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INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF COMMENTS ON FACEBOOK PAGES OF PARTY LEADERS DURING TWO DANISH ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

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Introduction

The internet has been examined thoroughly early on as a viable space for political discussion and deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2002). Recently there has been a movement towards a more pessimistic evaluation of the online space as a space of conflict and incivility (Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Cicchirillo, 2014). The research field is still struggling with, how to analyze online discussions in a way that balances the optimistic ideals with current online practice (Wright, 2012), and it is clear that there is still a great need for data-driven research that explore ways to present and measure the political discussion taking place online. Much of the research on public discussions has relied on public sphere theory that emphasizes consensus seeking based on critical rational debate (Dahlberg, 2007). Dahlberg suggests that research should focus on whether online spaces allow for a variety of opposing critical political views, or rather contestation of the dominating discourse, instead of consensus seeking debate. He suggests that we examine this through the lens of intra- and inter-contestation. From this perspective, the key to a vibrant public sphere is whether it enables critical contestation of the dominating discourse either through critical discussions between insiders (Intra-contestation) and/or critical perspectives from people from opposing political groups, that is: insiders and outsiders (inter-contestation). In this paper, we examine the comments section of Facebook pages of four party leaders through a coding scheme that is inspired by Dahlberg's notion of intra- and inter-contestation. We do this to explore whether Facebook-pages of politicians are viable spaces for a vibrant and critical debate between people from various places on the political spectrum. Or whether they are more clearly one-sided spaces for political marketing, where politicians can communicate with their supporters.

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Method

This study is a quantitative content analysis of comments to the status updates of four Facebook pages belonging to Danish party leaders during the Danish general election in 2011 and 2015. The four politicians include the two prime minister candidates on each side of the political wings as well as two smaller party leaders, also on opposite political wings. These four politicians are ideal to study because they are the only four party leaders who were in the campaign both in 2011 and 2015. We decided to do a random sample of status updates during the short campaign period and selected 20 posts from each candidate during each year that is 40 from each candidate in 2011 and 2015 totaling 160 Facebook posts from all four candidates. Of these posts we sampled up to 100 comments from each post chronologically. We ended up with a total of a little more than 11000 comments that were coded according to our predefined coding scheme. Our coding scheme was deductively defined inspired by Dahlberg's notion of intra- and inter-contestation. These two codes were defined as comments about a political issue made by either insiders arguing within the general political agenda of the politician, or political issues made by outsiders arguing outside of the general political agenda of the politician. We included two extremes on each side of his notions of contestation, which were comments without a clearly identifiable political issue but only positive (support) or negative (smear). Thus, our coding scheme was divided into support, intra-contestation, inter-contestation, smear and a neutral category. Two assistants completed the coding process and it was tested for inter-coder reliability at $\geq .753$ according to Krippendorff's Alpha, which is above the lowest accepted level of $\geq .667$ (Krippendorff, 2012)¹.

Results

Overall it is clear that the vast majority of comments are support and praise of the politicians without any clear political content or discussion. Comments defined as 'support' could be understood as a form of verbal likes or a type of phatic communication, because the content of the comment is not as relevant as the symbolic gesture of support and praise of the politician. In 2011 we identified about 65% of the comments as 'support' and in 2015 it was about 59%. Around 20% of the comments in 2011 were coded as intra-contestation and in 2015 the number was slightly lower at about 16%. Comments defined as inter-contestation ranged from very harsh to polite questioning by identifiable outsiders. Only about 3% were identified as inter-contestation in 2011 and 5% in 2015. The most negative and unconstructive comments were coded as 'smear'. These were clearly negative and in opposition to the general political agenda of the politician, but without any relation to an identifiable political issue. The number of comments within this category was around 8% in 2011 and 14% in 2015. Here we can identify a slight increase in negative comments without a relation to political issues.

Some of the most notable individual differences between candidates in this data are first of all Anders Samuelsen, who in 2011 had a very positive comment thread of about

¹ The value can be significantly improved by removing the neutral code because the coders tended to disagree the most on this, but we decided to keep the neutral code for the holistic picture it provides.

80% supportive comments and only 1% smear comments. However, this could be due to the fact that he started out as a much smaller candidate in 2011, which probably meant that opposing citizens did not see a purpose of interfering as much on his Facebook page. In contrast, the prime minister in 2011 Lars Løkke Rasmussen had one of the highest numbers of inter-contestation - about 5% in 2011 and 4% in 2015, and the percentage of smear was - 6% in 2011 and 10% in 2015. It would be logical to assume that the biggest candidates in the campaign would also attract more critics, because critics might see a strategic purpose in focusing on the most public candidates. However, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, who took over from Lars Løkke as Prime minister in 2011 and defeated again by Lars Løkke Rasmussen in 2015, only had about average percentage of inter-contestation and smear comments during both campaigns. Based on this we cannot conclude that the amount of critical comments and smear is related to the size of the politician alone.

Table 1. Comments during the 2011 election campaign

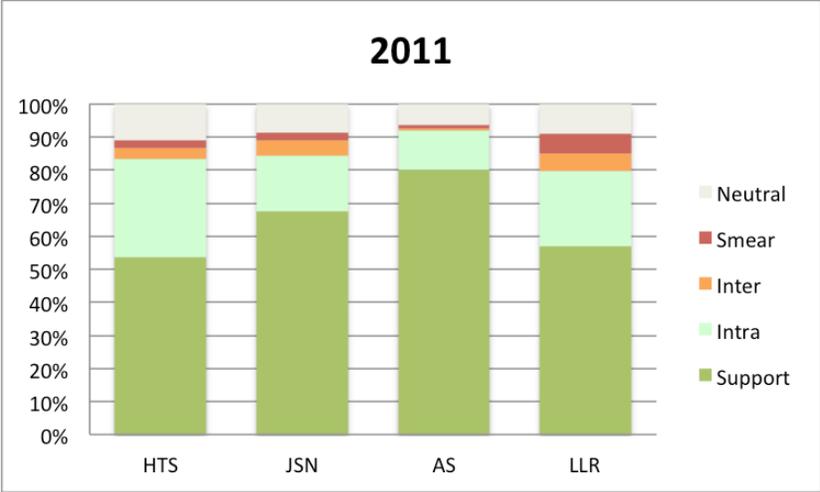
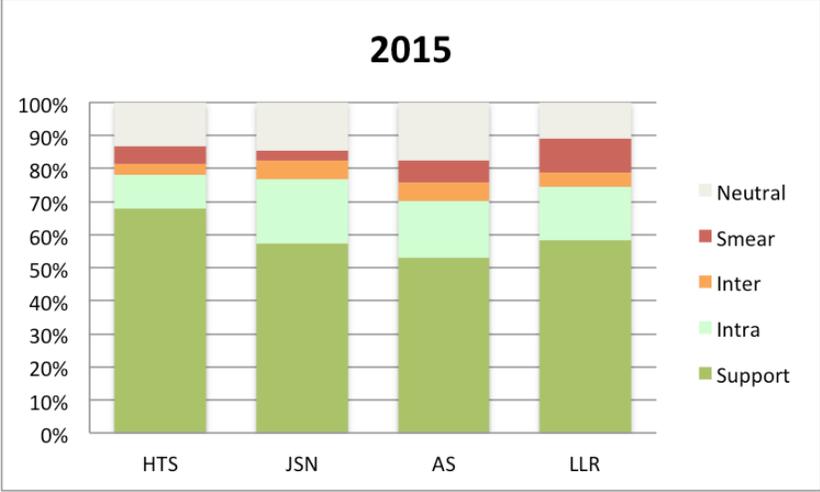


Table 2. Comments during the 2015 election campaign



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