

Mimicking News

How the credibility of an established tabloid is used when disseminating racism

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Abstract

This article explores the mimicking of tabloid news as a form of covert racism, relying on the credibility of an established tabloid newspaper. The qualitative case study focuses on a digital platform for letters to the editor, operated without editorial curation pre-publication from 2010 to 2018 by one of Denmark's largest newspapers, *Ekstra Bladet*. A discourse analysis of the 50 most shared letters to the editor on Facebook shows that nativist, far-right actors used the platform to disseminate fear-mongering discourses and xenophobic conspiracy theories, disguised as professional news and referred to as articles. These processes took place at the borderline of true and false as well as racist and civil discourse. At this borderline, a lack of supervision and moderation coupled with the openness and visual design of the platform facilitated new forms of covert racism between journalism and user-generated content.

Keywords: racism, letters to the editor, borderline discourse, digital journalism, fake news

Introduction

Publish your own text on the biggest news website. The People's Voice is for people who are passionate about a cause – and want to say their piece.
(*Ekstra Bladet*, 2016)¹

This quote was placed on the front page of The People's Voice [Folkets Røst], an online platform operated by the Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* from 2010 to 2018. While active, users were encouraged to “get involved in the debate, make your opinion known” (*Ekstra Bladet*, 2016) without editorial supervision or curation pre-publication. *Ekstra Bladet's* editor-in-chief, Poul Madsen, described the platform as an open space for discussion, in which users could write anything they wanted (Andreassen, 2015). The newspaper consistently referred to content on The People's Voice as “letters to the editor” (Andreassen, 2015), insisting that it represented the digital equivalent of

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opinion pages in print media (Madsen, 2016). Yet, authors on The People's Voice often described their work as news articles, suggesting a hybrid format between news and opinion. Several of the most active authors on The People's Voice were also prolific contributors to hyperpartisan right-wing news platforms. This suggests the appropriation of The People's Voice as an extension of hyperpartisan news platforms and nativist blogs.

Critical research has shown how racism is increasingly present and even amplified in digital media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). The ideal of enabling as much freedom of expression as possible has led to a plethora of new outlets, giving rise to new forms of deception that blur traditional boundaries between journalism and opinion (Tandoc et al., 2018). While studies of fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media discuss the changing role of gatekeepers, from journalists to social media platforms (Bro & Wallberg, 2014; Heft et al., 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018), studies of digital racism focus on tactics of oppression within changing media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018). The present article combines these lines of research, analysing the discursive tactics of nativist far-right actors at the juncture of digital journalistic formats and covert racism. We explore how The People's Voice was tactically appropriated to legitimise racist discourse supported by the infrastructure of a tabloid newspaper. In the following, we introduce the conceptual foundations of the case study, drawing on scholarship about the blurring boundaries of online journalism and digital racism. We then outline the study's qualitative approach drawing on discourse theory, followed by the analysis of letters published on The People's Voice, which is structured along the technological context, sources, and stories.

Journalism, clicks, and social media

In today's hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), the boundaries between journalism and user-generated content, old and new media, media institutions and social media, and credible and dubious information, have become increasingly fluid (Tandoc et al., 2018). Multiple actors participate in the production and dissemination of both professional journalistic work and user-generated content presented in similar packaging. As noted by Carlson, "struggles over journalism are often struggles over boundaries" (2015: 2). While journalistic boundaries have never been entirely static, the digital era introduces new struggles over what counts as news (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Recent studies indicate that online users have difficulties assessing information credibility and sources (Garrett et al., 2019; Nygren & Guath, 2019). In part, this is due to social media's visual design, making different types of content "often visually indistinguishable" (Vaidhyathan, 2018: 5).

The rise of digital platforms challenges journalistic authority on several levels, as these spaces "alter the availability of news, its economic structures, and the relationship between journalists and their audience" (Carlson, 2017: 2). Newspapers increasingly rely on online user engagement as measures of proliferation (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). While journalists still act as gatekeepers of newsworthiness, the premises on which decisions are made have, to some extent, changed (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). As Lee and Chyi (2014) argue, online newsworthiness is defined by a greater variety of factors than in print media. This gives rise to new hybrid modalities of gatekeeping and news (Eg & Krumsvik, 2019).

One important aspect of online news proliferation is the “clickability” of headlines, or their ability to attract attention and cause users to distribute it further by clicking, liking, commenting, and sharing (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2013; Kuiken et al., 2017). Clickbait articles are often simplified, speculative, negative, and provocative (Blom & Hansen, 2015), using questions and surprising statistics to attract attention (Kuiken et al., 2017). In a broader context, scholars argue that this amplifies existing “erosion of the fact/commentary distinction” (McNair, 2017: 1327). Fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media often rely on clickbait headlines to attract attention (Bradshaw et al., 2019). While such content can spread in social media and outside the reach of established media institutions (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Heft et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2017), professional news media can amplify and legitimise harmful digital content by increasing its visibility and reach (Phillips, 2018).

Deceptive news and its connection to racism

The loss of accuracy in favour of clickability in digital media has been identified as a key factor in the rise of what has been defined as fake news, junk news, and hyperpartisan media (Carlson, 2017).² As argued by Tandoc and colleagues, fake news appropriates the credibility of news media, undermining journalistic credibility by mimicking “the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions” (2018: 147). They argue that fake news is in many respects co-constructed by the audience who mistakes it for credible news and legitimises it through online engagement. Over the past decades, research has increasingly shown how deceptive tactics are mobilised to promote racism in digital media environments (Daniels, 2013; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018).

In this context, Matamoros-Fernández (2017: 930) introduces the notion of “platformed racism” to encompass the amplification of racist discourses on digital platforms at the intersection of user practices, algorithms, interfaces, policies, and business models. Digital media platforms are in many respects ambiguous spaces of expression, blurring the boundaries between what is considered inappropriate, fake, trolling, and normal (Phillips, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017). Krzyżanowski and Ledin (2017: 567) present the notion of “borderline discourse” to encompass the ways in which racist ideas can become legitimised online by being packaged as civil and acceptable. This packaging occurs through the tactical appropriation of institutional authority, for example by exploiting existing platforms or mimicking established formats, such as journalistic genres. Borderline discourse can proliferate both on fringe websites and established platforms hosted by credible institutions, where uncivil ideas are promoted under the guise of civility. Here, racist actors take a “self-proclaimed role as interlocutors of the accepted sites of debating political views” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 570). Borderline discourses normalise otherwise uncivil ideas and bring them from fringe positions into mainstream media and parliamentary politics. This is linked to populist rhetoric revolving around the discursive construction of “us” versus “them” and “the people” versus the “foreign Other”. As noted by Engesser and colleagues, “populist communication logic and online opportunities go hand in hand” (2017: 1284).

This research departed from this intersection of racism, deception, ambivalence, and online news. Following Giglietto and colleagues (2019), we approached the case study

from a processual perspective, focusing equally on the studied *sources* (their authority and proximity), the *stories* (and their alignment with the specific values), and the *technological context* (the platform infrastructure and visual presentation). We argue that the normalisation of digital racism takes place at the borderline of true and false as well as civil and uncivil discourse. Within this conceptual framework, we explore how The People's Voice was tactically appropriated to amplify racism through borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017) and how it blurred the boundaries of journalism and opinion (Carlson & Lewis, 2015).

The People's Voice

The Danish tabloid newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, founded in 1904, operates the second-most visited Danish website, surpassed only by the national public service broadcaster, Danmarks Radio (Alexa, 2018). Launched in 1997 (Sahl, 2017), *Ekstra Bladet's* website has continuously ranked as one of the most visited in Denmark (Danske Medier Research, 2018). With the emergence of social media, the newspaper increasingly relies on online distribution, especially through Facebook, with 72 per cent of the Danish population having a Facebook account (Rossi et al., 2016). *Ekstra Bladet* is known for its combination of entertainment and investigative journalism for which it has received several journalistic awards (Dansk Journalistforbund, 2018). Following international developments in news digitisation (Carlson, 2017), the newspaper has in recent years adapted to digital media by enabling native advertising (Barlag, 2016) and producing clickbait headlines to increase user attention and engagement on social media. *Ekstra Bladet* also runs one of the largest online discussion forums in Denmark, The Nation [Nationen], which has been criticised for its hostile tone and racist sentiments (Kjeldtoft, 2016).

The People's Voice was a digital platform, operated by *Ekstra Bladet* from 2010 to 2018, where users could publish their own letters to the editor. The platform received an award for "Best User Involvement" by the Association of Danish Interactive Media in 2010 (Mediearbejdsgiverne, 2010). Officially, The People's Voice never progressed beyond beta mode, being perpetually labelled as an unfinished product (*Ekstra Bladet*, 2016). In late March 2018, *Ekstra Bladet* decided to discontinue The People's Voice, stating that this was due to insufficient user activity and readership (correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 22 March 2018). *Ekstra Bladet* has since deleted all content from The People's Voice.

Methodological approach

Drawing on discourse theory, this qualitative case study analysed the most visible letters to the editor published on The People's Voice. The research examined the construction and presentation of themes, narratives, and rhetorical strategies taking place within the blurring boundaries of news and opinion, and journalism and user-generated content facilitated by *Ekstra Bladet*. The in-depth analysis of the letters focussed on the strategies and narratives that attracted most attention on the platform and discussed their implications for journalistic boundaries.

While *Ekstra Bladet* does not provide access to the most read or shared entries, each entry published on their website (during the time of data collection in February 2017)

contained a share-counter indicative of the number of shares on Facebook (see Figure 1, top right corner). To collect the most shared letters on The People's Voice from 2015 and 2016, we departed from statistics on social media interactions around Danish news content (see Bro & Wallberg, 2014; De virale nyheder, 2019),³ which showed the number of interactions (likes, comments, and shares) of each entry from Danish news outlets after their first week of publication. These data were collected via Facebook's Graph API and the API tool SharedCount. From the data, we generated a list of the 200 entries (that received most interactions after a week) and crosschecked them with the share-counters for each of these entries on *Ekstra Bladet's* website. This way, we generated a list of letters that had received most shares on Facebook over time (excluding entries that had since been deleted).

To enable in-depth qualitative analysis focussing on discourses and rhetorical strategies, we narrowed our scope to the 50 most shared letters, which were collected through screen captures. Subsequently, we created an overview of the letters ranked from most shared to least shared on Facebook containing their headlines, authorship, and numbers of shares and interactions (see appendix⁴). Throughout the analysis, each letter from The People's Voice is referenced using the author's surname, year, and ranked number (e.g. [1]), indicating its proliferation.

Following Yin (2009), we approached *Ekstra Bladet's* The People's Voice as a context-dependent case shaped by the interaction of user actions, discourses, and digital architecture. The 50 letters in our study were analysed in four rounds. First, to get an overview, we counted and catalogued four key elements: authors; quotes and references from public figures and experts; hyperlinks to newspapers, blogs, and websites; and sources of statistics. Second, with a closer reading of the letters, we identified the main topics and themes in headlines, texts, and images across the material. Third, we identified patterns for each of the themes in the letters. Fourth, informed by discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), we conducted an in-depth discourse analysis of the letters. This discourse analysis centred on the ways in which different narratives and identities were constructed relationally within the studied material. We particularly focused on subject positions (articulated political identities), logics of difference (ways in which signifiers gain meaning through differences from other discursive elements), and logics of equivalence (ways in which signifiers are linked to discourse, against a shared opposition) (see Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). This qualitative analysis enabled a detailed presentation of rhetorical and discursive strategies.

Upon completion of the process, we used Google search to query for the title of each letter to the editor, searching for references to them and re-publications. We also performed queries on Facebook, searching for the letters shared through public accounts, particularly by political figures. For further information about The People's Voice, we corresponded with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist (and editor of The Nation) Thomas Harder, collected newspaper articles about The People's Voice, and (where possible) followed the proliferation of letters through shares, comments, and likes on social media. While the study could not draw conclusions about representability of the letters for The People's Voice overall, following the proliferation of the most visible letters enabled a critical discussion of how this phenomenon contributes to the blurring of journalistic formats, opening up questions for similar use by other media institutions.

A brief note on significance

The 50 letters from The People's Voice that received the most interactions on Facebook (likes, comments, shares) after a week of proliferation received 124,364 interactions. The 50 letters in our study, which excludes letters deleted by *Ekstra Bladet* or authors at the time of data collection, received 78,834 interactions within the first week and were shared 124,303 times on Facebook across time. These are relatively small figures as compared to *Ekstra Bladet's* main website (where the top 50 entries from the same two years received 1,084,598 interactions within the first week), which helps explain why the newspaper chose to discontinue the platform. Still, *Ekstra Bladet's* website is one of the most visited news sites in Denmark. While we do not have comparable numbers for fringe media and hyperpartisan blogs, The People's Voice did provide an infrastructure for promoting perspectives that would not be acceptable in mainstream media.

Studies of interactions on Facebook news pages often differentiate levels of activity such as likes, shares, and comments (see e.g., Larsson, 2018). While likes are usually classified as low-level engagement, they mean something different if the entry represents otherwise unacceptable political perspectives (see Neumayer & Svensson, 2016). The interactions on Facebook with the analysed letters include the official Facebook page of the Danish People's Party (the third largest political party at the time), the official page of Pia Kjaersgaard (former leader of the Danish People's Party), and the official page of Martin Geertsen (member of parliament for The Liberal Party). They shared the letters leading up to the 2015 national elections in Denmark where immigration and the so-called refugee crisis were heavily disputed and politicised issues. By being shared by prominent political actors and becoming part of mainstream political campaigns, the letters played a significant role in transgressing the boundaries between acceptable and uncivil discourse, as our analysis revealed.

Technological context: An infrastructure for mimicking news

The infrastructure provided by The People's Voice made it possible to mimic news published by *Ekstra Bladet*. This was mainly due to the resemblance between entries published on both platforms. The overall layout, fonts, and colours were identical, making it difficult to differentiate between user-generated content (originally published on The People's Voice) and the work of professional journalists (originally published on *Ekstra Bladet's* news website). With the layout being identical, a reader would have to identify the author's name printed in small font below the headline as not belonging to a journalist (see Figure 1). Within this infrastructure, The People's Voice enabled users to produce their own headline, subheading, body text, and hyperlinks as well as to upload an accompanying image in a visual layout closely resembling news articles by *Ekstra Bladet's* editorial team. Moreover, *Ekstra Bladet* did not prohibit users from calling their work "news" or "articles". When shared on social media (see Figure 2), letters to the editor appeared identical to articles published by *Ekstra Bladet's* newsroom, with identical formatting and visual layout. The letters appeared with *Ekstra Bladet's* top-level web domain *ekstrabladet.dk*, identical to news articles. The only difference was a small-print disclaimer: "Publish your own text on the biggest news website. The People's Voice is for people who are passionate about a cause – and want to say their piece" (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Resemblance in visual layout, *Ekstra Bladet* (top) and *The People's Voice* (bottom)



Comment: Translation of headline: Diplomatic Crisis: Løkke [Prime Minister] to the Turks – stay away



Comment: Translation of headline: Denmark is dissolving – Gangs of immigrants are taking over more and more areas

Figure 2. Resemblance in visual layout for articles shared on Facebook, *Ekstra Bladet* (left) and *The People's Voice* (right), differences highlighted



Comment: The image from *The People's Voice* has been blurred. It derives from a criminal case in the UK (Topping, 2013).

While the technical infrastructure made it possible to mimic news articles, *Ekstra Bladet* handled *The People's Voice* as an opinion page and encouraged anyone to voice their opinion through the platform (Andreassen, 2015). As an opinion page, *The People's Voice* functioned without supervision, content moderation, or curation pre-publication. *Ekstra Bladet* argued that this lack of interference was key to producing an atmosphere

of free and open debate (Bendtsen, 2016). This was supported by the ideal of a platform that “took care of itself” (correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 19 February 2018). The editorial team referred to the content as “letters to the editor”, “reader posts”, or simply “posts” (Andreassen, 2015; correspondence with *Ekstra Bladet* journalist Thomas Harder, 19 February 2018).

The resemblance between the news articles on *Ekstra Bladet* and opinion pieces on The People’s Voice led to criticism on several occasions, as they were clearly mistaken as articles written by professional journalists. A letter to the editor was widely circulated as news from *Ekstra Bladet* prior to the Danish parliamentary elections in 2015. The letter allegedly “revealed” that the husband of Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, had committed tax fraud (Andreassen, 2015). Editor-in-chief Poul Madsen admitted that even he was “very confused” until he realised that the story had not been published by *Ekstra Bladet*’s newsroom, but “it’s just arranged so it resembles” (Andreassen, 2015). The newspaper responded by removing the content, but the visual layout of The People’s Voice remained the same (Andreassen, 2015). In 2016, a letter to the editor from The People’s Voice, with the headline “Trend arrived in Denmark: Immigrants kidnapping Danish girls for sex”, once again sparked criticism (Hemmeth, 2016). Within a week after its publication, the letter received 20,484 interactions on Facebook. Madsen responded defensively to the criticism, arguing that all news media encompasses both journalism and opinion, and The People’s Voice “is the users’ own universe” (Madsen, 2016). The platform was, from his perspective, equivalent to opinion pages in print media. Despite *Ekstra Bladet*’s defence, Lars Werge, head of the Danish Union of Journalists at the time, criticised The People’s Voice, arguing that “when you see this post on social media, I don’t think you notice it’s not a journalistic article [...] which can ultimately damage journalism’s credibility” (Bendtsen, 2016).

The combination of visual layout of The People’s Voice’s, *Ekstra Bladet*’s insistence in treating The People’s Voice as an opinion page, and the ability of such to travel through social media in the guise of news articles written by professional journalists, created a hybrid news format. This format represented personal opinions of users but could be fashioned into a journalistic news genre and referred to as such. The technological infrastructure was thus not only provided by The People’s Voice but also by *Ekstra Bladet* and social media platforms. Combined, they created an infrastructure where letters were shared as newspaper articles and strategically quoted and used to legitimise and normalise racism through “borderline discourse” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 567), as we will unfold in the following sections.

The source: Tracing authors, media, and hyperlinks

Within the technical infrastructure of The People’s Voice, various aspects gave letters legitimacy and the appearance of news articles published by *Ekstra Bladet*’s journalists. Of the 50 most shared letters to the editor in our study, only three were written in first person, drew upon personal experience, and stylistically resembled letters to the editor found in opinion pages (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004 for such criteria). Written in third person, with consistent use of images, subheadings, statistics, and hyperlinks, the authors of a majority of letters explicitly referred to their own content as “articles” and “news”.

Of the 50 letters to the editor in our sample, 17 were also posted identically elsewhere online on the same day as on The People’s Voice, often referenced directly as news: in all cases, these additional postings were on nationalist-conservative or anti-Muslim blogs or both. The five most shared letters from The People’s Voice in our sample all revolved around Muslims and immigrants, containing fearmongering headlines and promoting conspiracy theories (see Table 1).

Table 1. *TPV letters to the editor most frequently shared on Facebook*

Headline	Facebook shares	Author, year
Research: Islam is the world’s most violent religion	23,369	Sennels, 2015 [1]
Alarming paragraph: Islam might be illegal according to Danish law	14,736	Sennels, 2015 [2]
Vandalism against asylum centre led to 18 months in prison – Immigrant assault led to 2 months	8,104	Frederiksen, 2015 [3]
Asylum director: The government has made Denmark more attractive to asylum seekers	7,536	Mogensen, 2015 [4]
Four more years with Thorning [Danish prime minister] will likely result in 128,000 additional Muslim immigrants	4,239	Mogensen, 2015 [5]

The most visible letters on The People’s Voice could be traced back to only a few authors. Just twelve authors were responsible for the 50 most shared letters to the editor in our sample. The most active user wrote 22 letters, accounting for 72,754 shares on Facebook (59% in our sample). This user account belongs to Nicolai Sennels, former leader of PEGIDA Denmark, the Danish branch of the German movement PEGIDA: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West [Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes]. Sennels is also a frequent contributor to hyperpartisan online news platforms in Denmark, such as 24Nyt and NewSpeek, which have been characterised as “junk news” outlets (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019). This indicates a tactical use of The People’s Voice to legitimise partisan agendas. Among the twelve authors of the 50 letters is also Daniel Carlsen, the former leader of the ethno-pluralist Party of the Danes [Danskernes Parti] and leading member of Denmark’s National Socialist Movement [Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Bevægelse]. These prominent nationalist, nationalist-conservative activists voiced white nationalist agendas on The People’s Voice, mastering a hybrid genre of news and opinion.

Of the 50 letters to the editor in our sample, 48 contained images and 41 contained hyperlinked references. Authors used a total of 217 hyperlinks, indicating a writing style mimicking journalistic referencing of sources. The most referenced sources in the letters were, respectively, Wikipedia, a Danish blog named Cultural Radicalism Destroys Denmark [Kulturradikalisme Smadrer Danmark], two established Danish news outlets (*Jyllands-Posten* and *Politiken*), and The People’s Voice itself (see Table 2).

Table 2. Five most referenced sources (left), five most referenced types of sources (right)

Most referenced sources	#	Most referenced source types	#
Wikipedia	20	Danish news articles	69
Cultural Radicalism Destroys Denmark (CRDD, Danish anti-Islamic/nationalist-conservative blog)	15	Danish anti-Islamic/ Danish anti-Islamic/nationalist-conservative blogs or websites	33
Jyllands-Posten (Danish newspaper)	14	Foreign news articles	23
Politiken (Danish newspaper)	11	Encyclopaedias	20
The People’s Voice (Letters to the editor)	10	Foreign anti-Islamic/nationalist-conservative blogs or websites	12

In a letter on The People’s Voice entitled “Research: Islam is the world’s most violent religion”, which was shared 23,369 times on Facebook, author Nicolai Sennels wrote in third person; used subheadings and a thematic (and stereotypical) image of a dark-skinned, bearded man shouting; referred to results from research, statistics, and surveys; and linked to external sources. The five hyperlinks in the letter directed the reader to one German and two Danish news outlets; a Danish book publisher; and an international anti-Muslim website (thereligionofpeace.com), which has been described as being part of an online “industry of Islamophobia” disseminating a “heavily biased worldview” (Chao, 2015: 58). Across the dataset, we find that authors indistinguishably mixed hyperlinks to partisan blogs, established news media, statistics from national agencies and research institutions, nativist blogs, and other letters to the editor from The People’s Voice.

Across the letters, experts were often quoted in decontextualised ways to convey a political message. For example, Interpol director Robert Noble was quoted as saying “Close the borders or you will be attacked” (Sennels, 2016 [30]). A hyperlink led to a 2011 article from *The Independent*, in which the chief of Interpol argued for a systematic screening of passports in Europe but not for closing all borders (Hastings, 2011). Along similar lines, a programme manager from the Bulgarian Red Cross was quoted in a headline stating that “the government has made Denmark more attractive to asylum seekers” (Mogensen, 2015 [4]). Tracing the source showed that a programme manager indeed made a statement about Denmark becoming a destination for refugees but made no mention of the Danish government (Borg, 2015). These examples illustrate that racist discourses take place not only at the border of civil and uncivil (as Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017 contend) but also at the border of true and false.

Despite the incorrect quote of the programme manager from the Bulgarian Red Cross, two members of Danish parliament – Martin Geertsen from the Liberal Party [Venstre] and Pia Kjærsgaard from Danish People’s Party [Dansk Folkeparti] – shared this letter from The People’s Voice on their public Facebook accounts (see Figure 3). Both politicians (whose parties were in opposition at the time) referenced the letter and explicitly blamed the government for an increase in immigrants. Kjærsgaard added to her post: “Yeah, not exactly news that Thorning [Prime Minister] and De Radikale [party of government] have made Denmark more attractive” (Kjærsgaard, 2015). Members of parliament thus shared these as news articles written by journalists, thereby furthering the normalising of racist discourses in the guise of legitimate news.

Figure 3. Letter to the editor shared by Pia Kjærsgaard (MP, Danish People's Party) and Martin Geertsen (MP, Liberal Party)

Pia Kjærsgaard
10 June 2015 · €

Ja, ikke just nogen nyhed at Thorning og De Radikale har gjort Danmark mere attraktivt ved at fjerne starthjælpen til asylansøgere og åbne grænserne. Enig? Vi hører jo igen og igen asylansøgere, der siger, at Danmark var deres mål – og ikke Italien, Grækenland eller andre af de lande, som de først kommer til, når de kommer til Europa. Dansk Folkeparti vil tilbagerulle alle Thorning og De Radikales lempelser på udlændingeområdet, hvis vi får indflydelse efter valget.

Asylchef: Regeringen har gjort Danmark mere attraktivt for asylansøgere
Publicer din egen tekst på den største nyhedsside. Folkets Røst er for dig, der brænder for en sag – og vil have den frem
EKSTRABLADET.DK

2.6K · Most relevant

Martin Geertsen
28 March 2015 · €

Ja, og derfor bliver vi ganske enkelt nødt til at få kigget på det faktum, at denne regering har givet fuld kontanthjælp og en altn flygtningefamilie 10.000 kr. mere om måneden, så snart man får opholdstilladelse i Danmark. Jeg vil have genindført starthjælpen. Af tre grunde. For det første for at regulere på tilstrømningen til Danmark. For det andet for at skærpe incitamenterne i kontanthjælpssystemet til at finde sig et arbejde. Og for det tredje, fordi det ganske ikke er rimeligt, at man får fuld kontanthjælp - i lighed med mennesker, der har boet i DK hele deres liv - så snart, man sætter sine fødder i DK.

Asylchef: Regeringen har gjort Danmark mere attraktivt for asylansøgere
EKSTRABLADET.DK

Kristian Pihl Lorentzen and 1.3K others · Most relevant

While the sources cited are not entirely fake, they are at the borderline of true and false and rendered credible by their perception as legitimate and reliable. In another letter entitled “Professor: Muslims have killed 270 million people since Mohammad”, the author referenced Bill Warner as an academic expert in support of the “fact” that “Muslims have killed a total of 270 million non-Muslims” (Sennels, 2016 [14]). While Warner is indeed a former professor, he is in the field of physics (rather than political science, history, or religion) and known for his controversial and one-sided critique of Islam (Smietana, 2010). Similarly, a “German newspaper” was referenced to present as a fact the conspiracy theory that Merkel was strategically using refugees to weaken European nation states (Frederiksen, 2015 [18]). The German magazine in question has repeatedly been criticised for sensationalist headlines and articles propagating anti-EU and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories as well as for allowing authors to write for the magazine with complete anonymity, thereby challenging principles of press ethics (Boeselager, 2015). While the newspaper indeed exists, its credibility is questionable. Through these links, The People’s Voice created openings between fringe media, blogs, and websites of nativist and nationalist political actors, creating further legitimacy and acceptability of otherwise uncivil sources.

The story: Discourses of exclusion and covert racism

The story of the Muslim Other on The People’s Voice built upon stereotypes pertinent across Europe, yet through the legitimate presentation of these stories as “borderline discourses” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin 2017), they were amplified, normalised, and

stabilised. We found key logics of difference and equivalence (see Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011: 19) feeding into stories across the letters. Overall, the 50 letters to the editor in our sample addressed the following issues: Muslims and Islam (n=24), immigration (n=19), terrorism (n=13), the European Union (n=10), crime (n=8, not including terrorism), state benefits (n=3), cannabis legalisation (n=3), and state privatisation (n=1). Letters involving negative representations of immigrants and Muslims were shared most frequently, comprising 88 per cent of shares on Facebook in our sample (109,361 shares). The headlines of these letters contained clear characteristics of clickbait news (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Kuiken et al., 2017), including sensationalist terms such as “shock” and “destroy” as well as attention-grabbing sentences such as “See the numbers” and “Denmark is dissolving”.

Across the letters, the subject position of Muslim, immigrant, migrant, and refugee (often directly overlapping) were discursively positioned as dichotomous adversaries of the Dane. Muslims and immigrants were continuously coupled through logics of equivalence to violence, crime, terrorism, hypersexuality, deceitfulness, chaos, and conspiracy, while Danes became “cattle for terrorists” (Sennels, 2016 [19]) who disguise themselves as refugees and come “pouring across the borders” (Sennels, 2015 [24]). According to the letters, “research” and “statistics” show that Muslims systematically destroy Denmark while remaining invisible to the weak Danish political elites (Sennels, 2016 [20]). If politicians remain unwilling to make harsh and targeted anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies, Denmark will ultimately cease to exist:

And at that point, Denmark will surely be called Denmarkistan... and somewhere in Denmarkistan will be a statue of Lars Løkke [Prime Minister, Liberal Party], Søren Pind [Minister of Justice, Liberal Party] and Inger Støjberg [Minister of Immigration and Integration, Liberal Party] in passionate embrace, and in elaborate Arabic writing, it will say: “Here are those who destroyed Denmark”. (Sennels, 2016 [22])

Danish politicians from both centre-left and centre-right parties were presented as wilfully enabling a Muslim conspiracy, concealing the horrific truth about Muslims and immigrants. Their subject position was that of the traitor conspiring with the invading enemy. While the Danish Social Democrats claim that crime is declining, they supposedly conceal the truth that each day “more foreign criminals come to Denmark” (Mogensen, 2015 [37]). The politicians’ treachery is, according to several letters, caused by their loyalty toward the corrupt European Union, which is controlled by greedy elites that are hostile to the subject position of the Danes, represented as “the people”. German Chancellor Angela Merkel plays a key role in this conspiracy narrative as she allegedly seeks to spark a series of major national crises through immigration, which she plots to use as a vehicle for creating a “United States of Europe” (Frederiksen, 2015 [23]). This fact, the letters proclaimed, is supported by both statistics and credible sources. The plan is supported by multinational corporations and the United Nations, which conspire to “import cheap labour – even though it destroys our culture” (Sennels, 2015 [6]). This discourse of an enormous conspiracy of powerful political, economic, and cultural-left elites was combined with narratives of Islamisation.

Muslims were portrayed as hypersexual, violent, criminal, and deceitful by both nature and culture, making them dichotomous adversaries of (white, Christian) Europeans, who they will eventually replace. The notion that Muslims are conspiring to overthrow

European countries has been labelled by researchers as the Eurabia conspiracy theory and it is prevalent on nativist, nationalist-conservative blogs and social media channels across Scandinavia (Ekman, 2015). The authors on The People’s Voice picked information and sources to construct a political narrative presenting Muslims as the enemy, for example by arguing that the Danish justice system privileges immigrants over “real Danes” (Frederiksen, 2015 [3]), building on the populist narrative of “us” versus “them” (Engesser et al., 2017).

Besides the use of questionable and cherry-picked sources and quotes, distorted statistics and figures were also used to create objectivity and legitimacy for the narratives. In a statistical projection of the number of immigrants in Denmark, an influx of “120,000 immigrants per year” was reportedly expected (Frederiksen, 2015 [9]). This projection was based on national statistics solely from two weeks of immigration in 2015, when Europe experienced a peak in incoming refugees. The statistical projection was based on official – yet extremely skewed – statistical data. Similarly, a prediction that Denmark would receive “128,000 extra Muslim immigrants if Helle Thorning-Schmidt remains prime minister” (Mogensen, 2015 [5]) was based on only one year of national statistics (2014). The causal relationship between the prime minister and Muslim immigrants was validated by a hyperlink to another letter on The People’s Voice, creating a circular referencing, where distorted facts on the platform supported other distorted facts.

While deception based on inaccurate, cherry-picked or decontextualised data has been a staple of xenophobic and racist discourses in the past (Daniels, 2013), the use of a digital platform from an established news source as well as hyperlinks to both established and fringe media, national statistics, and anti-Muslim nativists makes The People’s Voice a potent case of amplification of racist discourses, far-right populist rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. A majority of the references on The People’s Voice could not be dismissed as mere falsehoods, although authors misled readers by cherry-picking, decontextualising, simplifying, and overgeneralising information to support racist agendas, packaged as news articles from *Ekstra Bladet*.

Conclusion

This study shows how a small group of highly active users tactically appropriated *Ekstra Bladet*’s The People’s Voice to promote nativist narratives and far-right antagonism through a careful assemblage of manipulative visual cues, distorted facts, opaque references, and populist rhetoric. Several of these authors were active contributors on anti-Muslim blogs and hyperpartisan news sites, characterised by manipulative reporting (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019) and low levels of transparency (Heft et al., 2019). This indicates that far-right activists tactically took advantage of The People’s Voice as an extension of hyperpartisan channels, most likely to obtain legitimacy through *Ekstra Bladet*. When public figures such as politicians shared these letters as news articles, this further enhanced the credibility, visibility, and propagation of racist ideas as part of mainstream political discourse.

In this study, racist discourse moved between the letters to the editor and their sharing as news articles in legitimate public discourse, creating a hybrid news format built around “borderline discourse” (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017: 567), legitimising racist antagonism via its presentation as legitimate news. This was enabled through

The People's Voice's openness and lack of moderation coupled with the institutional authority of *Ekstra Bladet*, creating a genre with little resemblance to the opinion pages in traditional news (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). The People's Voice enabled racist discourses at the intersection of user practices, interfaces, and (lack of) policies and business models, a form of "platformed racism" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017: 930). The circulation of the letters on Facebook increased the blurring of journalistic boundaries, as social media contained few "of the cues that ordinarily allow us to identify and assess the source of a story" (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 5). Thereby, the letters became difficult to identify as opinions of prominent far-right activists, rather than professional journalism.

There are limitations to this study in that it cannot assess the exact proliferation of the analysed letters among Danish Facebook users nor conclude how many users were potentially deceived. Despite these uncertainties, this research serves as an example of a tactically assembled manipulative format, challenging *Ekstra Bladet's* journalistic authority from within and contributing to existing developments in which "journalistic authority has increasingly become a topic of concern" (Carlson, 2017: 2). Rather than arriving at an answer to how exactly such tactics take place and succeed, this research opens up for further questions of how user-participation combined with the infrastructure of a respected newspaper can produce hybrid formats that are at the borders of civility and also challenge the borders of journalistic work. As a recent study by Larsson (2019) shows, actors from the political right are particularly visible on Facebook. The tactics outlined in this paper are part of the repertoire of right-wing actors who utilise emotional and aggressive language within the format of deceptive news articles to gain user engagement and visibility.

Junk news and hyperpartisan media, manipulation, and deception predominantly derive from outside established media institutions, such as fringe partisan outlets (Arnfred & Kjeldtoft, 2019; Heft et al., 2019), conspiracy theory websites (Bradshaw et al., 2019), news fabrication schemes (Tandoc et al., 2018), and automated social media accounts (Bradshaw et al., 2019). The People's Voice exemplifies an established institution's attempt to increase clicks and engagement via a digital platform that would not need much supervision. By doing so, *Ekstra Bladet* transgressed borders of journalism by creating a bridge to hyperpartisan fringe media. This new manipulative format furthered the pressure on journalistic boundaries.

The question remains as to which strategies are at media professionals' disposal besides the blunt instrument of simply shutting down such platforms (as eventually occurred with The People's Voice in 2018) as a means of coping with such hybrid forms of user-generated content and journalism. There is a need for further understanding of how new forms of professionalism can steer discussions in hybrid media systems, avoiding the spread of misleading information and racism. The mimicking of news needs to be studied within the context of changing media systems, platforms, interfaces, policies, actors, political economies, and political cultures in order to understand the normalisation and legitimisation of racist discourses in hybrid formats between user-generated content and journalism.

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Notes

1. All quotes originally in Danish have been translated by the authors.
2. It should be noted that the notion of “fake news” has increasingly come to function as a rhetorical weapon in political debates (Farkas & Schou, 2018).
3. Developed by Filip Wallberg at the University of Southern Denmark.
4. The letters from The People’s Voice can be made available by the authors as PDFs upon request.

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