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EXPERIENCES OF REPERCUSSIONS FROM PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE DEBATE

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Introduction

The Internet has radically changed opportunities for participation in public debate. While many studies have explored the democratic potential of online discussion forums (Jensen, 2003; Wright and Street, 2007), others have investigated the rise of problematic behavior such as "flaming" (Lee, 2005; Santana, 2014), "trolling" (Coleman, 2012; Phillips, 2015), and harassment of women (Biber et al., 2002). Some recent studies have indicated that men experience threats more often than women, whereas women are more prone to gendered and sexual responses, and tend to limit their own utterances to a larger degree than men (Author, 2014a; Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Comment systems of online newspapers have been a particularly controversial area, due to the need to balance the news media's commitment to free debate with their legal and ethical responsibilities (Author, 2014b; Singer et al., 2011).

In this paper we explore negative experiences reported in a survey among contributors to the online comments systems of four Norwegian newspapers. The survey was conducted one year after the 2011 terror attacks, which led to a public backlash against online debate in Norway (Author, 2013a; 2013b). We investigate the following research question: How do contributors to online comments systems in newspaper websites describe their experiences of repercussions from participation in debates?

In earlier analyses of data from this survey (Author, forthcoming) we have explored the respondents' experiences with editorial control, and found that they could be described along a spectrum between 'interventionist' (favouring stronger editorial control) to non-interventionist (favouring less editorial control) positions. The non-interventionists are typically males who participate in debates often and prefer to be anonymous. Our

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findings resonate with those of Enjolras et al. (2013, pp. 111–152), who found that contributors to online comments in national newspaper websites were predominantly male, somewhat less educated, somewhat more negative towards immigration and islam, more polarised in their opinions and placed less trust in the government and public institutions.

Method

The participants in the survey were invited through a link placed in the comments section of each newspaper. The survey was open for two weeks, from 17 September – 3 October 2013 and we received 3470 answers. The survey consisted of closed and open-form questions, and this paper is based on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of two of these questions. For analysis of the open-form question two independent coders have first coded the responses following a codebook developed by the authors. In the second step of the analysis, the authors have done a close reading of the free-text answers.

Results and discussion

We started our analysis intending to explore relations between gender and the experience of negative repercussions from participation in online comments, by analysing the following question from the survey: *"Have you ever experienced problems in your everyday life as a consequence of something you have written in online comments - for instance problems with your employer or colleagues, harassment, threats, etc.?"* A logistic regression analysis shows a significant correlation with gender, indicating that female respondents more often have experienced problems of this type (standardized beta: 0.650; Sig: 0.000).

Respondents who answered "yes" to this first question (11%), were presented with a conditional follow-up, free-text question: *"Can you give an example of problems that have occurred as a consequence of online discussions (as mentioned in the previous question)?"* The diagram below (Figure 1) shows the types of problems mentioned by respondents, separated by gender.

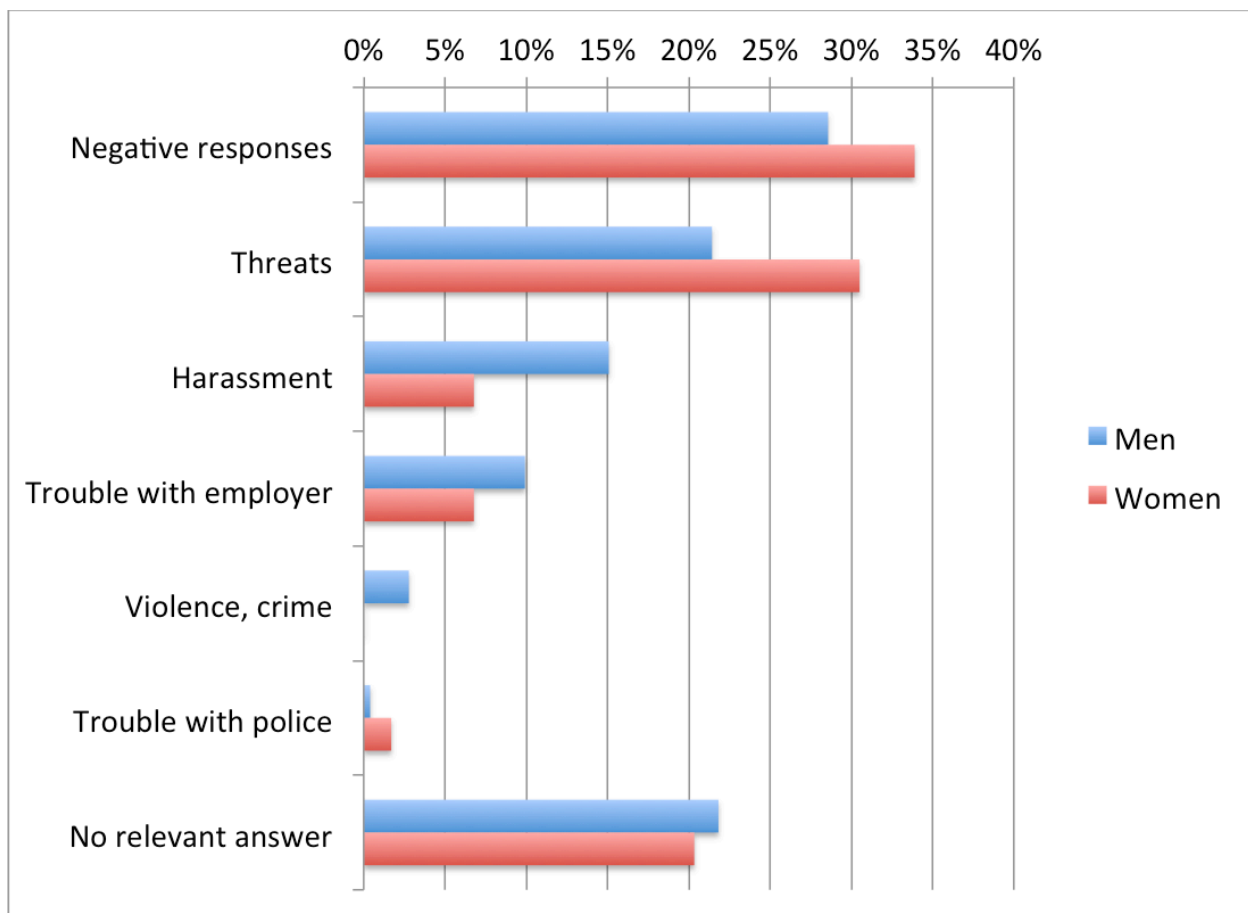


Figure 1: Types of problems. Two independent coders. Krippendorff's Alpha: 0.757. X-squared=8.046, df=6, p=0.23.

While our analysis shows some gender differences, these are not statistically significant. A qualitative reading of all the 316 free-text responses, separated by gender, also failed to provide any clear gender-related findings of the type reported elsewhere (Author, 2014b).

Instead, the qualitative reading shed some light on the large number of answers that have been coded as 'negative responses' or 'no relevant answer'. The former category represents descriptions of relatively inconsequential problems, such as "unwanted discussions" or "uncomfortable confrontations". Virtually no respondents (1-2 cases) reported incidents involving police or legal consequences. In other words, we found that a large proportion of respondents were unable (or unwilling) to give specific examples of serious incidents.

Instead, we found ubiquitous references to political affiliation and attitudes towards immigrants and Islam. A picture emerged of respondents who divide the world in two along a political axis, and explain the problems they have experienced as a consequence of the struggle between two opposing fronts. Among the responses where a political standpoint was indicated, most respondents expressed affiliation with the right wing and opposition to immigration and Islam. Many expressed an experience of marginalisation, censorship and bullying by "politically correct" media and elites. And yet

the concrete repercussions they would mention would often be relatively inconsequential experiences, such as:

- "Friends call me racist."
- "Negative comments."
- "People who don't like my opinions have given sarcastic comments or tried to patronize."

We suggest that the responses to our survey should be viewed in light of differences in communicative competencies among different groups of participants. The main purpose of online comments systems in newspaper websites is to invite non-elites to take part in public debate: people who do not necessarily possess the competencies of a professional communicator. It should not be surprising if such participants have quite different expectations about what consequences one might reasonably expect after making controversial statements in public. This points to an important challenge for online newspapers, which will be elaborated further in our full paper and presentation.

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