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The Roar in the Comment Section: How Journalists Mediate Public Opinion on the Danish Online Newspaper politiken.dk

Rasmus Rønlev

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Abstract

This article was originally published in 2018 in *Journalistica*, a Danish journal of Scandinavian journalism studies. It showcases how the ‘Copenhagen school’ conception of argumentation has been adopted and adapted to analyze how digital media affect the function, format, and form of public debate. The article presents a case study of an intense debate on the Danish online newspaper politiken.dk in 2012, triggered by a young university student’s op-ed piece about her tight economy. A rhetorical analysis reveals how the coverage of the debate in Danish media simplified the public opinion that manifested itself in the online newspaper’s comment section: The polyphonic choir of arguments uncovered in the analysis was, in Danish media, reduced to a monophonic criticism of the student and her piece. The study shows how journalists’ role as privileged interpreters and mediators of public opinion may not only be sustained online, but amplified. In this sense, the study continues the Copenhagen school’s tradition of combining analysis of public debate with constructive criticism of news media and journalists.

Introduction

With the spread of digital networked media, observers have raised questions about journalists' traditional role as gatekeepers in political debates between citizens and power holders (Bro and Wallberg, 2015: 99). In light of the media development, several rhetoricians have advanced the hopeful hypothesis that citizens' online vernacular rhetoric will challenge the authority of traditionally privileged communicators such as journalists (Hauser, 2007: 338; Howard, 2010: 256-257; Ingraham, 2013: 17-18). For example, Gerard A. Hauser has pointed out that the internet makes it possible for citizens to influence public opinion and ultimately political decision makers quickly and effectively, not only without interference by journalists, but occasionally as a manifestation of a direct destabilization of journalists' privileged position as moderators of public opinion formation (2007, 338). In principle, the news media's own digital platforms can also support a more direct communication flow from citizens to power holders. In op-ed pieces, citizens can share their experiences and opinions; in turn, other citizens can do the same in comment sections, and by reading, sharing and commenting, citizens can draw attention to an issue and initiate a dialogue with power holders. With online newspapers as a supporting intermediate, citizens can ideally set the political agenda and achieve influence.

In this study, however, I argue that digital networked media like online newspapers and the communication between citizens and power holders they facilitate have not made journalists superfluous as interpreters and mediators of public opinion—on the contrary. The way journalists summarize debates on online newspapers can still be vital for the *rhetorical agency* of the citizens who partake in the debates. Agency is here understood as the dialectic interplay between citizens' individually conditioned abilities and structurally conditioned opportunities to act rhetorically and achieve influence (Gunn and Cloud, 2010; Hoff-Clausen, Isager

and Villadsen, 2005; Isager, 2009).¹ My analysis will demonstrate that when journalists cover debates on online newspapers and interpret and summarize what the central topics and viewpoints among debating citizens are, the journalists have considerable influence on the citizens' opportunity to attract attention and achieve influence on political opinion formation in the broader public.

Previous research have shown that in line with scholars, journalists also see great democratic potential in inviting citizens to comment on news and views on online newspapers: In that way, news media can strengthen their ideal function as channels for public debate and contribute to democratizing public opinion formation by letting more and new voices speak out (Braun and Gillespie, 2011: 386; Robinson, 2010: 132; Singer, 2010: 134, 138; Singer and Ashman, 2009: 13, 18). This view is so widespread among journalists that journalism scholar David Domingo has called it a strong, socially constructed *myth* (2008: 682-683). However, this myth has proven difficult to realize in practice. According to journalists, reader comments are generally of low quality (Bergström and Wadbring, 2015: 143; Chung, 2007: 56; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011: 136; Singer, 2010: 133; Winsvold, 2009: 47, 51) and full of personal attacks, not only among citizens but also on the journalists' sources (Braun and Gillespie, 2011: 388; Canter, 2013: 612; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011: 136; Loke, 2012: 239). Many journalists therefore think that journalists should maintain the role as gatekeepers, also in debates on online newspapers (Hermida and Thurman, 2008:

1. Joshua Gunn and Dana L. Cloud have argued that after two decades of discussion among rhetoricians, there exists at least three understandings of rhetorical agency and the relation between subject and structure to which the concept refers: a critical post-humanistic understanding that emphasizes structure; a conservative humanistic understanding that emphasizes the subject; and finally a pragmatic dialectic understanding that emphasizes the reciprocal conditional relation between the two (2010: 52-57). When I follow Gunn and Cloud in this article and draw on the dialectical intermediate position (2010: 71), I align myself with recent Danish rhetorical critiques that all have agency as their conceptual focus and explicitly or implicitly draw on this understanding of the concept (Berg and Juul Christiansen, 2010: 10-11; Hoff-Clausen, 2013: 429; Isager, 2009: 271-272; Villadsen, 2008: 27).

350-351, 353-354; Singer, 2010: 138). However, owing to the potential volume of reader comments, moderating online debates and finding and highlighting possible moments of quality in them can be very resource demanding (Braun and Gillespie, 2011: 386-389; Chung, 2007: 56; Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011: 141; Robinson, 2010: 135; Thurman, 2008: 147, 152; Winswold, 2009: 47-48, 52). Despite these negative practical experiences, journalists still claim that comment sections in online newspapers can be a journalistic resource, for example as sources for new stories and angles, expert knowledge, and criticism that may lead to professional self-discipline and self-development (Diakopoulos and Naaman, 2011: 140; Graham and Wright, 2015: 320, 328-332; Hermida and Thurman, 2008: 349, 352; Loke, 2012: 238-239; Singer, 2010: 135).

All the cited studies of journalists' experiences with, and viewpoints on, the use of comment sections in online newspapers are based on interviews, surveys, and observations. Some of the studies supplement such methods with content analyses of reader comments and compare journalists' impressions of comments with the actual content of comments (Canter, 2013: 606; Graham and Wright, 2015: 321-323). None of the studies examine journalists' texts, for example journalists' summaries of debates on online newspapers, and how these texts are related to citizens' texts, for example op-ed pieces and reader comments. However, a basic assumption in this article is that public opinion formation is a dynamic process that manifests itself in public rhetoric; if one wants to know how journalists affect citizens' opportunity to achieve public attention and influence via online newspapers, one has to look precisely at *texts* and their intertextual interplay in communication flows across media types and forms of communication (cf. Hauser, 1999: 84-85, 272-277). I therefore use the interplay between citizens' and journalists' texts as my point of departure and present a case study of debate among citizens on an online newspaper and journalists' coverage of it. The key question is how journalists ascribe rhetorical agency to citizens in the debate.

The study's case is an extended, intense debate in Danish media triggered by an op-ed piece by university student Sofie V. Jensen (SVJ) about her tight student economy, published both in the national newspaper *Politiken*² and the paper's online version politiken.dk³ on January 7, 2012. Within a few days, the piece received close to 2,000 reader comments on politiken.dk, and the debate quickly spread to other news media, blogs, and online debate forums. As the piece attracted a record number of comments on politiken.dk⁴ and created debate across Danish web media, journalists, politicians and others joined in. The following week, the widespread online attention was converted to attention in traditional mass media. SVJ appeared on the front page of national newspapers *Ekstra Bladet*⁵ and *Kristeligt Dagblad*⁶ and on national television, first the morning show *Go'morgen Danmark*⁷ [Good morning, Denmark] on TV2 and later the news program *Deadline*⁸ on DR2, both national public service television stations. In the media coverage, journalists typically started by mentioning how many had read and commented on SVJ's op-ed piece on politiken.dk and pointed out that the majority of comments were negative, even hostile towards her. The dominant story in the Danish media was that while SVJ may have put students' economy

2. Sofie V. Jensen, "Myten om det fede studieliv er falsk" [The myth about the phat student life is false], *Politiken*, January 7, 2012, 2.
3. Sofie V. Jensen, "Jeg er træt af at have en dårlig dag hver dag" [I'm tired of having a bad day every day], January 7, 2012, <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1501598/jer-er-traet-af-at-have-en-daarlig-dag-hver-dag/> (accessed January 19, 2012).
4. Annelise Eskesen, "Studerende sætter rekorddebat i gang" [Student ignites record-breaking debate], *Politiken*, January 12, 2012, 2.
5. *Ekstra Bladet*, "Du er ikke fattig, Sofie" [You are not poor, Sofie], January 10, 2012, 1.
6. Ida Skytte and Ulla Poulsen, "De værdigt trængende er kommet i høj kurs" [The deserving have become very popular], *Kristeligt Dagblad*, January 14, 2012, 1.
7. Morten Bruno Engelschmidt, "Klynker de fattige studerende?" [Are poor students whining?], January 9, 2012 <http://finans.tv2.dk/nyheder/article.php?id=47317257:klynker-de-fattige-studerende.html> (accessed January 31, 2013).
8. *Deadline*, "11/01: Fattig eller bare klynk?" [Poor or just whining?], January 11, 2012, http://www.dr.dk/DR2/dead-line2230/2012/01/08/151901_1_1_1.htm (accessed January 31, 2013).

on the public agenda, her fellow citizens thoroughly put her in her place. Nevertheless, SVJ managed to attract attention from several political power holders, including MPs⁹ and not least Minister of Education at the time, Morten Østergaard, who conceded “that Danish students (...) [did] not live a life of luxury.”¹⁰

The case is interesting as a prototypical example of how digital networked media, including online newspapers, can support not only political communication from power holders to citizens, but also from citizens to power holders. *Politiken*'s debate editor, Per Michael Jespersen, called it a “bottom-up debate”,¹¹ and the newspaper's editorialist Kristian Madsen saw it as “a strong manifestation of the distinct Danish debate culture that also gives ‘ordinary’ people access to newspaper columns”.¹² However, Madsen also thought that the debate illustrated the difference between being heard and being understood: “It is an undisputed positive thing about the Danish public debate that even a young student can set an agenda. All we need now is that professional debaters also try to understand what they [i.e., non-professional debaters] write.” Many of the “professional debaters” Madsen criticized were journalists. As his critique implies, the case also illustrates that online debate among citizens may set the public agenda, but journalists may still play the role of interpreters and mediators of what the agenda is and which arguments prevail among the citizens who take part in the debate.

My analysis of the debate consists of three steps: I analyze SVJ's op-ed, the approximately 2.000 reader comments it received on *politiken.dk*, and the Danish media coverage of the op-ed piece and the comments. By comparing my analyses, I assess how fairly

9. *Ekstra Bladet*, “Du er ikke fattig...”.

10. Jakob Sorgenfri Kjær, “Studerende lever i fattigdom” [Students are living in poverty], *Politiken*, September 3, 2012, 1.

11. Per Michael Jespersen, “Domineres medierne af røv og nøgler?” [Are the media dominated by stupidity?], January 28, 2012, <http://politiken.dk/debat/profiler/permichael/ECE1521869/domineres-medierne-af-roev-og-noegler/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

12. Kristian Madsen, “Fattig? Næh, da jeg var ung, du ...” [Poor? Let me tell you about when I was young ...], *Politiken*, January 14, 2012, 7.

the journalists who covered the debate interpreted the questions and opinions expressed in both the original op-ed piece and the subsequent reader comments on politiken.dk. Based on this, I discuss the journalists' role as rhetorically privileged interpreters and mediators of public opinion online. However, before I embark on the analysis, I will more thoroughly explain the study's underlying theory and method.

Journalists' Rhetorical Privileges in Public Opinion Formation

In an article about political communication in mediated mass-democracies, Jürgen Habermas claims that society can be viewed as a *communicative hierarchy* (Habermas 2006, 419; see also Rønlev 2014, 43-46). According to Habermas, the stratification in this hierarchy is based on an unequal distribution of *power*, be it political, social, financial, or media power (2006, 418-419). From a rhetorical perspective, this means that some communicators enjoy rhetorical privileges in the public sphere that other communicators do not. For example, it is generally easier for journalists, due to their affiliation with the press as a societal institution, to speak out and be heard in public than it is for most citizens. What Habermas implies, in other words, is that there exist *institutionalized differences in rhetorical agency* in the public sphere (see also Rønlev, 2014: 47-49). Not in the sense that journalists necessarily have better rhetorical *abilities* to act compared to most citizens, but in the sense that they have better rhetorical *opportunities*.

Traditionally, journalists have thus had privileged opportunities to exert influence on *public opinion*. Rhetorician Gerard A. Hauser has argued that a public opinion emerges in society's ongoing *multilogue*, by which he means a network of conversations among engaged citizens, not only in the public sphere but in all societal spheres. Here, practical argumentation—or rhetoric, if you will—is decisive for publics to reach a common understanding and assessment of a societal issue and based on that to express

an actual public opinion (1999, 65, 74 and 93-108). Therefore, if you want to know what a public thinks and how it arrives at a public opinion, you have to study public rhetoric and, importantly, both the formal institutional rhetoric of privileged debaters, for example journalists, and the more informal vernacular rhetoric of less privileged debaters like most citizens (1999, 85).

Although public opinion formation is not, according to Hauser, limited to a small elite's discussions in institutional forums like the press and parliament, he recognizes that journalists assume a rhetorically privileged position in the multilogue he describes, exactly because of their access to the media (1999, 275, 277). As *debaters*, journalists not only have easier access to disseminate their views; their profession as news providers (Bro 2009, 382) also gives them special access to the political power holders and thus greater insight into the background of political proposals and the proposers' motives. Consequently, political commentators and editors enjoy a natural attention in the public that most citizens do not. In addition, journalists enjoy special privileges as *moderators* of the multilogue (see also Hansen 2015, 104-105). Via their access to news media as platforms for public debate (Bro 2009, 382), they have influence on what is debated, which contributions are published, and on how the debate, including the public opinion, is interpreted.

As discussed, media developments have put these traditional privileges up for debate. As media scholar Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2012, 186-189) has shown, the spread of digital media has changed societal *communication flows* fundamentally, e.g., flows of information across media types and forms of communication. Earlier, these flows were dominated by interpersonal one-to-one communication and mass mediated one-to-many communication, but now, according to Jensen, a third step has been added, namely many-to-many communication in digital networked media (Jensen, 2009: 335-336, 2010: 64; Jensen and Helles, 2011: 528-529; Jensen 2012: 188). As I mentioned in the introduction, this development has been seen as a potential democratization of public opinion formation: Digital networked media may afford more citizens to gain attention and exert influence as public

debaters (Hindman, 2009: 6). Moreover, the more direct communication between citizens and power holders, which digital networked media apparently facilitate, may make journalists superfluous as mediators of public debate (Bro and Wallberg 2015, 99).

However, studies indicate that journalists' rhetorical privileges in public debate are sustained, perhaps even amplified in digital networked media. In a frequently cited study, social scientist Matthew Hindman has shown how journalists affiliated with established news media attract by far the most attention in the political blogosphere in the US (Hindman 2009, 116-117, 122). In other words, online journalists still have better opportunities to speak out and be heard as debaters. Likewise, in a study of the Danish national newspaper *Berlingske Tidende's* journalistic project *Forbrydelsen* [The Crime] from 2008, rhetorician Christine Isager has shown how journalists maintain a privileged role as moderators of public opinion formation online (2009, 287). How journalists manage this role is precisely what I focus on in this article.

The following case study is a *rhetorical critique* (see Isager 2015, 6; Lund and Roer 2014, Villadsen 2009) based on a close reading of texts and the intertextual reactions they trigger (see Ceccarelli 2001; Hauser 1999, 275-277). I examine the extended debate launched by SVJ's op-ed piece in three steps: First, I analyze the op-ed, then its reader comments on politiken.dk, and finally the coverage of both in Danish media. In this step-by-step analysis, I first focus on the arguments SVJ used in her piece, then the (counter-)arguments in the reader comments, and finally which of the arguments in the piece and the reader comments were disseminated by journalists in the media coverage. In the analyses of the reader comments and the media coverage, I supplement my qualitative analyses of which arguments were found in the analyzed texts with quantitative analyses of how widespread those arguments were. This way, I map which arguments dominated in different steps of the communication flow and finally demonstrate a conspicuous discrepancy between the public opinion expressed

in the comment section on politiken.dk and how that opinion was conveyed in Danish media.

From One Citizen to Many: What Did Sofie V. Jensen Write?

When SVJ's op-ed piece was published, it was already a hot issue in Danish media how to define poverty in a welfare state such as Denmark, and, in continuation of this, what the responsibilities of citizen and state, respectively, ought to be in relation to poverty.¹³ A triggering factor was another heated debate a few months earlier in November 2011 about "Poor Carina", a single mother on cash benefits whom Özlem Cekic, MP for the Socialist People's Party, used as an example of a poor Dane in a confrontation with Joachim B. Olsen, MP for Liberal Alliance.¹⁴ However, this previous debate alone cannot explain why SVJ succeeded to the extent she did in attracting attention to herself and to her case. The op-ed piece she sent to *Politiken* is another part of the explanation for all the fuss.

First and foremost, the piece did not have one *purpose*, i.e. a clear overall claim (cf. Pontoppidan, 2013: 21). Rather, the piece contained two purposes and, in turn, addressed two different *rhetorical audiences*, i.e., mediators of change (Bitzer 1968, 7-8). The fact that both purpose and audience were unclear may help explain the great disparity in the reactions the piece triggered.

The primary purpose in SVJ's piece was to express frustration that her surroundings showed "no tolerance and understanding" for her being poor, which in her words made her feel "excluded" and "lonely". According to her, the media claimed that "you [could] live in luxury on a state education grant" and that young people were "rich, drunken fashionistas [going] to expensive parties on the weekends and [drinking] latte at lunch". Against this

13. Allan Larsen, "Fattig-Carina fik danskerne op af stolen" [Poor Carina got the Danes up from the armchair], December 18, 2012, http://www.ugebreveta4.dk/fattig-carina-fik-danskerne-op-af-stolen_14183.aspx (accessed May 23, 2014)

14. Anne Sofie H. Schrøder, "Fattigdomsdiskussion raser hos kontanthjælpsmodtager" [Raging poverty discussion at the home of cash benefit recipient], November 28, 2011 <http://www.b.dk/politiko/fattigdomsdiskussion-raser-hos-kontanthjaelps-modtager> (accessed May 23, 2014).

background, she appealed to “more solidarity and understanding among students” and called for her surroundings to consider her situation in connection with, for example, student parties, family Christmases, or media stories about student life. “What happened to potlucks and BYOB?”, she asked rhetorically. This purpose appeared as the most important in the piece, not least because SVJ finished by saying that it was “okay” that she could not afford a latte, but that it was not okay that others could not tolerate or understand this. The rhetorical audience for this message was a relatively broad group, namely SVJ’s fellow students, her family and “society at large”, as she put it.

The secondary purpose in SVJ’s piece was to express frustration over being poor, a claim she substantiated by showing that her disposable monthly income—excluding student loans—was DKK 329 (approx. 49 USD). She was “tired of being ... forced to beg her parents to pay for travel to visit them during vacation” and “not being able to afford birth-control pills and vitamin supplements”, but also of “waking up with cold sweat and palpitations”, “being tired and in low spirits” and just simply “having a bad day every day”. It was not clear what exactly SVJ was advocating for with this. However, she wrote, among other things, that she was “fed up with the fact that it [was] ... a cliché to fight for higher state education grants”, and that she felt “despondent” when she saw “how little the educational system [took] into consideration that you [had] to earn money alongside your studies”. The rhetorical audience for this second, less developed purpose was a more narrow but not less vaguely defined group of students who, like SVJ, wanted a reform of the state education grant (SEG) and educational system, and politicians who could make this happen.

The ambiguity of the piece in terms of purpose and audience was further substantiated by its style. The most characteristic stylistic element was the anaphora “I’m tired of ...”. It first appeared in the middle of the second period and subsequently introduced 18 of the 24 periods in the piece (which contained 34 periods in total). As the things SVJ was tired of gradually accumulated, the text’s content, i.e., SVJ’s descriptions of being overwhelmed, was enacted by its repetitive form (Leff & Utley

2004, 42-43). Moreover, all the sentences starting with the anaphora were equal-ranking, which meant that all the things SVJ was tired of also appeared as equal-ranking. The anaphora thus introduced periods that were related to the primary purpose of the piece as well as periods that were related to its secondary purpose: SVJ was simultaneously “tired of feeling excluded, even among [her] co-students” and “tired of being told that [she] [could] not call [her]self poor”. Typical for anaphora, the repetition contributed to making the text appear as a piece of agitation with bombastic emphasis (cf. Albeck 2000, 165); likewise, the many equal-ranking periods starting with an anaphora contributed to maintaining the dual purpose and audience.

From Many Citizens to Many: What Did Debaters Write on politiken.dk?

In the next step of the analysis, I analyze the 1,971 reader comments to SVJ’s op-ed piece on politiken.dk.¹⁵ When I quote from the comments, I indicate with a number in parentheses which comment I quote. The number 1 refers to the first comment published on politiken.dk, and the number 1.971 refers to the last comment published.

I have used the nine categories in Table 1 to describe how the many reader comments on politiken.dk related to SVJ’s piece. The nine categories are exemplified with quotes from the comments, and below, I supplement these examples with a detailed description of recurring arguments in each of the nine categories. Overall, the categories and descriptions provide an overview of the reader comments to SVJ’s piece.

Horizontally, the categorization in Table 1 is based on *topic*. Based on my analysis of SVJ’s op-ed piece, I have categorized the comments in terms of whether the debater commented on SVJ’s argument that poverty was a question of exclusion (the primary

15. My analysis is based on a version of the comment section dated January 19, 2012, which I have archived as pdf files. Since the debate had subsided by then, there is reason to believe that this is the complete corpus of comments generated by the piece on politiken.dk in 2012.

purpose), her argument that poverty was a question of definition (the secondary purpose), or something else.

Vertically, the categorization in Table 2 is based on *attitude*. Again, I have taken my point of departure in the analysis of SVJ’s piece and categorized the reader comments based on what attitude the debater expressed towards her arguments. Did the debater express agreement or support, was s/he in doubt or neutral, or did s/he express disagreement or criticism?

Table 1. It is worth noting that the categories nine categories I have used are not mutually exclusive. They are illustrated by quotes from the comment section.

Attitude expressed by the debater	Topic addressed by the individual debater		
	Primary purpose	Secondary purpose	Something else
<i>Agreement/support</i>	"I just think you are looking for more solidarity and understanding of when you can't afford to participate in things as a student, and then you're looking for potlucks and cheap BYOB, and I couldn't agree more" (118)	"I totally understand you. The SEG just isn't enough, and people shouldn't come out and say that it's enough. (...) Often, just one book costs a quarter of the SEG. If we have to take an education, we have to be able to live on the grant" (31)	"Thanks for sharing your story with us. That takes courage! I really understand what you're saying because I'm a poor student myself!" (155)
<i>Doubt/neutral</i>	"You are tired of being poor, OK. But what is the point of telling us that? Is it because you want help with something, e.g. more money? Or is it just to get sympathy and understanding?" (2)	"http://www.findbolig.nu/ (search for roskilde, sort based on price. Now it's only DKK2794, + you live closer to RUC [i.e., Roskilde University], and then you can drop the student travel card (...) Incl. student grant, you now have approx. 4000 at your disposal. That's pretty OK? Without the loan: 1500. That's OK too?" (187)	"Personally, I've never been a member of any political organization, but when I read your piece, what comes to mind is primarily that you should do that ... That is, join a political youth organization" (178)
<i>Disagreement/criticism</i>	"Your biggest problem is (1) that your family apparently doesn't recognize your money shortage (...) and (2) that you care WAY too much about your co-students who (...) [e.g. have] student jobs (...) These are battles that you have to fight with yourself and them" (88)	"I am a student. And I disagree that we should feel sorry for students. My fixed expenses are also around 4800 (...) [I can] take an SEG loan (...) (the cheapest loan in the world?), which I can easily pay off when I get a job (...) And finally, I can of course get a student job" (6)	"OMG, it wore me out to read your piece – and that was just one poor sentence!" (92)

The reader comments that addressed the primary purpose of the op-ed piece contained some recurring arguments. In general,

the debaters who agreed with or supported SVJ confirmed that some students were excluded because they had no money and agreed that there were many prejudices about students' economy and consumption patterns. They recognized "the frustration that the school Christmas party is once again held at a nightclub that charges DKK 45 (approx. 7 USD) for a beer" (474) and also found that society sees students as "latte-drinking spoiled consumer monsters" (1,830). According to the debaters in this category, friends and family should become better at factoring in students' economy in relation to social gatherings. One debater wrote: "I think (...) that we as students have to become better at doing things that don't cost money when we want to be social" (941).

However, some of the debaters who also commented on the primary purpose but disagreed with or were critical of SVJ challenged the idea that students were excluded due to their economy; that was not their experience. One debater objected: "My experience is precisely that I'm 'the poor student', and everyone around me is almost too considerate" (361). In general, these debaters thought that SVJ could solve her problem by dialing down consumption, talking to friends and family and moreover initiating cheap gatherings—of course, if her friends and family were not quite as "monster unpleasant" (522) as they sounded. If they were, SVJ should reassess these relations: "Drop your spoiled RUC [i.e., Roskilde University] friends" (460) and "Get a new family" (552) were some suggestions.

Among the comments that concerned the primary purpose, only few expressed doubt or were neutral. In the example in Table 1, a debater meta-commented that SVJ's piece contained two purposes and asked whether SVJ was angling for support for one or the other, but did not explicitly take a stance.

In the comments concerning the secondary purpose, there were also several recurring arguments. In general, the debaters who disagreed with or criticized SVJ thought, among other things, that she should be grateful for her free education, her free SEG and cheap student loan, and that she should take responsibility and do something like get a job, take a loan, move somewhere cheaper or drop out. "[W]hy don't you get a student job so that you can afford

the latte ... I actually think you should be grateful for everything you a getting”, one debater wrote (1,305). Several debaters wrote about their own experiences to illustrate that it was possible to complete an education under the same conditions as SVJ. They described how they had managed, and the following argument was a recurring theme in these comments: “We HAVE tried living under these conditions, and you know what? We are still here, we survived!” (314).

Conversely, the debaters who agreed with SVJ or supported argued that it was not quite that easy to find a student job and cheap housing or drop the television license and monthly travel card. Again, personal experiences were used widely: “Am also on SEG and can’t even stretch it to cover my housing—which I picked out of necessity”, wrote one debater who signed herself as “Another Sophie” (807). In addition, these debaters thought that SVJ and her parents paid for her education and SEG themselves. Comments such as “[E]d. is certainly not free in Denmark we ALL pay dearly for it via taxes” (327), and “It is MY parents who paid for my SEG via their taxes” (25) were some examples. Finally, the debaters in this category thought that it was important to remember that not all students had the same (economic) support from home, the same preconditions for studying and learning, or the same energy to both study and work. As one debater put it: “[S]tudents are different and have different abilities and resources, they do not all have equal strength and coping skills” (1,955).

Other comments about SVJ’s secondary purpose expressed doubt or were neutral. As the example in Table 1 shows, SVJ received a lot of economic advice in the comment section. However, by simply advising her on how to adjust her expenses and in turn increase her disposable income, the debaters did not explicitly take a stance to the argumentation in the op-ed piece. In other comments in this category, debaters who were or had been students shared their budgets or experiences but notably without explicitly stating whether they agreed or disagreed, supported or were critical of SVJ and her piece. In principle, these budgets and stories could prove both that you have little money as a student and that it is still possible to manage. Others questioned SVJ’s

budget or clarified information in it but remained neutral. For instance, one debater asked how SVJ's budget would look if she included her student loan (1,530), while another specified that the income from SEG SVJ had indicated in her budget was what was left after taxes (1,590). Finally, some debaters in this category indicated that they were in doubt about what to think, for example: "I am somewhat divided" (998), and "Am I the only one who is divided?" (1.099).

The comments that addressed something else besides the two purposes in SVJ's piece addressed several aspects. As the examples in Table 1 illustrate, some expressed support or criticism without explaining which specific parts of the piece they supported or criticized. The negative debaters described SVJ's piece as "whining" (261) and "moaning" (338). The positive debaters criticized the many negative comments, often with reference to their tone, and offered more or less explicit support to SVJ. They saw the comments as a symptom of widespread lack of empathy and solidarity in Denmark. One debater said: "[T]his debate (...) will remain as a glowing pillar of shame of how low the Danes' empathy could go" (1,263).

Other comments in the "something else" category expressed doubt or were neutral. Besides ideas like the stray thought shared by a debater in Table 1, these comments contained, among other things, uncommented links to other web pages and meta-comments that deplored the tone in the commentary track or in named debaters' comments, notably without indicating agreement or disagreement with SVJ. One debater stated, without elaborating: "Wow, there are so many bitter assholes judging by the comments" (872).

When we look at how the comments were distributed in the nine categories, two points stand out as central for the further analysis. First, far more debaters commented on SVJ's point that she was tired of being poor than on her tiredness of no one showing understanding or tolerance of her condition. 75 % comments addressed the secondary purpose, whereas only 11 % addressed the primary purpose. In other words, the majority of the debaters

were more interested in SVJ's definition of poverty than in her experience of exclusion.

Second, more debaters expressed agreement with or support of SVJ than disagreement or criticism: 45 % against 38 %. However, there were differences relating to whether the comments regarded the primary or the secondary purpose. Among the comments addressing the primary purpose, 69 % expressed agreement or support, 24 % disagreement or criticism. Among those addressing the secondary purpose, 44 % expressed disagreement or criticism, 40 % agreement or support. As the next analysis will show, this result stands in sharp contrast to the media's coverage of the debate.

From Few Journalists to Many: What Did Journalists Write about the Debate?

In the final step of the analysis, I analyze the media coverage of SVJ's piece and the debate it triggered based on a corpus of 15 texts published in *Politiken* and on politiken.dk and 13 texts from other news media. I found these by searching on combinations of the words "Sofie", "Jensen", "fattig" [poor] and "SU" [SEG] on Google and in the newspaper database *Infomedia* for January 1, 2012—January 1, 2013.

Three days after its publication, SVJ's piece reached the status as the most read and commented piece ever on politiken.dk.¹⁶ When *Politiken's* journalists followed up on the debate at this early stage, they seemed impressed by the volume of reactions and highlighted, for example, that the piece "so far [had] triggered more than 1,000 reader comments",¹⁷ and that "more than 1,000 readers [had] commented on politiken.dk".¹⁸ Based on these initial

16. Eskesen, "Studerende sætter ...".

17. Katrine Jo Andersen, "Der er ikke meget sympati for den fattige studerende" [Not much sympathy for the poor student], January 8, 2012, <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1501942/der-er-ikke-meget-sympati-for-den-fattige-studerende/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

18. Peter N. Christensen, "Ringe sympati for fattig studerende" [Limited sympathy for poor student], *Politiken*, January 9, 2012, 2.

media mentions, it was not completely clear what the debate was actually about. In an article on *politiken.dk* the day after the piece was published online, a journalist stressed that SVJ was “fighting for the right to call herself poor”¹⁹ and thereby emphasized its the secondary purpose. In contrast, a journalist in *Politiken* stressed that SVJ thought “the lack of money [was] directly excluding”, and that “she misse[d] understanding from both society and co-students”,²⁰ thus emphasizing the primary purpose.

While the two journalists may not have agreed what the piece was about, they agreed on what a majority of those who had commented on it online meant: “[T]here is far between those who express sympathy with the poor student”,²¹ said the former article, while the latter said that “even though some declare that they agree (...), the majority strongly disavows her”.²² This interpretation was in both cases backed by examples: “Embarrassing piece. We need to confront the entitlement mentality in DK” (96), and “Wake up, Denmark! Look at the super-spoiled children the welfare monster has created!” (119).²³ This interpretation was nuanced somewhat at the end: “The sympathy is in minority, but it is there”, the journalist wrote under the subheading “A bit of sympathy”.²⁴ Again, this was backed by a quote: “I am ashamed of the people who just discredit a young student’s plea for help. I am ashamed of where we Danes have ended up: In eternal bashing of each other and others’ circumstances” (47).²⁵ Although the comment exemplified that not everyone in the comment section was against SVJ, it nonetheless confirmed the journalists’ overall interpretation, namely that the majority was “bashing” the student.

The two news stories were symptomatic of how *Politiken*’s journalists covered and interpreted the debate in the weeks and months that followed. Both the quantitative fascination and the

19. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

20. Christensen, “Ringe sympati ...”.

21. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

22. Christensen, “Ringe sympati ...”.

23. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

24. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

25. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

qualitative understanding that characterized the initial coverage continued. 11 of the 13 articles published after the first two mentions emphasized how many times the piece had been read and commented on. The piece has “so far”,^{26, 27} resulted in “hundreds and hundreds”,²⁸ “over 1,000”²⁹ and even “more than 2,000 comments”³⁰ on politiken.dk, and it was the the online newspaper’s “most discussed and most read op-ed piece ever”.³¹ In 4 of the 13 articles, the journalists stressed the specific numbers of readers and page views for SVJ’s piece: “270,000 readers read her article in the debate section, and 100,000 (new record!) clicked online”.³²

In 8 of the 13 articles following the first two mentions, *Politiken*’s journalists commented on the views expressed in the many reader comments, and in all cases they established that the majority of comments were negative. Over the next six months, this interpretation was repeated in different wordings in the coverage of the debate: After a few days, a journalist wrote that even though the student did not personally think “that her piece [was] all that controversial”, “the readers thought (...) that Sofie [should] get her act together”³³; after one week, this turned into

26. Andersen, “Der er ikke meget ...”.

27. Mette Højbjerg, “Fattig eller forkælet” [Poor or spoiled], *Politiken*, January 14, 2012, 8.

28. Annelise Hartmann Eskesen, “Studerende efter vild fattig-debat: Måske skal man bare lade tabu være tabu” [Student after wild poverty debate: Maybe we should just let taboo be taboo], January 11 2012 <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1504039/studerende-efter-vild-fattig-debat-maaske-skal-man-bare-lade-tabu-vaere-tabu/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

29. Christensen, ”Ringe sympati ...”.

30. *Politiken*, “Tyskere undrer sig over dansk studerendes “luxusproblemer” [Germans puzzled about Danish students’ ’luxury problems’], February 3, 2012, <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1528508/tyskere-undrer-sig-over-dansk-studerendes-luk-susproblemer/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

31. Eskesen, “Studerende efter vild...”.

32. Per Michael Jespersen, “Kære læsere, vi siger nitten tusinde tak” [Dear readers, we thank you 19,000 times], *Politiken*, December 29, 2012, 7

33. Eskesen, “Studerende efter vild...”.

“most debaters disagree[d] with Sofie’s case”³⁴; after a month: “the great majority of the readers who commented were unsympathetic towards the self-proclaimed poor student’s problems”³⁵; after six months: “comment upon comment called her spoiled, criticized her (...) and offered quite specific advice”³⁶; and finally, after nine months: “the large majority criticized her for being spoiled and demanding”.³⁷ In other words, the media organization mainly responsible for enabling SVJ to attract as much attention as she did was also responsible for advancing a specific public understanding of the reaction she received, namely that the great majority scolded her.

In the days after SVJ’s piece was published on *politiken.dk*, the debate spread to other media, online as well as offline. 9 of the 13 texts where the debate was covered in other media than *Politiken* and *politiken.dk* referred to the original comment section on *politiken.dk*. In 7 of the 13 texts, journalists and debaters employed at news media started by establishing that SVJ’s piece had received a record-breaking number of reader comments on *politiken.dk*, and 9 of the 13 claimed that the majority of the comments were critical. Just as in *Politiken*’s coverage, it was emphasized, in almost identical phrases, that the piece “so far”³⁸ and “just now”³⁹ had received “more than 1,500”⁴⁰ and “several thousand”⁴¹ comments on *politiken.dk*, which made it the “most discussed and most read op-ed piece in *Politiken* ever”.⁴²

34. Højbjerg, “Fattig eller forkælet ...”.

35. *Politiken*, “Tyskere undrer sig ...”.

36. Jacob Fuglsang, “Da Sofie fik fattigrøven på komedie” [When Sofie had her poor bottom spanked], *Politiken*, July 1, 2012, 6.

37. Kjær, “Studerende lever i ...”.

38. Deadline, “11/01: Fattig eller ...”.

39. Anne Sophia Hermansen, “Sofie-orkanen – succes som fiasko” [Hurricane Sofie – success as failure], January 12, 2012, <http://annesophia.blogs.ber-lingske.dk/2012/01/12/sofie-orkanen-succes-som-fiasko/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

40. Tom Jensen, “Sofies verden” [Sofie’s world], January 9, 2012, <http://tomjensen.blogs.berlingske.dk/2012/01/09/sofies-verden/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

41. Hermansen, “Sofie-orkanen ...”.

42. Deadline, “11/01: Fattig eller ...”.

Politiken's interpretation of the dominant attitude in the comment section was repeated: SVJ had launched a "hurricane",⁴³ "an avalanche"⁴⁴ and "thousands (...) of subsequent comments",⁴⁵ and it was a "mainly furious",⁴⁶ "massive and negative and one-sided",⁴⁷ "predominantly negative",⁴⁸ "overwhelming" and "furious"⁴⁹ as well as "intense (...) criticism that [had] been heaped on"⁵⁰ her. In the TV coverage of the debate, the news program *Deadline* on the public service station DR2 reported that SVJ's piece "caused so much resentment that more than 1,800 readers so far [had] responded",⁵¹ and the financial news on the public service station TV2 concluded the same: "The op-ed piece has attracted widespread debate, and most reactions have been critical".⁵² Whether these summaries were based on the journalists' own assessments or simply reproductions of *Politiken*'s interpretation of the debate is unknown. However, although the journalists' and debaters' own opinions about the debate varied—some agreed, some did not—they certainly confirmed that the sentiment in the comment section on politiken.dk was generally against SVJ.

What the debaters on politiken.dk reacted so strongly against was not always clear in the ample media coverage. But judging by the way journalists initiated debate on news websites and in

43. Hermansen, "Sofie-orkanen ...".

44. Morten Mærsk, "Fattig-studerende: Jeg kræver ikke flere penge" [Poor student: I'm not demanding more money], January 9, 2012, <http://www.bt.dk/danmark/fattig-studerende-jeg-kræver-ikke-flere-penge> (accessed January 31, 2013).

45. Sofie Rye, "Er fattigdom noget, der kun findes i Afrika" [Does poverty only exist in Africa], *metroXpress Aarhus/Vest*, January 10, 2012, 13.

46. Jensen, "Sofies verden ...".

47. Rye, "Er fattigdom noget ...".

48. Jensen, "Sofies verden ...".

49. Sebastian Gjerding, "De provokerende fattige" [The provocative poor], *Information*, January 14, 2012, 14.

50. Camilla Paaske Hjort, "Hadet til de produktive klasser" [The hatred of the productive classes], January 16, 2012, <http://www.b.dk/kronikker/hadet-til-de-produktive-klasser> (accessed January 31, 2013).

51. Deadline, "11/01: Fattig eller ...".

52. Engelschmidt, "Klynker de fattige ...".

television programs, they seemed to think that it was the question of whether Sofie was poor or not, i.e., the secondary purpose of the piece, that mainly triggered so much debate and anger. Two of the largest online newspapers in Denmark, *ekstrabladet.dk* and *bt.dk*, asked their users: “22-year-old RUC [i.e., Roskilde University] student also wants to be called poor even though she receives SEG. What do you think?”,⁵³ and “What do you think? Is Sofie V. Jensen right that she is poor?”⁵⁴ *Deadline*, on public service television, asked a panel to discuss the piece under the heading “Poor or just whining?”,⁵⁵ and the public service station TV2 asked their users on *finans.tv2.dk*: “Is Sofie V. Jensen whining, or is she right that students live a hard and poor life?”⁵⁶ *Pressen* on P3, a public service radio program, set the stage for a debate on the news website *dr.dk*, after SVJ had been in the studio, with the question: “Is it OK for Sofie to call herself poor?”⁵⁷ Across online newspapers, TV and radio, journalists emphasized that the debate was about definition—whether SVJ was poor—and not about exclusion.

Discussion

Offhand, the process that SVJ’s piece launched is an example of how online newspapers can support “debate from below”, i.e. debate that originates at the bottom of society’s communicative hierarchy. With *politiken.dk* as the primary launch pad, an unknown student put her own and other students’ economy on the

53. Anders Kjærulff, “Studerende: Jeg vil også kaldes fattig” [Student: I also want to be called poor], January 9, 2012, <http://ekstrabladet.dk/nationen/article1687880.ece> (accessed January 31, 2013).

54. Morten Mærsk, “Studerende: Forstå nu, jeg er fattig!”, January 9, 2012, <http://www.bt.dk/danmark/studerende-forstaa-nu-jeg-er-fattig> (accessed January 31, 2013).

55. *Deadline*, “11/01: Fattig eller ...”.

56. Engelschmidt, “Klynker de fattige ...”.

57. Jonas Delfs, “Er studerende fattige?” [Are students poor?], January 9, 2012, <http://www.dr.dk/p3/programmer/pressen/2012/01/09/er-studerende-fattige> (accessed January 31, 2013).

public agenda—not only across online news websites, blogs and debate forums but also via traditional mass media like newspapers, TV and radio. And because many of the media mentions covered the reader comments to the op-ed piece and not only the piece itself, the debate among citizens who participated in the debate on politiken.dk also received broad media attention.

As such, this case seems to confirm the hypothesis that digital networked media like online newspapers contribute to the democratization of public opinion formation by facilitating more direct communication between citizens and power holders, thereby making journalists superfluous as moderators. However, my analyses cannot confirm this hypothesis. On the contrary, they illustrate how journalists' traditionally privileged position as interpreters and mediators of debate among citizens is not only sustained but amplified online. In the end it was journalists' simplified interpretation of the dominant topic and attitude in the debate on politiken.dk that prevailed in the mediated public, as manifested in the texts studied in this article (cf. Hauser, 1999: 64, 97).

As mentioned, the initial coverage of SVJ's piece and the subsequent debate on politiken.dk showed the same ambiguity as the piece itself in terms of what its central purpose was. Without commenting on it, *Politiken's* journalists disagreed on whether the piece and the debate concerned its secondary purpose, i.e., that SVJ was tired of being poor, or its primary purpose, i.e., that she missed understanding and tolerance of situation. However, as coverage of the piece and the debate spread to other media, and media coverage bred more media coverage, the second purpose conquered the headlines: The interpretation of the topic of the debate increasingly lost its ambiguity and became one-sided: The basic question was now whether SVJ was “[p]oor or spoiled”.⁵⁸

Whereas the journalists' interpretation of the debate topic changed, they were sure in their interpretation of what the dominant attitude of the citizens who participated in the debate was. My analysis shows that a small majority of debaters on

58. Højbjerg, “Fattig eller forkælet ...”.

politiken.dk were positive, while a large minority was negative. However, the dominant media story was that the large majority of readers on politiken.dk disagreed, were critical or downright hostile. Not only did the media coverage portray the public opinion in the comment section on politiken.dk as more unanimous and less nuanced than it actually was; it disseminated a directly misleading interpretation of the reader comments as dominantly negative and critical towards the citizen who initiated the debate and her opinions.

As the debate and the coverage evolved, the nine categories in my analysis were thus reduced to one: The debate concerned whether or not SVJ was poor, and the verdict of the debaters on politiken.dk was clear: She was *not*. In other words, the polyphonic choir of arguments uncovered by a close rhetorical reading of the reader comments was portrayed in the media coverage as a monophonic roar (to turn the journalists' hyperbolic jargon against themselves).

Their self-assured interpretation was conspicuous considering *how* many comments the journalists actually summarized. At the time, the design of the comment section on politiken.dk forced one to click through 100 pages of reader comments in order to read the comments SVJ's piece triggered just within the first 24 hours. As reflected in the journalists' own fascination with the volume of reactions, it was overwhelming bordering on unmanageable. Thus one might think that journalists would be more hesitant to offer such a one-sided interpretation of the public opinion manifested in the comments. As mentioned in the introduction, several studies show that journalists who work with online debates are highly aware of how difficult it can be to moderate and summarize what citizens write in online comment sections, not least because citizens at times write so many comments that individual viewpoints drown in the huge volume of viewpoints.

As my case illustrates, however, reader comments on online newspapers may affect public opinion formation due to their sheer volume. Even though Danish media offered a misleading interpretation of the dominant public opinion in the many reader comments on politiken.dk, the comments nevertheless, owing to

their large numbers, created attention around SVJ and her piece, not only during the initial days when the debate peaked, but also in the following months. During the summer break, SVJ once again appeared in *Politiken* in a large interview in a series titled “What ever happened to ...?”⁵⁹ As universities were about to start again after the summer break, she was vindicated on the front page as a consumer economist agreed that students were indeed poor.⁶⁰ And by the end of the year, *Politiken*’s debate editors highlighted her as someone who “defined the agenda in the previous year”.⁶¹ Each time, it was mentioned how many comments her piece had triggered on *politiken.dk* back in January. Over time, the many comments thus became a platform for SVJ to repeat her views. And as my analysis has shown, the majority of those who commented on her piece actually shared those views.

Conclusion

Since digital networked media facilitate many-to-many communication on an unprecedented scale (Jensen, 2012, 187-188, 2013, 25), the potential number of both recipients and senders is larger online. However, the more who speak out, the fewer are heard, also on online newspapers (Hindman, 2009: 142; Winswold, 2009: 52). Instead, public attention tends to focus on those communicators who already enjoy attention, not least journalists (Hindman, 2009: 116-117, 122). The case study presented here illustrates how journalists enjoy special rhetorical privileges, not only when they express themselves online but also when they interpret and summarize online debates between less rhetorically privileged citizens. In light of the quantitative scope of debates among citizens online, the public’s understanding of the

59. Fuglsang, ”Da Sofie fik ...”.

60. Kjær, ”Studerende lever i ...”.

61. Mads Zacho Teglskov og Per Michael Jespersen, ”Vi diskuterede voldsofre, fattige studerende og sexovergreb i 2012” [We discussed victims of violent crime, poor students and sex sexual abuse in 2012], January 3, 2013, <http://politiken.dk/debat/ECE1854738/vi-diskuterede-voldsofre-fattige-studerende-og-sexovergreb-i-2012/> (accessed January 31, 2013).

qualitative meaning of those debates will likely rely on journalists' interpretation and dissemination. In other words, the potentially unmanageable nature of comment sections revitalizes journalists' right to interpret the public opinion expressed in them.

A key challenge to journalism as both education and profession is therefore to strengthen journalists' ability to 'read' what online publics mean (cf. Hauser, 1999: 92-93). As Hauser points out, this is a *rhetorical competence* that requires insight and skills in practical argumentation (1999, 33, 93-94). Being able to present one's own arguments and to interpret others' are closely related activities (1999: 92), so becoming better at one makes you better at the other. On the more basic level, Hauser pleads that interpreters of public opinion should understand public opinion formation as polyphonic, even cacophonous (1999: 67, 92, 97, 100-101). Public opinion is rarely as clear-cut and definitive as, for instance, opinion polls and the widespread use of them in news media may indicate; on the contrary, public opinion, according to Hauser (1999: 67, 91-92, 278-279), is often ambiguous and fickle. Such an understanding of public opinion may be difficult to unite with journalists' focus on *conflict* as a news criterion. As critics have pointed out, abuse of this criterion sometimes leads to simplification, reinforcement and even distortion of conflicts in society (Kabel, 2014: 427). If journalists are to be better prepared for the role as interpreters and mediators of online public opinion, it requires that journalists, both in journalism programs and editorial rooms, critically reflect on their understanding of what public opinion actually is, how one should 'read' it, and with what expectations. Strengthening journalists' agency in this sense also strengthens their possibility of providing agency to citizens who participate in public opinion formation online.

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