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## NUCLEAR FEAR AND LOATHING – COMMENTING NEWS ABOUT FUKUSHIMA DAIICHI DISASTER ON FACEBOOK

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The triple meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan in March 2011 was major global news, and it galvanized publics both online and offline. Much of the discussion and comments about the disaster that went on in social media was a far cry from the deliberative discourse often associated with public debate. Instead, what surfaced were threads filled with myriad negative emotions: worry, anger, and fierce disagreement – even in Finland, roughly 8000 kilometers removed from Japan.

This paper examines Facebook comments on news about the Fukushima Daiichi disaster. In particular, I am interested in how affect circulates in networked publics of social media, and how it may divide publics as well as unite them. The ongoing study presented in this paper draws from the concepts of networked and affective publics, and investigates how these concepts come together with the discussion about Fukushima Daiichi on Facebook that centered on content produced by professional mainstream journalism.

### Empirical Data and Theoretical Offsets

The empirical data of the study consists of 54 Facebook updates with a news item about the Fukushima Daiichi disaster made by Finland's seven major news outlets' public profiles between March 11 and April 30 2011, and comments attached to the updates. The amount of updates made by an individual media ranged from 11 posts to just three during the examination period. The comment threads varied in length from just one or two short messages in one post to more than fifty lengthy comments in the other, covering altogether hundreds of individual comments.

The theoretical portion of the study focuses on two concepts: *networked public* (boyd 2010) and *affective public* (Papacharissi 2014; 2015). The paper examines Facebook commenters on mainstream media pages as a type of a networked, affective public and explores how these definitions come together in a situation that also reflects a type of hybrid media system in the making (Chadwick 2013; Papacharissi 2015), with

mainstream media, ordinary people, and political actors coming together around the volatile topic of a nuclear power plant disaster.

Moreover, the paper investigates how commenters circulate affect while discussing the news about Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Facebook. Of particular interest is how affect can create both senses of community and senses of animosity (cf. Paasonen 2015; Papacharissi 2014) within the same discussions. In this paper, I thus look at affect as intensities, sensations and impressions that are created in encounters between bodies, texts and technology (Paasonen 2015, 28). These intensities can be mediated, and while they are experienced as deeply personal, they are also social, cultural, and historical (Ahmed 2004; Paasonen 2015; Wetherell 2015). As Paasonen (2015, 28) argues, affective intensities drive and attach people to online discussions, inviting them to stay on and revisit sites and threads. In addition, as Ahmed (2004; cf. Paasonen 2015, 28; Wetherell 2012) has pointed out, affect may also stick to signs, bodies and objects. Following Ahmed's (2004) and Paasonen's (2015) argument, I suggest that this affective stickiness can be seen as a crucial feature in formation of affective, networked publics. In other words, what draws people to and keeps them engaged with discussions online may have to do with sticky affect that appears to fuel the very much non-deliberative debates of various networked publics.

## **Research Frame**

The aim of this study is twofold. First, it examines how affect is constructed and circulated in the networked, affective publics of Facebook in the context of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. The empirical material of the study is analyzed qualitatively, by using the idea of affective stickiness (Ahmed 2004; Paasonen 2015) as a key concept. The study aims at uncovering some of the ways in which affect becomes formulated in text, and how it sticks and circulates in textual interactions between the commenters. Second, it explores the wider implications these findings and results from previous studies may have in terms of online debate and journalism in the current situation, where the contemporary hybrid media system can be understood as in some ways more complex and more volatile than six years ago.

The comments about Fukushima Daiichi disaster on Facebook provide an interesting and fruitful context in which to study affect in networked publics for several reasons. Firstly, a dramatic, major global news event that involves an already contested topic (in this particular case: nuclear energy), can be argued to invite affective publics into being (cf. Papacharissi 2015). In the case of Finland, the Fukushima Daiichi disaster coincided with an already heated parliamentary election campaign period and brought nuclear energy policy back to national agenda. Moreover, for many, the disaster re-ignited old memories of Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Second, studying comments written about Fukushima Daiichi disaster outside of Japan can help us to understand how affect in affective, networked publics can become tied to national political and cultural contexts, while simultaneously circulating in a global media system. Third, the heated debate of affective publics of 2011 can give us a retrospective view on how both the hybrid media system and political discussion online have since evolved.

## **Expected Results**

The study provides new insight on how affect accumulates and circulates in networked publics in Facebook. In addition, the study provides new information on how affective publics may simultaneously be cohesive and divisive, global and local. Furthermore, the study tests out ways to study affective, networked publics in ways that help us to understand the current situation where traditional journalism and political debate appears to be under threat by an alternate version of reality.

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