

## Participation and Control:

The Interactions between Editorial staff, Technology and Users in Online Commentary Journalism.

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## Abstract

This article investigates commentary journalism online, based on a case study of the Norwegian regional newspaper *Nordlys* and its online commentary and debate section. The aim is to discuss how journalists perceive the loss of control when technologies and users interact with the debate agenda online. Actor-network theory (ANT) is used to explore the interaction amongst editorial staff, new technologies, professional norms and the participation of audiences. The findings reveal that digital technology becomes a powerful actor in the network of public media, as it directly affects the forms of journalistic presentation and public debates. In addition, new technologies contribute to the empowerment of audiences, who gain better access to both the newsroom and the wider public.

### *Keywords:*

interpretive journalism, regional newspapers, public opinion, actor-network theory, commentary journalism, digitisation, audience participation

## Introduction

*The reason why online commentary journalism is a success is that people like participating, feeling that their voices do count. It gives citizens an opportunity to participate in debates in a quite different way than before.*

The quotation above is from one of our informants in the Norwegian regional newspaper, *Nordlys*, describing how they work with commentary journalism online. In 2013, *Nordlys* launched its innovation within the commentary- or opinion-based genre: *Nordnorsk debatt* (the High North debate), first in print, and the following year in the online version. The newsroom aims to be an important agenda setter in the public debate in the northern region of Norway. Simultaneously, the print circulation is rapidly declining, the newsrooms are experiencing large cutbacks, and advertisers prefer social media. Due to this situation, *Nordlys* wants to capture a position as the leading newsroom in the northern region, by prioritising an online innovation within the *interpretive* part of journalism, which is the specific issue in this article.

Commentary journalism is an expanding genre that represents interpretive moments in a complex world with a rapid information flow (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2008; McNair 2008; Knapskog 2009; Esser & Umbricht 2014). The characteristics of commentary- or opinion-based journalism is analysis, knowledge, critique, controversy and interpretation (Knapskog 2009; McNair 2008). Unlike news reporting, it represents a subjective genre. The genre has strong historical roots, particularly in printed newspapers. The digital media landscape provides new opportunities for columnists to reach out in the public debate, and for the public to participate and contribute. At the same time, the journalistic professional control over content is challenged. Digitisation and user participation within journalism implies a power shift within communication (Picard 2011); users are given the opportunity to produce journalistic content and Facebook is emerging as a competitive arena for the public debate.

This article investigates online commentary journalism, based on a case study of the Norwegian regional newspaper *Nordlys* and its online commentary and debate site. We have interviewed commentary journalists in the newsroom and observed the site *Nordnorsk debatt*. The aim is to discuss how the journalists perceive the loss of control when both technologies and users gain access to the arenas of online debate. We use the actor-network theory (ANT) to investigate the concept of power in the newsroom of *Nordlys*, especially regarding how the newspaper has built up its online debate site and facilitates public debate. We analyse the tension between the technological development, the democratic gains of participation, and the professional journalistic control over content, all based on the journalist's perspective.

The article is organised as follows: First, we present the context of the Norwegian media landscape in general, and the newspaper *Nordlys* in particular. This is followed by a brief overview of the development of the commentary genre. Before we proceed to the analysis of the empirical data, we present the ANT, our case study and the method used. In the end, we conclude and summarise the findings.

## Background

Regarding reading newspapers, the Norwegian people differ from many other Western countries insofar as both circulation and readership have been comparatively high (Høst 2015; Vaage 2015). The press structure consists of a great number of local and regional newspapers spread all over the country, with a decentralised press being characteristic of Norway. In the end of 2014, the number of editions in Norway was 230, which is published in 187 different cities and smaller communities (Høst 2015, 5). The number of newspapers is high in Norway compared to other Western countries. Nonetheless, both circulation and readership are decreasing in Norway and in all Western countries, particularly in the large national newspapers and regional press such as *Nordlys*.<sup>1</sup> During the same year of 2014, the readership of news in Norway was for the first time higher online than in print (Vaage 2015, 58).

Høst (2005, 148) characterises the local press as the “backbone” of the Norwegian press structure. Local media are the mediators of culture and identity (Skogerbø & Windsvold 2011). This is not only a Norwegian or Nordic issue, as the regional press in the United Kingdom is described in much the same way (Aldridge 2007, 26). Additionally, the local media in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland are regarded as important for their national identity (Franklin 2006). Still, the Norwegian media system is part of a Nordic tradition, in which the media system is linked to political, social and economic factors. Weibull (2005) claims that Norway, Sweden and Finland constitute a region in Europe with both the highest level of newspaper circulation and the largest share of the advertising market.

The Nordic countries also share a long democratic tradition, characterised by the stability of political institutions and a confidence in public authorities. Unlike systems with rapid political upheaval and less predictability, this has created an interest in reading newspapers (Weibull 2005). Hallin and Mancini (2009, 298) describe both the Nordic and Central European media systems as a Democratic Corporatist Model with several similar characteristics. For example, they share a historic co-existence between political parallelism and journalistic professionalism, and a state media policy in which media autonomy is also highly valued. Moreover, the media culture is characterised by a surviving advocacy tradition that considers the media as important in order for different social groups to have a voice and for diverse ideologies to be communicated.

Placed in this context, *Nordlys* is an example of the regional press in Norway. *Nordlys*, has been published in the town of Tromsø since 1902, and is the largest newspaper in the northern part of Norway. Distinct opinions from a regional viewpoint have always been central for the newspaper (Christensen & Tjelmeland 2002, 392). During the period of the party press, *Nordlys* was a labour newspaper, and is now a part of the Amedia Group. After the decline of the party press, opinion-based journalism and the facilitation of the public debate became important in order to legitimise the institutional role of the press (Christensen & Tjelmeland 2002, 467ff). For the newspaper *Nordlys*, regionalism became its branding, through both news prioritising and commentaries. The agenda of the newsroom was to build and support the northern region, culturally, economically and politically, to further support opinion-making and the public debate.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mediebedriftene.no/Tall--Fakta1/Opplagstall/>

In 2013, *Nordlys* launched its commentary innovation in print, and in 2014 the *Nordnorsk debatt* was launched online. According to columnists, the aim with *Nordnorsk debatt* is to continue the heritage of the newspaper by reconquering its regional position within the northern areas. The website contains all opinion-based content, both editorial columns as well as audience contributions, such as chronicles and letters from the audience. The website is organised with daily chronicles and columns, as well as a daily editorial. The site also gives an overview of which articles gain the most likes and shares on Facebook, and which ones are most read. In the columns produced by the editorial staff, politics is the most vital theme, constituting 57 per cent (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016).

*Nordnorsk debatt* is run by an editorial staff of five: three columnists, the debate editor and the chief editor. They serve both the print and online versions, writing the editorial columns as well as editing the audience contributions. Concurrent with this innovation, the newsrooms face revenue loss and downsizing, due to what is described as the media crisis. This has affected the entire Norwegian press, as well as the media industry in other countries. From 2013 to the spring of 2015, the editorial staff was reduced from 52 to 37 employees. Altogether, the circulation of *Nordlys* was 20,555 in 2014.

### *A Rapidly Growing Genre*

Commentary journalism is part of a critical tradition characterised by interpretation and analyses, also named opinion journalism or interpretive journalism. The aim is to stimulate debate and discussion (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016; McNair 2008). Today, the genre is rapidly growing in several countries, including in print, online and broadcast media (McNair 2000, 2008; Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2008; Knapskog 2009; Wahl-Joergensen & Hanitzsch 2009; Salgado & Strömbäck 2012; Esser & Umbricht 2014).

Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2008, 209) describe the growth of interpretive journalism as one of the most significant changes within Swedish journalism over the recent decades. McNair (2008, 112) characterises the growth of opinion-based journalism in online media as a “commentary explosion”. Furthermore, McNair (2008, 117) explains this growth with increased media competition and economic restraint. The commentaries are considered to be relatively inexpensive, requiring no resource-demanding investigative reporting or travel expenses. He also emphasises that the growth in public relations demands a journalistic response in the political debate:

In a world of spin and intensified news management, political commentary is the best counter-spin we have. When politics is increasingly a series of performances, we need reviewers. (McNair 2008, 83)

In a study of the development of both American and European journalism, Esser and Umbricht (2014, 245) conclude, as per McNair, that there has been a change in journalism from observation to interpretation. The level of analysis and opinion-making has expanded, both in news journalism in general, and in commentaries in particular. They explain this along with changes in market dynamics, level of education and status of the profession.

Ward (2009, 229) ties interpretive journalism to partisan press and biased reporting. He also claims that the liberal idea that a free press should inform citizens is tied to the tradition of interpretive journalism, which seeks to explain the significance of events. Furthermore, he points at the tradition of activist journalism, which seeks to reform society.

Both traditions believe that journalists have a duty to do more than simply stenograph facts. Knapskog (2009, 304) argues for a journalistic re-orientation where the commentaries play a crucial role, both in its pure form as an argumentative, knowledge-based statement, and as a medium for an extended dialogue with the readers about the descriptions and interpretations provided by journalists.

Thus, the news media in general are prioritising the commentaries and opinion-based journalism, both in print and online. However, commentary journalism has also been subject to criticism and public debate (Patterson 2000; McNair 2000, 2008; Lysbakken & Isaksen 2008; Enli 2009). The critique has been concerned with the lack of relevance and analytical depth, and that the columnists assume a self-proclaimed and cynical expert role in the public sphere (McNair 2008; Allern 2010). However, other scholars refute this criticism. Bjørkdahl (2016, 17) analysed columns concerning the swine flu epidemic in Norwegian newspapers in 2009, showing that the columnists did not appear to be cynical, superficial and tendentious experts. In fact, he claims they are the opposite: reflective, informed, relevant and possessing well-justified perspectives on the issue.

Moreover, the critique concerns the columnists being “herd animals”, with a coinciding analysis helping to narrow the public sphere (Åmås 2007). However, opinion journalism in the regional press stands out as a counter-voice, bringing alternative interpretations, descriptions and worldviews into the public sphere, often opposing those of the national media (McNair 2000; Enli 2009). A previous study of commentary journalism in regional newspapers in Norway explored how these editions bring alternative and nuancing perspectives in several political debates (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2015). In this way, commentary journalism in regional media, with a different viewpoint from the national one, may contribute to a more nuanced public.

A vital contemporary issue in media studies is audience participation, particularly the possibility for audiences to interact and express themselves in public debate. Although this issue does not specifically address commentary journalism, it is just as vital to news reporting. Still, with the increase of opinion-based journalism and the transition from print to Internet, these are important aspects of commentary journalism. A recent study of participatory journalism in Swedish media shows that the facilitation of user comments increased from 2007 to 2010. During this period, the newsrooms showed “quite a large willingness to invite the readers/users into the discussion”. From 2010 to 2013, the researchers found a similar decrease of articles, with the inclusion of comments and blog links. Therefore, they concluded that over the last couple of years the media organisations have been “less eager to facilitate a public discourse” (Karlsson et al. 2015, 301). Several studies conclude that journalists show a general resistance to audience participation (Williams et al. 2011, Bergström & Wadbring 2015).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Witschge and Nygren (2009, 41ff) describe journalism as a profession in tension between change and tradition. One challenge is that journalists and their audience blur into one another, with audiences becoming a part of journalism. On the other hand, technological changes in the newsroom have contributed to an alteration in the professional identity of journalists. They describe journalism as a profession under pressure, partly because journalistic control of the mediated public sphere seems to be fading. Journalism is

in transition and in search of a redefinition of its purpose and social contract. It is also undergoing a reconstitution of its boundaries, which have become blurred with the rise of participatory modes of journalism (Hanitzsch 2013, 200).

In addition to this *producer-user tension* in journalism, technologies and routines are also important in the decision-making processes within the organisation. One way of understanding this is to view changes in organisations and society as technological determinates (Krogh 1996). Another way is to look at technology as an actor that interacts with other actors within the organisation. We use actor-network theory (ANT) to examine the relationship between actors in the regional newspaper *Nordlys* during this period of rapid change in the genre of commentary. The aim of ANT is to empirically explore relations of power among actors in different networks (Latour 1983; Callon 1986; Law 1992). The radical claim is that:

... networks are composed not only of people, but also of machines, animals, texts, money, architectures – any material that you care to mention (Law 1992, 381).

The work of an ANT analyst is therefore to examine the relationships among human and non-human actors in networks, or to trace the *associations* between actors, and to identify the interactional effects of such associations (Callon 1986; Law 1992). To claim that non-human actors (things) have power does not mean that they possess human attributes, but rather that they, aligned with other actors, are able to make things happen. Latour (2005, 72) states it this way:

... things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on (...) the analyst should be prepared to look in order to account for the durability and extension of any interaction.

Negotiations will appear among people, machines, technologies, strategies and texts in networks, and interactional effects will be the result of various choices. Power appears when some actors are able to convince other actors in the network that their arguments and understandings are the most suitable. By using ANT, we can explore the interaction amongst the editorial staff, new technologies, professional norms and the participation of audiences. How are the negotiations between actors enacted in the media organisation, and who or what has the power to make changes or to make things happen?

Westlund and Lewis (2014, 16) claim that “scholars have paid little attention to the distinct and integral role that technological actants have to play in the overall unfolding of journalism innovation”. This issue is explored in this study. Lewis (2012, 852) even encourages the actor-network analysis of news production, and considers technical artefacts as important actors, along with humans. Ihlebæk et al. (2014) used ANT in a study of innovation in *Nordlys*, more specifically, for the implementation of an application for a tablet. They used ANT to explore the power-relations in the decision-making processes during the innovation process. They argue that ANT is an effective analytical tool, in particular because networks have to become stabilised in accordance with innovation processes. We are using ANT to study another innovation, one that is content-based regarding a specific genre. By using ANT in this project, our aim is to investigate the concepts of productivity and power, regarding both producer and user relations in the journalistic profession, as well as technological changes within the organisation.

According to Callon (1986, 201ff), *translation* is an important concept in ANT. He claims that researchers using ANT have to become part of an ongoing translation process. He outlines four phases of translation in ANT: 1) *Problematization*, which describes the forming of a system of alliances, or associations, that make the actors indispensable to the solving of a given problem; 2) *Interessements*, which describe how actors attempt to impose and stabilise the identity of other actors in accordance with the problematisation; 3) *Enrolment*, which is achieved if the interessement succeeds in attributing a set of interrelated roles to enrolled actors who accept them; and finally, 4) *Mobilisation*, which concerns whether the enrolled actors gain sufficient support from the collectives it represents. We translate our findings in relation to these four phases during our research on the online debate section at *Nordlys*.

## Data and Methods

The case study of *Nordnorsk debatt* is a continuation of a former and larger study of commentary journalism in six Norwegian regional newspapers, including *Nordlys*<sup>2</sup> (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2015, 2016). During our research period, *Nordlys* launched its innovation *Nordnorsk debatt*. We found this topic interesting as a further case analysis for several reasons. For example, it represents a content innovation within the commentary genre in periods of crisis and downsizing. Furthermore, it is relevant because of the stated objective to stimulate public debate. This article investigates how journalists perceive the loss of control when both technologies and users interact within the debate site.

Our empirical data consist of interviews with five columnists at *Nordlys*, including the chief editor, the editor of *Nordnorsk debatt* and three columnists. The informants were selected strategically, and together they constitute the entire staff working with *Nordnorsk debatt*. The interviews concentrate on three topics: 1) How the newsroom organises the work with commentary journalism, and how the *Nordnorsk debatt* website is organised, 2) how they deal with new technological opportunities and audience participation within this innovation, and 3) how they perceive the role of the debate website in the facilitation of public debate, both regionally and nationally. Consequently, our analysis is based on the perspectives of the editorial staff. We do not analyse the comment fields or the audience views and perspectives. This does not imply that we find the audience perspective irrelevant. Rather, it exceeds the scope of this study. However, we have observed traffic on the *Nordnorsk debatt* website, mainly identifying themes of the columns, and which type of article gain the most likes and shares.

## Findings and Discussion

In this section we will present our findings and discuss how user participation and the logic of professional control interact with technology. First, we will discuss the expanded possibilities of interaction between the audience and newsroom and the introduction of new arenas for public debate. Second, we will discuss the technology as an actor and explore the tension between human actors, professional norms and technology. Third, we will shed light on the role of *Nordlys* as a regional actor in the public debate, with the possibilities provided

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<sup>2</sup> In this part of the research, we conducted a content analysis, qualitative text analysis and interviews with 11 editors and columnists in six regional newspapers, including *Nordlys*. This was conducted in 2013/2014.

by the technology. In the end, we will discuss the dialogue, or the absence of dialogue, between audiences and actors in the newsroom. The discussions are all tied to the tension between control and participation, as well as the concept of power.

### Democratic Gains

*Nordlys* has a strong tradition of commentary journalism in print. With increased digitisation of the newspaper industry, this genre has been transferred online (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016). Hermida (2011, 14) believes that digitisation gives “myriads of possibilities for the readers to participate in the debate and to interact with the news or the publication”. The comment field, both in relation to columns and news, becomes a new platform for public debate; it offers readers and citizens new means by which to participate in the public sphere within the context of journalism (Graham 2013, 118). This also applies to *Nordlys*. The newspaper is convinced that digitisation gives its readers further possibilities to participate in a comment field (both in relation to columns and to news), on social media and by sharing columns. This finding contradicts former studies from both Sweden (Karlsson et al. 2015; Bergström & Wadbring 2015) and the United Kingdom (Williams et al. 2011). They conclude with resistance in the newsrooms to audience participation, and reveal that media organisations have become less eager to facilitate a public discourse. *Nordlys* is, even in 2014, eager to invite readers to its debate sites. The newspaper describes this facilitation in positive terms, highlighting the democratic values of a more diversified public debate. One of the informants states:

The more who participate in the public debate, the better it is. It is good for society, and also good for *Nordlys* (...) The reason why online opinion journalism is a success is that people like participating, and feel that their voice does count. It gives citizens an opportunity to participate in debates in a quite different way than before.

Another underscores:

We journalists have been sitting for decades in our ivory towers, and never cared about how many who read what we wrote, and never had the possibility to know it either. I mean, we do not write for each other, we write because we want people out there to read it (...) Moreover, I do not feel that we lose control. We had much less control before, when we did not have a clue whether people were interested or not.

In both of these quotations, the informants highlight the positive effects of increased participation. Journalism’s role within the public sphere is to fuel, encourage, facilitate and act as a platform for public debate (Graham 2013, 115). Our informants value the possibilities created by the fragmented public scene (Enjolras et al. 2013, 187ff), even if the audience breaks into the jurisdiction of the journalistic profession, and the power of gatekeeping has vanished (Singer 2014). This optimism on behalf of user-generated participation contradicts the findings in other studies regarding activity in the comment fields. Studies show that few users participate in the comment fields (Hargittai & Malejko 2008; Enjolras et al. 2013, 119; Staksrud et al. 2014; Bergström & Wadbring 2015; Karlsson et al. 2015, 302). An examination of attitudes towards reader comments in Swedish media

even shows that journalists are “less positive of the quality about the appearance of reader comments” and “more critical of the quality of comments than the average person” (Bergström & Wadbring 2015, 147). The journalists at *Nordlys* emphasise the democratisation of media access in a way that corresponds more with the description provided by Deuze and Fortunati (2011, 67):

Opening up the conversation society has with itself, as a way to get more voices heard in an otherwise rather hierarchical and exclusive public sphere.

In this process of “opening up the conversation”, one can see how digital technology has become an actor, together with readers and editorial staff in the media. Digital technology makes it possible for the editorial staff to create public comment fields and for readers to participate. The tension between professional control and open participation emphasised by Lewis (2012) does not seem to be perceived as very problematic by the columnists and editors at *Nordlys*.

### *Technology as an Actor*

The evolvement of the debate site *Nordnorsk debatt*, first in print and later online, indicates a characteristic of *Nordlys* as an innovative and change-oriented newsroom, which was also shown in a study by Ihlebæk et al. (2014). Staff constantly change their editorial routines and practices in order to meet the numerous possibilities offered by new technology and new participatory practices from the audience. The editorial staff applauds the chief editor for his willingness to navigate in new ways, even if not all the solutions are found to be effective. In this innovative and changing journalistic environment, we observe an interesting interaction and communication between humans and technologies. One can argue that technology is an independent actor in the newsroom (Latour 2005). One example of this is when the editorial staff create a new online comment field to improve the dialogue with their readers. The editor describes this situation:

Instead of putting the comments from Facebook below the article, we put them beside the article on the site. Our idea was that the readers could comment while reading the article, and we assumed that we would achieve a closer dialogue with our readers. That was my plan. But that’s not the way it works. The readers do comment on Facebook only. Our articles are shared on Facebook, followed by comments. On our website though, we have a large empty space next to the articles. We now have to rebuild our website.

Here, we observe the way technology interacts with users, which has prompted the editorial staff to change their editorial practice. The intention was to improve dialogue with the readers; they wanted the audience to comment while they were reading an article, and thus they created a space beside the columns for the audience debate. However, as the editor states, “That’s not the way it works”. Readers are used to communicating online and sharing and commenting on articles directly on Facebook, which they also did when *Nordlys* launched its new commentary site. The readers did not follow the guidelines mediated on the website. Instead, the technology offered other opportunities more in line with the users’

already established media practices. In this existing alliance between technology and users, *Nordlys* is unable to intervene. Thus, the editorial staff had to negotiate with both the technology and the readers, and rearrange its website once more in accordance with the already established media logic. This example also shows that new digital platforms demand new digital skills from media professionals.

Another example is how the same alliance between digital technology and user practice, particularly the utilisation of likes and shares, impacts how journalists change their way of presenting articles online. One of our informants refers to a column he wrote which gained low traffic numbers and was shared only twice the first day of publishing:

Then my good and clever tabloid friend created a new title and presented a different picture along with the article. The article reached more than 100 shares two days later. Presentation is incredibly important online. However, it is extremely difficult to know in advance what will work or not online.

This example shows that communicating online is risky, even if one has been a profiled columnist in the printed newspaper for decades, like this columnist. Küng (2015) has analysed the challenges of transforming traditional media organisations into digital news industries. One such challenge, she claims, quoted from the editor of *the New York Times*, is that "... print is in the blood of most of the journalists at the paper" (Küng 2015, 39). This is probably the challenge that our informant at *Nordlys* also discusses: the columnist is acting as he did in print when writing columns. However, online, media professionals have to align themselves with new technologies, and with the readers using them. They have to think "online" in all parts of the presentation, not least in finding a title that communicates well and is searchable.

Callon (1986, 201) argues that the first step in an analysis of the interaction between actors in a network is to translate and identify who the actors are, and how the actors become indispensable. Both examples quoted above show that the digital technology, together with readers and the editorial staff, must be identified as indispensable actors in the network formed within the digital newsroom of *Nordlys*.

The second step in Callon's analytic scheme is to identify the "interessements" and alliances among the actors (Callon 1986, 203). The human actors in the newsroom of *Nordlys* have to interact and form alliances with these digitised interessements, and change their practices in advance with this digital environment. In the first example, the newsroom has to change its website to re-establish a dialogue with its readers. In the second example, the columnists have to change their mode of presentation in order for their content to be shared or read by the public. In their interaction with technology, the readers gain control over the agenda through the likes and shares in a way the print media do not offer. *Nordlys* will prioritise the kind of columns and presentation of columns that gain the most shares and likes on Facebook. Our observation of the online traffic indicates that general issues of values gain the most shares and likes, not more specific local or regional matters.

Journalists also experience tension between their private and professional use of social media. Olsen (2014) interviewed journalists in local media about the tension between the private and professional use of social media. Privately, they use social media to communicate and share pictures and experiences with friends. Professionally, social media is primarily used for journalistic research and for communicating with readers. However, it is not easy to maintain a clear distinction between private and professional media practices

within the same digital logic, nor are the two practices unproblematic to combine. Our informants attempted to handle this dilemma by giving priority to professional practices. One of them states:

I experience that my Facebook account has moved from being private to being a professional work tool. Of course, it is still possible for me to put some private family pictures on Facebook, but I cannot perceive it as private any more. Partially, this is because I put articles on my Facebook, and because readers appear on my Facebook account when they share my columns. In that way, it is work. Our routine is first to put our columns on the *Nordnorsk debatt* website, then on our [i.e. the newspapers] Facebook account, then do some tweets and finally put it on my own Facebook account.

Again, one can see how digital technology and the design of digital platforms impact the strategies adopted by journalists. Social media, when first established, is a vital instrument for a newspaper to communicate with its readers. It means relinquishing control in order to maintain control. The columnists in this study do not consider this submission of control to be problematic. "If there is someone benefitting from Facebook and Twitter, it is the columnists", one of the informants claimed.

Callon's (1986, 205) third step in the ANT analysis is to define and coordinate the actor's enrolment in a given network. Even if the columnists at *Nordlys* seem to have accepted their new allocated and privileged roles in the newsroom, we want to present a final example of where one of our informants opposes the way their practice has evolved, or the way technology was *enrolled* in the newsroom. The example concerns their editorial moderating practice. This columnist claims that the new practice challenges the ethical standards within journalism:

I find it a huge disaster that newspapers allowed unedited utterances in our comment fields. I cannot understand why technology should change our editorial practices. The fact that something will be communicated on a digital platform can never change the ethics and what to expect as a minimum with regard to manners and morals. I cannot see the sense in that ethics have to change because technology changes. Nevertheless, that is what happens. Today, we allow opinions in our online comment field that we never would have published in print. This will weaken people's perception of quality. In my opinion, the newspaper should outdistance the blogosphere and all that shit out there.

The moderating practice has changed because of technological developments. Technology influences ethical decisions in the newsroom. In the quotation above, the informant protests the fact that technological power is about to change the editorial practice in relation to ethics. His concern is that technology has forced the newsroom to introduce a new standard of professional ethics that, in the long run, will destroy the credibility of journalism as a profession. However, his colleagues do not express the same concern for the changing moderation practices. For example, the chief editor claims the opposite:

We are not moderating all of the comments online. That is out of the question, and it is incredibly outdated. It is a delusion that some editors, with too large wallets, had

some years ago. It is not the premise online. The net doesn't work like that. It's as simple as that.

He finds it "incredibly outdated" to review all the comments online before publishing them, and accepts that new technology implies a new practice. Human actors within the newsroom make alliances with technology in different strategies. Most of the editorial staff seem to accept their *enrolment* in the new digital environment, even if one of them protests and finds it ethically unacceptable. Technology is stretching the borders for what is regarded as acceptable or not, and thus exerts an effect on professional judgements and discretion. In accordance with Callon's (1986) fourth analytical phase, the mobilisation of support from a collective, the chief editor speaks on behalf of the digitised debate section of *Nordlys*, perhaps in alliance with the digitised technology. The chief editor is the one who decides how the moderating practice should be performed, and most of his colleagues in the newsroom (the "collective") salute him for being innovative and forward thinking in relation to the new digital opportunities.

### *Strengthening the Regional Power*

The tension between control and participation not only concerns the relationship between technology, newsrooms and the audience. In the following, we discuss the tension between control and participation between regional and central positions. Furthermore, we explore how digitisation may empower regional actors in the national public debate.

The main themes in regional commentaries are national, not regional issues. Our previous research shows that 54 per cent of the columns focus on national issues, and 11 per cent about international ones. Only 35 per cent of the columns focus on regional or local issues<sup>3</sup> (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016, 73f). Regarding *Nordlys* in particular, the number of regional issues was slightly higher (41 per cent). Despite this, the commentators and editors in regional newsrooms find it difficult to influence the national public debate because of their position outside the capital. They describe the public debate as narrow, as "an exclusive club of national commentators" and "a wall which is impossible to climb over". According to regional columnists, the result is a public debate with a lack of important nuances, alternatives and perspectives, as well as a lack of counter-voices. Not least, they find that important issues from the different regions disappear from the public. However, they also find that digitisation increases their possibilities to impact, since geographical borders become less important. Through digital distribution and the likes and shares of the audience on Facebook, the regional columnists capture a more prominent and visible role in the national public debate (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2015).

How does the online commentary innovation of *Nordnorsk debatt* impact its role in the national debate? In this matter, our informants feel empowered on their own terms, more so than they do in print. Digitisation and social media abolish geographical borders, with one of them explaining:

The Internet, Facebook, social media have given us incredible opportunities (...) In columns, timing is overall important. The digitization gives us the same possibilities to

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<sup>3</sup> The content analysis consists of 1123 articles: 475 editorials and 648 columns in six regional newspapers during autumn 2013.

set the agenda as every other media company. That makes us more relevant on our own terms.

Another informant highlights the way in which digitisation abolishes the old challenges of the distribution of printed versions. Columns are shared on social media and reach a wide range of audience members. Given that online columns are available nationally immediately after they are published, postal time is no longer an issue. The digital technology removes old barriers – one loses control in relation to audiences and gains control compared to the national media actors. Digitisation changes the public sphere and creates new communicative spaces, which challenge the hegemony of the traditional national media. Consequently, one can argue that their aim of being a regional voice is strengthened, aiming to serve the interests of the northern region. Digital technology has lowered the huge walls and opened the door to the national debate arena for *Nordlys* and the regional columnists. Readers have the same access to regional debates as national ones.

However, one could also question the prioritisation of national issues. Being a regional newsroom, one could argue that the regional public and the regional debates and issues should be more vital for *Nordlys* than national ones. The local and regional media are legitimised through their local and regional role, bringing other views and perspectives than media in the capital. Becoming more like the national media might undermine their existence. Still, national and global issues also have regional perspectives; further, national decisions impact citizens in the regions.

### *Strengthening the Dialogue*

Digital technology increases the possibilities for citizens to participate in public, and it provides new opportunities for dialogue between newsrooms and their audience. A central question is whether the technology emerges as an actor that also strengthens the dialogue. Our informants appreciate the new possibility of participation as a positive democratic value, despite the loss of professional boundaries, and despite the rather pessimistic findings of journalists' critical attitude according to the value of user-generated participation in other studies (Bergström & Wadbring 2015). The question is how the journalists at *Nordlys* actually interact with the public. In our previous study, editors and columnists admitted that the dialogue was insufficient (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2016). We found that the possibilities of dialogue were not fully exploited. The chief editor of *Nordlys* admits that the dialogue with the audience has to be improved:

We talk about communication with our readers. It also happens sometimes that we actually do it, but there is no systematic work towards it, and it is characterized by volunteering.

The other informants confirm that they could have done a better job regarding dialogue. The explanations are related to time and resources:

Of course, some commentaries create so many reactions that it will be a full-time job to answer or discuss all the feedback and comments. That is a barrier for us. At the same time, I find it important to do that job and to be a part of that discussion, on

either Twitter or Facebook, and to answer both nice comments and not so nice comments.

Despite the time-consuming job, this informant finds the dialogue with the audience important. Nonetheless, the newsroom does not prioritise this task, nor do all the informants share this perception of how important the dialogue is. One of the informants claims that he does not have the “fitness” to communicate with the audience constantly. However, he actively intervenes in the comment field to correct any misunderstandings and incorrect facts addressed by the audience:

If someone writes that *Nordlys* is receiving press subsidies, I reply that *Nordlys* never has received press subsidies. If someone claims that I am a member of the Labour Party, I reply that I am not a member of any political party. I correct those kinds of facts. Nevertheless, I have neither the time nor the desire to dive into the septic tank of the comment fields.

This informant has made a choice to not participate in the dialogue in the comment fields or Facebook walls, and he justifies this viewpoint with ethical considerations. According to the ethical guidelines of the press, replies and contributions to the debate should not be accompanied by polemic editorial comments (Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press, 4.15)<sup>4</sup>. The informant finds that this paragraph also has some important democratic aspects, in which journalists with their agenda-setting power should not be allowed to utter the last word.

Thus far, some contrasting perceptions regarding the dialogue have appeared; some of the informants find it important, arguing that the newsroom has a great potential for improvement. Others point out ethical considerations and power: the journalist as a professional is given institutional authority and power, thereby making it a democratic failure to argue against his or her readers. After the column is published, the audience should be free to discuss and protest, they argue.

Graham (2013, 117f) has been investigating journalism and comment fields in the UK newspaper *The Guardian*. He concludes that, in his case, the idea that common fields open up a space for readers to debate with journalists is an illusion. Even if 17 per cent of the postings were specifically directed at journalists, the journalists posted only five responses. When the journalists responded, they did not engage in the debate, but rather provided additional information, in the same way as our informants from *Nordlys*. Furthermore, Graham (2013) describes how journalists and editors fear the quality of comments, labelling them as being offensive, untrustworthy and unrepresentative of the audience. This aligns with characteristics from the informants at *Nordlys* about the “septic comment field”, as a former quotation revealed. Based on this, one might question how real the culture of participation actually is.

Journalists generally salute the idea of a dialogue with the readers, even if it means that readers are moving into what has previously been the journalists’ domain. On the other hand, there appears to be no real dialogue. Journalists seem to be squeezed between the normative ideal of dialogue, which the technology and new platforms allow for or even require, as well as their own capacity and motivation to participate. Hence, they limit themselves to pointing out factual errors, in addition to facilitating and monitoring the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://presse.no/pfu/etiske-regler/vaer-varsom-plakaten/vvpl-engelsk/>

debate amongst readers. This does not mean that journalism is unaffected by the new network formed in the newsroom. *Nordlys'* own newly established comment field is empty, while the discussion continues on other platforms. Journalists have to produce their columns in new ways and share them through different platforms, such as Facebook, to facilitate readers' comments, likes and further shares. They even respond, only not in ways in which they risk being captured in dialogue on the readers' terms. However, the alliance between technology and the readers does have consequences. Journalists are forced to compromise, and they struggle to retain power over the actual journalism.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed how journalists at *Nordlys* perceive and meet the challenges when both audience and technology interact within the site. We find ANT to be a useful analytical tool to help identify and describe the relationships formed between technology, audiences and the newsroom.

Digital technology creates new public spheres where the audience can interact, intervene and participate. The audience gains access inside to what used to be the journalists' privileged domain; this challenges the journalists' traditional role as gatekeepers and agenda-setters. Some describe it as a power shift from newsrooms to audiences (Singer 2014). In the tension between control and participation, digital technology emerges as an actor that affects both the audiences and the practice of journalism. The journalists at *Nordlys* regard this as a positive development.

Digitisation forces editors and journalists to rebuild and change their websites in accordance with new communication practices in digital arenas. Audiences are empowered to impact the editorial agenda by utilities such as likes and shares. The newsroom has to prioritise the kind of columns that attract the most likes and shares. Even the journalists have to follow and participate in the debate in arenas other than their own. However, the dialogue seems to primarily take place between representatives of the audience, and not between audiences and the newsroom. The question is whether the journalists exclude themselves from the arenas they contribute towards creating.

On the other hand, this study reveals that digitisation strengthens regional voices in the national public debate, as new technologies surpass geographical borders. The fact that regional columnists gain easier access to national public debates may even strengthen the economic situation for regional media by making them more desirable to investors and advertisers.

In this way, digital technology becomes a powerful actor in the network of public media. Firstly, digitisation impacts the forms of journalistic presentation and public debates. Secondly, it contributes to the empowerment of audiences, as well as regional columnists and regional media at large. Regional media obtain better access to the national debate arena, whereas audiences achieve access to both the newsroom and the wider public.

Nonetheless, newsrooms have to negotiate with both technology and their readers, who use the new technology to change their media habits. The case study shows how *Nordlys* has changed its publishing practice as a result of Facebook virtually "stealing" its new digital arena for debate. The study also shows how journalists abstain from actively participating in dialogues with readers on the *Nordnorsk debatt* website. The question is whether digitisation will lead to the debate being moved from the newsrooms' websites into the fragmented arenas of Facebook and Twitter, or whether the editors will manage to

stabilise a network between themselves, readers and the new platforms. This will enable journalists to continue to set the conditions for the debate. These examples show that changes happen quickly, and they should be studied by researchers while they are occurring.

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