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Participation in an online social policy discussion: Arguments in focus

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates participation in digital agora through a case study analysing opinions as arguments. The material under scrutiny pertains to social policy: we explore nine comment threads from news sites following a news item on social policy research concerning social workers' opinions about the causes of poverty in four Nordic countries. The analysis concentrates on three argument types, all justifying the conclusion that Finnish social workers are rude. The argument types vary in terms of the obviousness of the link between justification and participants: The argument types of 'personal experience' and of 'irresponsibility of those claiming social assistance' display a rather clear link while the argument of 'national temperament' indicates less clearly who is participating. The analysis especially highlights the involvement of the most disadvantaged and the role of professional journalists. The arguments also refer to the discourses circulated, e.g. national stereotypes and the Nordic media discourse of blaming the social policy system while sympathising with the clients.

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1. Introduction

News site comment sections are communicative spaces in which opinions concerning socio-political topics—among others—are presented and justified in various ways. Recently, the quality of the justifications of the opinions shared on these sites has begun to attract attention. For instance, Finland's major newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, now invites comment thread participants to evaluate the other comments as well argued or not. In academia, a number of studies have investigated if engagement with news sites and other online spaces can be conceived as a reincarnation of the Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 2008 [1962]; Papacharissi, 2009). For instance, Dahlberg (2001), Graham and Witschge (2003) and Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) have explored whether equal and reciprocal deliberation with rational argumentation truly takes place in online spaces. However, Coleman and Moss (2012) criticise this line of research for its narrow-mindedness—they argue that it tends to reflect a researcher's preference for certain modes of civic talk over others. Hence, Zimmerman (2015) asserts that rather than seek out traces of deliberation, a more fruitful approach is to consider many present-day socio-political online discussions as indicative of a combination of deliberation and liberal individualism, with the latter being characterised by monologue, negative statements, self-expression, self-interest and storytelling (cf. also

Dahlberg, 2011). This is the type of communication under scrutiny in this paper. Adding a new perspective, this paper also discusses the impact of professional journalism on lay-participants' discussion and opinion-forming in socio-political online-discussions. We study the opinions presented in news site comment threads as argument schemes, and explore the implications of the selected arguments in terms of who is participating in the comment thread. In the discussion, we will interpret our results in the light of the discourses the arguments reflect and circulate as well as the potential role of professional journalism for their construction and for patterns of participation.

The material analysed consists of online discussions on a specific theme: the news coverage of a research study (Blomberg et al., 2010) relating to social policy; namely social workers' opinions on the causes of poverty in four Nordic countries. The publication of the research was a prominent news story in Finland as the results were widely reported by the Finnish press. Overall, the press popularised the results by claiming that Finnish social workers are more "rude" to their clients than their Nordic colleagues. The subject of the present study is the comment threads following nine news items on different sites, consisting of 456 comments altogether. We explore the opinions presented in this material as a whole and explore more specifically three argument types. In the argument analysis, we firstly examine what kinds of justifications are used to support the opinions: we identify both the opinion (conclusion) and its justification (premises), i.e. describe the argument scheme. Secondly, we analyse the arguments according to

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which social groups are likely responsible for expressing them, i.e. who is participating in the comment threads.

The study is built on three main concepts: argumentation, participation and discourse. The first one, argumentation, will be defined below in Section 2. In keeping with Carpentier's (2015) approach, we understand the second one, participation, as distinct from the concepts of access and interaction. Following Carpentier's access-interaction-participation (AIP) model, we consider that, in our material, what is at stake is minimal participation: the commenters not only have access to the news site comment thread in which they interact with others by producing, selecting and interpreting content, but they also participate in the news site comment thread. Their participation involves a dimension of power; while they may not actually influence decision-making processes, they can influence the public socio-political discussion on social policy and thereby affect the general (de)legitimation of welfare provision to the poor. Thirdly, in the manner of Gee (1999, p. 7), we understand discourse as referring both to language use overall and to a means of representing reality—the latter is particularly at stake in this study because we explore the different discourses as different perspectives on the world.

Previous research on arguments in online communication – in addition to the above mentioned ones on the public sphere – has focused especially on knowledge-construction forums. For instance, Jeong et al. (2010) study argumentation in online science learning environments. In addition, Weinberger et al. (2010) investigate the effect of online collaboration in learning argumentative skills among university students. With regard to opinion-presenting forums, Boltužić and Šnajder (2014) and Habernal and Gurevych (2016) investigate arguments from the perspective of computational argumentation mining. In the social sciences, opinions presented in digital discussions have been the subject of many studies (cf. e.g. Laihiala and Ohisalo, 2017). Further, linguists and discourse analysts have explored, from varied perspectives, the expression of opinion in digital environments (cf. e.g. Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015). To our knowledge, arguments in opinion-presenting forums have not yet been investigated from the point of view of participation. The notion of participation, however, has been largely explored in relation to online socio-political discussions (cf. e.g. Dynel and Chovanec, 2015; Johansson, 2014; Thornborrow, 2015). The objective of our research is, firstly, to increase understanding of the nature of opinion-based online argumentation. Secondly, we aim at exploring whether and how argument schemes can be used to identify the most likely participants in an online discussion. Finally, the study will also reveal important aspects of how welfare state services are discussed in the current digital agora.

2. Material and method

In December 2010, the Finnish media reported the publication of social policy research (Blomberg et al., 2010) concerning the opinions of social workers (gathered via survey) on the causes of poverty in the four Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The main findings of the study were that the majority of social workers in all four countries perceived social injustice to be the main cause of poverty. However, the results also indicated differences between the countries. In particular, the most important finding was that Finnish social workers leaned more heavily towards individual attributions as the cause of poverty than their colleagues in other Nordic countries. This latter finding is what attracted attention. The finding was popularised in the media who reported on it by using the word “rude” (in various forms) when referring to Finnish social workers' attitudes (cf. Section 3 below).

The material of the present study consists of the comment threads accompanying the news items reporting on this topic online, totalling 456 comments altogether. All of the comment threads are from the news sites of Finnish newspapers and tabloids. Among the newspapers, *Helsingin Sanomat* has the largest subscription and it can be considered the most important newspaper in the country. Other newspapers are more or less local. *Ilta-lehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are national tabloids. Table 1 represents the news sites included in the analysis and the number of comments in each comment thread.

Our basic unit of analysis is one comment. In the manner of Berlin et al. (2015), we consider a comment as a speech act, i.e. as a social act in context. In our material, the immediate context of a comment is the news item to which the comment is a reaction. Indeed, the piece of news has a central role in the participation pattern, i.e. the overall picture of who is participating, of the comment threads. Most of the comments in our material are follow-ups to the news item, rather than reactions to other comments. This type of communication represents the seemingly monological nature of liberal individualism as defined by Zimmerman (2015) (cf. also Section 1 above).

We concentrate on the opinions concerning the alleged rudeness of Finnish social workers. Therefore, we have excluded from our analysis both entire comment threads and some individual comments in which the opinion and/or its justification is difficult to detect or pertains to a different type of topic. Firstly, the entire comment threads excluded (on the sites of TV channel MTV3, the magazine *Kaksplus* and the local newspaper *Keskisuomalainen*, respectively) are highly interactional: in these three, the commenters engage in a discussion. As the commenters react and reply to each other's comments, the theme shifts far away from the rudeness of Finnish social workers. Secondly, in the comment threads included in our investigation, some of the comments are replies to other comments. However, if they do not present an opinion concerning the rudeness of Finnish social workers, these comments are categorised in the argument category ‘other’ (cf. next section), which is not the main subject of our analysis.

The main method of the study is the analysis of argument schemes. We will investigate in detail three argument types (namely personal experience (Section 3.1), irresponsibility of the clients (3.2) and national temperament (3.3)) in our material. The choice is based on high frequency, in the case of the first and the last, and the second type is an interesting example of the less frequent argument types—this particular one was chosen because of its complex implications with regard to possible thread participants. Our analysis follows van Eemeren et al. (1996) in that the arguments as justification schemes involve abstraction, i.e. meaning detachment from the context in which an argument occurs, and their presentation in a standard form, i.e. the identification and presentation of the premises and the conclusion, without, however, using logical constants in our description of the arguments. To do so, condensed versions of the sentences are created and these abbreviations are combined with linking words. The final step of abstraction mentioned by van Eemeren et al. (1996, pp. 9–10) is omitted in our study: we will not use logical constants in our description of the arguments.

As a method of abstraction of the arguments, we use the compendium of argument schemes presented by Walton et al. (2008). The compendium is characterised by the inclusion of arguments described by Walton et al. (2008) as defeasible, i.e. those that are not binding in the manner of deductive or inductive logic but which can be defeated even after the argument has been accepted if new evidence enters into consideration. According to Walton et al. (2008, pp. 1–2), such arguments need to be included in the study of argumentation schemes because of their wide use in real life situations, such as legal and ethical reasoning, let alone dif-

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