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Political conversations on Facebook – the participation of politicians and citizens

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Abstract

Political conversations are according to theories on deliberative democracy essential to well-functioning democracies. Traditionally these conversations have taken place in face-to-face settings, in e.g. party meetings and town meetings. However, social media such as Facebook and Twitter offers new possibilities for online political conversations between citizens and politicians. This paper examines the presence on Facebook and Twitter of Members of the Danish national Parliament, the Folketing, and focusses on a quantitative mapping of the political conversation activities taking place in the threads following Facebook posts from Danish Members of Parliament (MPs). The paper shows that, in comparison with previous findings from other countries, Danish MPs have a relatively high degree of engagement in political conversations with citizens on Facebook – and that a large number of citizens follow MPs, read posts from the MPs and discuss politics with them and other citizens via the posts made by the MPs.

Keywords

Facebook, Political conversation, public sphere, social media, Twitter

Introduction

It is a widely held belief that conversations among citizens – and between citizens and politicians – concerning matters of common interest are essential to well-functioning democracies. This has been a key idea in theories of deliberative democracy from Dewey, Koch and Habermas through to more recent positions (see e.g. Dewey, 1991; Koch, 1991; Habermas, 1974, 1989; Sunstein, 2007; Held, 2006). Such political conversations have traditionally taken place in face-to-face settings, with coffee houses (Habermas, 1989) and town meetings (Mansbridge, 1980) as classic examples, but also in unplanned encounters in public places such as street corners and parks (Sunstein, 2007) as well as party meetings. However, with the ever-increasing use of the Internet and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, new possibilities for political conversations have emerged and been accompanied by hope of a revitalization of the public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002; Linaa Jensen, 2011).

The ease with which one can participate in political discussion via Facebook, Twitter and other social media has, however, also been heavily criticized. Morozov (2009) is e.g. very critical towards the effect of activism via emails, Facebook and Twitter and has coined the term 'slacktivism' to describe this new form of activism by what he calls a lazy generation. According to him, "Slacktivism" is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.' (Morozov, 2009).

A similar critique towards online activism has been raised by White (2010). He criticizes what he sees as a new superficial and self-destructive combination of marketing and activism that he calls 'clicktivism' (White, 2010). According to White, activism has increasingly become a matter of clicking links – and activist groups have become more interested in the click-rates than in the real impact of their actions. Clicktivism is therefore according to him a danger to activism and political participation: 'In promoting the illusion that surfing the web can change the world, clicktivism is to activism as McDonalds is to a slow-cooked meal. It may look like food, but the life-giving nutrients are long gone.' (White, 2010) However, on the other hand Facebook, Twitter and other social media have also been credited for having played a positive role in e.g. the Arab Spring (Howard et al., 2011) and according to Gustafsson's (2012) study, Facebook may perhaps help raise political awareness and make citizens more interested in politics as well as getting them to debate political issues they have heard about online.

This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of social media's role in contemporary western democracies by examining the political conversations between Danish Members of Parliament (MPs) and citizens on Facebook. When politicians are asked why they use Facebook, Twitter and other social media, they often point to the two-way communication possibilities that these media offer as a key motive for using them (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). So far, however, there has not been much evidence that a two-way communication is actually taking place on these social media. According to e.g. Nielsen (2010), who conducted in-depth ethnographic studies of two campaign organizations in the 2009-election for Congress in the USA, politicians were present on Facebook and other social media but they were not very active. He is therefore skeptical towards the claim that politicians are invading You Tube, Facebook and other social media.

Ross et al. (2015) explored the Facebook wall posts of New Zealand MPs in relation to the general election in 2011. They monitored the posting and conversation activities of 26 MPs and did not find a high level of engagement in the conversations on Facebook among the MPs. Facebook was mostly used for broadcasting information and opinions – not for discussing them. Similar results were found by Macnamara & Kenning (2011, 2013). They have studied Australian federal politicians' use of social media during the election campaigns in 2010 and 2013. They concluded that the politicians and political parties still mainly use the Internet and social media as channels for one-way transmissions – and that the idea that the Internet and social media would 'give voice to citizens and create a more open participatory public sphere was unrealized in the 2013 Australian federal election' (Macnamara & Kenning, 2013: 24).

Finally and along the same lines, Enli & Skogerbø (2013) in their study on Norwegian politicians' use of Twitter and Facebook found that the monitored politicians 'report higher and more *idealistic motivations for*

democratic dialogue for their social media use than they actually manage to manoeuvre in practice.’ (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013: 770) This was especially the case on Facebook.

In close relation with these studies, this paper examines the presence on Facebook and Twitter of Members of the Danish national Parliament, the Folketing, and focusses on a quantitative mapping and analysis of the political conversation activities in the threads following Facebook updates from the MPs. The guiding research question is: *to what extent do politicians (Danish MPs) and citizens engage in political conversations on Facebook in the threads to the posts made by the politicians?* Following this research question the paper tries to answer a range of related questions, e.g.:

- How many Danish MPs use Facebook and Twitter?
- How active are the Danish MPs on Facebook in terms of making updates and commenting on citizens’ comments?
- Are there differences between the different parties, age groups and genders in terms of activity and conversation behavior?
- How popular are the pages and updates of the Danish MPs?
- Are the Facebook posts of Danish MPs political or private?
- Do citizens read the posts from the MPs and do they comment on them – and to what extent?
- How many citizens participate in political conversations in the threads of posts made by Danish MPs?

The studies mentioned above suggest that there apparently is not much hope of a revitalization of the public sphere through social media. The engagement of both politicians and citizens in political conversations through Facebook and Twitter has thus so far been found to be rather low. However, these studies primarily focus on political conversations during the last weeks of an election campaign. The observation period of this study has deliberately been placed outside these election campaign weeks in an attempt to get a picture of the normal or everyday conversation activity. These everyday political conversations are in many ways more important for deliberative democracy than the ones taking place during an election campaign.

Methods

The sample consist of all the MPs elected in Denmark (n=175) and all updates on Facebook made by these MPs during the month of June 2014 (n=3085).ⁱ The monitored period has been chosen in order to get a non-election campaign biased picture of the political conversation activities taking place. The latest election in Denmark was held in September 2011 and the next election will take place during 2015, September 15 2015 at the latest (the Prime Minister determines the date but it should be no later than four years from the last election).

The data collection was carried out partly manually and partly by using NCapture for NVivo 10. Danish MPs’ presence on Facebook and Twitter was first manually mapped. Hereafter NCapture/NVivo 10 was used to collect the content of the MPs’ Facebook pages in the monitored period. Facebook data can be collected as both dataset and PDF-files via NCapture/NVivo 10. However, private Facebook settings may prevent the collection of some data as datasets. This is especially a problem with private pages. The MPs monitored in this

study both use public pages (that you can 'like' and 'follow') and private pages (friend-pages) when communicating with the public and it was only possible to collect data from 88 MPs as a dataset; the rest of the data could only be collected as PDF-files and as screen shots (2 MPs, because of very high activity). A substantial amount of manual work therefore had to be put into the study in order to gather data, count and calculate the number of likes, comments etc. for the non-dataset MPs. However, except for the number of citizens participating in the conversations in the threads of the non-dataset MPs (cf. below, in the last part of 'Findings') this was still possible to do manually. Background information on the positions of the MPs, parties, number of mandates etc. has been collected via the official website of the Danish national Parliament (Folketinget.dk).

In line with the literature on democratic conversation (Schudson, 1997), deliberative democracy (Koch, 1991; Held, 2006) and the public sphere (Dewey, 1991; Habermas, 1974, 1989) a political conversation is in this paper understood as a conversation between two or more people on matters of common interest. In defining a political conversation emphasis has been put on two criteria: *First*, the conversation should be focused on common issues; and *Second*, there should be a mutual commitment and responsiveness – a genuine interest in listening to the other participants.

Accordingly, all the posts (updates) found in the monitored period were first coded as either political or private. Thereafter the political posts were coded in four categories according to the character of conversation in them: 1. No conversation. 2. Conversation between followers and/or other citizens (hereafter referred to as citizens). 3. Conversation between MP and citizens. 4. Conversations both between citizens and between citizens and the MP. A conversation between person "A" and person "B" was defined as an exchange of words with minimum three steps: *First*, a post/comment from A. *Second*, a comment from B to the post/comment of A. *Third*, a response from A to B.

It is therefore not the number of comments or people participating in the dialogue that defines a conversation in this study. That citizens are commenting on a post made by a MP – or a comment made by another citizen – is also not enough to classify the entire thread as 'conversation'. The MP or the citizens have to reenter the thread at least once to reply to a comment to their own post/comment, in order for the thread to be coded as containing a conversation. This was done in an attempt to discern if the MPs and citizens actually listen and react to the comments of others – and thereby participate in a conversation as opposed to merely posting an opinion.

Findings

Around 2.7 million Danes (out of a total population of 5.6 million people) had a Facebook account in 2014 and a little more than 0.5 million Danes had a Twitter account (Danmarks statistik, 2014: 19). Danish MPs are also to a great extent present on Twitter and Facebook and have used these social media as tools for communication. Højholt & Kosiara-Pedersen (2011) found that 67% of the Danish MPs already had a Facebook account (page or profile) in 2010. In the observation period of this study, June 2014, 101 MPs had a Twitter account and 170 MPs had a Facebook account out of the total of 175 Danish MPs in the Danish Parliament. Accordingly only 5 Danish MPs did not have a Facebook account: Alex Ahrendtsenⁱⁱ and Martin Henriksen from the Danish People's Party, Birthe Rønn Hornbech from the Liberal Party, Henning Hyllested from the Red-Green Alliance and Per Stig Møller from the Conservatives.

Figure 1 shows the different parties represented in the Danish Parliament as well as the number and percentage of the party's MPs on Twitter and Facebook. In June 2014, Denmark had a minority government formed by the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals and supported by the Red-Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party as well as both members from Greenland and one of the two members from the Faroe Islands together with the independent MP Uffe Elbæk.ⁱⁱⁱ

Figur 1. Danish MPs on Twitter and Facebook, June 2014.^{iv}

Note: Total number of MPs belonging to the group reported in parentheses after the name. Number of MPs with a Facebook/Twitter account reported as n=x.

The widespread use of Twitter and Facebook among Danish MPs is part of a general trend in western democracies where Facebook and Twitter have become key communication channels for politicians. However, there are differences in what social media is preferred in the different countries. In Denmark, Facebook is clearly more popular than Twitter whereas e.g. in Australia Facebook and Twitter are almost equally popular. Macnamara & Kenning (2011) thus found that 70% of the federal politicians were active on Facebook during the 2010-election in Australia and 45% had a Twitter account, but that Twitter almost had caught up with Facebook in the 2013-election where 81% of the MPs had a Facebook account and 76% had a Twitter account (Macnamara & Kenning (2013).

Political posts

The main tool used by politicians on Facebook to communicate with citizens is the 'update status-feature' on their Facebook pages. Here the politician can make posts that are shown in the news feeds of all the followers of their pages (unless of course the followers have chosen not to receive posts from the politicians).

The post can be words alone, words in combination with a picture, a link or a movie clip or simply just a picture, link or movie clip. The total number of posts made by the 170 Danish parliamentarians with a Facebook account during the month of June 2014 was 3085 – a little more than 18 posts per MP. However, not all of these posts were political posts. 12% (n=364) of the posts had a clearly private character with no or a very limited interest for the general public. One example of such a private post was from an MP who on June 16 2014 posted a picture of a wheelbarrow (+ link to an advertisement at dba.dk) together with the text: 'For those of you who still ride horses: Have put my tournament-wheelbarrow up for sale. Have to admit that it could be of more use elsewhere.' Another example of a post with a clearly private character is from an MP who wrote: 'I'm just so proud of my son, Troels, who today got an A in his second year high school exam in Ancient studies.' (posted June 11 2014).

If we exclude such private posts we end up with 2721 political posts – 16 posts or on average about one political post every second day per MP with a Facebook page during the observed period. However, this number conceals large variations in the number of posts made by the single MPs. As figure 2 shows, 11 out of the 170 politicians with a Facebook account did not make any political posts at all during the observed period and 39 MPs only made 1 to 5 posts. In contrast, 28 politicians made more than 30 political posts each during the same period.

Figure 2. Number of political posts made by Danish MPs (n=175) on Facebook, June 2014.

The 26 monitored MPs in Ross et al.'s (2015) study on MPs' use of Facebook during the 2011 election campaign in New Zealand made 1148 wall posts during the monitored period of 4 weeks or on average 44.15 posts per MP. This is a high number compared to the Danish MPs where only 28 out of the 170 MPs with a Facebook account posted more than 30 posts during the month of June 2014. However, a direct comparison is not possible since the New Zealand observation period was the last 4 weeks of an election campaign and the period monitored here is a month outside the election period.

Dialogue or one-way communication? Politicians' participation in the political conversations

Enli & Skogerbø (2013) found three main motives among Norwegian politicians for using social media: marketing, mobilisation and dialogue. Dialogue also seems to be among the key motives for Danish politicians when asked about their motives for using Facebook (Rysgaard, 2014). However, the extent to which the Danish MPs actually engage in conversation via their Facebook pages varies a lot. Some politicians never or almost never answer or reply to questions and comments from followers whereas others engage in conversations to a very great extent.

Figure 3 shows the 11 MPs who made the highest number of replies to comments made to their own posts. Two politicians stand out and are in a league of their own when it comes to involvement in the political conversations going on in the threads to their wall posts: Özlem Sara Cekic from the Socialist People's Party and Ole Birk Olesen from the Liberal Alliance. Cekic made 297 comments to her 23 political posts, i.e. she re-entered the conversation of her posts more than 12 times on average. Birk Olesen made 236 comments to his own 60 political posts, about 4 comments per post on average. The total number of comments made by the MPs to their own political posts was 2303. This means that Cekic and Birk Olesen alone made over 23% of all the comments to own posts made by the 170 MPs during this monitored period.

In terms of engaging in a conversation, most of the other politicians in figure 3 are, however, also quite active. Pia Olsen Dyhr, the leader of the Socialist People's Party, and Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen, spokeswoman on political affairs for the Red-Green Alliance, made approximately 2.5 to 3.5 comments per post, and some of the others made around 2 comments per post. This indicates that these MPs actually 'listen' (i.e. read the comments to their posts) and to some extent engage in a dialogue.

Figure 3. The most answering Danish MPs, June 2014 (n=170).

However, this is not the general trend among Danish MPs. In 1837 posts out of the total number of 2721 political posts during the observed period, the MPs did not engage in a conversation. A conversation between the politician and citizens only took place in less than a third of the posts (n=884). 11 of the 170 MPs with a Facebook account did not make any posts at all during the period – and therefore could not make comments to their own posts. But also many of the MPs who made posts did not engage in any conversations related to their own political posts. As figure 4 shows 45 MPs in total did not make a post/comment to their own political posts and thereby did not use the potentiality for two-way communication that Facebook offers. 45 MPs did it less than every fourth time they posted a political post. Only 8 MPs commented on more than three quarters of their own posts. The three MPs who commented on all their own posts during the observed period only made 1 or 2 posts each. This is in line with Macnamara & Kenning's (2011, 2013) findings. They looked, as mentioned above, at Australian MPs during two election campaigns in 2010 and 2013, and they found that the MPs mainly used social media for one-way communication – for 'speaking' and 'broadcasting' – and to a lesser extent for 'listening' and two-way communication.

Figure 4. Percentage of own posts that MPs reenters/make comments to.

If we look at the number of posts made by the different parties and the answering behaviour of these parties (cf. table 1), we can see that three parties slightly underperform compared with the rest in terms of making political posts. The average number of posts is 16.01 but members of the Danish People's Party (13.25), the Social Liberals (13.58) and the Social Democrats (14.06) made slightly fewer posts. On the other hand two parties clearly over-perform in terms of the number of posts they made – the Liberal Alliance with 23.44 post per MP and the Conservatives with 25.29 posts per MP. The only MP who stands outside the established parties is the former Minister of Culture Uffe Elbæk who left the Social Liberals and is now forming a new party called the Alternative. As shown in table 1 ('Outside parliamentary groups') he is also very active on Facebook and perform well above average.

Table 1. MPs' answering behavior, June 2014.

	1. Mean number of political posts	2. Mean number of political posts where MPs answer	3. Proportion of political posts where MPs answer (Pct.)	4. Mean number of answers in own political posts	5. Mean number of answers per political post
Overall results (n=170)	16.01	5.50	34.35	13.54	0.85
Parties (members with a Facebook account in parentheses)					
Red-Green Alliance (11)	16.82	7.36	43.78	15.18	0.90
Socialist People's Party (12)	16.58	7.33	44.22	38.67	2.33
Social Democrats (47)	14.06	4.60	32.68	8.73	0.62
Social Liberals (17)	13.58	2.88	21.22	4.71	0.35
Liberal Alliance (9)	23.44	13.33	56.87	45.78	1.95
Liberal Party (46)	15.96	5.17	32.42	9.87	0.62
Conservatives (7)	25.29	5.71	22.60	14.00	0.55
Danish People's Party (20)	13.25	3.75	28.30	7.40	0.56
Outside parliamentary groups (1)	72.00	26.00	36.11	48.00	0.67
Gender					
Female MPs (66)	16.55	6.15	37.18	17.88	1.08
Male MPs (104)	15.67	5.09	32.48	10.80	0.69
Age groups					
20-29 (8)	13.50	5.38	39.81	7.13	0.53
30-39 (51)	16.78	6.57	39.14	19.96	1.19
40-49 (51)	19.24	6.39	33.23	16.47	0.86
50-59 (34)	13.53	4.53	33.48	7.62	0.56
Over 60 (26)	12.19	3	24.61	4.96	0.41

Note: Number of MPs with a Facebook account within each group reported in parentheses. The proportion of political posts where MPs answer (3) is calculated by dividing 1 and 2, and multiplying by 100. The number of answers per political posts (5) is equal to (4) divided by (1).

Table 1 also shows the mean numbers of posts where the MPs answer or comment on comments made by followers to their posts and thereby engage in a conversation. The overall mean number of posts where the MP comments on comments made by followers is 5.50 posts per MP. Besides Uffe Elbæk from the Alternative, who also here with 26 posts is almost five times the average, two parties stand out. On the one hand the Social Liberals only engage in conversations in 2.88 posts per MP during the observed period whereas the Liberal Alliance members on the other hand are the most active in this regard. On average they engage in conversations in 13.33 posts per MP during the same period. However, both the Red-Green Alliance and the Socialist People's Party with 7.36 and 7.33 are also above the average for all MPs.

Column 4 in table 1 shows the mean number of reentries of the MPs; i.e. the number of answers/comments they make to their own political posts. This tells us something about the depth of the involvement of the politicians in the conversations taking place at their Facebook walls. Members of the Social Liberals (4.71) together with the Danish Peoples Party (7.40) are the least engaged in these discussions whereas the members of the Socialist People's Party (38.67) together with Liberal Alliance members (45.78) on average are the two most active groups. But it should also be noted that these two groups are the ones with the two overall most answering politicians, as discussed above. Özlem Sara Cekic from the Socialist People's Party alone made 297 comments out of the 496 comments made by politicians of her party to their own political posts and Ole Birk Olesen from the Liberal Alliance made 236 comments out of a total of 412 comments made by the MPs from the Liberal Alliance. However, if we take away these two very active politicians and calculate the average number of comments made by the rest of the MPs in these two groups they still perform a good deal above average. The 11 remaining MPs from the Socialist People's Party made on average 18.09 comments to their own posts in the observed period whereas the 8 remaining MPs of the Liberal Alliance on average made 22 comments in the same period. Both numbers are still decidedly above average (13.54) and this together with the fact that the same two groups in addition also include the two overall most answering politicians could indicate a certain kind of social media conversation culture within these two political party groups.

If we then turn to differences in gender there is as table 1 shows not a big difference between the number of posts made by woman and men (16.55 vs. 15.67). However, women are apparently more engaged in the conversations in their pages than men. Women thus on average take part in more conversations than men – and they are more deeply involved in these conversations with an average of 17.88 comments to own posts in comparison with the 10.80 comments on average made by the male MPs. If we again remove Özlem Sara Cekic and Ole Birk Olesen it does not change the overall picture; female MPs are more deeply involved in the conversations than the male MPs. However, the impact of these two high performing parliamentarians and especially Cekic becomes clear when we look at the influence they alone have on the average. Cekic made 297 out of 1180 comments made by the 66 female MPs and Birk Olesen made 236 out of the 1123 male MP-comments. Without these two MPs the average number of comments for male MPs would drop to 8.61 and the number for the female MPs would drop to 13.58.

If we then finally look at the extent to which the different age groups take part in the political conversation on Facebook, the 40-49 years old MPs make more political posts on average (19.24) than the other groups. With 16.47 answers per MP in own political posts they also comment on own posts more often than the average MP. But here the 30-39 years old MPs are doing even better with an average of 19.96 comments to own posts which means that they on average make 1.19 comments per own political post. Again Cekic's and Olesen's performance heavily influence the findings. Cekic belongs to the 30-39 years old group and Olesen to the 40-49 years old group. If we remove them from the two groups the overall order of how the different age groups are doing is the same but these two groups no longer perform much better than the other groups. The 40-49 years old MPs would without Olesen have 0.66 (instead of 0.86) as their mean number of answers per political post and the number for the 30-39 years old MPs would be 0.86 instead of 1.19.

Citizens' participation in the political conversations

If we look at the activity going on in the threads following the political posts made by the MPs it is not only the dialogue between the politicians and the citizens that is interesting. With Habermas (1989) we could say that the dialogue between private citizens on societal or common problems is the core of the public sphere. It is therefore interesting to see, as table 2 shows, that some of the political posts that the MPs themselves do not re-enter and comment on nevertheless lead to conversations between citizens. This happens in 10% of the political posts (n=274). In total 22% (n=588) of the political posts led to a dialogue between citizens. On the whole 43% of the political posts led to a conversation in the thread (n=1158) between citizens and/or between politicians and citizens. In 76% of these posts (n=884), corresponding to a third of all the posts, the MPs took part in the conversation. This is a high number compared to Ross et al.'s (2015) findings where the MPs only responded to comments in 14% of the posts.

Table 2. Conversation in political posts (n=2721)

		Conversation between politician and citizens	
		No	Yes
Conversation between citizens	No	No conversation 57% (n = 1563)	Conversation between politician and citizens 21% (n = 570)
	Yes	Conversation between citizens 10% (n = 274)	Conversation between politician and citizens and between citizens 12% (n = 314)

When we look at the citizens' engagement in the political conversations on the Facebook pages of parliamentarians, we must also differentiate between very easy or low-cost forms of participation and more demanding ones. The figures in table 2 are referring to a relatively demanding way to participate, namely to write something on the Facebook wall of a MP. There are, however, less demanding ways to take part in the conversations through the Facebook pages of politicians – and the easiest way is simply to follow a politician. This is done by clicking 'like' to a politician's Facebook page (or by becoming a 'friend' of the politician if they use a private page). In this way those who have clicked 'like' on a page (or become a 'friend') will receive posts

from the politician; unless he or she uses a filter to avoid these posts, and we do not know how many use these filters.

The 10 most popular Danish MPs in June 2014 in terms of followers are shown in Figure 5. Not surprisingly the Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt (the Social Democrats), 152492 followers, and the leader of the opposition Lars Løkke Rasmussen (the Liberal Party), 132570 followers, have the most followers. In third and fourth place we find spokeswoman for the Red-Green Alliance Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen with 94308 followers and Pia Kjærsgaard, the former leader of the Danish People's Party, with 66045 followers. Among the top 10 most popular Danish MPs on Facebook in June 2014 we also find two other party leaders; Margrethe Vestager (the Social Liberals) and Anders Samuelsen (the Liberal Alliance).

Figure 5. The most followed Danish MPs on Facebook, June 2014.

From the politician's point of view, posting an update on Facebook is a rather unique communication channel. It is completely up to them to decide what they want to post and the post can potentially reach thousands of citizens. However, we do not know exactly to what extent the posts are read by followers and other Facebook users. According to Vesnic-Alujevic (2012), 44.4% of the respondents in her study on political participation via

Facebook during the 2009 European Parliament election chose to follow political party pages and/or politicians' pages because they wanted to read more about the opinions of a party or politician, 28.9% wanted to express their support and 13.1% had become a fan because they wanted to discuss different political issues. We do not know if the figures are the same for Denmark. However, we know how many people clicked 'like' on the different posts made by the politicians over the month of June 2014 and this could give us an indication of the number of readers the posts' have. However, since people who read a post but do not like the content of it probably will refrain from 'liking' it, this can only be seen as a minimum number.

Figure 6 thus shows the mean number of likes the most popular politicians received to the posts they made during the month of June 2014. The 10 most popular Danish MPs in terms of followers on Facebook (cf. figure 5) made between 6 and 56 political posts each in the monitored period and they received on average between 170 and 6530 likes per post. With 56 posts the leader of the Liberal Alliance – Anders Samuelsen – made the highest number of posts and got an average of 1681 likes per post. The Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt only made 6 posts and got 4341 likes per post. This is considerably more than the number of likes given to the 26 New Zealand-MPs monitored by Ross et al. (2015). Although these MPs on average made more posts during a comparable time period than the Danish Facebook-MPs they received far less likes to their posts. The highest number of likes to one New Zealand MP-post was 870 and only 46 posts out of a total of 1148 attracted more than 100 likes.

The person who received the highest number of likes on average among the Danish MPs was Inger Støjberg, the Liberal Party's spokeswoman on political affairs. She made 10 political posts in the period and got 6530 likes on average. However, the high number of likes is due primarily to two posts – both with reference to integration and Muslims. One post was about an assault on an employee at a bakery as a reaction to a critical remark made by the shop owner to a female Muslim customer's headscarf and included a link to an article on this assault in the Danish newspaper *Ekstra Bladet* (Selin, 2014):

When will you understand, you crazy Muslim-extremists, that it is Denmark you live in? Here we don't destroy bakery shops and give headbutts just because of a stupid comment. That said, the headscarf in my opinion is a repressive symbol for women, but you have the right to wear it. That's the way it is in a free country. Post by Inger Støjberg, June 16 2014 (My translation).^v

This post alone got 27688 likes and in the monitored period Støjberg also made another post that got a high number of likes; a post from June 26 on the separation of men and women in a new mosque in Copenhagen and on the same mosque's view on homosexuality. This post received 11469 likes.

Figure 6. Mean number of likes on political posts. 10 most popular MPs June 2014, (n=170)

Note: Number of political posts reported in parentheses.

Reading a post from the politician is of course a relatively passive way to take part in a political conversation (although if we compare with face-to-face meetings most people would in the same way also just be listening passively). A more demanding way to participate is, as discussed above, to comment on a post made by the politician or on a comment made by another citizen to the thread. The total and mean numbers of comments made to the posts by the 10 most popular Danish MPs on Facebook are shown in table 3. The opposition leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the Liberal Party got the most comments; in total 9778 comments to his 53 posts or on average 184.5 comments per post.

Inger Støjberg from the Liberal Party received with 8523 comments second most comments in the monitored period. However, she only made 10 political posts and therefore on average got 852.3 comments per post. This is more than three times as many on average as the next two on the list: Pia Kjaersgaard from the Danish People's Party with 258.5 and Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt from the Social Democrats who got 242 comments per post in this period.

Table 3. Mean number of comments for the 10 most popular MPs (June 2014)

	Total number of	Total number of	Mean number of
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	comments	political posts	comments
Helle Thorning-Schmidt	1452	6	242.0
Lars Løkke Rasmussen	9778	53	184.5
Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen	4086	24	170.3
Pia Kjærsgaard	3619	14	258.5
Margrethe Vestager	661	18	36.7
Mette Frederiksen	224	7	32.0
Anders Samuelsen	3056	56	54.6
Inger Støjberg	8523	10	852.3
Özlem Cekic	3172	23	137.9
Manu Sareen	367	10	36.9
Total	34938	221	158.1

There is thus not surprisingly a huge difference in the number of people who like a page, read/like a post and comment upon a post. The 10 most popular Danish MPs on Facebook had in June 2014 between 17199 and 152492 followers, they received on average between 170 and 6530 likes per post and got between 32 and 852 comments per post they made. This is three different ways of participating and the more demanding it gets the fewer people naturally take part.

Number of citizens taking part in the political conversations

It is often said that it is just a small number of people who dominate online debates – a selected few or an elite (Linaa Jensen, 2003). However, this cannot be confirmed by this study. On the contrary, as table 4 shows, the 9778 comments made to Lars Løkke Rasmussen's posts were not just made by a few enthusiastic followers but by 5790 different individuals who actively took part in the political dialogue by commenting on his updates or on comments to his posts.

Table 4. Comments and individuals commenting to most popular MPs (among the dataset-MP's/88 politicians)

MPs (number of political status updates in parentheses)	Number of comments on political status updates	Summed frequency	Number of individuals commenting on political status updates
<i>78 MPs (1128)</i>	<i>11794</i>	<i>11794</i>	
Kristian Thulesen Dahl (23)	688	12482	413
Tom Behnke (19)	1219	13701	686
Kristian Jensen (33)	1297	14998	722
Pia Olsen Dyhr (31)	1299	16297	793
Helle Thorning-Schmidt (6)	1452	17749	810
Søren Espersen (67)	1751	19500	946

Özlem Sara Cekic (23)	3172	22672	1762
Pia Kjærsgaard (14)	3619	26291	1956
Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen (24)	4086	30377	2651
Lars Løkke Rasmussen (53)	9778	40155	5790
Total (1421)	40155	40155	19251

Note: Number of political status updates reported in parentheses. The total number of individuals commenting on political posts is calculated as the sum of individuals commenting on the 88 MPs' posts with duplicates removed.

Table 4 also shows the total number of individuals commenting on the political posts made by the 88 Danish dataset-MPs during June 2014. In total 19251 individuals made 40155 comments to 1421 political posts from the 88 dataset-MPs. If we assume that the rest of the 170 MPs with a Facebook account on average have as many individuals commenting on their posts as the 88 dataset-MPs, then we end up with at least 35000 citizens that have actively taken part in a political conversation during the observed month by commenting on a post.^{vi}

However, it should also be noted that half of the comments are found in just a few pages. 20655 comments were thus made to posts from just 4 out of the 88 MPs. The main political conversation activity is in other words concentrated in a few MPs' Facebook pages.^{vii} The vast majority of politicians may thus be on Facebook and may to some extent engage in conversations but have so far not been able to generate a lot of conversation activity in their pages.

Discussion

Studies of political conversations on Facebook between MPs and citizens have up till now, as discussed in the introduction, not found much evidence of a genuine exploitation of the new two-way communication possibilities that Facebook offers. The results found in this study also show that many politicians still do not enter into dialogue with citizens on Facebook. Even though 170 Danish MPs out of a total of 175 MPs had a Facebook account – and 159 of them made posts during the observed period of June 2014 – a conversation only took place in about a third of the posts made by the MPs. 45 out of 170 MPs did not make any comments to their own posts.

However, on the other hand, the results also showed that the majority of Danish MPs (125 out of 170) do have some kind of dialogue with citizens via their Facebook pages. Many of the politicians also re-entered the conversations going on in their own posts more than once, indicating a real interest in two-way communication. Politicians from the Liberal Alliance together with the MPs from the Socialist People's Party did better than the rest of the groups in this regard and the female MPs did better than the male MPs. However, although there are differences among the MPs in how much they listen and respond to comments to their own posts, there seems on the whole to be more political conversation activity taking place in the Danish MPs' Facebook pages than have been found in previous studies in other western countries (cf. Ross et al., 2015; Macnamara & Kenning, 2011, 2013; Nielsen, 2012; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013) as well as in Denmark (Højholt & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2011).

There are probably many reasons for this. One reason could be that the majority of previous studies focus on political conversations during the last weeks of an election campaign. This is a very busy period for the politicians with a lot of street campaigning, face-to-face meetings and other activities leaving little time for online conversations. The observation period in the present study was for this reason also placed outside these few, very busy weeks to get a more adequate picture of the regular political conversation activity on Facebook between MPs and citizens. Another reason for the observed differences could be due to time differences between the previous studies and the present one. The observation period in this study was in June 2014 whereas many of the previous studies go back to the period between 2009 and 2011. Facebook was first made completely public in 2006. So time differences of three to five years between the observation periods could cause large differences in the results. The observed increase in the use of Facebook for political conversations between MPs and citizens in this study compared to previous ones therefore perhaps could be attributed to a general evolution in the use of Facebook.

The differences found might of course also reflect actual differences across countries. According to Linaa Jensen (2011), Denmark is a paradigmatic case when it comes to deliberative democracy. Albeit decreasing formal political participation, Denmark has a high level of political interest combined with a general trust in politics and society. Together with a high degree of Internet penetration and many users of social media, this might explain the relatively high political conversation activity on Facebook between Danish MPs and citizens. Denmark also has a long tradition for understanding conversation as essential to a well-functioning democracy. Hal Koch's book on democracy (1991, first published in 1945) in which he argues that conversation together with mutual understanding and respect is the essence of democracy has for decades been hugely influential in Denmark and helped form the normative background for public debate on what democracy is and ought to be. However, Højholt & Kosiara-Pedersen (2011) also found that the majority of Danish party leaders (in 2010) used Facebook as a one-way communication channel. Further studies are therefore needed to determine if Danish MPs actually engage in political conversations with citizens to a greater extent than politicians in other countries or if the observed differences simply are due to time differences and/or differences in the observation periods (inside or outside election campaigns).

Another interesting finding in the present study is that many of the posts made by the MPs also lead to conversations among citizens (22% of all the political posts). Citizens are on the whole relatively active in the conversations. As discussed, a large number of citizens receive and read posts from politicians and many citizens also actively take part in the conversations going on in the threads to the posts made by the MPs. In the observed period more than 35000 citizens actively contributed to the political conversations on the MPs' Facebook pages with one or more comments.

How big these numbers are becomes clearer if we compare them with the number of people who are members of political parties in Denmark and receive information and participate through this channel. The latest available figures are from 2013 and the party with the highest number of members in 2013 was the Liberal Party with 43530 members followed by the Social Democrats with 39345 members (Folketingets Oplysning, 2014). The number of party members has dropped tremendously over the last decades. In 1960 the Liberal Party had 192629 members and the Social Democrats 259459 members. In total more than 600000 Danes (out

of a population of 4.6 million people) were members of a political party in 1960. In 2013 the population had increased to 5.6 million people but the number of party members had decreased to only 143352 people (Folketingets Oplysning, 2014).

Compared to these figures, the leaders of the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats alone had respectively 132570 (Løkke Rasmussen, LR) and 152492 (Thorning-Schmidt, TS) followers on Facebook in June 2014 and they received 78069 (LR) and 26046 (TS) likes to their own political posts during this month. Being a member of a political party and following a politician on Facebook are of course two very different things. However, the high number of citizens showing an interest in politics via Facebook compared to the rapid and continuous decrease in the number of party members seems to suggest that Facebook in Denmark has become more than just another medium for the active citizens (cf. Linaa Jensen, 2011). A very limited part of the population is today a member of a political party and enters into dialogue with the MPs through e.g. party meetings. Other platforms are therefore needed for the continuous political conversations between MPs and citizens – and as shown above, Facebook already seems to have become the chosen forum for a great deal of these conversations.

However, as the findings in this study also show, some politicians are better than others in engaging citizens in the political conversations on their Facebook walls. An example of a Danish MP who is successful in this regard is Inger Støjberg who, as discussed above, alone received more than 38000 likes for just two posts. These two posts also led to many comments – the story about the baker received 2934 comments and the post on the separation of men and women in the mosque received 2377 comments. This is a very high number of likes and comments in view of Støjberg having less than 30000 followers of her page in June 2014.

For practical reasons (lack of space) it has not been possible in this paper to have a closer look at the quality of the content of the posts and the comments. However, a brief look at the content of the top-comments to these two posts by Støjberg reveals that at least the threads to these posts are not what Sunstein (2007) calls 'echo chambers'. Quite on contrary there is a very lively debate going on here that in nature more resembles Baek et al.'s (2012) findings. According to respondents in their study, online deliberation in comparison with face-to-face deliberation is less demanding for participants – less aimed at consensus and post-deliberative action – but at the same time it opens up for more diversity than face-to-face deliberation and allows participants to engage with people they otherwise would not have exchanged political views with. That people who comment on Støjberg's posts are not just echoing her views can e.g. be seen in the two top comments (measured by the number of likes) to her post on the mosque's separation of men and woman where two citizens, Mohammed Hassan and John E. Larsen, wrote:

Great, Inger. Work for something you can change. Women also sit separately in the synagogue. Would you then suddenly say something about Jewish theology? Dare you? Muslims you can of course bully and hate without consequences. (Comment by Mohammed Hassan, June 26 2014, my translation)

Dear Inger Støjberg Then remember to have the same attitudes towards Catholics as well as Jews since their view on women is not different. It is too easy only to criticize Muslims. And now that we have started to talk

about it, we can undoubtedly also find fractions among normal Christians who have a weird view on woman as well as homosexuals. (Comment by John E. Larsen, June 26 2014, my translation)

That these comments are also read by others can be seen from the number of likes and comments they received – Hassan got 911 likes and 103 replies, and Larsen’s comment got 505 likes and 34 replies.^{viii} Also the comments to the other post on the assault on the employee reveals a lively debate both for and against the views of Støjberg. The present study does not give us an answer to the question of what creates the high activity following posts like the two from Støjberg. It could be the subjects she addresses, the way she writes about them or other factors that draw people to her site. Further studies are needed to tell us more about this. However, what we can see from the present study is that the high activity is not merely something that could be called ‘clicktivism’ (White, 2010) or ‘slacktivism’ (Morozov, 2009). People do in other words not only click like on the two posts but also write comments.

Finally, it should again be noted that this study primarily has mapped the political conversations quantitatively and that further studies are needed to give us a better understanding of the quality of these conversations. We thus still know very little about the general deliberative quality of the conversations taking place. Do the comments from citizens resemble the ones cited above or are they in general perhaps shorter and less substantial? We know that complaints have been made from MPs about the character of the conversations going on in their pages (Jacobsen, 2012; Jensen, 2014) – the widespread use of ‘argumentum ad hominem’, insults, threats etc. – and one MP, Søren Espersen from the Danish People’s Party, has even chosen to stop using Facebook because of this. He wrote (in my translation) on November 13 2014:

Goodbye to Facebook

This will be my last update on Facebook. My page will from 13/14 2014 [sic!] no longer be active, just as you can no longer send me messages this way. The reason I now quit Facebook is that although there have been many good, friendly and exciting comments, that I thank you for, there have also been – sadly enough – on a daily basis a host of death threats and other threats on Facebook – including against my wife. On top of this comes a host of obscene comments. Sometimes I have used many hours to erase them but now I don’t want to do that anymore. I am by nature a happy soul, and this decision can hopefully bring me even more happy days...

All the best to all of you!

PS: If you want to ask me questions in the future – or make me aware of something, you are welcome to email me at dfsesp@ft.dk just like you are welcome to send me a letter through Christiansborg, 1240 Kbh. K.

Best wishes to all of you

Søren Espersen

On the other hand, we also know that there are many well-argued comments on Facebook – even in relation to posts that are themselves pretty direct and tough in character. This, together with the fact that many politicians are actively present on Facebook and that a large number of citizens follow the MPs and read and comment on their political posts, makes Facebook an inevitable and interesting arena to study if we want to know more about political conversations in contemporary western democracies.

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ⁱ The Danish national parliament, the Folketing, has 179 members. However, only 175 members are elected in Denmark, 2 members are elected in Greenland and 2 in the Faroe Islands. Greenland and the Faroe Island are autonomous countries within the Kingdom of Denmark. The four MPs from Greenland and the Faroe Islands have not been included in the sample because their social media activity is aimed at the much smaller and therefore not comparable public spheres focused on Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

ⁱⁱ Alex Ahrendtsen has previously used social media but stopped using them because they took up too much of his time and because of the many hate mails he received – some of them even contained death threats (Linnemann, 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ The four members from Greenland and the Faroe Islands are not included in the sample. However, three of them also had a Facebook account in June 2014: Sara Olsvig and Doris Jakobsen from Greenland as well as Edmund Joensen from the Faroe Islands. Only Sjurður Skaale from the Faroe Islands did not have one. Sara Olsvig was the only one of the four who had a Twitter account.

^{iv} Danish MPs both use public, fan pages (with 'followers') and private, profile pages (with 'friends'). In June 2014 133 MPs had a private, profile page and 103 had a public, fan page – 66 MPs only had a private, profile page, 38 only had a public, fan page and 67 had both. Where the MPs have both types of pages data has been collected from the page primarily used for communication with the public (the page with most activity and most followers or friends).

^v The issue of immigration and integration has for many years been high on the political agenda in Denmark, even though the last election in 2011 was less characterized by this issue (Mouritsen & Hovmark Jensen, 2014). Together with members of the Danish People's Party Inger Støjberg is among the most active critical voices in the public debate on immigration and integration of people from non-western countries.

^{vi} This is a conservative estimate. The 82 MPs not included in the datasets thus made 1300 political posts or on average 15.85 posts per MP compared with the 1421 posts or on average 16.14 made by the 88 dataset MPs. The non-dataset MPs also have a similar profile as the dataset MPs when it comes to the proportion of women (37.8% vs. 39.8%) and men

(60.2% vs. 62.2%) in the two groups. They could therefore be expected to attract all most as many comments per MP as the dataset MPs.

^{vii} We know that among the MPs that we do not have datasets on are politicians with a lot of activity, first and foremost Inge Støjberg, so the total number of MPs with a lot of activity is higher than these four.

^{viii} These figures were checked on March 16 2015.