Please Like, Comment and Share our Campaign!

How Social Media Managers for Danish Political Parties Perceive User-Generated Content

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Abstract
Based on 18 qualitative interviews, this article explores how the social media managers for the nine parties in the Danish parliament articulate the role of social media during the 2015 national elections. The article finds that the interviewees emphasise Facebook as an important means for one-way political communication and the monitoring of public opinion. The majority of the interviewees articulate a sense of responsibility for facilitating public debate on Facebook through the moderation of user-generated content and/or interactions with users. Yet the social media managers do not systematically analyse political input from social media users, nor do they see Facebook and Twitter as viable means of citizen influence on political decision-making. This is explained by a perceived lack of voter representativeness among Facebook users, fear of appearing politically imprudent and scepticism towards social media's participatory potential.

Keywords: political participation, political communication, user engagement, social media, Denmark

Introduction

Social media platforms have increasingly become key sites for political communication in both Europe and the United States (Vergeer 2012; Enli & Moe 2013). In Denmark, Facebook in particular has become a near-ubiquitous part of the campaign mix due to widespread uptake in the country (Skovsgaard & Van Dalen 2013). This development enables Danish citizens to communicate to and with political parties at an unprecedented scale. While recent studies highlight that social media platforms enable citizens to have access to political discussions (Schwartz 2015; Ohme, de Vreese & Albæk 2017), little research explores how actors within institutional politics perceive and approach such user-generated content. This article examines this issue through the following research questions:

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- How do the social media managers in Danish political parties perceive the role and potential of user-generated content and interactions on social media?
- What responsibilities and obligations do they feel they have to facilitate discussions with and between citizens?
- How do they reflect on the democratic opportunities and challenges of party-user interactions?

The examination is based on interviews with the social media managers of the nine parties that are represented in the Danish parliament. The interviews are analysed through an inductive qualitative coding, establishing key themes, narratives and perceptions towards social media users as an audience, as content-producers and as democratic citizens. The presented findings are discussed through the conceptual vocabulary of Carpentier (2011, 2017), who defines political participation as processes of co-deciding, conditioned by access and interaction, yet also dependent upon influence on the decision-making processes. Building on this theoretical framework, the article discusses the opportunities and limitations of access, interaction and political participation on parliamentary social media platforms, as articulated by the social media managers within Danish parties. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of how institutional political actors navigate the complex processes of decentralised content production and dissemination on social media.

While a majority of the previous studies examine political content on social media (Jackson & Lilleker 2009; Karlsen 2011; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen 2013; Strandberg 2013), this study takes a different approach by exploring how political social media managers perceive and articulate their approach to and view of social media users.

Political communication and digital media

Political communication in online environments has been studied since the early days of the World Wide Web (Grossman 1996; Stromer-Galley 2000), and the use of social media can be seen as an extension of existing digital campaign strategies focusing on web 1.0 technologies such as static websites, narrow-casted micro-messages and targeted online advertisements (Norris 2000; Strömbäck 2007). Compared to these earlier practices, user-generated content in social media environments introduces new facets to existing political communication and campaign practices (Lilleker & Jackson 2010; Chadwick 2013). Furthermore, it invigorates existing scholarly debates around digital media's potential for strengthening or weakening democratic citizenship through political participation (Iannelli 2016; Coleman 2017).

In 2000, Norris envisioned that the Internet would transform political communication and campaigning, although this would not necessarily entail increased democratisation but would rather lean towards normalisation and reinforcement of traditional political structures (Norris 2000). Since this early prediction, the participatory potential of online platforms has been subject to extensive research and discussion among communication scholars (Papacharrissi 2010; Dahlgren, 2013; Iannelli 2016). Numerous researchers have argued that citizen uptake of digital media could potentially act as a democratising force, bridging gaps between citizens and politicians through new, empowering means

of "mass self-communication" (Castells 2012: 6; Alaimo 2015). Others have argued that social network sites (SNSs) undermine democratic politics due to commercial ownership (Fuchs 2013) and pseudo-participatory online practices that limit 'real' offline engagement (Morozov 2011).

In the context of institutional politics, a number of empirical studies show that digital media technologies primarily serve politicians as extensions of traditional media, reinforcing the status quo or 'politics as usual' (Lilleker & Jackson 2010; Coleman 2017). Scholarship engaging specifically with political communication on social media draws similar conclusions, finding that politicians first and foremost engage in one-way communication focused on image improvement and agenda-setting (Klinger 2013; Strandberg 2013; Larsson 2015). Political actors thus seem more cautious than innovative when it comes to social media usage (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska & Jackson 2015; Kalsnes 2016). According to Kalsnes (2016: 5), such cautiousness can be attributed to three perceived risks among politicians: (1) offensive user behaviour, (2) negative news media attention, and (3) limited resources. Based on qualitative interviews with the social media managers for parties in the Norwegian parliament, Kalsnes (2016) finds that these perceived risks cause discrepancies between expressed strategic goals and actual social media practices during election campaigns. She describes this as a "social media interaction deadlock" (p. 9).

While research highlights that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are becoming increasingly important for political campaigning (Chadwick 2013; Bruns et al. 2016), it appears that social media use, as a means for new modalities of interaction and deliberation with citizens, is cautious among political actors (Nielsen & Vacarri 2013). In practice, social media platforms primarily function as channels for one-way communications (Kalsnes 2016), despite their interactive and decentralised technological architectures.

Defining political participation

Political participation is a contested and elusive term in both political theory and media theory due to its many conceptualisations, connecting to different democratic models and ideals (Strömbäck 2005; Carpentier 2011, 2017). While some scholars primarily equate participation to acts of voting in representative democracies, others define the term broadly as processes of citizen influence on social organisations (see Ekman & Amnå 2012). In the context of digital media, yet others argue that participation encapsulates a range of modalities of personal expression, placing little emphasis on power dynamics and political outcomes. Examples of the latter include Jenkins' (2006) notion of 'participatory cultures', Gibson, Lusoli and Ward's (2005: 566) definition of participation, which encompasses sending "political jokes to friends from websites", and Cantijoch, Cutts and Gibson's (2016: 36) definition of participation, which includes "signing up for party news feeds". Drawing on a critique of such broad definitions of participation (Carpentier 2011; Fuchs 2013), the following section outlines how the term is used in this article.

In 2006, at the beginning of the so-called 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly 2005), the concept of participation rose to prominence through the work of scholars such as Gibson et al. (2005) and Jenkins (2006). Drawing on cultural and fan studies, Jenkins (2006) argued that the increased ubiquity of digital media gave rise to new forms of participatory cultures in which "consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circula-

tion of new content" (Jenkins 2006: 290). Digital media, he argued, served as a catalyst for participatory practices, as it facilitated the production of user-generated content, decentralised social formations and new forms of online communities. This brought "the realm of political discourse closer to the everyday life experiences of citizens" (Jenkins 2006: 208), giving rise to more open, participatory and democratic societies.

In response to Jenkins (2006), scholars such as Fuchs (2013) and Carpentier (2011) have criticised his use of participation as a synonym for user engagement, arguing that it neglects the societal role of power relations, equates content production with citizenship and overestimates the role of digital media as a democratic force. As Fuchs (2013) pointedly criticises, according to such broad definitions, anti-democratic groups spreading violent hatred are just as 'participatory' as democratic movements. In line with this argument, Carpentier (2011) writes:

> [P]articipation cannot be equated with 'mere' access to or interaction […] as Jenkins and others do […]. Access and interaction do matter for political processes in the media – they are actually its conditions for possibility – but they are also very distinct from participation because of their less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making. (Carpentier 2011: 69)

Carpentier (2011, 2017) distinguishes between access, interaction and participation. Drawing on Mouffe's (2005) democratic theory of agonistic pluralism, he argues that all forms of participation concern negotiations of power and antagonism between social actors. Consequently, access and interaction are pre-conditions for participation, yet they do not automatically translate into it, as participation requires some level of citizen influence on political processes. This, however, is not limited to institutionalised politics, but also includes social spaces, such as the workplace and local communities.

In line with Carpentier (2011), Ekman and Amnå (2012) define political participation as processes in which citizens seek to "influence politics and political outcomes in society, or the decisions that affect public affairs" (2012: 289). This not only pertains to institutional politics, but also extra-governmental social formations. Similar to Carpentier (2011), Ekman and Amnå (2012) distinguish between political participation and more latent forms of engagement, such as "[d]iscussing politics and societal issues, with friends or on the Internet" (Ekman & Amnå 2012: 295). In sum, emphasising the importance of citizen influence on political outcomes, Carpentier (2011), Fuchs (2013) and Ekman and Amnå (2012) all define political participation in a narrower sense than scholars such as Jenkins (2006), Gibson et al. (2005) and Cantijoch et al. (2016).

Based on the conceptual vocabulary of Carpentier (2011, 2017), social media platforms can be seen as key spaces for *potential* political participation, as they enable widespread access and interaction for citizens to engage in political debates, which are "pre-requisites of participation" (Carpentier 2017: 93). Yet they are not equivalent to participation, as this requires an element of influence on decision-making processes. Carpentier (2011) illustrates this distinction by equating access with the presence of people, interaction with the socio-communicative relationships that allow for co-production, and finally, participation with co-deciding, whether in relation to local communities, organisations or institutional politics (Carpentier 2011).

In sum, a prerequisite for participation is having access to a communicative space in which citizens can interact. Yet in order for access and interaction to result in partic-

ipation, it needs to have some kind of influence on political outcomes. In this article, we use this narrow definition of participation as a theoretical framework for discussing how party political social media managers perceive user activity and evaluate the participatory potential of social media. Particularly, we focus on how they articulate the opportunities, tensions and challenges between citizen access to, interaction with and participation with political parties. In this context, it should be stressed that the article does not seek to evaluate the overall state of political participation in Denmark nor advocate for a particular online participatory ideal. With a more limited contribution in mind, the article seeks to contribute new insights on the complex issue of citizen engagement and participation online, highlighting how party political social media managers in Denmark perceive user engagement on social media and its democratic potential.

Politics and social media in Denmark

Since 2015, the Danish parliament has consisted of nine political parties, in addition to four representatives from Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The newest party is The Alternative (*Alternativet*), which came into parliament in the 2015 elections. In Danish national elections, 179 mandates are distributed among the parties according to their percentage of popular votes throughout the country. This translates into 179 seats in parliament. Election campaigns are typically short, lasting only around three weeks. All parties that receive more than two per cent of the popular vote are elected, enabling a number of smaller parties to enter parliament. Coalitions and alliances are central to the Danish political system, currently dividing the parliament into a left wing comprised of five parties and a right wing comprised of four parties.

In the context of politics and political debate in Denmark, social media have come to play an increasingly important role both during and outside elections (Skovsgaard & Van Dalen 2013; Schwartz 2015). In 2015, 72 per cent of all Danish citizens had a Facebook account, and 58 per cent used the platform daily (Rossi, Schwartz & Mahnke 2016). In the 2015 national elections, 61 per cent of Danish social media users obtained information about the elections through social media (Jensen, Hoff & Klastrup 2016). Based on the predominant role of social media in Denmark, this article seeks to expand the current knowledge on how the social media managers for the parties perceive and articulate the role of users and user-generated content during election campaigns.

Method

The study is based on 18 qualitative interviews with the social media managers from all nine parliamentary parties in Denmark (the representatives from Greenland and the Faroe Islands are not included). All the respondents were interviewed twice: prior to the Danish national elections held on 18 June 2015 and in the subsequent months.[1] All the interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes and took place either at the Danish parliament or at the party headquarters.

In order to ensure that the interviews covered the same range of topics, a semi-structured interview guide was used throughout the data collection, enabling the interviewers to guide conversations, while allowing for variations. The interviews were

broad in scope, allowing the participants to define key issues and framings based on experience and perceptions. The questions were open-ended in order to avoid steering the interviewees into adopting particular concepts, perspectives or attitudes. Examples of the introductory questions include "what goals does your party have in relation to social media?" and "how does your party use social media to listen to users and/or engage with them?" Regarding perceptions of the participatory potential of social media, the questions included "when you receive input from social media users, do you analyse this in any way?" and "do you think social media can be used to assess public opinion?"

When contacting the parties, we requested to interview the 'Head of Social Media' within each party organisation. This brought us in contact with three types of staff. In some cases, the parties had a dedicated 'Social Media Manager' responsible solely for social media communications (although rarely using this official title). In other cases, the interviewees had the job title of 'Web Editor', being responsible for all digital communications, including websites and online newsletters. Finally, in some parties (particularly minor ones), the interviewees had the title of 'Head of Communications', as no single employee was assigned to digital media. Throughout this article, we use the term social media manager as a general marker to delineate all the interviewees.

In order to obtain permission to conduct the 18 interviews, we agreed to ensure the anonymity of all the interviewees by not revealing party-specific information. Accordingly, all the interviewees have been assigned a random number in this article (Interviewee 1, 2, 3, etc.). The interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded using a two-step, qualitative design. First, all the interviews were inductively coded, focusing on emergent themes across the dataset (Charmaz 2006). Second, one particular theme pertaining to users and user-generated content was selected to undergo a second round of inductive coding for emergent sub-themes. This resulted in four themes representing four distinct aspects of party political social media management and user-generated content. These four sub-themes are: *monitoring*, *moderating*, *replying* and *(user) influence*. While these codes have been developed inductively, they relate to Carpentier's distinction and progression from access and interaction to political participation, as the first three codes primarily pertain to access and interaction, while the final code, (user) influence, relates to political participation. Following the analysis, we discuss the implications of our findings in relation to this theoretical framework.

Findings

Across the 18 interviews, the respondents articulate that public social media accounts, particularly on Facebook, have become central components in communication strategies for both party organisations and individual political candidates. This is reflected in each party organisation, in which increasing amounts of resources – both economic and human – have been allocated to social media management in recent years. This increased allocation is found in both major and minor parties on both the left and right wing of the political spectrum. Across the parties, the primary platforms are Facebook and Twitter, although Facebook dominates:

> In relation to Facebook, we are very aware that […] there are 3.5 million Danes, right? It's a medium with a potential of reaching huge amounts of people, who we

> would not be able to reach, not even if we were in prime-time news or had a front page in Berlingske [Danish newspaper] […]. Our strategy for Twitter is different because Twitter is desolate when it comes to regular Danes. I mean, at least active Twitter users are all opinion leaders and politicians and […] a great concentration of journalists […]. So, it's not a place where we do mass communication in the same way as we do on Facebook. (Interviewee 3, pre-elections)

Twitter is generally seen as an elite medium for media professionals and opinion leaders, whereas Facebook is "where the votes are" (Interviewee 7, pre-elections). This is discernible across all nine parties. The interviewees generally state that a majority of user-generated content on party Facebook pages derive from existing supporters. This engagement from supporters, however, is vital for reaching and influencing new voters, as the quantity of likes, comments and shares influences the visibility of content on Facebook (see Bucher 2012). Consequently, social media managers continuously seek to increase the amounts of user reactions to further algorithmic content dissemination:

> Every time someone comments something, it reaches a couple of hundred more people. And every time someone likes it, well, that is in fact a lot of free advertisement, you could say, during an election campaign… Facebook makes sure to distribute it further and further, the more engagement it receives. And that is the problem really that not that many people see our stuff, if we don't create engagement in some way or another. (Interviewee 5, post-election)

In the above quote, we find several interesting arguments. The response suggests that user-generated content on Facebook primarily serves as a vehicle for reaching larger audiences through one-way communication. At the same time, the social media manager underlines that party-generated content needs to be emotionally engaging in order to make people take action by liking, commenting and sharing. The quantity of user reactions thereby functions as a key parameter of success, leading social media managers to continuously optimise their ability to incite such reactions.

Although all the interviewees articulate that user-generated content is important for political communication, their perceptions of social media users diverge across parties. This is discernible from responses to the four, identified (sub-)themes. In this categorisation, *monitoring* refers to practices of observing and monitoring user activities on party political social media platforms; *moderation* refers to practices of removing user content and blocking users from commenting – an option available for page administrators on all Facebook pages and profiles (Farkas, Schou & Neumayer 2018); *replying* refers to reciprocal communications between political parties and users; and *(user) influence* refers to the ability of users to influence decision-making processes associated with the political parties.

Monitoring users

Across the nine parties, social media managers express that monitoring user-generated content on party platforms, particularly on Facebook, takes up a predominant portion of their working hours. Not surprisingly, this process is less organised in minor parties than in major ones due to fewer resources. Within large parties, monitoring users during elections encompasses several individuals, working in time schedules stretching from

early mornings until late evenings (including weekends). To optimise their work, several parties utilise third-party applications that provide overviews of user activities related to specific words, names and topics.

A key purpose of social media monitoring, expressed across the interviews, is to continuously stay up-to-date on public opinion, especially on proposals and announcements made by the party in question. As one interviewee formulates it: “You need to be there in order to sense the vibe […] so I constantly have my eyes on it [social media]” (Interviewee 5, pre-elections). The interviewees attribute key importance to their ability to ‘take the temperature’ of public attitudes towards political issues as well as the party ‘brand’: “It’s like having a running focus group delivering input on all types of matters” (Interviewee 9, post-elections). From this perspective, monitoring users strengthens party communications by providing insights on public opinion. Although the interviewees perceive this as central to their work, several express caution towards viewing Facebook users as representative of Danish voters:

> A Facebook page is not representative of the Danish population, but it gives us a good indication, you know, of the three most typical reactions. And we of course take that in […] perhaps we have to tune it [our communication] differently. (Interviewee 3, post-elections)

As the quote exemplifies, Facebook is articulated as a window for monitoring public opinion, yet also as unrepresentative of Danish voters. Users are thus, perhaps somewhat contradictorily, articulated as both voters expressing popular attitudes and online users distinct from the Danish population. As one social media manager states: “We get a good sense of what kind of arguments we will meet when we go out in the *real* world and discuss” (Interviewee 1, pre-elections, original emphasis). Several interviewees articulate these two concurrent perceptions of Facebook users as ‘real’ citizens and as a distinct group. For this reason, the exact value of monitoring user-generated content on Facebook remains somewhat ambiguous across the interviews.

Moderating users

On a general level, the interviewees perceive the quality of public debate on Facebook as problematic to varying extents, arguing that moderation is necessary or even compulsory for parties in order to maintain an appropriate level of discussion. As one interviewee expresses: “We have become very aware that in order to get a reasonable debate and so on, we really have to go in and moderate some more in relation to all the noise” (Interviewee 9, pre-elections). Across the interviews, the tone of debate on Facebook is described as “fierce” (Interviewee 3, post-elections), “racist” (Interviewee 8, pre-elections) and “rude” (Interviewee 6, pre-elections), as well as connected to “aggression” (Interviewee 1, pre-elections) and “intense hatred” (Interviewee 9, post-elections). A majority of social media managers perceive moderation as a fundamental condition for having civilised debates with users, both during and outside election campaigns:

> It is terrible, but that is the way it is. You have to have moderation in case someone threatens others with violence or writes things that are completely inappropriate […]. You simply have to block some people from the debate [because] even though they wrote it, people will hold us accountable for that. (Interviewee 4, post-elections)

As this quote highlights, moderation serves to protect the party 'brand' from being affiliated with aggressive and unconstructive debates. Social media managers consequently spend a lot of time removing content and regulating access to discussions. Nonetheless, the interviewees perceive moderation as a controversial issue, which they approach with caution. Several social media managers state that their caution derives from a number of cases in recent years in which Danish journalists have criticised political actors for limiting public debate through moderation (see Andersen 2010; Bremer 2013). Consequently, a majority of interviewees state that they keep records of all deleted user content, including screenshots, in case of accusations of censorship. A majority of political parties furthermore include a public 'code of conduct' on their Facebook pages, serving as guidelines for users and a justification for deleting comments in case of violations. To some interviewees, this code of conduct enables them to moderate systematically. Others, however, state that guidelines are usually defined in broad strokes, and cases are rarely "black and white" (Interviewee 4, post-elections). Consequently, moderation will always require a high degree of subjective judgement.

The social media managers are generally critical of the debate culture on Facebook and see moderation as necessary to maintain a constructive debate. Only one social media manager expresses a different view. This interviewee states that moderation is unnecessary, as social media users are good at correcting each other and dismantling aggression through constructive "counter-comments" (Interviewee 2, pre-elections). The interviewee adds that moderation goes against the basic "logic" of Facebook, which is about participating in "open social media" debates (Interviewee 2, pre-elections). Accordingly, the party in question reportedly allocated "zero time" to moderation during the 2015 national elections (Interviewee 2, post-elections). This account stands in sharp contrast to the other interviewees, who perceive moderation as a necessary and time-consuming task, even designated by some as "what you spend most of your time doing" (Interviewee 3, post-elections). Nevertheless, all the interviewees who moderate believe that their tolerance levels are high, as they only delete comments containing deeply harmful language such as personal threats, explicit racism or other extreme cases:

> It almost needs to be direct threats, spam in extreme amounts, posting other people's personal information […]. You can disagree heavily with us and get away with quite a lot of trolling before we exclude people, I would say. (Interviewee 6, post-elections)

Overall, party political social media managers in Denmark, with the exception of one respondent, perceive the moderation of user-generated content as a necessary element of political social media management. If left untouched, a minority of users would lower the level of debate to an unacceptable extent, hindering constructive discussions and hurting the party brand: "If you want to build a community that works, you have to throw people out who destroy the debate" (Interviewee 3, pre-elections). Practices of removing, blocking and documenting instances of unacceptable behaviour are thus generally viewed as necessary, important and time-consuming tasks. Otherwise, there would simply be too much user-generated "noise" (Interviewee 9, pre-elections).

Replying

While a majority of the interviewees respond similarly to questions of monitoring and moderating, the responses vary significantly regarding party replies to user-generated content. The responses range from replies having no priority "at all" (Interviewee 4, post-elections) to party-user interaction being a key success criterion for parties' social media presence. The interviewees expressing the latter position are primarily situated in smaller parties. For these practitioners, replying to users was perceived as fundamental for the 2015 elections campaign:

> I will say that our biggest success [in the 2015 national elections] was that we replied to as many as we did […]. I do not think there were any private messages or posts on our page, no matter how nasty […] that did not receive a response. In relation to comments, we prioritised that people could discuss with each other […]. But if anyone asked a genuine question, which we could answer, then he or she always received a reply. (Interviewee 1, post-elections)

In contrast to this account, other interviewees perceive replying to users as both too time-consuming and challenging. These social media managers state that their parties rarely engage in debates on their pages and only reply to users if they pose direct questions. One interviewee argues that this lack of response is acceptable, as users do not typically expect a reply from the party:

> I do not feel any responsibility for answering [user requests on Facebook]. It is not the same as if a journalist posed a question and we do not reply […]. I also think that people know that they do not necessarily get a reply. (Interviewee 5, pre-elections)

Several interviewees argue that limited resources are the main reason why they do not engage more in party-user interaction, while others viewed it as a strategic choice. Across the parties, the interviewees articulate that they were overwhelmed, and to some extent surprised, during the 2015 Danish national elections by the amount of user-generated content on party social media platforms. According to the interviewees, citizens engaged at unprecedented levels, requiring the parties to spend more time monitoring, moderating and/or replying to user-generated content than ever before. The social media managers experienced that other citizen communication channels, which used to be popular (e.g. telephone and email), have largely been replaced by user-generated content on social media. In response, some party organisations added resources to social media management in order to compensate for the extra work, while others narrowed the scope of their social media presence during the elections by replying less, if at all.

User influence

In the following, we examine how party political social media managers in Denmark assess the opportunities and challenges of user influence on communicative or political processes within the party organisation through social media. The section is based on interview questions regarding the analysis of citizen input on social media, as well as reflections on the possibility of including user-generated content in organisational planning, discussion, communication or decision-making. Overall, the interviewees

articulate that, although they monitor user-generated content, they do not systematically analyse this material. Social media managers reportedly only use user inputs as a means of "taking the temperature" (Interviewee 8, pre-election), getting an "impression" (Interviewee 9, pre-elections) or having a "guidepost" (Interviewee 3, pre-elections) on public opinion:

> We do not have a clear structure. It is a little… uhm… see what works, try to guess why it worked […]. We do not have some sort of matrix we put things [user input] into to measure statistics and cross check this and that. It is pretty simple, I would say. (Interviewee 6, post-election)

A majority of interviewees express ad hoc approaches in which user-generated content solely functions as a guidepost for improving party communications and not as a means of influence on political and organisational deliberation or decision-making processes. The interviewees provide three primary reasons for this. First, they argue that Facebook does not accurately reflect the Danish population, making it important not to ascribe too much importance to political debates on the platform. Second, they argue that if they opened up and enabled users to influence political communication or decision-making, this could potentially make their parties come off as unserious and imprudent. Increased political participation on social media could, in other words, backfire, as voters would potentially see openness as a sign of weakness:

> It is a delicate balance to include people and still show that you know your political project […]. The credibility of politicians, party leaders and parties is crucial. People need to feel that you are in control of things. So, if you open up, you might come off as modern, inclusive and democratic. But at the same time, this can also come off as […] don't you have a foreign policy of your own or what? (Interviewee 8, pre-elections)

Opening up and allowing social media users to influence organisational or communicational practices could, in other words, undermine the credibility of parties as stable and trustworthy institutions, according to some interviewees. Third, the interviewees perceive Facebook as poorly equipped for user influence on political outcomes due to the platform's problems with user aggression and political polarisation. User-generated content can therefore only be selectively used to assess public opinion:

> I experience that social media have generally become frozen politically in the sense that they have become locked formats without any real dialogue. This pertains to both politicians and citizens. Those big hopes and dreams we had, if we wind back the clock – that we would now reinvent democracy and develop the best solutions in collaboration on these platforms [Facebook and Twitter]. Well, that has not been accomplished […] the distance between citizens and politicians has become greater, and, at the same time, we now have clashes every minute on social platforms. (Interviewee 9, post-elections)

As this quote highlights, the party in question used to have idealised hopes and dreams about social media's democratic and participatory potential. Yet the interviewee has become disappointed by the aggression and polarisation which the party encounters on Facebook. A majority of the social media managers in our study articulate similar

sceptical perceptions of the participatory potential of social media, though not everyone subscribed to an original optimistic ideal. A single interviewee states that the party in question hopes to experiment more with user involvement in decision-making processes in the future.

In conclusion, the social media managers perceive user-generated content as an important means of continually improving party communications. Yet due to a perceived lack of user representativeness, the fear of appearing imprudent and scepticism towards social media's potential for enabling citizen influence on political outcomes, the parties do not generally strive to include users in decision-making processes regarding communicative or political practices. Power imbalances between political actors and citizens are thus largely reproduced in social media, leaving user influence – and thus participation – restricted to fine-tuning party communications and rhetoric during election campaigns. And even in this context, user input is only used sporadically and selectively rather than based on systematic analyses. Despite the prevalence of user-generated content, social media thus primarily function as channels of vote persuasion rather than deliberation.

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the four themes presented in this article – monitoring, moderating, replying and user influence – we have uncovered a range of perceptions among party political social media managers in Denmark about users and user-generated content. Overall, our findings show that the social media managers for the parties that are represented in the Danish parliament perceive user-generated content, particularly on Facebook, as an important means of successful political communication during the 2015 election campaign. In this context, the users are not only characterised as the recipients of one-way communications, but as the (re-)distributors of content through likes, comments and shares. The quantity of user engagement acts as a key measure of successful social media management across the parties. User engagement, however, is primarily valued as an instrument for increasing the proliferation and reach of one-way party communications. Yet the social media managers continuously monitor user comments in order to moderate and reply to users, as well as to "take the temperature" of public opinion.

As stated at the beginning of this article, previous research on the relationship between political parties and social media users finds that parties primarily engage in one-way communications without much interaction (Lilleker et al. 2015; Kalsnes 2016). Our findings indicate that although not all the parties prioritise interaction with users, the social media managers reportedly spend considerable time monitoring user activities. Additionally, the study shows that the social media managers place great emphasis on facilitating political debates through party-user moderation and/or replies. These findings indicate that political social media platforms in Denmark do not solely function as one-way communication channels, but at least to some extent contain dialogical elements. These findings, however, could also point to a different conclusion, namely a potential discrepancy between the expressed ideals and actual practices on political social media platforms. As Kalsnes (2016) finds, the party political social media managers in Norway express a more idealistic view in the interviews than is reflected in what they do in practice. As our study solely relies on qualitative interviews, similar discrepancies could

exist in Danish politics between perceptions and activity. This comparison is outside the scope of this article but is something we hope to explore in the future.

Political participation, as Carpentier (2011) defines it, relies on access and interaction. Through our analysis, we find that social media platforms provide widespread access for Danish citizens to take part in political debates. According to the interviewees, citizens are increasingly present and engaged on party social media platforms. At the same time, however, the interviewees hesitate to view Facebook as representative of the general population. The users are thus simultaneously – and to some extent contradictorily – perceived as a guidepost of public opinion, an unrepresentative focus group and an aggressive online crowd. Due to the latter, user access only translates into limited interactions between the parties and the users, ranging from none at all to parties prioritising replies to all direct user enquiries.

Based on our study, we only find a few examples of user access and interaction translating into any form of concrete political participation on social media, defined as influence on political outcomes or decision-making. Particularly during election campaigns, there is reportedly little time and incentive to allow users to influence any political processes related to the parties. However, through their function as guideposts of public opinion, social media users do seem to have some degree of indirect influence over the way in which the parties communicate. This influence, however, is both limited and opaque, as no party systematically analyses user input, but only selectively uses comments to "take the temperature" of public opinion. Hierarchies of power between the parties and the citizens are thus largely (re-)produced on social media. Social media managers argue that hierarchies are necessary, as the level of debate would otherwise deteriorate. Political participation is not perceived as feasible due to user aggression, fear of appearing imprudent as well as the unrepresentativeness of Facebook users. While this confirms the existing findings of 'politics-as-usual' on the parties' social media platforms, it contributes new insights on how social media managers explain, reflect on and reason about the participatory potential of social media in practice. While this does not reflect the general state of online participation in Denmark, it shows that no political party, perhaps with the exception of one minor party, systematically seeks or plans to enhance citizen influence on key political decision-making processes through social media.

In conclusion, our findings show that the political parties enable little political participation in the sense of co-deciding through social media. The social media managers are primarily interested in user-generated content as a means of distribution, because likes, comments and shares increase the reach of political posts. In this context, however, it should be noted that as election campaigns revolve around influencing voter preferences, it is perhaps not surprising that political parties focus more on one-way communications during such periods. An additional line of inquiry, which we hope to pursue in future work, is therefore whether user-generated content is perceived and approached differently outside election campaigns.

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1. One party, *The Alternative*, was not yet in parliament before the elections. They were, however, included in the study as opinion polls predicted their election to parliament (which came true).

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