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A digital public sphere
Just in theory or a perceived reality for users of social network sites?

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Abstract

Social network sites (SNS) have the potential of providing new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation, and researchers, media and politicians often discuss them in those terms. Still, little attention is given to how ordinary users perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation. This study addresses this gap by investigating how SNS generally are perceived by the users as potential spaces for public deliberation and if this perception is conditioned by demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education, use of Twitter, and activity in SNS. The study draws on users of SNS in a nationally representative survey from Norway (N=1699). The results show significant differences in the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation according to both demographic characteristics and activity. More importantly, even if people are aware of SNS being portrayed as spaces for public deliberation, few are found to use them in such a way.

Keywords
Social network sites, social media, public sphere, public space, public deliberation

Introduction

In the decade that has passed since social media, and more particularly since social network sites (SNS) made their entry, researchers have discussed their potential to provide new and more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation (Neuman et al., 2011; Schäfer, 2015). Due to the architecture of the internet, the expectation was that all users could be equal, have the same access and possibility to take part and that this could have a democratising effect (Neuman et al., 2011; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Storsul, 2014). However, there is now a general understanding that SNS have not lived up to this potential (ibid.). Moreover, it is debated whether it is meaningful to discuss SNS as public spheres for reasons such as fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015), little and non-egalitarian active participation and the unclear impact of such participation (Dahlgren, 2013). Nonetheless, SNS are frequently discussed in terms of public impact, not only by researchers but also by politicians and the mainstream media. These discussions often centre around the derogatory tone and incivility that is seen to be a part of the debates on SNS (Rost et al., 2016) and reflect a concern about the negative impact this might have on public deliberation in general. Regardless of whether the SNS discourse is framed as constructive or destructive, the underlying premise is the same – that SNS are taken for granted as spaces for public deliberation, and as such, are taken seriously as public spaces. This article proposes that there is reason to question this premise, since *how* "ordinary users" actually perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation is mostly overlooked. Therefore, this study is concerned with the way these platforms are regarded, understood or interpreted in terms of societal relevance by its users. This study goes beyond the existing discussions about the role SNS have or should have in society, and instead, asks how the users perceive SNS as spaces accommodating public deliberation. Instead of exploring visions of what may or could be, this empirical study, using survey data, provides an overview and potential systematic differences in actual perceptions of SNS users by following two lines of inquiry.

The first research question is: *are SNS perceived by their users at all as spaces for public deliberation?* This question explores the perception of added value, importance and accessibility of SNS as spaces for deliberation. Furthermore, demographic characteristics provide us with insight into potential differences in this perception based on age, gender and education. Additionally, the use of Twitter is included, since the use of this platform is expected to influence the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The first line of inquiry is then twofold: there is the question of how users perceive SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and what influence demographic characteristics and the use of Twitter have on this perception.

The second research question is: *does the view on SNS as spaces for public deliberation correspond with the type of activity in these spaces?* Information about this can provide insight into *why* some participate while others do not, beyond the effect of the demographic characteristics explored in the first line of inquiry.

The study is conducted in Norway. Almost all Norwegians have access to the internet (medianorway, 2018), with four out of five Norwegians being users of SNS; the big platforms such as Facebook are used regardless of age and level of education (Statistics Norway, 2018). Norway makes a compelling case for this study, since the widespread and egalitarian use of SNS in combination with a society that is characterised by equal rights and freedom of speech (Freedom House, 2018; Reporters without borders, 2019), should provide the best possible scenario/backdrop for SNS to live up to their potential as spaces for public deliberation. However, in Norway, like other countries, harassment of, for example, politicians and minorities in SNS has provoked a general question whether these debates are a [worthy] contribution to public deliberation on important public issues. This has in turn sparked a national campaign for a "spring cleaning" of the online commentary fields (NOhate, 2019), drawing even further attention to this as a topic in the Norwegian public.

Theoretical perspectives

This study deals with SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which is intertwined with the notion of *the public sphere*. Commonly described, the public sphere is the space where people can interact; where public opinion is formed; where citizens deal with matters of general interest and express and articulate their views (Habermas, 1991). SNS have been pointed out as new public spheres, with potential for rational deliberation; the internet ostensibly provides an architecture in which all users are equal and may interact directly with one another (Neuman et al., 2011; Storsul, 2014). In these potential public spheres supported by online social media, participation is open and available to all who are interested, and discussion of common interests takes place through a process that is visible and accessible to all (Schäfer, 2015). Still, it has been found that the majority of users do not actively take part (Kushner, 2016; Malinen, 2015; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Sun et al., 2014; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009).

While some researchers follow this Habermasian concept of a unified public sphere, others believe that this internet-induced structural transformation is so radical that we ought to abandon such a concept (Webster, 2013), or at least that it cannot be the single approach (Dahlgren, 2005). One central characteristic of this structural transformation is fragmentation (Bruns & Highfield, 2015) – not a single type of fragmentation, but diverse types of public spheres (e.g., political or cultural): publics defined by their main medium of communication (e.g., Twittersphere), or temporary publics that emerge around a particular theme, issue or event, with all of them characterised by immediacy, with fast-moving timeframes that can fade away just as suddenly as they come into being (Ibid.). In other words, we are not talking about one digital public sphere, but instead, "networked microspheres" (Dahlgren, 2013).

Another central point in this discussion is that despite the fact that the internet and related technologies have created new public spaces for politically oriented conversation, the technology itself cannot transform this public space into a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). Papacharissi makes the distinction explicit by stating that public space is not the same as the public sphere: a virtual space enhances discussion, but a virtual sphere enhances democracy (ibid.). Therefore, public space is a public sphere only if the conversation can be interpreted as a contribution to a democratic society, and the question is whether new communication technology can foster democracy, promote rational discourse and also represent equally the diversity of different public spheres of different social players (Papacharissi, 2002). Moreover, Dahlgren (2013) argues that what he refers to as microspheres are disconnected from the traditional decision-making processes which govern society, and are thus unlikely to enhance democracy.

This study does not examine SNS contribution or connection to the decision-making processes, but instead, how SNS are perceived by the users to be a part of the public sphere by providing spaces for public deliberation. The examination of SNS as potential spaces for public deliberation needs to go beyond addressing these platforms as merely public spaces and instead look at how they are understood as potential public spheres, and as such, as spaces that are understood by users to have a democratic function. The terminology "space for public deliberation" is used in this study in an explorative manner, as it encompasses more than a space being understood as public (as compared to private), and should instead be seen as an indicator of a digital public sphere.

The impact of social networks

The aim of this study is to look at the user's perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which makes the way they experience these platforms essential. SNS are described by boyd[1] and Ellison (2007) as networked publics, "publics that are restructured by networked technologies". As such, they are simultaneously "(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (boyd, 2010, p. 39). The second part of this definition is central, as this study questions what kind of collective the users imagine being part of when they log on to SNS. Do they understand SNS as spaces for publicly oriented conversations, or do they imagine them to be something unrelated to such notions of the public? There are fuzzy boundaries in SNS, as users move back and forth between unevenly distributed levels of personal and public topics. The expectation is that this perception will differ from one user to another, as it is shaped not only by the architecture and affordances of social media, but additionally by people's social contexts, identities, and practices (Baym & boyd, 2012). These spaces based on communication and everyday use are of different sizes that overlap and interconnect (Keane, 1991). Therefore, the assumption is that a user who predominantly connects with close friends through

personal topics and private chats will probably have a different perception of SNS than users who take part in debating news and politics on these platforms, and who are part of a digital network of friends that also do so (Lampe et al., 2008). Moreover, the user's practice and personal experience of these spaces are likely to be linked with how they, in general, perceive the role of these platforms, the societal function of these sites, and how they ought to be used. To sum up: the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is likely to be shaped by user practices and the type of online network the user is involved in (Baym & boyd, 2012).

Three conditions for SNS as spaces for public deliberation

By adhering to the argument that public space is not the same as a public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002), "the publicness" of SNS needs to be problematised rather than assumed. Indeed, SNS do provide a public space, but for these spaces to be perceived as spaces for public deliberation, one could argue that they also need to be spaces where people's ideas, conversations and minds meet. This argument goes beyond the idea of what public versus private space is and requires the consideration of an additional democratic perspective. The perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is therefore divided into the following conditions in this study: 1) SNS cannot be seen as private; 2) the quality of deliberation must be considered to have some added value; and 3) SNS must be considered as spaces where public deliberation is understood to – and does – take place.

   The privacy issues regarding these spaces involve both how social network sites are perceived in a more general manner, and more specifically, the individual's perspective on SNS for personal use. Some users are found to be more concerned about privacy and feel less at ease when participating and thus more restrictive in their posting behaviour (Burkell et al., 2014; Fenigstein et al., 1975; Snyder, 1974). While this study concerns itself with the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and not directly with users' underlying posting behaviour, it is likely that this perception is influenced by the level of privacy in use. Moreover, with such unclear boundaries between public and private (Burkell et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2015), SNS has been described as private spaces where users engage in "privately public conversations" – not behind closed doors, nor in full view of the public (Papacharissi, 2015). In addition, we have an unknown audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011) that may just be our friends, but can also be wider circles of people unknown to us, meaning that what we think we say to a select few is also a public opinion of sorts, with potential, if nothing else, to reach many people (Hermida, 2014). Such unclear boundaries between private and public will not only relate to the audience, but also to the kind of topics that are raised and, furthermore, the way these are discussed. Therefore, participants in this study are asked how they make sense of SNS. Are they indeed seen as primarily social and mostly connected to interaction with groups of friends, or are they seen as arenas where information and communication are part of the

wider public deliberation? This understanding is mapped using statements concerning whether the user predominantly chats in closed groups or private chats, and if they consider what is posted in open forums to be part of a wider debate or simply an exchange between friends.[2]

The *value of the debates* in social network sites is frequently discussed. The online exchange is often criticised for its robust tone, and it has been suggested that the participants are more interested in shouting at each other than engaging with substantive ideas (Hermida, 2014, pp. 41-42). The dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity and lack of cues are some of the aspects found in online communication, which foster deindividuation, as described in *SIDE-theory* (Joinson, 1998; Walther, 2011), and what is known as *the online disinhibition effect* (Suler, 2005). Such explanations for the more aggressive debate-climate on SNS suggests that users are able to detach themselves from their online behaviour and take less responsibility for one's actions (ibid.), thus promoting a behaviour that is both antisocial and contagious (Brown, 2000, pp. 10-11). It has been argued that even if SNS do not cause someone to be rude or make derogatory comments, they have made such attitudes more transparent than before (Hermida, 2014, pp. 42-43). When people take social cues from others, this kind of behaviour can spread, insofar as observing derogatory remarks may make it more acceptable to be rude and offensive (ibid.). Various studies recognise the presence of comments that display disagreement with the views of others, both denying and disrespecting these opposing views (Hwang et al., 2018; Ruiz et al., 2010). Such incivility is argued to be a matter for concern, since it harms democratic values and favours polarisation (Anderson et al., 2014). Following this line of thought, participants in this study are asked to evaluate the content or debates in SNS, where the assumption is that the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation will have a positive correlation with the evaluation of the content in the very same space. To put it another way, if the content is perceived to consist mainly of incivility or nonsense, it is unlikely to be considered as a valuable space for public deliberation, regardless of whether this view comes from direct personal experience or from the general way mainstream media or society discuss these spaces.

The last dimension is the *understanding of SNS as spaces where the public deliberation is supposed to – and does – take place,* which is concerned with what the participants expect of the function of SNS from a societal perspective. The question is if the users' understanding of SNS is predominantly about everyday social interaction with friends and where public information, news and debates do not belong, or on the contrary, as a public space where such deliberation should take place, or somewhere in-between. One would expect such an understanding to be related to the specific platform, and therefore Twitter and Facebook are both considered, since they are arguably the platforms most relevant as potential spaces for public deliberation, albeit for different uses. Twitter is highly associated with sharing opinions and information (Hughes et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2010), and is broadly found to be a platform where people check, share and comment on

the news (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). With Facebook, however, most users log on to interact with friends; very little of public concern is shared and half of the users do not even want news to be part of their newsfeed (ibid.).

Another critical difference between the two is that, unlike Facebook, Twitter predominantly consists of communication practices that are public, meaning that posts are visible to every user by default and that the system of "hashtags" and "mentions" allows the creation of audiences around specific discussions regardless of group creation (Colleoni et al., 2014). The two platforms are in general perceived differently; Facebook is primarily seen as social, while Twitter is seen more as a public space (see Marwick & boyd, 2011 for further info). The participants in the survey were asked to evaluate SNS as spaces for public deliberation based on their perception of the function they understand them to have from a societal perspective. These questions relate to the feeling of how users could or "ought" to take part in public debates happening on SNS, rather than their actual participation in these spaces. We asked in such a way since democratic ideals are often vague or implicit (Kweit & Kweit, 1981), and consequently understood in abstract terms that tend to evoke affective rather than a cognitive response from individuals (Moynihan, 2003). However, in the second part of the analysis in this study, the perception of SNS spaces for public deliberation and actual activity in SNS are both used in the analysis.

Method

Two research questions guide this analysis: (1) are social network sites (SNS) perceived as spaces for public deliberation by their users?, and (2) does their view on SNS as such correspond with activity on social network sites?

Participants and data collection

An online survey was chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection for this exploratory design for two reasons. First, the research question called for quantitative data to provide an overview and look for systematic differences, and second, because the target group are users of social media, which means that they are all users of the internet.

The data originates from an online panel with 1,699 participants[3] that was conducted as part of the MeCIn Public connection project in the fall/winter 2017 (Hovden & Moe, 2017; Nærland, 2018; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018) and that addresses Norwegians' public connection (Couldry et al., 2007) in Norway. The sample is overall statistically representative of the Norwegian population according to three demographic properties; age, gender and education. The mean age is 51 years (min. 18, max. 89), 48 pct. of the participants are female, and 45 pct. has a degree from University (3 years or more). When it comes to age and education, our sample is a little skewed towards the higher age groups and a higher education level than the average population (SSB, 2017) – the analyses are weighted to rectify this. The 1,699 informants that are included in this study are all weekly or more

frequent users of SNS, which is 82 pct. of the total sample from the online panel. Out of these 1,699 participants, 94 pct. report to be users of Facebook and 16 pct. are users of Twitter. Less than 1 pct. use Twitter without also using Facebook.

Measurements and method

The participants were presented with eight statements about *SNS as spaces for public deliberation*[4] and asked to assess them on the following scale: 0 = not correct, 1 = do not know, 2 = somewhat correct, 3 = correct. Such a scale was used to allow the respondents to choose the option that best supports their perception.[5] These statements address the three conditions for the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation: *the societal role of the platform, the notion of private versus public, and the perceived value of the content* (see Table 1).

SNS-activity was measured by how often users reported doing ten different activities in SNS (see Table 1). The informants were asked to answer on a five-point scale: several times a day, Daily, Weekly, Rarely, Never. Every activity that was reported to be weekly or more frequent was counted as a "yes", while less frequent activities were counted as "no" (dichotomised variables). The activities were then split into two categories which are used as index variables in the analysis, each with the possible values ranging from 0 (none) to 5 (all) according to the number of reported activities: *Public SNS activity* (alpha 0.89) which contain types of activities related to public deliberation, and *Social SNS activity* (alpha 0.61) which are more private or related to socialising (see Table 2).

Demographic characteristics (age, gender and level of education) were included, as they are found to be differentiating factors related to political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011), general public participation (Morrell, 2003), and SNS-participation (Song et al., 2017).

Use of Twitter was also included as a variable since we know that this platform (as earlier discussed) is associated with sharing opinions and information (Hughes et al., 2012; Kwak et al., 2010).

Exploratory hierarchical multiple (OLS) regression models are used to explore each of the statements measuring "perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation" as dependent variables. For every statement, the first model uses demographic variables and the use of Twitter as predictors of perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. In the second model, activity in SNS, both public and social, are added as predictors.

Analyses

Are SNS perceived as spaces for public deliberation by their users?

When it comes to the idea of public versus private, only one-third of the participants consider what is posted in social network sites to be public. When half the participants post things, they predominantly understand this as communication with their closed circle of friends and not as an exchange of opinion happening in the wider public sphere. It is also

worth noting that 16 pct. is unsure whether they think posting in SNS is public communication or not. This unclear boundary when it comes to what is considered private and public, therefore, seems to be part of a general contradiction between users supporting the idea of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, but still considering their own SNS activity to be happening in private spaces.

One of the conditions for perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation and part of the public sphere is that these spaces must be considered as public, and used as such. However, only one quarter reported not communicating in closed groups or private chats, which is further supported by two-thirds saying that SNS might be spaces for public debate, but are not used as such by themselves and their circle of friends, also indicating the extent to which their friends are taking part in public debates in SNS.

Over a third (41 pct.) think that debates in SNS are not as important as public debates taking place elsewhere, and just as many (42 pct.) think that it is not important to take part in the debates happening here. The view on whether or not public debates belong on SNS is thus quite divided. However, there is a majority that think that it is positive

Table 1: Statements about SNS as spaces for public deliberation.

Perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation	Correct	Some-what correct	Do not know	Not correct
SNS as spaces where public deliberation is understood to take place:				
1. Debates on social network sites are equally important to public debates taking place elsewhere.	7 %	42 %	10 %	41 %
2. It is important to partake in debates on social network sites if one disagrees or can contribute with a new perspective.	7 %	36 %	15 %	42 %
3. Debates about important social issues belong on social network sites.	14 %	35 %	13 %	38 %
4. It is positive that social network sites make it easy to partake in public debates.	18 %	51 %	12 %	19 %
Private versus public:				
5. What I and others write on social network sites is expressed privately and not part of any public debates.	15 %	37 %	16 %	32 %
6. Most of what I post in SNS happens in closed groups or as part of private chats.	35 %	33 %	9 %	23 %
7. SNS might be a place for public debates, but not used as such by my friends and me.	26 %	38 %	11 %	25 %
Added value of SNS deliberation:				
8. Most of the debates on social network sites are of little value.	28 %	45 %	11 %	16 %

Note: N=1,699.

Table 2: SNS activity indexes. Descriptive statistics.

Activities in each index, 0-5:	alpha	mean	Std. Dev.
Public SNS activity index includes: 1. Write posts about society or politics / 2. Start debates/discussion threads/ 3. Participate in debates / 4. Post links to news about society or politics / 5. Comment on news posts about society or politics	.89	.31	.84
Social SNS activity index includes: 1. Write "everyday" status update, post photos / 2. Find out what happens among friends / 3. Finding out about cultural activities / 4. Create events and send out invitations / 5. Participate in groups related to myself, or children's social life	.61	1.80	1.09

Note: Composition of "SNS activity indexes" (public and social), N=1,699.

that SNS make it easier to participate in the public debate (69 pct. correct/somewhat correct). Therefore, even if SNS are overall not considered to be spaces where delibera-tion on important issues takes place or where it is important to participate, it is generally acknowledged that SNS can be an accessible way to participate for those who wish to do so. Still, most users (84 pct.) think that the debates occurring on SNS are of little societal value.

The results suggest that SNS, due to the current level of debate, are not generally seen as beneficial spaces for public deliberation, but that most people seem to be open to their potential for other uses. Along these lines, it also seems that the blurred lines between public and private might stem from a user's perception of these platforms being used for public deliberation by others, yet not using them in such a way themselves. These results can indicate that we might be dealing with a gap between how SNS are discussed by researchers, media and politicians, as spaces for public deliberation and used as such by a "selected few", and how they are perceived by the majority of users who use these plat-forms as a part of their everyday life and who observe very little of these debates.

What influences users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation?
Two questions are proposed in this study: 1) if the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is related to demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of edu-cation and the use of Twitter, and 2) if this perception also is related to activity in SNS. To answer these questions, hierarchical multiple regression models with three types of predictors (demographics, use of Twitter and SNS-activity) was used for each of the eight "perception of SNS statements".

The first model explores the *demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, level of education in addition to the use of Twitter*'s ability to predict the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation (Model 1, Table 3).

Some distinctive differences associated with *age* are detected. Older people more often express that it is important to take part in debates on SNS and that the debates here are of value. Nevertheless, they also perceive that expressions on SNS are private, and do not use

Table 3: Demographic background, use of Twitter and SNS-activity's ability to predict the eight different indicators of perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation.

Debates on SNS is equally important	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.002	-0.001
male	-0.075**	-0.068**
higher education	-0.103***	-0.107***
twitter	0.065**	0.028
public participation SNS b		0.199***
social participation SNS c		0.113***
N	1647	1647
R-sq	0.018	0.081
adj. R-sq	0.02	0.08

It is important to take part in debates on SNS	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	0.067**	0.065**
male	-0.004	-0.001
higher education	-0.042	-0.044
twitter	0.115***	0.065**
public participation SNS b		0.293***
social participation SNS c		0.112***
N	1642	1642
R-sq	0.019	0.131
adj. R-sq	0.02	0.13

Public debates do not belong on SNS	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.008	-0.008
male	0.055*	0.051*
higher education	0.057*	0.059*
twitter	-0.088***	-0.067**
public participation SNS b		-0.121***
social participation SNS c		-0.060*
N	1646	1646
R-sq	0.012	0.034
adj. R-sq	0.01	0.03

SNS makes it easy to take part in public debates	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.006	-0.006
male	0.016	0.021
higher education	-0.035	-0.039
twitter	0.085***	0.055*
public participation SNS b		0.170***
social participation SNS c		0.091***
N	1645	1645
R-sq	0.009	0.053
adj. R-sq	0.01	0.05

Debates on SNS are of little value	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.081***	-0.082***
male	0.177***	0.174***
higher education	0.136***	0.138***
twitter	-0.056*	-0.047
public participation SNS b		-0.049
social participation SNS c		-0.035
N	1647	1647
R-sq	0.057	0.061
adj. R-sq	0.05	0.06

Expressions are private, not public	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	0.194***	0.199***
male	-0.008	-0.002
higher education	-0.063*	-0.067**
twitter	-0.038	-0.029
public participation SNS b		-0.074**
social participation SNS c		0.030
N	1647	1647
R-sq	0.049	0.054
adj. R-sq	0.05	0.05

Use mostly closed groups or private chats	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.185***	-0.176***
male	-0.113***	-0.103***
higher education	0.096***	0.088***
twitter	-0.041	-0.020
public participation SNS b		-0.160***
social participation SNS c		0.038
N	1641	1641
R-sq	0.064	0.087
adj. R-sq	0.06	0.08

Not how my friends and I use SNS	Model 1	Model 2
age group a	-0.094***	-0.086***
male	-0.021	-0.016
higher education	0.062*	0.057*
twitter	-0.028	0.002
public participation SNS b		-0.205***
social participation SNS c		-0.015
N	1644	1644
R-sq	0.015	0.058
adj. R-sq	0.01	0.05

*Note: N= 1,699. Exploratory hierarchical OLS regression analyses. Standardised beta coefficients; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001; a age group = ordinal (7 cat), b public participation SNS = index 0-5 (5= highest), c social participation SNS = index 0-5 (5= highest). Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity.*

SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Thus, there seems to be a discrepancy between how the older age groups think about SNS as spaces for public debate and what they experience in their own use. The younger age groups, on the other hand, are more critical of the value of the debates in SNS and report to post mostly in chats or private groups.

When it comes to *gender*, men are not only more likely to find the debates on SNS less important than debates happening elsewhere, but also that public debates do not belong on SNS, and that the ongoing debates are of little value. Thus, in general, men can be said to be more negative regarding the societal function for SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Women, on the other hand, are inclined to be more positive, but still post mostly in closed groups or private chats.

Moreover, *education* is shown to be significantly related to the perception of SNS, and those with higher education are found to generally be more sceptical to SNS as suitable spaces for public deliberation. Users with higher education do not find the debates happening here equally important, and also that these debates are of little value. Besides, they report posting mostly in chats or private groups. Even if those with higher education understand posts in SNS to be public rather than private, and understand them as spaces for public deliberation, they nevertheless tend to use SNS less in such a way.

The *use of Twitter*, as expected, has a significant positive relationship with the perception of debates in SNS being important, that it is important to take part, and that it is good that SNS makes it easier to take part in public debate. The use of Twitter also has a negative relationship with the view that the debates in SNS are of little value. Twitter is, as expected, associated with perceiving SNS as beneficial spaces for public deliberation.

What we then find is that perceptions of SNS as spaces for public deliberation is related to demographic factors and the use of Twitter. In short, the younger age groups, men and those with higher education are more critical of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The opposite is the case for users of Twitter, as they are more likely to have a more positive perception of SNS in terms of them being spaces for public deliberation.

Does activity influence the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation?
In the next line of inquiry (Model 2, Table 3), the relationship between the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation and activity is to be explored. SNS-activity was divided into *social* and *public* activity (see Table 2), and these two types of activities are found to have a small, but significant, correlation (.316) (Spearman, 1904). In this study, social activities are much more frequent than public activities: While less than 14 pct. engage in activity that is here considered to be a public way, two-thirds report taking part in social activities. Still, some of the social activity–items included can be said to require less effort (e.g., find out), which might attribute to the difference in frequency between the two modes of activities that we observe here. In this step in the regression models I explore the ability of *public* and *social activities* to predict the perception of SNS as public spaces after controlling for the influence of the earlier discussed democratic characteristics (age, gender, and education) and the use of Twitter.

Activity is, in general, a strong predictor for perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Moreover, engaging in public activity in SNS has a significant positive relationship with the perception that debates in SNS are important, that it is important to take part in these debates, and that it is good that SNS facilitates this. Furthermore, those who engage in public types of activities are more inclined to perceive that public debates do belonging on SNS, that what is expressed on SNS is not private. They also post less in chats or private groups and use SNS in ways considered less private. In short, the more one is active in SNS, in what is here categorised as a publicly oriented, the more it is not just more likely that one perceives SNS as a space for public debate, but also that one disagrees with the statements about SNS being a private space rather than a public one. Engaging in social activities, on the other hand, also predicts support for statements that describe SNS as favourable spaces for public deliberation but differs with a more unclear view of SNS being private or public. It could be understood as those who are active in ways that are here categorised as socially oriented, do see the value of SNS as spaces for public deliberation but are more uncertain about the distinction between what is private and public in these spaces.

Discussion

This article started by questioning the taken-for-granted quality of SNS as actual spaces for public deliberation since the perception of ordinary users of these spaces is mainly

overlooked. The findings indicate that users are familiar with SNS being discussed as spaces for public deliberation, and yet their own use and experience of these spaces neither seem to be characterised by that type of use, nor do they necessarily observe much public deliberation among their friends. Such perceptions are not only influenced by SNS-activity in general and the kind of activity, but also by demographic characteristics and use of Twitter.

Blurry boundaries between private and public

The respondents were asked if they perceive what they and others write on SNS as public or private. Some years back, Burkell et al. (2014) found that Facebook users considered what they wrote in online social spaces as public rather than private revelations, thus viewing and treating these spaces as public venues. By contrast, this study finds less evidence of that, and instead, more uncertainty: half the respondents perceive what they write on SNS to be private communication. This applies especially to the older age group, and an additional 16 pct. answers that they are unsure. The uncertainty might be attributed to SNS changing over time, where at least in the Norwegian setting, chat functions have now become an important part of social media use (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018). However, a low correlation between understanding expressions to be private and mostly communicating via chats indicates that this is only part of the explanation. In that sense, these finding are somehow unclear, as we cannot be sure of what kind of posts the respondents had in mind when answering, but it is, however, clear that the aspect of privacy is an important one, thus supporting Burkell et al.'s (2014) argument that the line between private and public seems to be quite blurry for users of social media.

Debates belong in SNS, but the use of SNS is not directed towards deliberation

This study finds an overall low regard for the value of deliberation on SNS, but neverthe-less that debates about important issues are understood to belong here. The users, like researchers, appear to be aware of the potential of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, but this potential might be prevented from being realised by the low opinion of the worth of the current debates on SNS. That few feel they ought to take part and voice their opinion on SNS, furthermore, indicates a lack of affective response (Moynihan, 2003) to SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Parallels can be drawn to worthwhileness, a concept that suggests why some news media and not others are chosen to be part of one's media repertoire (Schrøder, 2015). The opinion that the debates in SNS are of little value would make it unlikely that users find it worthwhile to participate in these debates, but would also elicit less feeling that one "ought to participate" in these debates. There is not, however, a symmetric relationship between worthwhileness and feeling of duty. If we use the case of voting as an example, it is normatively seen as a civic duty, even when we know that no single vote will alter the outcome (Jones & Hudson, 2000). For the case of the perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, the findings point to a lack of

normative expectations and varying understandings of citizen rights and obligations on these platforms, thus underpinning the idea that these are not generally taken seriously as spaces for public deliberation. Nonetheless, the various platforms are perceived differently, as previously found (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011), and the use of Twitter is in this study found to have a positive association with perception of SNS being positive spaces for public deliberation.

Level of attention is more important than then demographic differences
In this study, the findings show that there are demographic differences with respect to perceiving deliberation on SNS to be of value and important to take part in. Nevertheless, this becomes a hypothetical view of sorts; our respondents see SNS as spaces for deliberation utilised by "others", as they neither tend to be active, nor see much activity among their own friends' networks either. While there is a difference between the older and younger generations, between males and females, and between different education levels when it comes to the perception of SNS as spaces for deliberation, the common denominator is that their everyday experience is characterised by such debate to a very small extent, if at all.

What is found, however, is that SNS-activity, both public and socially oriented, generally have a positive relationship with perceiving SNS as spaces for public deliberation. Out of the factors considered in this study, SNS-activity explains most of the variation. This suggests that it is not the exact type of action that counts, but instead, that activity is an indicator of being present and paying attention to what is going on in these spaces. This is supported by earlier research findings that level of engagement and attention is a relevant factor for online participation (Dahlberg, 2001).

Limitations

This study used a survey with statements to map users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation, which has some limitations. First, more statements should ideally have been included to get a more comprehensive picture, as there is always the potential for a blind spot when using quantitative methods. Besides, the three conditions for SNS to be perceived as spaces for public deliberation were not equally mapped, as the added *value of SNS deliberation* is covered with a single statement.

Second, the multitude of spaces where deliberation can occur within the different SNS platforms are not taken into account. Newspaper comment sections are, for example, distinctly different from posts by friends that appear on one's feed, or perhaps in a closed group. This study falls short of exploring the contextual side of understanding SNS as spaces for public deliberation, and further studies are needed to gain further insight into this.

Conclusion

This study set out with the intention of getting an understanding of "ordinary" users' perception of SNS as spaces for public deliberation. The idea of public versus the private, the value of current content on SNS and the evaluation of SNS as a platform was used as the underlying structure for analysis.

The study uncovered a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to users' understanding of SNS as public or private. Moreover, deliberation on SNS are perceived to have little value, which both comes from the evaluation of the current debates in SNS, but is also shaped by the general perception of SNS as spaces for deliberation. By asking users to provide us with information, we found that SNS are perceived less as spaces for public deliberation and instead are mostly used for social or private use. This raises the point that perhaps only certain users will see the public debate happening in these spaces, and even if people know that such deliberation exists, it is not equally accessible to all users. What we find, then, is that the theoretical discussions and the expectations we might have of SNS as spaces for public deliberation are quite far from what ordinary users experience. Such a discrepancy between how SNS theoretically should or ought to work as spaces for public deliberation and what users perceive is important to understand more deeply, not only by researchers who are already debating this but also by media, politicians and those few who are active debaters. The results of this study imply that we portray SNS as spaces for public deliberation but that for most users, they are not.

Notes

1   Intentionally lower case.
2   No distinction is made between SNS on websites and apps.
3   MeCIn Public connection survey (late 2017), is a nationally representative web panel of Norwegian citizens over 18 years of age. The total number of participants in the online panel was 2,064 (https://www.uib.no/en/project/mecin).
4   Given that the word "deliberation" [deliberasjon] is not commonly used and is less known, the word "debate" [debatt] was used in the survey.
5   Ideally this scale should have more alternatives, but it was reduced to four, allowing for better functionality for those respondents who answered the survey using smartphones (estimated to be 50 pct.).

Appendix: Attitudes to social network sites versus selected background variables. Correlations.

	SNS public activity[b]	SNS social activity[c]	age group[a]	male	higher education	Twitter
1. Debates on social network sites are equally important to public debates taking place elsewhere.	0.23*	0.16*	0.01	-0.06*	-0.10*	0.05*
2. It is important to partake in debates on social network sites if one disagrees or can contribute with a new perspective.	0.34*	0.18*	0.07*	0.01	-0.05	0.11*
3. Debates about important social issues belong on social network sites.	0.15*	0.12*	0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.08*
4. It is positive that social network sites make it easy to partake in public debates.	0.21*	0.13*	-0.01	0.03	-0.03	0.09*
5. What I and others write on social network sites is expressed privately and not part of any public debates.	-0.06*	-0.05	-0.10*	0.16*	0.14*	-0.02
6. Most of what I post in SNS happens in closed groups or as part of private chats.	-0.06*	-0.02	0.21*	-0.01	-0.10*	-0.06*
7. SNS might be a place for public debates, but not used as such by my friends and me.	-0.17*	0.03	-0.20*	-0.12*	0.13*	-0.04
8. Most of the debates on social network sites are of little value.	-0.21*	-0.05*	-0.10*	-0.03	0.08*	-0.02

*Note: N= 1,699. Pairwise correlation, Pearsons R; * p<0.05; [a] age group = ordinal (7 cat),
[b] SNS public activity = index 0-5 (5= highest), [c] SNS social activity = index 0-5 (5= highest).*

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