the public sphere in yet another, more exact sense. For the kind of integration of mass entertainment with advertising, which in the form of public relations already assumes a “political” character, subjects even the state itself to its code. The state has to “address” its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity.” (Habermas 1989)

Bourdieu practiced empirical research that illustrated how economic capital interacts with cultural and social capital. Habermas’ Public Sphere can be seen as an ideal, the empirical works of Bourdieu as grounded explanations with further theories on structural distinctions. Further, Habermas is concerned with what he deems *refeudalization* of the public sphere. The counterfactual mode to refeudalization can be considered deliberation and egalitarianism, which implies room for in depth thinking, consideration, and analysis.

Because of the recent use of private data for personalised political campaigning, the policies practiced by Facebook in such cases is the epitome of refeudalization as the private of information of citizens is sold and utilized in order to tailor the ways political promotion is angled.

I list six ideal criteria for a public sphere as read from Habermas *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

1. Including. A public sphere has to be open to all in forming public opinion.
2. Opportunity for deliberation.
3. The possibility of fragmentation or many smaller public spheres
4. Absence of commercial motives or an approximation to absence as primary motivation.
5. Freedom of speech, freedom of association and the freedom of expression and publication of opinions.
6. Allows for integrity in opinions without danger to personal or group security.

One might discuss as how one can exclude commercial interests and economic capital when discussing a public sphere, and the answer is that one probably cannot.

### **3.1 Refeudalization of the Public Sphere**

“The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public: they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publically relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: People’s public use of their reason.” Habermas (1989 p.27)

As mentioned in the previous paragraph Habermas criticizes what he conceptualizes as a *refeudalization* of the public sphere. In an interpretation of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* by Goode (2005) refeudalization of the Public Sphere is seen as connected to an increase in use of visual media in news and other media production. More specifically to depictions of the body as physical object and as in opposition to the elevation of public discourse (Goode 2005) In one sense, the Internet, social media, globalization, the multiple sources of multimodal information and rapidly developing technology counteracts some of the mechanisms Habermas feared in refeudalization. There is ample opportunity to publicly

humiliate and punish because of the readily available channels of distribution, such as social media, citizen journalism and web sites managed solely by distributing gossip and celebrity related content. Yet, for most people the psychological effect can be the rather opposite of fear of being publicly humiliated as the focal point of attention often is on celebrities in a way that gives the relative impression of privacy and an ordinary and uninteresting life for the observing citizen. Further, the internet and social media like Facebook in particular, also creates a digital space that defies geographical limitations and allows for companionship and sense of community in ways that otherwise would have been limited.

Habermas made a distinction between *lifeworld* and *system*, when considering society, where *lifeworld* is a person's everyday lived subjective reality, including work and informal social interactions, and system is any given structures of State, Law and Government that the individual is subject to by premises. Social media constitute a new sphere in which the users choose how to construct the reality that they present in this sphere, and further as members of groups. In what ways and how the affordances of different social media are utilized can differ, and some of these aspects are part of the later investigation. According to Habermas *system* and *lifeworld* have become "uncoupled" in modernity with ambivalent consequences; "... in modern societies, economic and bureaucratic spheres emerge in which social relations are regulated only via money or power. Norm-conformist attitudes and identity-forming social memberships are neither necessary nor possible in these spheres, they are made peripheral instead."(sic, Goode p.69)

In my reading of Habermas this "uncoupling" of *system* and *lifeworld* can be transferred to refeudalization as a function in public displays of punishment, humiliation, celebrity focused entertainment and other overly vulgar focus on personal affairs. In this sense refeudalization can be seen as in contrast to the values of the Enlightenment and its focus on and advancement in fields relating to reason, liberty and tolerance. Public humiliation and punishment in the perspective that can be interpreted as appearing in the Digital Public Sphere can be experienced as public humiliation and punishment by invasion of privacy as through both traditional and new media. The internet and the informational flow afforded by modern technology makes potentially damaging information easily distributed within a very short timeframe. Public punishment through humiliation in traditional media and social media becomes more robust and massive in scope due to the rapid distribution in new media. These kinds of public discourses are largely a part of a commercialized entertainment business that grabs its material from reality, but twists and contorts it as to gain maximum commercial and

tabloid publicity, and by this economic capital. On a level relating to global conflict video footage of brutal displays of violence, torture and molestation both in areas of the world characterized by seemingly well-functioning government systems and in areas where there is known open conflict and war can be very visible in the distributed news media. Such news are overwhelming and can give the impression of an uncontrollable and chaotic digital sphere for those not well versed in navigating such technology, yet at the same time provide reality oriented documentation of violence and conflict.

One of the ways a Public Sphere could be more separate from the commercial business is by support not dependent on business interests. A public sphere not driven by commerce, or less dependent on commerce, might give more room for deliberate discussion amongst peers. An ideal Public Sphere would be characterized by deliberate discourse that is focused on both concrete and universal issues, rather than on the individual example. This does not mean that individual examples cannot be relevant and important in bringing issues forward to the Public Sphere as in news media or institutions, yet in a lasting political discussion the overall principles should be of main concern, not the fleshing out of individual cases and lives. A case example is the #metoo cases as they were brought forth in Norwegian press and in social media. First individual cases were reported, and then came various experts in the field, psychologists, experts on laws regarding harassment and so forth. The development became one such that the reporting of individual cases came parallel to a more impersonal debate on the principles defining the borders between subjective experience, harassment, helplessness and power, position and fear of loss of future opportunities.

One could argue that this illustrates two different modes of Public Sphere that influence and enrich each other. The difference between the first person focused, individual, at times first hand experienced narrative on one side and the meta - perspective commentaries and discussions by journalists, different experts and the general public becomes one of emotionality and authenticity and informal versus formalized competence. One that is fast paced, bold, to the point and in vivid colours, and another that is deliberate, reflecting, allows for side-tracking and careful nuance. In many cases it might be as simple as that, yet in these particular cases the victim narratives were often the more nuanced and reflecting, and the “experts” reactions at times seemingly offended and defensive, maybe due to the very basic category of gender as part of the issue.



In the #metoo cases there would not have been any cases to initiate the public attention concerning the issue without the individual and personal victim statements, however at some point individual testimonies lead to discussions on principles governing ethics and ideals in situations of unequal power where gender often is a component. The personal and individual component of the #metoo cases are not ideal according to a strict reading of Habermas Public Sphere, and can be interpreted as tabloid and vengeful had it not been for the fact that most informers and in Norway also most offenders were anonymous. However, such cases reflect how a public sphere can grow and how a issues can become part of a discourse that is more or less present as ambivalent in public opinion over time. Choosing to allow anonymity to both the victims and the offenders of these cases makes the issue less vulnerable for complaints on being speculative or tabloid. Anonymity also gives more perspective to the universal and deliberate discussion on mechanisms of and cultural norms concerning gender, labour, sexuality and power, and is often an important measure for those involved to dare to stand forth at all. Further, this is a case where issues that are often considered very private and not appropriate for public discussion or deliberation was brought forward in order to showcase how individual reports are not caused by unrelated personal incidents, but might be symptomatic of unhealthy cultural practices in the entertainment industry. In order to take away individual misplaced experience of shame from the perspective of the victim it can be helpful to know that one is not alone in having experienced sexualized trauma, harassment or discrimination.

### **3.2 Critique of the Habermasian perspective of a public sphere**

In the paper “Rethinking The Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy”, Fraser (1990, a) points to important differences in conceptualization and defines “the public sphere” as used when referring to everything outside the domestic or familial sphere. She further argues a view of “the public sphere” as a conflation of at least three distinct realms: “...the state, the official-economy of paid employment, and areas of public discourse”. These concepts as conflated account for a systemic misogyny in the description by Fraser (1990) The public sphere in Habermasian terms can help overcome these issues in that it is the space where “...citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction”

Fraser then introduces four assumptions underlying the Habermasian bourgeois conception of public sphere:

- Not the state, but receives information from the state
- Deliberate as peers
- Accessible information about state functioning so that state activity can be subject to scrutiny and the force of “public opinion”
- Free press, legally guaranteed freedom of speech and free assembly

Fraser (1990, b) offers further critique on the conception of the bourgeois public sphere as *The Public Sphere*, and points to a plurality of competing counter publics, and suggests that there is a ‘bourgeois masculinist’ public sphere that builds on the four assumptions (paraphrased from Fraser 1990, p. 62 c)

1. That social equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy.
2. That a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics.
3. That discourse in public spheres should always exclude discussions on “private interests “ and “private issues”
4. That a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state.

From the basis of the structures described by Fraser one can derive nuances to the criteria for a well-functioning Public Sphere. These criteria will not only serve the deliberation aspect of a Public Sphere, but also minimize exclusion based on ethnicity, religion, skin colour, political views or disabilities. The ideal Public Sphere according to Fraser (1990) then is dependent on;

1. Social equality
2. The possibility of a nexus of multiple publics
3. The opportunity to bring seemingly private issues to public attention

4. Dynamic and fluid interaction between civil society and state (without citizen groups having to be the state per se)

The premises upholding a well-functioning and democratic Public Sphere is thus much more dependent on the interactions of groups, voluntary participation in community and civil engagement than on news and media corporations alone. It is in this perspective that social media becomes even more relevant as it in many ways facilitate the dynamic interaction between private and community life in that it allows for discourse on most subjects both on individual and group level. Considering the distinct realms drawn by Fraser, the state and public discourse, are presented in social media such as Facebook. The state by Facebook pages that represent different governmental departments and agencies, and public discourse present in social media by newspapers and other media corporations, by diverse forums for discussion and by ideal organisations and political parties.

## **4 Democracy and psychometric evaluations and digital personalised content**

Kosinski, Stillwell and Graepel (2013) did a study on Facebook likes (58 000 individuals) in which they found that they could predict sexual orientation, skin colour and political orientation by between 80 and 90 % accuracy. Here is an example of the comparisons and implied correlations:

“For example, users who liked the “Hello Kitty” brand tended to be high on Openness and low on “Conscientiousness”, “Agreeableness” and “Emotional Stability”. They were also more likely to have Democratic political views and to be of African-American origin, predominantly Christian and slightly below average age”

(Kosinski, Stillwell and Graepel 2013)

Different parameters can covariate statistically without being causally related (Svartdal 2006) yet a study such as this one illustrates how information online is combined in profiling purposes used to enhance marketing and advertising. The researchers further imply potential usage such as personalisation of all kinds of digital systems and devices (including cars), online advertising, and further measuring of psychological traits. Negative implications mentioned are use of information that the individual may not have intended to share. This is

relevant when considering a digital public sphere as inclusive or inclusive, and has to do with the personal cost in cultural capital in participating. The suggested use is the sampling of information based on other peoples social and cultural capital with commerce as intent, in essence; by submitting such information one is giving away parts of ones embedded social and cultural capital for commercial agents to gain economic capital. This again implies the relevance of social media algorithms to the distribution of news to different groups. If the Facebook Newsfeed algorithm is based on psychometrically calculated user group interfaces, then such customizations might streamline content in a way that enhances in-group loyalty and disrupt areas that are mediating between groups that are otherwise different concerning sociodemographic variables nevertheless might share common interests. Algorithms control how the user interaction influences the Newsfeed output, and as such the user interacts in ways that shape the experience.

There are several concerns regarding Facebook especially related to the accessibility of information on users and privacy rights. The Snowden revelations in 2013 brought new actuality to dystopian descriptions of a society where inhabitants are subjected to surveillance and controlled through digital data collection (Lyon 2014). Recent events have shown how digital footprints can be misused as sensitive data information from apps communicating with Facebook was used by a corporation (Cambridge Analytica) working with psychometric evaluation with political campaign advertisement in mind. This can be a democratic problem especially if citizens are not aware of how their personal information is used and to which degree the information they receive is based on customized criteria. As such issues become apparent it becomes clear that technological corporations such as Facebook can be considered new actors that redefine political communication (Kreiss and McGregor 2018). The communication is no longer between the sender-media-audience, there is a new and dynamic component within the media, the algorithm. One could argue that the journalist is to the news article what the programmer is to the algorithm. The relative distance between communicative message and receiver has nevertheless an addition in that news flow now consumed through Facebook interface also is curated by an algorithm where it before would have been through selective process by editors of newspapers and then the reader alone. Traditional news media could never be as customised, dynamic and emotionally immediate in its rhetoric and communicative discourse, and would not have the digital footprints that allows for analysis of metadata in a way that can facilitate personalised information flow in spaces that might appear impersonal.

The psychological knowledge in use when doing psychometric evaluation for commercial purposes is often based on research on personality and on personality testing (González 2017), more specifically on the personality model The Big Five. The data used by Cambridge Analytica in political campaigning was harvested through a third party app. Personality assessment using the Big Five model places the personality of individuals within high to low scores on the dimensions of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. High scores on Openness is associated with being imaginative, low with being conventional. High scores on conscientiousness with being organized, low with being spontaneous. High scores on Extraversion with being outgoing, low with being solitary. High scores on Agreeableness with being trusting, low with being competitive. High scores on Neuroticism is associated with being prone to stress and worry and low with being emotionally stable. The dimensions of the Big Five has been researched in connection to personality traits associated with popularity. Especially being outgoing and social is associated with popularity in a study by Quercia, Lambiotte, Stillwell, Kosinski and Crowcroft (2012) and a study on predicting personality that was conducted using data from Twitter (Quercia, Kosinski, Stillwell and Crowcroft 2011) An open webpage offering psychometric evaluation in line with the Big Five model can be accessed at <https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/IPIP-BFFM/>

Such privacy rights are further connected to the relative differences in utilizing the digital sphere and social media, and to the ethical considerations in utilizing information on individuals in a way that is very different from that which they originally and within the given frame of understanding gave permission for. Such use for scientific purposes might be harmless and for the good of humanity, yet users should be aware of the possibility that such information can be used in ways that they themselves would not have preferred. The social aspect of social media is a key concept, as it taps into our basic need for social interaction, as well as our more spontaneous, humoristic and impulsive sides. Social interaction on social media probably appears as close to the authentic immediate sphere that it taps into our impulsive and less defensive modes in a way that make people less controlled in decision processes than they might have been in a context where information for commercial or political campaigning use was gathered explicitly with this in mind. This can function as a kind of priming and as rhetorically coercive. To appeal to our emotions is one way of making a point and can be indirectly coercive, in commerce, in politics and in personal interactions. Whether it yields the wanted results or not probably depends on complex psychological

dynamics, yet sometimes it might be as simple as evoking positive or aversive affect in individuals. In predicting such reactions knowledge of personality traits can be very useful to those investigating or marketing as knowledge of such traits help in personalised advertisement such as the kind Facebook is financed by. The interactionist principles of digital social media are relevant to a digital public sphere in that it entails a new actor in communication and information concerning formation of public opinion. The way content is customised and personalised in large social media such as Facebook, can potentially increase or decrease in-group and out-group effects in ways that can shift political affiliation. Certain selection in information is unavoidable. In traditional media use individual selection occurred when reading a newspaper in physical format, on for instance what information is being given particular interest and what is being skimmed through. When processing news and information through social media with dynamic algorithms such as on the Facebook interface, part of the decision process is moved from the individual to the weightings decided by programmers of the Newsfeed algorithm.

Accordingly, an individual that experiences massive amounts of positive attention related to sharing content on Facebook is naturally more inclined to continue sharing. The kind of content that receives minimal attention is likely to be interpreted as uninteresting or unwanted by the individual that again might publish less content of the particular valence. In these ways algorithms and social network shapes and conditions the behaviour of users on Facebook. Because of this some argue that criteria defining algorithms in social media should be transparent. Transparency in the functional and relative weightings of the algorithms that govern informational flow on Facebook will enable users to understand better what is probably the positive feedback loop that makes some posts on Facebook largely popular while others remain seemingly invisible, in essence how algorithmic decisions shape informational flow (Diakopoulis 2016). However from the perspective relating to misuse of private information and digital footprints Ananny and Crawford (2018) argue that a future approach is to rather construct systems that cannot be seen into, cannot be traced. The necessity of algorithmic filtering is to maintain a safe and social online sphere; the danger is that it could end up used in ways akin to censoring, in addition to the coercive and manipulative elements of customized political advertisement.

## 5 Method

Twitter has frequently been used in research on social media and in psychometric Big Data analysis mainly because Twitter data is relatively easily available compared to data on many other social media such as Facebook. In this thesis, the use of Facebook is researched because of its massive popularity, its combination of content, and because written content is present to a larger degree than for instance on Snapchat or Instagram. Facebook also has an obvious quality of inviting the user to represent themselves; the interface contains programmed personalised messages that address the user, sometimes by name with questions such as “What is on your mind today, X?” or “How are you feeling today, X?”. As the ground material for the study was researched, I also found that many governmental departments and other units representing State apparatus represented by separate Facebook pages. This in addition to pages run by a multitude of national interest groups and ideal organizations, political parties, local sports teams, libraries, television channels, newspapers and local schools, makes a strong argument for considering Facebook a digital Public Sphere. There are most often opportunity for commenting openly and more privately on the pages of such Facebook pages, and as such there is a semi-public space that allows for both comments that others can follow and discuss further and for those that are exclusive for the representatives administering the page in question. I was curious of to what point people viewed this social media as part of a public sphere, and if they used it as such.

When choosing method for researching views on Facebook as a possible Digital Public Sphere, questionnaire was chosen because of the advantages of allowing for anonymised individual perspectives that could also be analysed statistically. Some item questions allowing for individual answers that require qualitative interpretation, gives the advantage of evaluating individual perspectives more thoroughly. Perspectives that give new insight can also give grounds for generating new hypothesis and even bring new perspective to established empirical science.

The method is based on an idea by the author, and was built and developed around some of the extensive existing empirical research concerning social media, public sphere, new media, digital community and political engagement. New data was gathered from responses to a questionnaire distributed by mail (See Svartdal 2006 p.122, Evans 2007 p. 111 and Creswell 2003)

A pilot questionnaire was made using Easyquest (<https://www.easyquest.com/no/>) and Nettskjema (UiO) was used for the second version of the questionnaire. The initial questionnaire was sent with invitation letter by the author to the leader of a medium sized workplace after informal communication face to face and by telephone. The leader of the medium sized workplace distributed the letter of invitation with the link to the online questionnaire to the employees of the workplace.

The second version of the questionnaire was distributed by inviting three leaders to distribute the questionnaire by mail amongst their employees. Participation was explicitly voluntarily on all occasions, and none of the questions were obligatory.

Statistical analysis can make more apparent or reveal correlations that otherwise appear as possible faulty claims and can reveal contextual frames that are not obvious using only human cognitive abilities when analysing quantitative data. The participants of the currently presented questionnaire are anonymous which is intended to decrease respondent bias and confirmation bias. Respondent anonymity also decreases the risk of bias from the side of the researcher. Confirmation bias can cause respondents to answer what they believe the researcher wants to hear, or what they think is the “objectively right” answer. A plus side in distribution by mail is that it is flexible because respondents can answer whenever they have the time within a given time period, and there is no need to make individual appointments in addition to that this feature allows for total anonymity.

There are several items in the questionnaire and the variables are binary in the case of yes or no questions and in some cases nominal (different categories). Other question items are ordinal (there is a logical order). This means that the questionnaire was designed in a mixed method (Creswell 2003) which allows for both some statistical processing and also gives some qualitative data material. For more on method where there is intent to process data by statistical methods I recommend Field (2009) or the more updated edition by the same author.

## **5.1 Materiale**

The material consists of the theoretical material, scientific papers on the subject, data from Statistics Norway, Ipsos, Mediebarometeret and the new data collected through this study.



## 5.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire has items concerning different subconcepts that are discussed as relevant in constituting a possible Digital Public Sphere. These items are the *dependent variables* of the study. There are some differences between the pilot version of the questionnaire and the second version of the questionnaire; I will discuss the consequences of this further in the discussion part after having reported the results.

### 1. *Frequency and time use concerning Facebook.*

The aspect of frequency and time use on Facebook is in itself an indicator of the relative importance of a digital medium, in this case Facebook specifically, in how individuals spend their time as civil citizens and sometimes in work related tasks. An increase in time use on social media together with a decrease in time use in other areas of activity indicates that social media is influencing the lives of large groups and thus, society on a larger scale.

- “How often do you log on Facebook?” (Answer alternatives range from “seldom or never” to “several times a day”)
- “How much time would you estimate that you spend on Facebook during an ordinary week?” (Answer alternatives are given in a frame of “less than one hour” until “more than ten hours”)

### 2. *Use of Facebook as source of information on politics and civil society.*

Items that operationalize this concept are:

- “Some get information on future events in their local community from Facebook. To what degree do you experience this?”
- “Are you a member of open or closed groups on facebook that are relevant to your local community such as neighbourhood watch groups, sports teams, groups related to your workplace, hiking groups or similar?”

- “Do you follow the page of a newspaper, journalist, politician, a political party or an interest organisation on facebook?”

**3. Use of Facebook as source of news.**

Items operationalizing this concept are:

- “Do you read news retrieved from social media such as Facebook or Twitter?”

- “Do you share news on Facebook?”

- “If you do read news through the Facebook interface as part of your everyday news consume, do you find these news;

- “on the webpage of the media corporation”

- “as shared by friends on Facebook”

- “as shared by non-profit organizations, unions, political parties or such”

- “shared by the Facebook-page of the newspaper or media corporation”

- “Other/Don’t know”

**4. Use of Facebook as channel of information from government, media and different interestgroups.**

Items that operationalize this concept are:

- “Do you follow the pages of a governmental department, office or other administration on Facebook?”

- “Do you follow the page of one or more non-profit organizations or interest organisations on Facebook?”

- “In your experience, do you get information from non-profit organisations or interest organisations on Facebook?”

- “In your experience, do you get information from governmental departments, offices or administration on Facebook?”

**5. *Active and participatory of Facebook as an arena for expression on opinions concerning society.***

Item operationalizing this concept:

- “Some people are active on Facebook by discussing different issues in commentary fields on private or public posts. To what degree would you say that you use Facebook for such activity?”

**6. *Participant evaluation of Facebook as private or public.***

Items covering this directly or indirectly:

- “Do you consider Facebook primarily a publicly available digital sphere or a personal network society?”
- “What kind of content do you normally see in the Facebook NewsFeed?”
- “If you share content on Facebook, what kind of content do you share most often?”

The operationalization of the variables are concretisations of the concepts in the different hypotheses that are derived from the *research question* that was presented during the introduction section; “Can social media, with focus on Facebook, be considered a part of a *Digital Public Sphere?*”

*Independent variables* of the study are age group, years of education, civil status, employment status and if there are children in the household or not.

Due to time restrictions there had not been applied to NSD (Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata), and this is the reason gender was emitted from the study as such exclusion would further safeguard the anonymity of the participants.

## 5.3 Participants

### *Respondents age:*

Age segment 18-25 N=3, age segment 26-33 N=16, age segment 34-41 N=11, age segment 42-49 N=9, age segment 50-57 N=8, age segment 58-65 N=5, age segment 66-73 N=4

### *Educational level of respondents:*

N = 61

77, 611 % of the respondents had three years or more of education from University/Høyskole.

### *Children or not in the household of the participants:*

N = 46

21 out of 46 participants live in households with one or more children.

### *Respondents employment status:*

N = 68

Full time employee N = 53, Temporary employee N = 4, Retired N = 2, Student N = 9

### *Facebook friends that one have not met face to face:*

N = 47

17 out of 47

## 5.4 Remarks on method

In 2005, 25,1 % of the Norwegian population had higher education from University or Høyskole. This includes about one fourth of the population (From Statistics Norway) This means that a study distributed at The University of Tromsø, the Arctic University of Norway, would risk a statistical bias in the sample in the direction that the percentage of respondents

with higher education is very high compared to an average representative sample of the Norwegian population. To control for this variable educational level is included as one of the variables in the questionnaire, and the study was distributed to participants in workplaces both outside UiT and at the UiT.

The pilot-study was administered to a workplace with varied educational level among employees. From one perspective higher education is a societal arena where digital tools and digitalization in general are particularly relevant. From such a viewpoint it is an advantage that some of the participants are in close proximity to these issues in everyday practice. Young adults are also the population that most heavily use the internet and social media, and as such this group should have well informed views and opinions on the subject.

The second version of questionnaire was administered by e-mail on a combination of invitation and snowball-recruitment (Evans 2007 and Svartdal 2006) Participants could choose which questions to answer or not, and answers were tied to an anonymised numerical data key.

All informant replies are anonymous and most analysis are conducted mainly on group level, all respondents are anonymous during the data analysis with the exception of the voluntary free form answers that are used to elaborate on certain perspectives and opinions.

Dependent variables are questions that enlighten how the participants view their own Facebook-use separating between those that mainly use Facebook for leisure or if Facebook is being used for organizing volunteer activity, for activity related to political engagement, news consume or other activity relevant for society.

The method of this study is twofold. Part one is a systematic gathering and reviewing of existing empirical material relevant to the subject matter. According to Svartdal (p. 102-106. 2006) it is not unusual for researchers to use an approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The distributed questionnaire is a mixed questionnaire where some of the items are qualitative and open for elaboration.

Creswell (2003, p.158) suggests several follow up letters when administering surveys in the mail. A similar approach can be utilised in web based e-mail questionnaires. The initial invitation to participate with link to the questionnaire was administered, and a week later the follow-up mail is sent in hopes to increase the percentage of responses. In the currently

presented study these recommendations were customized due to national holidays and other relevant and necessary considerations. The questionnaire was edited and revised after the pilot study, and the second version contains several question items not presented in the pilot study. These were reported in results and discussed where there were 30 or more respondents. Where items investigate the same sub concepts responses from the two datasets are combined. Some of the concepts are separated in order to allow for better analysis on the different sub-concepts of civil participation and political engagement. Number of responses on different question items vary due to the deliberately chosen option of leaving all questions as voluntary. Due to the very small sampling size, the results of this study will not necessarily be representative of the results that a larger population would have yielded.

## **6 Hypotheses and results**

### **6.1 Hypotheses**

*H1: Facebook is considered a public sphere although it is used for private and personal communication.*

*H2: Facebook is used as a channel for information to the Public Sphere by local and national government institutions.*

*H3: There is indirect use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere by following news –and media-corporations and reading their updates through the Facebook interface.*

*H4: Facebook is used as a Digital Public Sphere by ideal and non-profit organisations.*

*H5: Facebook is utilized as a Digital Public Sphere for locally embedded activity*

*H6: Facebook is used for discourse that is a part of the Public Sphere.*

## 6.2 Results

Number of respondents are indicated by N =

In total there was N = 65 individual responses on the questionnaire. As no items in the questionnaire are obligatory, the number of respondent cases will vary on question-item level.

## 6.3 Frequency of Facebook use

100 % of the respondents on the question item concerning everyday use of the Internet do use the Internet every day (N = 40)

61 out of 64 respondents have a Facebook account (95, 3 %)

On the question item concerning everyday use of Facebook (N = 57) 48 out of 57 respondents reply that they are online on the Facebook platform at least once a day.

## 6.4 Time use on Facebook

N = 48

- 4 out of 48 respondents reported spending more than 10 hours on Facebook a week.
- 8 out of 48 respondents spent between 7 and 10 hours weekly on Facebook
- 36 out of 48 respondents spent between 1 and 7 hours on Facebook a week.
- 10 out of 48 respondents spent less than 1 hour a week on Facebook
- 2 respondents spent no time or almost no time on Facebook during a regular week.

## **6.5 Operationalisations of a digital public sphere**

### ***Following newspapers, media corporations, journalists on Facebook:***

31 (79,5 %) out of 39 follow one or more of a newspaper, media corporation and journalists on Facebook.

### ***Following political parties or politicians on Facebook:***

29 out of 57 follow a politician or a political party on Facebook.

### ***Following ideal organisations or interest organisations on Facebook:***

31 out of 38 respondents follow a non-profit organisation or interest organisation on Facebook.

### ***Following official departments, committees or other office related to State and Government on Facebook:***

25 out of 49 follow an official department, a committee or other office related to State and Government on Facebook.

### ***Actual experience receiving information on interest organisations or ideal organisations on Facebook:***

31 out of 39 respondents.

### ***Actual experience receiving information on political parties or politicians on Facebook:***

13 out of 39 respondents.

### ***Actual experience receiving information on official departments, committees or other office related to State and Government on Facebook:***

13 out of 39 respondents.

### ***Membership in open or closed groups on Facebook that have local community relevance:***

34 out of 40.



### ***Information on events in local community from Facebook:***

53 out of 59 answer that they agree, agree to some degree, or agree strongly that they get information on events in their local community activity from Facebook.

## **6.6 Sharing on Facebook**

Question items regarding sharing on Facebook. (How often do you share content on Facebook through publishing a status, sharing images or links?): N=55

- 28 out of 55 (50, 91 %) report sharing content from their Facebook profile once or more a week, every now and then or at special occasions.
- 21 out of 55 (38, 18 %) of the respondents that have a Facebook account respond that they almost never or never share content through their profile.
- 6 out of 55 (10, 91 %) respondents share content on their Facebook profile between once a week and several times a day.

### ***Active participation in discussions on Facebook:***

Question item on discussion on posts on Facebook: N = 57

7 out of 57 respondents answer that they sometimes will participate by commenting and discussing on posts on Facebook, an 50 out of 57 respondents will very seldom or never comment on posts on Facebook.

### ***News consume through Facebook:***

N = 59

49 out of 59 respondents report that they often or every now and then read news through Facebook.

### ***Group memberships in groups on Facebook that are relevant to local community***

Group membership in groups on Facebook that are relevant to local community: N = 57

48 out of 57 (84,2 %) respondents answer that they are members of open or closed Facebook-groups that handle and discuss subjects that are relevant to local community. Examples included in the question item were; “local sports teams, hiking trip groups, groups related to common areas in residents areas, groups related to the workplace or other”.

***Free form qualitative question item on propensity to participate in commentary fields in social media:***

On the free form written question item “What would motivate you to comment on issues in social media?” there were 16 responses.

- One respondent reply that they consider the climate in Facebook discussions “...polarizing, one has to defend oneself, and it becomes exhausting very quickly, then I don’t dare to participate”
- Several respondents find that issues that they find very engaging or injustice in general might make them find it worth the effort to comment on issues on posts on Facebook.
- Some respondents underline that a more decent and factual tone of discussion perhaps would have made them more inclined to participate in discussions on Facebook.

On the free form written response question item regarding viewing Facebook as a private or a public sphere there were mixed responses.

- Several respondents consider the Internet as public in general when choosing what they share and not. These respondents include Internet suppliers, the owners of social media sites and information that is spread in a way they can’t control as relevant in how their information is shared.
- Data-mining and psychometric sampling for advertising purposes by Facebook or as sold to third party applications is mentioned as a reason to not share as much information by some respondents.
- A repeated opinion is that Facebook is presented as a personal, social sphere, but users are cautious because they feel that it is actually a public sphere in the sense that very little can be assured total private security.

- Some respondents uphold the importance and practicality of the graded privacy settings on Facebook that allows for layers of information to different groups of friends and acquaintances.
- “You give away rights to your own pictures and other often sensitive information.”
- “It is private in the sense that I act there as a private citizen, but public in the sense that many of the things I do (likes or comments) can be seen by people far out of my circle of acquaintances.”

## 7 Findings and discussion

The percentage or share of respondents that do use Facebook in the ways that are operationalized as concretes of a Digital Public Sphere or community signifies the share that is using Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere. Cross-questioning as regarding following vs receiving information from specific pages can give indication to the functions of the underlying algorithms that constitute the Facebook Newsfeed, and further studies could be done in this direction as it indicates the interactionist perspectives of technology. If there is a strong correlation between respondent tendency to follow for instance news related Facebook pages and respondent experience in news related content in Newsfeed, then the personalised settings are weighted in the news feed algorithm. In this material the sample is too small for such analysis.

### 7.1 H1. Facebook is considered a public sphere although it is used for private and personal communication.

On the question items regarding if respondents consider Facebook a *personal space* or a *public sphere*, 27 out of N=40 answer that they consider Facebook a public sphere. N = 2 respondents consider Facebook a purely personal space, and 11 respondents give ambivalent answers in that they consider Facebook to be a personal space that is publicly available or that it is both a private and a public sphere. More on the ambivalent responses later. This gives some support for **H1**: Facebook is considered a public sphere although it is used for

private and personal communication is confirmed. The respondents results show enough overall ambiguity to confirm that most users of Facebook in the sample currently presented do show restrictions when posting, in what information they share and how they share it. Facebook is as such not a medium of immediacy, and how close a representation on Facebook is to the reality will vary. The respondents have interest in using Facebook in diverse ways that are discussed otherwise in this thesis. Many of the respondents share the privacy concerns that have been in focus during the Cambridge Analytica hearings.

Findings support *H1: Facebook is considered a public sphere although it is used for private and personal communication.*

## **7.2 H2: Facebook is used as a channel in line with a Digital Public Sphere by governmental departments, office or other administration**

In the question items concerning following governmental departments, office or other administration on Facebook 25 out of 59 reply that they do, and 13 out of 39 report that they get information from such pages by following. These results show that in the sample presented the majority does not use Facebook for information directly from governmental departments, office or other administration. This does not exclude use as public sphere, only that such elements of a public sphere are not in use at that particular interface. In line with Habermas (2002) this only points to how a public sphere exists as intermediating between individuals and state.

Findings confirm **H2**: Facebook is used as a channel in line with a Digital Public Sphere by government departments, office and other administration.

## **7.3 H3: News consume through Facebook**

Concerning Facebook as indirect filtering mechanism in news consume, 65 % of the respondents (N = 40) report reading news as distributed through Facebook “often” or “every

now and then” and 61,0 % (N=59) report reading news through Facebook *or* Twitter “often” or “every now and then”.

The results support **H3**: There is indirect use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere by following news and media-corporations and reading their updates through the Facebook interface.

#### **7.4 H4: Facebook is used as a Digital Public Sphere by idealistic and non-profit organizations**

Response to the questionnaire show that 31 out of 38 respondents follow non-profit organisations on Facebook, and 31 out of 39 reply that they do get information from these organisations through the page on Facebook. This gives indirect evidence that Facebook works as a Digital public sphere where organisations not driven by commercial motives can operate. **H4**: *Facebook is used as a Digital Public Sphere by idealistic and non-profit organisations* is confirmed.

#### **7.5 H5: Locally embedded social capital as practiced through Facebook**

The most salient results in the present study was concerning use of Facebook as a *Digital Public Sphere* in local community related activity. A percentage of 90 %, which in this case is 53 out of 59 respondents (N= 59) agree or strongly agree that they get information on activity and events in their local community through Facebook. Further, 48 out of 57 respondents reply that they are members of Facebook groups that are relevant to local community activity. This means that a large portion use Facebook for information concerning activity in their local community, which supports the notion that Facebook can be used and is in use as a Digital Public Sphere. Using Facebook as a digital public sphere concerning discussions, information on events, logistics in community related activity and so forth is very likely tied to offline discourse in local public spheres. That a Public Sphere is unidirectional concerning publishing content is mostly the case in the majority of the population considering national and local

newspapers and television, and there is easier opportunity for private citizens to initiate issues or create groups on Facebook. There is a probability that those that are members of groups relevant to local community or non-profit organisations on Facebook practice this expression of group membership as part of a public sphere in offline situations, and such interactions could be researched further.

Locally embedded activity in cultural, sports, and local political events are organized, planned and informed about on a platform that is developed and maintained by programmers far, far away in spatial location. Though the sample size is small these results still give indication that Facebook is used as a Digital Public Sphere for locally embedded community activity.

Locally embedded activity is defined as a part of a public sphere on the premises that the activity is open to all citizens, within given reasonable criteria (such as kids the right age in the case of children's sports teams for instance), and that its activity is communicated or documented in a way that contributes to a public sphere. As the organizers of for instance a children's sports team engage themselves in local media fronting the interests of the team, they are part of a public sphere. These groups can be considered separate public spheres by the definition by Habermas, Lennox and Lennox (1974) that contribute to a more encompassing public sphere by both having common interests with other locally embedded organisations of similar activity, and by representing the specifics of the local environment and those exact individuals.

The results thus support hypothesis *H5: Facebook is utilized as a Digital Public Sphere for locally embedded activity.*

## **7.6 H6: Facebook is used for discourse that is part of the Public Sphere**

*H6:* Facebook is used for discourse that is a part of the Public Sphere. Very few respondents in the current study report *participating* in discussions that are political or concerned with large society in Facebook. There are other parameters that function as indirect use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere. The question items concerning following Departments of State or other official governing offices on Facebook are relevant concerning an implicit and not active participatory use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere. Considering this,

results show that 29 out of 57 respondents to this question follow a political party or a politician on Facebook, which amounts to roughly half of the respondents. 31 out of 38 follow the Facebook page of Idealistic or non-profit organisations and 25 out of 49 follow the Facebook page of an official department, a committee or another office related to State and Government. 31 out of 39 respondents follow the page of a newspaper, media corporation or journalist on Facebook, and 49 out of 59 respondents report that they “often or every now and then” read news through the Facebook platform.

It is unclear how answers from more respondents would change this perspective, and the reasons for answering some and not other questions can be so diverse that there is no point in speculating in a sample such as the one presented. The questions that most participants have answered in the questionnaire yielded the number of individual participants to 65, so a share of 31 out of these would not be a small share given the small sample size.

Further, I would argue that the use of Facebook in planning or participating in local community activity also indirectly implies a use that makes Facebook part of a less private and personal space, and to a larger degree pertaining to a Digital Public Sphere. The indirect benchmarking involved in following politicians, political parties, media corporations or even non-profit organisations also indicate activity that is considered relevant to a public sphere and considering these elements that also constitute a Digital Public Sphere, *H6* can not be rejected. *Facebook is used in discourse that is part of the Public Sphere, H6 is confirmed.*

## 8 Discussion

### 8.1 “Can social media, with focus on Facebook, be considered a part of a *Digital Public Sphere*?”

*Can Facebook be considered a Digital Public Sphere?* What did the results of the questionnaire show, how can they be interpreted? How do the results from the presently collected new empirical material relate to previous scientific studies with similar hypotheses? In attempting to answer these questions I will revisit the questions from earlier in this thesis,

and then point to the results of the small-scale questionnaire. Premises for a well - functioning public sphere were listed as;

1. Including. A public sphere has to be open to all in forming public opinion.
2. Opportunity for deliberation.
3. The possibility of fragmentation or many smaller public spheres
4. Absence of commercial motives or an approximation to absence as primary motivation.
5. Freedom of speech, freedom of association and the freedom of expression and publication of opinions.
6. Allows for integrity in opinions without danger to personal or group security.

One could add in concordance with Fraser (1990)

7. Including channels of information sharing and distribution of discourse.
8. Egalitarian in ideal and discourse.

Facebook is separate from the state in most concerns excluding juridical limitations as it is a commercial transnational corporation based in the USA. During the Cambridge Analytica process Zuckerberg (CEO of Facebook) had to answer to the American National Senate. As such, Facebook is restricted by American laws, in addition to the terms and conditions on which the users agree upon when creating a user account. I would argue that Facebook probably is no more dependent on the State than any American newspaper. However, in Nordic context where the press is separate from State in the sense that it is free to be critical towards affairs of the State and government apparatus, yet receives press support, conditions should be ideal (NOU 2017:7). Press support is instrumental in keeping the news media independent as mediators of different publics and for communicating a pluralist public opinion, which again is necessary for freedom of speech. A dominating degree of dependency on shareholders or populist content can diminish the informative, nuanced and fact oriented content of news media. Threats to cut support to the press from governmental budgets can also lead to a less diverse and pluralist press. There have been discussions concerning



censoring on Facebook and the limits between national security and unwarranted surveillance. Facebook is inclusive in that it states that anyone above the age of 13 can join, and the apparent tolerance for diversity in content. The exclusivity of Facebook mainly consists of the necessary economic capital in order to be online and keep technological tools to utilize the platform. Facebook appears rather pluralist, at least in user group. This can alone be accounted for by the large portion of users in Norway, and further in other parts of the world. Regarding pluralist content the data from the present study shows that the news world and content from personal lives of users is the most frequent content. This implies that the not many of the participants in the current research sample are active in publishing directly politically related content or participating in political discussions on Facebook. As such, direct activity in using Facebook as a digital public sphere is not the majority use. The element of commerce as discussed in Habermas is definitely the critical point in the arguments pro and con Facebook as a *Digital Public Sphere*. Facebook was founded as a business and is conducted as the multibillion corporation that it actually is. According to Zuckerberg the main economic capital is from advertising. When cases such as The Cambridge Analytica emerge, a relevant question becomes how intimate and how encompassing the harvesting of user social and cultural capital is, and if users can trust the corporation in the future.

The concepts operationalized in the questionnaire are reflected in the dichotomies passive-active, private-public, purely social-relevant for society and local-national. The results of the presented study also indicate that there perhaps not are such strict dichotomies in all realms. Considering the passive-active dichotomy, the choice to refrain from having an account is the most definitive passive status in this perspective. On the other end of the spectrum, to publish often, and preferably content that is ideologically, politically or otherwise relevant to groups, and in settings that are open to all that are online, would constitute a high level of activity in using Facebook as a digital public sphere. The most fluid of the dichotomies listed here are as such the one concerning “social-relevant to society”. This is perhaps some of the core of the study, to what degree is a digital public sphere practiced as intermediating between individual and groups, and to what degree is the place of the individual in group a societal responsibility? Results indicate that the type of use by the individual is decisive in this process, and that there is an ambivalence in both wanting to have access to information yet wanting to keep the integrity of personal information. There is no doubt that Facebook can be

used for purposes pertaining to a *Digital Public Sphere*, and is utilized as such by a share of its users.

Because of the sample size there was not done any further analysis on the independent variables age group, years of education, civil status, employment status and if there are children in the household or not. Had there been a significantly larger data material different statistical models would have been applied. Statistics from large-scale national surveys indicate that the results from the present study at least are in line with statistics on approximate parameters that can be considered statistically representative for the Norwegian population such as concerning time use and news consume. The results nevertheless give indications that can be interesting in directing and defining future studies, and have a considerable intrinsic value.

In future studies in related subjects, the author would strongly recommend that gender is controlled for as variable in analysis. On a quick, subjective check it appears as if gender might have predictive power on type of use of the social media Facebook, especially gender in combination with being a parent. Most females with families appear to share more content directly connected to children and family life than men do. This perspective might be relevant and active only based on the information each user feeds the NewsFeed algorithm. Facebook users that post about children might be active in a way that informs the algorithm that they have interest in children, which leads the weighted algorithm to prioritize more such content in the Newsfeed of said users. Such differences can, but do not necessarily, reflect cultural practices and are significant when researching what perspectives and even HOW different values are presented. It probably illustrates how the Facebook algorithm works, and is reactive to how each user utilizes Facebook as a media. This is a speculation that could be elaborated upon in other controlled studies, and indirectly has been researched in studies mentioned in the current thesis.

## **8.2 Idealized self representations or real-time authentic social interaction?**

To what degree a social media profile is an idealized presentation or an authentic presentation of an individual relies on the type of social media and the chosen patterns of usage. Social

media users that adopt a more groomed presentation are not necessarily more vain or less genuine, the presentation can reflect more time spent on the given social media, a more well maintained persona overall or occupational status that naturally motivates some self-consciousness in representing. Social and representative interaction and presentation probably appears as more genuine and authentic when social media is utilized in a very intuitive and immediate sense, and even more so in the case of social media that are based on real-time user-interaction. The more the given social media relies on immediacy, the more impulsive, direct and closer to the core response of the individual in question, the closer to offline communication any representation in social media will be. Individuals with personality traits that do not correlated with impulsivity probably will not apply those patterns of usage in social media as in other areas of life, and are probably less presented in the social media that relies mostly on this kind of use, such as Twitter. Where the medium in use presents itself with many opportunities of revising and editing, a multimedia mode of document use and presents other user accounts that are seemingly well maintained, the unexperienced user will implicitly be invited to adopt similar modes of use. This logic finds support in most studies on presentation of personality in social media. A study on automatic personality assessment through social media language by Park, Schwartz, Eichstaedt, Kern, Kosinski, Stillwell, Ungar and Seligman (2015) finds that social media users present true, authentic and not idealized versions of themselves on social media, and that this approach can predict psychological well-being and mood. This study used data from a third party application (myPersonality) circulating within the Facebook user platform. However, there are already significant bias in studies like these. One is response bias in that the act of utilizing such apps might in itself imply a selection in responses based on certain personality criteria such as openness or extroversion. One might infer that such traits have a high probability of coinciding with being honest and genuine in social media, and as such there has been conducted a study on open and extroverted people that confirms that they also are so in social media. Those inclined not to be so open online will probably never take such a test in the first place. Still, the privacy issues have shown to be a problem.

There are studies such as one that found that introverts flourished in social media (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel and Fox 2002) and that social capital is empirically different in offline situations to online situations (de Zúñiga, Barnidge and Sherman 2017). Such findings suggest that users adapt to the different contextual premises of different spheres of interaction, as they would differentiate between social interaction in the workplace and for instance a

family celebration. To conclude; findings from the discussed literature suggest that the person as presented on Facebook is in concordance with the person in face to face situations, though different traits can be active in different spheres. This also appears to be the case concerning online vs offline situations.

### **8.3 On algorithms that control informational flow**

Mike Ananny (2016) define “networked information algorithms” as an “assemblage of institutionally situated computational code, human practices and normative logics” This definition beautifully hints to the social aspects of the architecture of algorithms. As one institution is based on certain algorithmic principles that imply a distinct kind of selection in informational and distributional prioritizing, a different institution or organisation will weight differently. To adapt to such environmental differences is a part of the human everyday learning mechanisms. Algorithms in platforms such as Facebook invite to user customization in a way that both maintains the loyalty of diverse user-groups and that allows for programming development by computing based on feedback from users.

Rader and Gray (2015) conducted a study on Facebook users understanding of algorithmic functions. The main goal of the study was to better understand interactions between users and algorithms. According to the paper people tend to assume that algorithms of search systems or social media are objective or impartial, in line with an idea that emphasises human error and subjectivity as weak compared to the wonders of technology. An important aspect of social media that is mentioned in the study is that people intuitively adapt to the ways technology around us function, and that people probably informally make reverse engineer assumptions on how the Facebook newsfeed algorithm works. This is a part of the ways we adapt and learn in everyday life, and even the criteria of subjectivity is implicitly latent in algorithmic functions as effects of the choices done by programmers and corporate directives and guidelines. Relatedness in the algorithm might be a very different concept from relatedness as perceived by human beings, and as users are both consumers and producers of content on Facebook the responses they are observing through the newsfeed affects what they post and how they use the options for personalisation in the future (Rader and Gray 2015)

The survey was based on the assumption that people form intuitive causal explanatory theories that often are based on heuristics. Heuristics are rules of thumb that are grounded in experience, and can be characterized as both implicit and explicit intuitive learning (Tversky and Kahneman 1974) Studies might still gain useful information on how people interpret and interact with technology. According to Rader and Gray (2015) most users believe that they can be part of the decisive process of information in news feed by a feedback loop mechanism that curates and personalises the algorithm of News feed. Results from the current questionnaire point in the direction that people experience the Newsfeed of Facebook as distributing content relevant to what they are following and liking sometimes, but not consistently.

Indirectly, the currently presented study addresses how interaction between Facebook users and the dynamics of the algorithm influences the content that shows up in the NewsFeed. The question items that ask if the participants follow different pages that represent organisations, functions or individuals that represent structures or ideas that are part of a public sphere, and then a follow up question asks to what degree the participants experience getting information on said organisation, function or realm that the individual represents from following the page.

There is an abundance of information on Facebook, but also a very well working structure of information control that can connect very large amounts of information about personal details of people's life together in a way that might not be ideal or ethical. Boyd and Crawford (2012) define Big Data as "...a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of:

1. Technology: maximizing computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyse, link and compare large data sets.
2. Analysis: Drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims.
3. Mythology: the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy.

Such amounts of Big Data can and have been utilized to manipulate public opinion in a way that threatens both individual privacy, integrity and basic democratic principles

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/cambridge-analytica-facebook-scandal->

[180327172353667.html](http://180327172353667.html) , Boyd and Crawford 2012, González 2017, Kreiss and McGregor 2018 ).

The ethical problems concerning how private information is handled in social media such as Facebook seems to be one of the concerns voiced by the participants of the independent questionnaire in the currently presented study. Many of the respondents consider Facebook a digital sphere that appeals to both personal and more professional activity, yet they are unsure of how their private information is safeguarded in online digital environments. They still report using Facebook both for activity related to personal interaction and leisure and related to civil participation and information in the intersection between traditional news media and community related activity. In such respects the results from the study are in line with established empirical material in the field.

In Bucher (2012) “Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook” the modalities of the basic human need to be seen and recognized is being discussed in relation to how the mechanisms of the algorithm controlling information on Facebook potentially shapes human behaviour. A focus of the Bucher (2012) paper is how Facebook rewards visibility and that the algorithm that controls the feed in Facebook operates on *popularity* principles that discriminates the minority voice in a way that is more similar to a tabloid magazine than to that of an objective informational structure. Papacharissi (2002) who describe social media as by default populist and commercialized in functional discourse supports this notion. Facebook is exactly what it claims to be, a web based social network system that is based on commercialised principles and aims to increase its economic capital. This is reflected in the algorithm in a way that favours the popular, which might be, but is not necessarily and definitely not always, the just or the informed. In a perspective relevant to a Digital Public Sphere such algorithmic functions can be problematic concerning minorities and underrepresent groups.

As soon as an individual joins a social media network, in this case, Facebook, the person draws intuitive conclusions on the social and functional affordances of this new environment. At first encounter, Facebook presents itself in a way that implicitly sets precedence of use that often is being furthered by the users due to the human tendency to conform. As such the way the algorithms of Facebook presents information indirectly guides increase or decrease in type of activity independently of personal interests or trait characteristics. Friend relationships also partake in the weightings of individual NewsFeeds, and the concept of social capital in

algorithmic function in the digital sphere is taken to new levels. It is an extremely complex informational system where your actions, in essence what you like, click, set as preferences and so forth in most cases will give a social media environment that for good or for worse reflects what you want to see and the kind of information and content that you have implicitly implied that you want more of.

In a paper published in 2017, DeVito reports a study using data from content published by The Facebook company in order to gain some insight in the workings of the NewsFeed algorithm. The study found that Friend relationships were the most important factor in the Facebook Newsfeed, followed by explicitly expressed user interests, prior user engagement, implicitly expressed user preferences, post age, platform priorities, page relationships, negatively expressed preferences and content quality (DeVito 2017). An important distinction between traditional news media editing and circulation by the Facebook newsfeed algorithm is made. Tabloid news might be focused on individuals and gossip at times, still traditional news media weights impact on society as an important criteria. In Newsfeed social capital is the guiding criterion according to the DeVito study. In that case there are still mechanisms uncounted for that bring forth posts that go viral and reach several thousands of users beyond those that are in a Facebook friend relationship with the sharing user. The results of the present study shows that Facebook users are conscious and show some ambivalence related to sharing what they consider personal and sensitive information online. Integrated in Facebook and other social media, there is metadata that often contain very personal information. This kind of information in combination with targeted political advertising makes technological firms such as Facebook new and apparently very powerful actors in political communication (Kreiss and McGregor 2018). Such power in combination while at the same time controlling parts of the information distribution from traditional news media makes Facebook a significant actor also in national media outside the USA.

Van Dijck (2012) argues that social media platforms like Facebook are neither a “new” public sphere or an expansion of a private sphere. If an extensively used social media platform is none of these, then the activity must be considered pure escapism, akin to a virtual reality unconnected to makings and activities offline and off screen. This is not the reality of social media according to earlier discussed research. Activity on social media is connected to activity offline and off-screen, both in connection to and as an extension of a private sphere and as a digital public sphere. Though there might be different ses of social media, as also the data in the current study shows, a large majority are practicing social media such as Facebook

in a way that constitute *Digital Public Sphere*, local and smaller digital public spheres, and expansions and displays of semi-private spheres. A considerable share in the current study also practice news consume, information updating on issues relating to society and politics that form public opinion through Facebook. Such use of social media constitute use in line with a *Digital Public Sphere*. Worth noting and very relevant concerning democratic processes is the ethics connected to such immense amounts of data gathered at the policies of one corporation. Local-national, private-public, personal-functional, individual-community, nuanced/deliberative-tabloid, spontaneous-deliberative, mainstream-counterculture, populist-unpopular/underdog, all these dichotomies can seemingly be challenged by the fluidity of a digital public sphere and social media.

#### **8.4 Cultural and social capital in exchange for access to and visibility in a digital sphere**

It is very clear that each and every user of free of charge social media should be aware that what they are actually trading is parts of their social and cultural capital in ways that are multiplied for economic capital. For many this will be ok, and the implied trade might be fair, yet the issue remains that as with any other area where information on private citizens is being used, the same information can in the worst case scenario be misused. The Snowden revelations together with the Cambridge Analytica case and several other examples illustrate the need for citizens to be cautious in their use and sharing in social media. This can severely lessen the Public Sphere aspect of Facebook. Valtysson (2012) addresses some of the same issues as processes of colonization and emancipation with particular concern regarding the grey areas in privacy terms and conditions and questions if this can be considered a colonizing mediatisation of the *lifeworld*. These issues is also in the view of Valtysson (2012) concerns mainly because the way users of Facebook are being targeted as consumers.

I added the criteria of channels of information sharing and distribution of discourse as ideal criteria for a well-functioning and democratic public sphere. The present study finds that there are such channels of information and distribution on the Facebook platform. In fact, Facebook appears very elegantly adapted to such activity, as also reported in a report by the Norwegian Government (NOU 2017:7). Most respondents (90 %) in the presented study do use Facebook as a source of information on activity in their local community. A fair share of the participants



also confirm that they read news through Facebook (49 out of 59, 83 %). According to a Norwegian report by Moe and Kleiven (2016) those most averse to news reading are those that most often consume news through social media. Some respondents follow pages of ideal or non-profit organisations. This is a marker of use of Facebook both for information from ideal organisations and as an indirect symbolic group adherence, the exact motives behind each association is not clear. In any case Facebook serves a function as channel of information.

A criteria for an ideal *Digital Public Sphere* should be Egalitarian in ideal and discourse in line with ideals discussed by both Habermas (2002) and Fraser (1990). It should also allow for integrity in opinion, without threat to individual or group safety. This is necessary for a Public Sphere to function as democratic in public opinion formation. Facebook to a certain degree applies to this criterion in that the terms and conditions give directions that prohibits harassment, bullying and other invasive and threatening behaviour over the platform. The trade of user information to third party actors is controlled in the user agreement on Facebook, however these terms and conditions are complex and time consuming to get acquainted with. As the earlier mentioned cases of Cambridge Analytica, information can still go awry, and is intentionally used in ways that many will not be comfortable with, which of course is ethically questionable.

*If you share content on Facebook, what kind of content do you share most often?* This question in the questionnaire was kept including as the main point was to distinguish between feeling comfortable with being a visible contributor of any kind of content in Facebook and not. Another factor is of course the possibility that those not sharing would be comfortable doing so, but just do not practice their life in that particular arena, however this particular study is limited within the scope of the select participants of the questionnaire. Out of those that answered the questionnaire, there was only one participant that did not have an account on Facebook, the results from this participant are included as comments on social media. The results on the question concerning content in sharing on Facebook are very evenly distributed between; *“Updates on how those close to me or myself are doing”*, *“Status or commentary on something concerning society today”*, *“Something humorous”*, *“Pictures from trips, anniversaries, adventures or similar”*, and *“News articles or commentaries on society from a media corporation”*.

Nilsen, Hafstad, Staksrud, and Dyb (2018) found that young survivors of the Terror attack on Utøya found social support in social media usage, but also that they experienced negative emotions in meeting information and opinions that they found distressing. Facebook was the most used social media and social support was reported as both reaching out for support and coping mechanisms, and checking up on others to offer support (Nilsen, Hafstad, Staksrud, and Dyb 2018). Social media use in many ways appear to constitute exchange of social and cultural capital as inflated currency in exchange for free of charge use of a well-adapted digital sphere. This notion points to one of the less ideal elements of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere, it is transnational and dependent on commercial growth which it mostly gains from trading in user information. Use such as this illustrates both how Facebook is used for smaller public spheres in accordance with ideals for a *Digital Public Sphere*, yet that it still might be too public and open for sensitive issues.

## **8.5 Online Public sphere and Offline community**

There are two types of actors without whom no political public sphere could be put to work: professionals of the media system—especially journalists who edit news, reports, and commentaries—and politicians who occupy the centre of the political system and are both the coauthors and addressees of public opinions. Mediated political communication is carried on by an elite. (Habermas 2006)

The Public Sphere exists on the basis that democracy is built on the possibility of changing political government in accordance with changes in public opinion, societal and environmental variables, in essence; that elections can result in new and different political leadership. In the perspective of evaluating a Digital Public Sphere it appears as if the areas that could constitute a Public Sphere are fluid and dynamic both to conditions pertaining to the actual practical usage and to technological and juridical affordances. Facebook has many characteristics that pertain to these criteria;

1. It is free of charge when it comes to economic capital.
2. The principles on which it was built are idealistic (connecting people), yet based on a commercial business model.

3. It is inclusive in that anyone with access to an internet connection above the age of 13 can join.
4. It is relatively pluralist if being utilized in a pluralist way (meaning that the interactionist principles of the algorithms depend on user input)
5. It is developed apparently in concordance with maintaining a good relationship with its users.
6. It allows for varying degrees of openness and privacy excluding the interface in itself.

Facebook programmers do have access to all kinds of information given proper motivation and jurisdiction. There has been discussions on to what degree engagement online reflects or amplifies community engagement and collective action offline. Some argue that easy to sign or click petitions online can lead to slacktivism, not broader and real engagement (Cabrera, Matias, Montoya 2017). Van de Donk et al (2004) argues that the internet and social media will complement existing social movements.

That departments and other representative institutions of the state is present on Facebook is positive because the pages on Facebook can be a way to further information through links that lead to information outside of Facebook. A general principle in communicative democracy is that channels of information should be presented where they are easily available to those they might be of interest to. Because social media and Facebook in particular is so commonly used, the population probably benefits from such information channels also in such media. As long as sensitive information is controlled, such Facebook pages appear relatively easy to maintain and administer.

The main focus in this thesis in researching Facebook as a digital public sphere has been on the use of Facebook by private citizens in their own time. Utilization of social media as administrator of pages for non-profit organisations or the maintenance of social media accounts as part of responsibilities in a work setting would probably uncover different interactions concerning values, ethics and role. The currently presented questionnaire included one item that asked if the participants used social media for promotion or activity intended to distribute information. Out of the 39 respondents that answered the question in the second survey 19 said that they were using social media in such a way, in the first questionnaire 7 out of 19 confirmed that they used social media in a work related way, to inform or promote. This indicates that such use of Facebook is not unusual, yet not the majority use.

Skoric, Zhu, Goh and Pang (2016) conducted a meta-review where they find that a typical socio-recreational use of social media is negatively related to production of social capital, whereas informational uses had a positive relationship with the production of social capital. The meta-analytic review found positive relationship between social media use and engagement. In particular the use of social network sites for informational purposes, relational use and an expressive use in contrast to a consumer-type of use, was linked to different measures of engagement. They also found that those politically active in parties or political groups were also more active online in a way reflective of civil engagement. The most robust find was that informational uses of social media was linked with participation. Boulianne (2009) found a small, but significant positive relationship between internet use and engagement, where the strongest effect was the positive correlation between online news consume and political engagement. Some of this variance might be explained by age effects as younger citizens both tend to be more active in online communities (Enjolras and Bock Seggaard 2011; Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen 2011) and more extroverted in political engagement. Engagement finds different outlet with different circumstances as per example in experienced job fulfilment or extended family life and as such situational factors outside of the online sphere very well might be the main determinants of type of use concerning internet and social media. This however might also be changing as the generation in the West that are soon to be young adults have grown up in a largely connected and online world, and this mode of being able to find information both on personal affairs and factual information could change the way future generations relate to retrieving information and knowledge about their surroundings. Prensky (2001 a and b) fronts a view on the changing circumstances for learning and socializing that is based in some knowledge of neuroplasticity. The scientific background is based on the broadly researched field of biological basis of learning and remembering. Simply told, how we use our brains will shape our brains.

Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012) conducted an online survey of 1600 Canadians on the impact of social media such as Twitter and Facebook on news consumption. This survey found a statistically significant relationship between heavy social media use and higher trust in professionally curated content. These results imply that the pluralism of social media attracts content aware users, or alternatively that heavy social media use increases probability of encountering low quality news content or fake news, an experience based competence that again increases reliance on professionally curated content. The overall pluralistic culture of most social media where all kinds of cultural, political, personal and even educational content

can be encountered might also lead to a higher degree of trust in curated content due to informational overload and a general impression of complexity that can be experienced as time consuming to navigate. Students were more likely to value the use of social media content by journalists and high and medium users of social media placed greater value on the integration of social content by news organisations (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan 2012). The same study supports my notion that sharing can be part of consuming news, and that this is social activity. If sharing is a central part of news consume implies that this kind of sharing happened in different ways and perhaps to a different degree before social media was introduced and in popular use. In the present study very few respondents report that they often share news on Facebook, yet they do consume news as distributed through the Facebook platform which implies not sharing reactions on news, or only sharing in offline settings.

Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012) “a person’s social circle takes on the role as news editor, deciding whether a story, video or other piece of content is important, interesting or entertaining enough to recommend”. This further supports the notion that social and cultural capital is expressed and shared through social media, much the same way as social circles of acquaintances would give judgement and infer appropriate symbols, themes and tastes and also, the state of current news. Findings of the current study also indicate that this kind of use is established discourse, and preferences vary on individual level. Much larger quantities of data on habits in social media use would be necessary in order to make inferential statistics on such habits, not unlike the study by Kosinski, Stillwell and Graepel (2013) and the methods of research presented by Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell (2015).

If it is the case that the use of, and sharing of news content in social media is preferred due to recommendations from trusted friends or even specific news reporters and journalists, this could imply a shift in the power of informational structures. From media corporations to friend circles, chosen by criteria personal to each individual. Perhaps news consume would happen in similar ways before the digitalization and social media. In that case the newspapers would still control some content in that readers would have the entire paper at hand even though each individual habit would decide how reading was prioritised. Hermida, Fletcher, Korell and Logan (2012) conclude that social media users share similar news habits to the overall online news consumer, and even imply that social media users are more likely than non-users to have “a diverse news diet”. This is in contrast to Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen and Wollebæk (2013) who argues that there is a divide between those rich in social

and cultural capital and those sparse in such where engagement, social and cultural capital is connected to diverse and resourceful news consume, including, but not exclusively by means of social media. Lindell (2018) also reports habits concerning social media and news consume as dependent on social class. Lack of social and cultural capital is connected to less engagement and filtering of information through social media, which can lead to limited views and an “echo chamber” effect (Enjolras, Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk 2013) Habermas (1989 and 2002) addresses “ingroups” that have basis in family, friends, and close community as producers of a politically homogenous climate of opinion. A different notion is that a degree of agreement allows for advancing ideas, culture and community and as a result overall flourishing. This is a notion that supports the necessity of fragmentation into smaller public spheres.

A previously mentioned study by Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel and Fox (2002) found that in “introverted and neurotic people” found their “real me” on the internet, while “extroverts and non-neurotic people” located their “real me through traditional social interaction. Earlier in this thesis a study by de Zúñiga, Barnidge and Sherman (2017) was mentioned. This study had a more thorough focus on social capital in online and offline situation where the aim was to uncover if social capital in face-to-face situations was equivalent to or distinct from social capital on Facebook. They found that online and offline social capital was empirically distinct from each other. The same study further concluded that “...social media social capital is related to political participation in multiple communicative realms is that social media reduce barriers to participation” . This conclusion does not necessarily stand in conflict with the study by Querica, Lambiotte, Stillwell, Kosinski and Crowcroft (2012), yet it does show the complexity and possible oversimplification of equalling online displays of personality to offline practiced life. Social capital in online and offline situations is not necessarily equal to popularity, however popularity is associated with having many friends and associates. The study by Querica, Lambiotte, Stillwell, Kosinski and Crowcroft (2012) does not establish that those popular in offline situations are the same people that are popular in online situations, only that the same traits seem to be popular. This implies that those present in each other’s lives in offline situations might not necessarily show the same support or connection on the social media Facebook, and further implies that personality traits in offline situations can, but do not necessarily reflect the same traits in online situations. The interaction causality behind this are probably complex and can rely on mechanisms such as digital competences, different lifeworlds and priorities in time use.

The suggested practical implications of the results from the study conducted by Queria, Lambiotte, Stillwell, Kosinski and Crowcroft (2012) and similar studies, such as one conducted by Queria, Kosinski, Stillwell and Crowcroft (2011) are related to commerce as marketing campaign and brand awareness in specific online communities. Indirectly, such research is also relevant to possibly investigating how cultural specific practice affects the spheres of social and political interaction as visible through for instance activity in social media or other online communities. The results from this study further find an age effect in that younger users tend to have more contacts on Facebook. Such results support the notion of immediacy in social interactions as a possible determinant of practice in that those that have grown up within a highly digitalized society might be more inclined to use social media as a way of keeping track of acquaintances and networking. This might imply that social interaction increasingly will take place in social media or that a certain age group is super-social in a way that also is present in high activity in social media, but will decrease in line with the establishment of other social structures such as family life. An increasing percentage of those in the not younger user-segment will have established relationships that are also present in their living space, such as a spouse and children. The family as category (Bourdieu 1986) can theoretically be a natural signifier that governs where any given social interaction mainly is present. Those that live with a partner or family naturally can maintain both social interaction and communication regarding most planning and logistics in offline situations. The typical age group that live alone or perhaps live on campus and away from family and friends will have a stronger incentive to connect and socialize in ways that permits such communication with people whom they are not in proximity to in offline situation. An interesting find in the Queria, Lambiotte, Stillwell, Kosinski and Crowcroft (2012) study is that being in the group that has many social contacts on Facebook predicts either 1. Many offline (real world) friends, or 2. A propensity to maintain superficial relationships.

Habermas is concerned with a refeudalization of the public sphere which is present in the sense that the public sphere lacks deliberative and informed discussion and is reduced; " to a "publicity arranged for manipulative purposes" (1971, p. 221) instead of the intended and democratic discourse of critical public sphere. A pessimist view is that social media is a confirmation of this critique in the way that personal popularity gains space and reward while there is little room for the more time consuming deliberative practices. The positive angle is that public spheres do exist, also in social media and on the internet.

Habermas (1986, 2002) further discusses how an opinion does not even have to be verbalized, but can be present through religious, habit, tradition and prejudice in practice, and further how these practices reach the public sphere through group processes. The notion that habits, traditions, religion and also education and labour also are expressions of opinions, are further investigated and elaborated upon in the works of Bourdieu whose studies conclude that something as apparently private, or in any case *subjective*, as taste and cultural interpretation, are symbolic and actual carriers of cultural capital. This cultural capital is reproduced in habits not only in personal life, but also in choice of education and profession. In many ways internet and social media is a relatively new way in which the signifiers of social groups, social, cultural and economic capital are highlighted by nature of the very fluid informational flow of the internet. Habits connected to the traditional distinctions in social and cultural capital can probably still influence habits in use of internet and social media as a private sphere or as a public sphere. This is probably especially valid concerning news consume in online spheres. In the perspective given by the empirical material from the present study a majority of the participants have chosen membership in the social media Facebook, and as such have chosen to have the opportunity to partake in such a digital sphere. Practices differ and evidence point to that Facebook functions as a mediating digital public sphere *if utilized as a digital public sphere*. This implies that for those that are extroverted and oriented towards community, politics, local or large society in their chosen use of online social media, Facebook can fill most of the criteria for a digital public sphere.

## **8.6 Discourse of community and discourse of chaos**

Public refers to the good we potentially seek together, but also to the very notion or creation of the “we” that may do the seeking. This is sometimes obscured by use of nouns and definite articles like “the public” or “the public sphere” (Calhoun 2017 )

Van Dijck (2012) points to that legal scholars argue social media as “polluting” or “diffusers” of the private sphere. The Digital Public Sphere including social media should be treated as publicly available spaces where you might have to guard your own information, and also should be held accountable for maintaining a behaviour that makes this digital space available for everyone. This implies not harassing or bullying, and at the same time that people should



not need to be so cautious in guarding their own information that it hinders free speech or a discourse that gives room for a multitude of opinions and viewpoints. In essence, an approach that is liberal, yet aware, and considers information competence and information management might be advisable when participating in semi-public or public digital spaces. A society where all is guarded can be a society where there is difficulty building community, maintaining social capital and cooperate. In short, this might foster a very cold and alienated society. The premises upon which the digital public sphere can be including, not tabloid and bigot, deliberative and yet impulsive enough to maintain naivete, creativity, and friendship are not very much discussed in the everyday lives of those the issues are relevant for, in essence, humankind. However a too mild a climate can also put an end to all development, all life, and as such some kind of insensitivities must be tolerated in order to allow for people to actually exist as individuals, not only functions of society. Corporations such as Facebook cannot be accounted for regarding stability in channels that contribute to a public sphere as it is subjective to other structural premises by the very fact that it is a transnational corporation intended for social networking.

The tabloid perspective of news consumption applies both to the utilisation of Facebook and to news consume through social media such as Facebook. A traditional tabloid format might embrace many of the aspects Habermas maintain as part of a refeudalization of the public sphere. Still, the tabloid format also serves a purpose, it is effective, grounded and to some degree informative in form. Informative in the sense that the most salient information will come across as very visible and available, whereas elements that require consideration and reflection will be less maintained. Of course, there is not necessarily any widespread and established consensus on what is the most salient information in any event, which illustrates the point that visibility is rhetoric and ignorance can be inhibitory to the point where it is experienced as frightening.

There has been made an empirical distinction between social media use by those high in political engagement and interest and those less politically engaged (Wollebæk and Seggaard 2011; Enjolras, Steen-Jonsen, and Karlsen 2014 and Bock Seggaard 2017). Several studies have confirmed increase in social media activity connected to political discourse and community participation during both local and national elections, and during periods of political turbulence (González 2017; Enjolras, B, Steen-Jonsen and Karlsen 2014; Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce and Boyd 2011). Such studies are in favour of viewing social media as parts of a digital public sphere, and a digitalized discourse of civil

community. These results further support my notion that the way individuals utilize social media, Facebook in this particular study, will decide its valence as pure leisurely and personal interactionist or community oriented and relevant to public opinion formation in relation.

I argue that social media function as a digital public sphere for a part of the population where activity fluctuate as local, national and global events appeal and engage. The borders between private and public, personal and societal are not clear-cut, and are at times under negotiation, both in social spheres and on structural levels, and social media can be a sphere where such negotiations are practiced. Social media is still not the ideal realm for such discourse, yet it is practiced as such, and groups are dynamic in utilizing any available resources. As activities connected to the everyday habitus of a population, news and events that concern larger and global community are also a natural part of what concerns people that utilise social media as part of their integrated multimedia communication. When communities are in conflict, there is an increase in political activity also in social media reflecting a general increase in case focused societal engagement in the population. This is reflected also in areas of extreme political conflict (Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce and Boyd 2011) Nilsen, Hafstad, Staksrud, and Dyb (2018) found that young survivors of the Terror attack on Utøya found social support in social media usage, but also that they experienced negative emotions in meeting information and opinions that they found distressing. Facebook was the most used social media and social support was reported as both reaching out for support and coping mechanisms, and checking up on others to offer support. The survivors also used social media as platform for symbolic actions and to mourn diseased peers (Nilsen, Hafstad, Staksrud, and Dyb 2018)

The presented study shows that Facebook for most of the respondents of the current questionnaire is not utilized as an arena for *publication* in a Public Sphere, yet it is recognized as an arena where both formal and informal information concerning the Public Sphere and public opinion is presented and collected. Facebook is practiced as a digital public sphere, and not unlike any other media institution most of the population is not explicitly visible or at the publishing end. Most participants in my study recognize Facebook as inherently more public than their living room, regardless of customised privacy settings, and as such as a space where behaviour has different personal and civil connotations than in the privacy of a home; *“It is a mix. Both private and public. It makes one think before posting personal content. It’s easier to share content from other people, things such as events or news.”* (respondent of the questionnaire on the question on seeing Facebook as mainly a private or public sphere). This

sentiment is not in conflict with a study by LaPoe, Olson, Eckert (2017) which found that even media scholars adapted personal strategies to differentiate between personal life and professional life when using social media.

## **8.7 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The present study was limited by small sample size and the lack of gender as a variable. One could argue that the social parameters of Facebook are based on personality rather than gender, or in any case that the traits that motivate different behaviour might be more dependent on personality than on gender. In any case the variable gender should be accounted for as control in future studies. There are indications that imply that social media as utilized less dynamic regarding privacy settings are dominated by men, in other words that men are more visible and active in those spheres of social media that are the most open to the public. This especially appears to be the case with Twitter as presented in a sample of one percent of the American population of Twitter users (Mislove, Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela, Rosenquist 2011) However, gender is not a feature of the standardized profile information on Twitter, and as such it is a less prominent feature of any communication there. Profile pictures are often not images of the users facial appearance, which makes gender a feature less in focus should the user chose so. The poster paper by Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela and Rosenquist (2011) does not reference how the statistics on gender on Twitter was gathered, which makes the conclusions less reliable. Conclusions from the same study do nevertheless comply with data from statistics from other sources such as the IPSOS medie barometer which according to their website gathers data from a Norwegian test panel of 50000 individuals (<https://www.ipsos.com/nb-no/datainnsamling-og-feltarbeid-ipsos-observer>. Updated information retrieved on the 07.09.18)

Another factor that is interesting is greater technical knowledge of the programming specifics of the Facebook interface, especially the programming of the NewsFeed. A general approach on research where Facebook is an objective is presented in Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell (2015) "Facebook as a Research Tool for the Social Sciences: Opportunities, Challenges, Ethical Considerations, and Practical Guidelines". It should be noted that the sampling techniques presented here are not dissimilar to those under scrutiny in the American senate after the Cambridge Analytica reveal. The way participants are informed before giving

consent and how the information will be handled further is essential in considering the ethical nuances of such information sampling.

## **9 Conclusions**

The initial curiosity concerning this project was based on an impression of a changing use of media in society where information of all kinds is available, distributed. To me this implied both a positivity based on ideals of a culture of information sharing, exchange of ideas and opinions and better possibility to keep up relations over distance, yet also a possible danger in information gone awry and a brutalized digital sphere. A part of the interest was based on the ways the internet changes media consume and the ways we discuss and share our views and interpretations of what is going on in the society we are part of. In connection to this I found interest in how social media created a new tendency of semi-public display of at times very personal situations in combination with locally embedded activity as discussed and planned in groups. I found that social media as a relatively new sphere merged elements from the private lives of individuals with information from various state and governmental apparatuses, and that the news media are present in social media. This presence of news media appears not only as tweaked advertisement, but also at real and authentic content that makes discussion and comments possible in a way that is dramatically more immediate, realistic and in “real-time” than the readers sections of traditional paper format, or if the online presence had been limited to the specific web-sites of each media business.

Consumer behaviour is neither collected nor the subject being investigated in the currently presented study. Information on patterns of use on Facebook and some questions on surfing habits are part of the questionnaire as such information is integral to defining use as a digital public sphere or not. The objective was the use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere in line with ideals of maintaining and forwarding a good, flourishing and including society. Settings were put as not to collect and store IP data or other information that can trace questionnaire answers to individual participants or individual computers. The main point of the study was information on the specific questions, not on more individualized, contextualized narratives. However, the individual narratives presented in the free form sections of the questionnaire are valuable and much appreciated as qualitatively rich and individual perspectives. These

individual perspectives appeared as in line with the current news and situation on privacy issues on Facebook during the period the questionnaire was distributed. Statistical analysis concerning the implied correlations connected to age, education and other variables would have been conducted in the present study if there had been sufficient number of respondents to justify such analysis. As the sample size remained very small, there was no point in doing that particular kind of analysis as there would have been no way to know if they were relevant to any other case than the specific dataset in use (Svartdal 2006, Field 2009).

A different scientific approach that can be taken in future studies on the subject is to conduct qualitative interviews on experience and value-formation concerning digitalization of publicly available information, civil and political discourse and social media. Such interviews could possibly give valuable knowledge concerning the interaction between traditional methods of knowledge management, marketing, and information distribution as practice and views change in interaction with the ever-developing digitalized world of the internet. Those that do not have an account on Facebook may have diverse reasons for refraining from such activity, and might still be active in other online based communities or by indirect means such as through some representative web-site or account. In any case all perspectives are relevant to the subject. The public sphere is already a multitude of informational and cultural spheres and to not participate in one does not exclude participation in many other.

Habermas (2002) discussed the growth of a bourgeois public sphere as mediating between the individual and the state, and as central to communicating public opinion. Bourdieu researched associations between cultural, social and economic capital as practiced through taste. A broad main division in the research literature on the subject matter and related fields goes between a view that describes digital social media as escapist and leisurely or purely private and a view that points to the civil societal, political and community related discourses of the internet including social media. The currently presented thesis has attempted to investigate some of these concepts related to actual use and opinions regarding Facebook as a potential digital public sphere through a web-based questionnaire. The results show that a majority of 65 respondents view the social media Facebook as a personal, yet public sphere. The same research finds that Facebook is used in line with what constitutes some use as a Digital Public Sphere by a majority of the respondents on parameters relating to local community, idealistic organizations and non-profit organizations. Considering the more explicit and political use of Facebook as a Digital Public Sphere only a minority of the respondents of the current study were active in ways other than information gathering or news consume through Facebook

related to politics. This likely reflects how a majority of the population is engaged in politics elsewhere in the public sphere, through information gathering, discussion and reflection in personal spheres and then through electing representatives. Very few individuals of a population can be categorized as public figures in contexts relating to public opinion, politics or public sphere. Though there are few respondents in the currently discussed and analysed material, each contribution is valuable. The degree to which the respondents of the questionnaire on Facebook as a digital public sphere use and consider Facebook a digital public sphere vary on individual level. This variation does not imply that one can reject the notion that Facebook is utilized as a digital public sphere, only that in any defined public sphere there will be some groups that are more active and extroverted participants, while others take a less outwardly visible role and perhaps are active in other spheres. The overall findings imply that Facebook is perceived as a digital public sphere or part of a digital public discourse, though the how strongly it is perceived and utilised as such varies on individual level. Still a slight majority of the respondents of the currently presented study report sharing content on Facebook (50, 91 %) report sharing content on their Facebook profile "...once or more a week, every now and then or at special occasions." In early paragraphs I discussed how Norwegian conditions should be ideal for a well functioning digital public sphere because of factors such as peaceful elections, a high BNP, a well established press that receives press support and a tradition for widespread locally embedded community activity.

The findings in direction of social media as Digital Public Sphere regarding news consume, locally embedded community activity and activity related to civil and non-profit organizations are further supported in the current study, as well as in other empirical research discussed in this thesis. There is a contrast between the globally functioning platform of Facebook and its use in very small-scale locally embedded community activity which beautifully illustrates both the wonders of technology and the numerous possibilities of informational chaos. Other studies that have focused on social media as arena for political promotion and political communication have found solid support that such use is established, and has become part of political practice.

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# Appendix 1 - Spørreundersøkelse

Nettskjema

Sosiale medier og digitale allmenninger

- Bruker du internett hver dag?
- Svaralternativ Ja eller Nei i avkrysningsboks.

Har du konto på det sosiale mediet Facebook?

- Svaralternativ Ja eller Nei i avkrysningsboks

Hvor ofte vil du anslå at du er innom Facebook?

- Mer enn ti timer
- Mellom sju og ti timer
- Fra en til sju timer
- Mindre enn en time
- Nesten ingen tid

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du ikke bruker Facebook i det hele tatt, men bruker andre sosiale medier er det fint om du kan fortelle litt om hvorfor her:

- Svar i tekstboks.

Hvor ofte deler du innhold på Facebook gjennom å publisere en status, dele bilder eller lenker?

- En til flere ganger om dagen
- En til flere ganger i uken

- En gang iblant, ved spesielle anledninger
- Nesten aldri
- Aldri

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Enkelte oppgir å få informasjon om fremtidige arrangement i lokalmiljøet og omegn via Facebook. I hvilken grad opplever du dette?

- Svært stor grad
- Noen grad
- Liten grad
- Ingen grad

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Er du med i åpne eller lukkede grupper på facebook som er relevant for lokalsamfunnet ditt?

Dette kan være lokale politiske parti, turforeninger, velforeninger, idrettslag eller lignende.

- Ja
- Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Følger du siden til en eller flere av disse på Facebook; aviser, mediebedrifter, journalister

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Følger du siden til en eller flere politisk parti eller politikere på Facebook?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Følger du siden til en eller flere interesseorganisasjoner eller ideelle foreninger på Facebook?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Følger du siden til en eller flere offentlige etater, departement eller annen administrativ statsinstans på Facebook?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.



Opplever du å få informasjon fra interesseorganisasjoner og ideelle foreninger via newsfeed på facebook?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Opplever du å få informasjon fra politiske parti eller politikere via Newsfeed på Facebook?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Opplever du å få informasjon fra offentlige etater, departement eller andre statlige instanser via Newsfeed på Facebook?

Ja

Nei

Vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Leser du nyheter hentet fra Facebook?

Ja, ofte

Ja, av og til

Sjelden

Aldri

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Leser du nyheter hentet fra andre kilder på internett?

Ja, fra andre sosiale medier

Ja, fra avisene og mediebedriftenes egne nettsider

Fra andre kilder som samlesider, blogger ol

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du leser nyheter hentet fra Facebook i hverdagen, er disse:

Delt fra avisen eller mediebedriftens nettside

Delt via venner på Facebook

Delt via interesseorganisasjoner, foreninger, parti eller lignende

Delt fra avisen eller mediebedriftens Facebookside

Annet/vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Er du aktiv på Facebook i form av å diskutere ulike saker i kommentarfelt på private eller offentlige poster. I hvilken grad vil du si at du bruker Facebook på denne måten?

Flere ganger om dagen

1-7 ganger i uken

Sjelden

Aldri

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du deler innhold på Facebook, hva slags innhold deler du som oftest?

Oppdateringer om meg selv eller mine nærmeste

Innhold som er hentet andre steder på internett

Innhold delt videre fra andre på Facebook

Min mening om noe

Innhold på vegne av en forening eller organisasjon

Annet/vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Hva slags innhold opplever du som oftest å se in Newsfeed på Facebook?

Oppdateringer på hvordan venner og familie har det

Innhold hentet fra andre steder på internett

Nyheter eller samfunnsrelevant innhold

Saker om humor og fritid

Annet/vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Snakker du med venner, familie, kolleger eller andre om hendelser fra nyhetene?

- Ja, med familie
- Ja, med venner
- Ja, med kolleger
- Ja, med venner, familie og kolleger
- Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du deler innhold på Facebook, hva slags innhold deler du som oftest?

- Oppdateringer på hvordan jeg eller mine nærmeste har det
- Status eller kommentarer om noe samfunnsaktuelt
- Noe humoristisk
- Bilder fra turer, merkedager, opplevelser eller annet
- Nyhetssaker eller samfunnskommentarer fra en mediebedrift
- Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du deler nyhetssaker på Facebook, er disse som oftest hentet:

- Fra avisen eller mediebedriftens nettsted
- Fra avisen eller mediebedriftens Facebookside
- Fra venner på Facebook sin deling
- Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Oppfatter du Facebook som et sted en først og fremst er personlig?

- Ja
- Nei
- Vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Oppfatter du Facebook som et offentlig sted?

- Ja
- Nei
- Vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Deler du videre nyhetssaker som er bak betalingsmur?

- Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Hvilken aldersgruppe er du i?

18-25

26-33

34-41

42-49

50-57

58-65

66-73

74-81

82-89

90-97

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Hva er din sivilstatus?

Enslig

Gift/samboer

Kjæreste (uten samme bosted)

Enke/enkemann

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Er det barn i husstanden din?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Hvor mange års utdanning har du?

10 årig grunnskole

13 årig grunnskole

1 år eller mer fra universitet eller høyskole

3 år eller mer fra universitet eller grunnskole

5 år eller mer fra universitet eller grunnskole

Fagbrev, autorisasjon eller annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Har du vokst opp med foreldere der en eller begge har høyere utdanning fra høyskole eller universitet?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Hva er ditt daglige virke?

- Arbeid, fast ansatt
- Arbeid, vikariat eller engasjement
- I permisjon
- Student
- Pensjonist
- Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Har du eller noen du bor sammen med abonnement på avis?

- Ja
- Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Har du tilgang til å lese avis eller tidsskrift fra annen kilde?

- På jobb
- På studiested
- På biblioteket



Via organisasjon eller frivillig verv

Via venner eller utvidet familie

Nei

Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Er du betalende medlem i en eller flere av følgende: politisk parti, interesseorganisasjon

(slike kan være Redd Barna, Filmklubbforbundet, Turforeningen eller lignende)

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du er betalende medlem i et politisk parti eller en interesseorganisasjon, er du aktiv ved å delta på møter, seminarer, skrive eller annet i regi av partiet eller organisasjonen?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Bruker du sosiale medier som en del av informasjonsarbeid eller promotering i ditt daglige virke?

Ja

Nei

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Om du skulle velge mellom følgende aktivitet en helg, hvilken ville du valgt?

Tur i naturen

Kino eller konsert

Kunstmuseum eller annen utstilling

Å være hjemme og gjøre ulike aktiviteter

Å besøke eller ha besøk av venner og familie

Å reise bort, på hytte eller annet sted

Annet

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Har du venner i nettverket ditt på Facebook som du ikke har møtt ansikt til ansikt?

Ja

Ja, vi har felles kjente i sosiale medier

Ja, jeg kjente de fra andre sosiale medier eller nettbaserte samfunn

Ja, kjendiser

Nei

Annet/vet ikke

Svar i avkrysningsboks.

Oppfatter du sosiale medier som Facebook først og fremst som et offentlig tilgjengelig digitalt sted eller som et personlig nettsamfunn?

Svar i tekstboks.

Om du har noen kommentarer om ditt syn på sosiale medier og internett i vårt samfunn er det fint om du kan komme med de her:

Svar i tekstboks.