From Playground to Salon: Challenges in Designing a System for Online Public Debate

Full Paper

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ABSTRACT

This article brings together two separate strands of media research: Online comments and media design. Online comments have long been a topic of much concern, both among scholars and the public at large, fearing negative effects from phenomena such as echo chambers, filter bubbles and hate speech. This paper reports on a project by the Danish public service broadcaster Danmarks Radio, aiming to develop a system for online comments in line with the broadcaster's public service ideals. Through interviews and observations, I explore the challenges encountered by the project team as an empirical case study of cross-disciplinary design work intersecting the fields of design, journalism and new media. I discuss the challenges encountered by the project team in light of Domingo's model of audience participation, suggesting that the broadcaster's strategy represents a development from the "playgrounds" model to a "salon" model. Building on Löwgren and Reimer's work on collaborative media, I suggest some of the broadcaster's struggles point to a lack of adequate methods for balancing interaction design concerns with the concerns of mass communication and journalism.[1]

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI**

KEYWORDS

Media design, experience design, journalism, online comments, public debate

1 INTRODUCTION

Reader comments on mass media websites have long been a topic of contention both among media professionals, scholars and the public at large [35]. Studies have addressed problem behaviour and risks such as the "echo chamber" effect and polarization [37], "flaming" [20], "trolling" [8], sexual harassment [2] and hate speech [11], as well as editorial strategies for dealing with reader comments [22]. In the Nordic countries, these controversies were heightened by the 2011 terror attack in Norway, which was accompanied by a "compendium" of anti-Islamic texts largely copied from online forums [17]. Recent political events such as the "Brexit" referendum in the UK and the 2016 US presidential elections have raised these issues high on the international public's agenda, even featuring as an important theme in US president Barack Obama's 2017 farewell address [30].

These issues pose challenges for media professionals aiming to develop new systems for online comments and debate. They also present an interesting question for design: How can one design better debate systems? In recent years, design scholars have presented design approaches which go beyond issues of usability and task accomplishment, to instead focus on enjoyment [3], emotions [29], experience [27], ambiguity [14] and other aesthetic or hedonistic concerns, sometimes referred to as "third wave HCI" [4,15] or recently "humanistic HCI" [1]. However, as pointed out by Löwgren and Reimer [24], approaches founded in interaction design and HCI seem to come up short when approaching the highly participatory mass media applications that dominate the contemporary web – such as social media, discussion platforms and systems for online comments. Löwgren and Reimer call these systems "collaborative media" [23], and suggest that the design of such media should be approached from a perspective that combines interaction design with media and communication studies: "This implies that the academic discipline of *media and communication studies* becomes a core part of producing knowledge on collaborative media. […] media and communication studies need to embrace an interventionist stance in order to produce meaningful and relevant knowledge" [24:98–99]. Other media scholars have put forward similar arguments suggesting concepts such as "media design" [18,25,26], "communication design" [21,28,36] and "aesthetic design" [6]. If such approaches (in the words of one of their most prominent proponents, Jay Bolter) carry the ambition to "bridge the apparent gulf between academic theory and new media practice" [5:30], then the design of interactive systems for news media should be a promising testing ground. After all, news media and journalism have always been a core interest of media and communication studies. Given the strong societal interest in issues surrounding online debate in recent years, one might expect that creating better systems for online comments would be a welcome challenge for media scholar/designers. However, research on online comments

for news media has been dominated by theoretical and empirical studies of existing systems and their use, and relatively few studies focusing on the design of new systems for online comments. On the other hand, media design/communication design approaches such as those referenced above are dominated by research through design, which means that there are relatively few studies of media design outside of an academic context.

This paper contributes by providing a case study of cross-disciplinary journalism and design work outside of an academic context, through interviews and observations of media professionals tasked with designing a new system for online comments for the Danish public broadcaster Danmarks Radio (DR). I aim to shed light on the following, exploratory research question: *What are the main challenges faced by media professionals in designing a system for online debate for a public service broadcaster?*

I argue that the work of the DR team inhabits an interesting borderland between journalism and design. Much of their work focus on questions that are familiar turf for journalists, such as fairness and objectivity, the limits between acceptable and unacceptable statements, and how to facilitate an appropriate level of controversy and publicity. At the same time, many of the issues the team had to handle were typical design tasks, such as how to make a system that was attractive and easy to understand, how to cultivate a good user experience, manage the users' expectations and interactions, and how to coach the users. I hope that identifying the main challenges faced by the team can form the starting point for an exploration both of ways to design for better online debate, but also of how media design can be developed as an approach that is not only relevant for research, but also for professional practice in the media industries.

2   ONLINE COMMENTS IN MASS MEDIA

Much research on online comments has focused on the problems and benefits of allowing anonymous participation [7,10,34]. Rowe [32,33] found that comments posted on a mass media website were more uncivil, yet exhibited a greater deliberative quality than comments on the same website's Facebook page. More generally, approaches to designing online communities suggest that regulating the behavior of users must be balanced against the need to encourage contributions [19]. Faridani et al. [12] emphasize the need to highlight the most insightful comments.

Domingo [9] identifies two main strategies for managing audience participation in online newspapers: The "playground" strategy, in which participation is relegated to a separate space for free experimentation, or the "source" strategy in which participation is much more closely managed and controlled by editorial staff. Furthermore, Domingo outlines four strategies for boosting the quality of user contributions:

1) Having a leader with the mission of coaching journalists in participation management and users in the creation of meaningful contributions.

2) Having systematic participation channels that are clear for the users, with specific newsroom roles designed to manage the input.
3) Shifting the focus from moderation to curation of user contributions, devoting more energy to highlighting the best content rather than hunting for the bad apples.
4) Involving the audience in UGC management, reinforcing the curation strategy but without eliminating the oversight by professional moderators or journalists. [9:93–94]

Zvi Reich [31], studying online comments in particular, similarly identifies two main strategies for moderation: "An interventionist strategy [that] insists on pre-moderation of every comment" on the one hand, and "a relatively autonomous strategy of post-moderation" on the other. Reich forecasts that the latter will become the dominant strategy. Recent research on online comments in the news media indicate that Reich's forecast has largely been correct; in Norwegian newspapers an almost uniform consensus for post-moderation was apparent already in 2009, according to Ihlebæk and Krumsvik [16]. However, studies conducted after the 2011 terror attack in Norway show a tendency towards stricter editorial control [13,17].
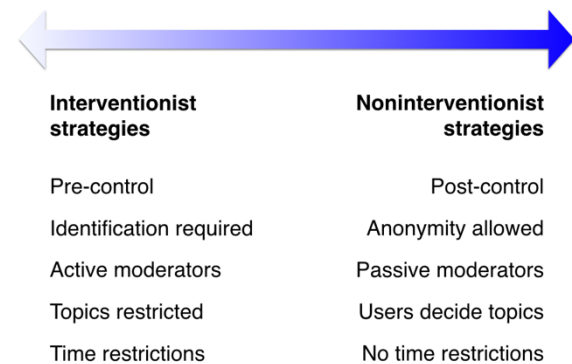

Interventionist strategies	Noninterventionist strategies
Pre-control	Post-control
Identification required	Anonymity allowed
Active moderators	Passive moderators
Topics restricted	Users decide topics
Time restrictions	No time restrictions

Figure 1: Strategies for editorial control with online comments.

In previous work [17,22], my colleagues and I have proposed a model for understanding strategies for editorial control with online comments set out on a spectrum between "interventionist" and "noninterventionist" strategies, outlined in Figure 1. The lines in the figure describe some main design and policy choices that may be used to impose control. A survey of contributors to online comments suggests that many commenters struggle to understand editorial control measures, and that "many respondents have a strong experience of antagonism towards moderators and editorial control measures" [22:15].

3 METHOD

This article reports on a production study based on interviews and observations with a small team of employees of the Danish public

service broadcaster Danmarks Radio (DR) from January 2015 - February 2016. The observations and interviews were conducted by a single researcher, the author of this article. In keeping with practice in ethnographic research I refer to myself in the first person, and attempt to make clear my own position in relation to the object of study. I first came in contact with the team developing the new DR Debat website in December 2014 after an event at my university where I had presented my earlier research on online comments. The leader for the DR Debat team had attended the event, and invited me to a meeting in order to share insights from academic research on online comments with the rest of the team. This meeting took place in January 2015, and afterwards we agreed that I could follow the project doing observations and interviews. Data collection took place primarily on three points in time: First, an interview with two core team members in June 2015, prior to the launch of the website. Second, I observed the first debate organized by the team on 3 September 2015, after which I did a follow-up interview. Third, I returned nearly half a year later in February 2016 to do a new interview and observe two new debates.

During observation I was mostly a passive observer, sitting on a desk next to the team taking notes, and occasionally asking clarifying questions. Audio was recorded during the interviews and two of the three observation sessions, and transcribed for analysis. The first observation was not recorded because it took place in an open office landscape where it was impossible to establish informed consent for audio from everyone present, so analysis of this session is based on notes and saved materials from the debate website (screenshots and html files).

As will be discussed further on the project experienced a number of changes in personnel and leadership through the period of data collection. However, my most important informant, Alex, headed the team for most of the observation period and was my main contact person in the project. I refer to him and the other informants using pseudonyms because most of them are no longer involved in the project and do not want to be seen as speaking on behalf of the team. All the DR informants have signed informed consent forms and approved the quotes used in this article. As journalists whose work generally consist of seeking publicity, and who are trained in participating in public debate, they are considered fully competent at judging the consequences of voicing their opinions in a publication such as this. However, I have chosen to offer them anonymity in order to make it easier for them to speak freely. I also avoid using the real names of ordinary commenters on the website. Although the website is a public forum and comments may be considered public statements, the identity of the commenters is not important for the arguments in this article and some of them may not want their identities to be disclosed in this context. Names and photos of some professionals appearing in the figures (e.g. the TV show host) are not informants for this study.

List of informants, with aliases and professional role in the project:

Alex, editor/concept developer (team leader from mid-2015)
Betty, team leader (until spring 2015)
Cindy, commissioning editor
Dennis, journalist/digital editor
Elisabeth, journalist/digital editor
Frank, journalist/digital editor

4 THE PROJECT TEAM

The team as I was introduced to it in January 2015 consisted of a small group of journalists, "digital editors" and concept developers employed in a department of DR that mainly focused on producing educational materials. Their task was to develop a new subsection of the main DR website (dr.dk) which should facilitate a higher quality of debate. Their work considered both editorial policies as well as design decisions about the main functionality and user experience of the new site. For the technical development of the site, which was going to run on a custom-made platform, they were collaborating with developers in a technical department.

Whenever I asked team members about the purpose of the new website, they often struggled to identify a clearly formulated goal. Often they would invoke a negative comparison with the debate site *Nationen*, a site run by a notorious tabloid newspaper which was infamous for inflammatory comments. In an interview 8 June 2015, few months prior to the launch of the website, Alex explained that DR had previously had problems with online debates which "ran off track". The core idea for the new website was that debates should to a larger degree be "curated" and subjected to editorial control. "On many of the debate sites you find a very hard tone, many ad hominem attacks and hard language. Our idea was that we would like to raise the bar, so first of all the site should be a pleasant place to be, you shouldn't feel that you would all the time be personally attacked, but also that you would learn something." [2] The debate team considered this part of DR's core mission, as set out in two of the main clauses in the public service contract:

> "DR shall ensure that the population has access to substantial and independent information about current affairs, as well as substantial debate.
> DR shall, through content and services, stimulate participation in public debate and the democratic process." [3] [38]

The team members repeatedly insisted that their goal was not to generate large volume of traffic, brand loyalty or other forms of commercial goals. [...] In the June interview I asked Cindy, the commissioning editor who had the overall responsibility for the project at the broadcaster, what she thought was the greatest challenge for the project: "I am anxious to see how many we actually can get to use the site and participate - is it going to be just a small circle of participants debating, and how many will just be there to watch? And can we make it interesting for both those

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[2] All quotes from interviews and observations are my translations from Danish.
[3] My translation. Original in Danish: "DR skal sikre befolkningen adgang til væsentlig og uafhængig samfundsinformation samt væsentlig debat. DR skal gennem indhold og tjenester stimulere til deltagelse i den offentlige debat og den demokratiske proces."

groups?" However, she also emphasized a qualitative ideal: "If we do all those classic, serious political debates, then obviously we are addressing a particular audience. [...] I think we might open up for some other audiences who might find their way to us and discover that this is a pleasant place to learn something."

Going in to the observations, my expectations were focused on this tension between qualitative and quantitative goals. While the team emphasized the need to improve the quality of debate, based on my own experience as both a media professional, designer and design teacher I expected that the team would need to spend a great deal of effort on generating a sufficiently high level of traffic and audience engagement on the site. While I aimed to keep an open and explorative approach to my observations, I was particularly keen to observe the ways in which these two concerns were addressed, both separately and in situations where one had to be balanced against the other.

5 THE DEBATE WEBSITE

The new website launched on 3 September 2015, and offered debates that were open for commenting only at particular times, usually in connection with a TV show or a news event. Debates were moderated by a debate "host", a journalist at DR, and also included a panel of invited experts or prominent figures, who were visibly present on the website (see Figure 2). In order to participate in the debate, users had to register and agree to have their real name posted along with their comments.

At the start of the debate the website contained a series of articles giving background and depth to the topic at hand (written by team members or other journalists at DR). Each article was posted on the main debate page as a "snippet": an item with a headline, an image, a lead text and a link to the main article. User comments would be posted in threads forming under each snippet. Users could respond to comments in sub-threads, and they could also vote on comments by clicking on links saying "agree" or "don't agree" (Figure 3).

Particularly interesting comments from users could also be extracted from these threads by the debate host and turned into new snippets that would move to the top of the page and allow new comment threads to grow under them - thus setting up a mechanism for promoting contributions that the editorial team found particularly noteworthy (Figure 4).

Figure 2: The dr.dk/debat website, with names and photos of the debate host and three debate panelists (3 Sept 2015). (The names and photos of informants have been obscured in order to preserve their anonymity.)
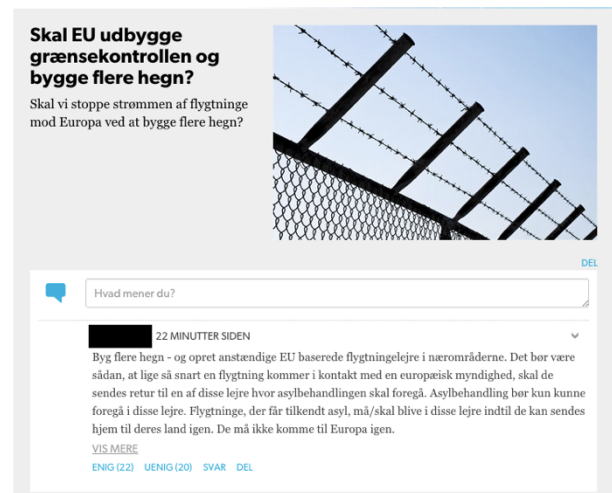

Figure 3: Snippet with comment field and one comment. The commenter's name has been blacked out. The labels "enig" (agree) and "uenig" (don't agree) are links that can be clicked to signal agreement with the comment. (Screenshot 3 Sept 2015.)

The website launch coincided with the season's first show of the well-known TV debate show "Debatten", in which prominent politicians and commentators debate current affairs. While the TV broadcast was on the air from 20.00-22.30, the online debate opened already 11.20 and ran till around midnight. On this day the team included Alex, who had recently taken over as team leader and spent most of his time coordinating the team's work and communicating with other departments, as well as two journalists who wrote articles, hosted and moderated the debate. In addition, Cindy and the leader of the technical development team were present at some points during the evening.
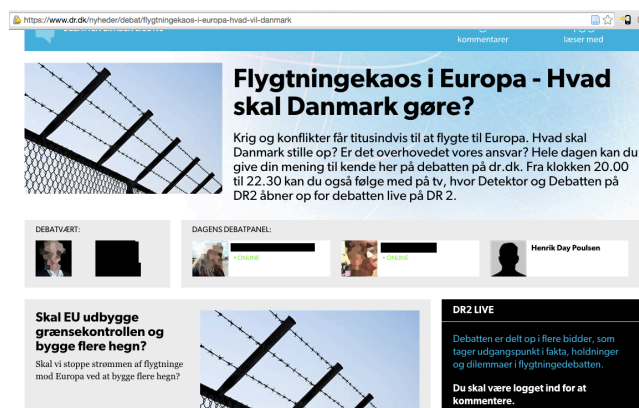
Figure 4: A comment has been extracted and turned into a new "snippet". In this case the original comment was posted by one of the panel members. The names of the other commenters have been blacked out. (Screenshot from 3 Sept 2015.)

The most striking observation I made, both on this and subsequent sessions, was that the team had to spend a large amount of time and attention on communicating and coordinating with other departments in DR. The main reason seemed to be that this was necessary in order to make sure the debate site was sufficiently well publicized by both the dr.dk website editors and the TV show, in order to secure traffic to the site. On the launch day Alex repeatedly contacted the front page editor for dr.dk, in order to make sure that the debate site would be featured on the front page (see Figure 5). He also coordinated with the editors of the TV show, partly because the debate site was hosting a series of poll questions to gauge the viewers' opinions, the results of which were going to be presented in the program (Figure 6); but perhaps most importantly because Alex needed to make sure that the show host would mention the debate website during the broadcast and encourage TV viewers to participate in the debate.

During the day Alex made several remarks speculating about whether there would be a high number of comments on the site, at one point saying that 300 comments would be a high bar. Activity was slow on the website throughout the day, but picked up when the TV broadcast started in the evening, at which point the debate was also featured prominently on the dr.dk front page. At a point in the TV broadcast the host turned to the camera and encouraged viewers to participate in the debate online, while the website URL was displayed on the screen. After this the traffic on the debate site increased strongly, and by the time the debate closed (around midnight) the number of comments was 275. Only one of these comments was removed (due to strong language and a suggestion that Islam should be banned). Each of the poll questions had received 4-5000 votes. In an interview conducted some days later

Alex made it clear that he was very satisfied, both with the volume and the quality of debate.

Figure 5: Front page referrals (dr.dk) to the debate site (dr.dk/debat). (Screenshot 3 September 2015.)

When I returned to do new interviews and observations in February 2016, I observed again the importance of coordination with the live TV broadcast for the debate site. At this time organizing debates had become established routine, and the debate was hosted by a single individual, Dennis. He explained that the coordination with other departments now had been made automatic. However, on this particular evening the invitation to participate did not appear during the TV broadcast, apparently due to a misunderstanding. As a result there was virtually no traffic on

the site during the entire evening, only 32 comments were posted and Dennis expressed great disappointment. During my third observation one week later, 18 February 2016, Dennis again expressed disappointment about low traffic volumes, which he believed must be due to a public holiday.

3 sep 2015 20:12

Er det rigtigt af Danmark at skære i udviklingsbistanden?

43% Ja
2000 stemmer

57% Nej
2699 stemmer

redigeret af

3 sep 2015 20:12

Skal Danmark bygge flygtningelejre i nærområderne?

82% Ja
3812 stemmer

18% Nej
839 stemmer

redigeret af

Figure 6: Poll questions posted through the tool Scribble. Names and photos of informants obscured. (Screenshot 3 Sept 2015.)

In the 5 months from the website launch to February 2016, the site had developed through several changes. First of all, the debate team had almost entirely stopped running debates at other times than during and directly after an accompanying TV broadcast, because they would not get enough activity at other times. They had also stopped writing background articles to serve as starting points for debate, due to capacity constraints. They had also dropped the idea of highlighting selected user comments by turning them into new "snippets". This change seems to have been done to simplify the system both for the hosts and the users. The hosts complained on several occasions that it was difficult for them to keep overview of the comments, in particular when there was activity in many discussion threads simultaneously. The moderator's interface displayed comments in chronological order according to the time when they were posted, but did not display context such as the thread in which the comment was posted, making it difficult to assess the comment. The hosts therefore avoided creating new snippets in order to reduce the amount of threads they had to keep an eye on.

Team members speculated that another feature lacking in the user interface had a limiting effect on the debate: There was no system for notifying participants if someone responded to their comments or mentioned them in another thread. Therefore, participants would only be able to engage in a dialogue with each other if they stayed on the site monitoring the threads they commented in. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this appeared to happen very rarely. I observed many occasions where the host attempted to engage a commenter in dialogue, posing questions to try to get commenters to clarify their views or reason about a standpoint; often these attempts failed because the commenter never answered, presumably because they never noticed that at question had been posed to them.

7 DISCUSSION

The team members consider the development of their site as a qualified success, in particular considering the low amount of comments they have needed to remove as a positive improvement. In February 2016, after nearly half a year, Alex explained that they had only banned one user permanently from the site. While he emphasized that their success should be assessed by the quality of the debate discourse, it is obvious from my observations that reaching a certain volume of traffic also has been an important concern for the team; and they have relied in large degree on the power of promotion from the dr.dk front page and the TV broadcast to achieve this. According to Dennis, during a busy debate there would be over a thousand visitors on the site at any given moment, posting a three-digit number of comments in the course of the evening.

If we regard the website in light of the model for editorial control outlined in Figure 1, it is clear that the team has opted for relatively strong editorial control on most dimensions: The website requires users to identify with their real names, the moderators are active and clearly visible on the site, the topic for the debate is defined by the hosts and they moderate contributions in order to prevent debate from straying off-topic, and the debate is open only for a limited amount of time. Only regarding pre- or post-control does the site have a non-interventionist design, which is in line with common industry practice. Overall, the DR Debat team has chosen an unusually interventionist strategy for editorial control, and might be seen as a vanguard in the development towards tighter control discussed earlier.

As other studies have pointed out, stronger control may have an adverse effect on the volume of contributions [10,31]. It is not possible to determine whether the control strategies have affected the traffic and/or the quality of comments on the dr.dk/debat site. It has been a deliberate strategy for the team to use control measures to raise the quality of debate, even if it would come at the cost of a high volume of contributions. Given this priority it seems relevant to discuss the site in view of the "best practices" identified by Domingo (see above). In spite of the project's ideals, it has only partially lived up to Domingo's recommendations.

First, regarding management of participation, the journalists on the team seemed free to dedicate all their time to managing user contributions and coaching users, and seemed to place high importance on developing good relations with the users. These tasks did not seem to be devalued by the journalists as an

unwelcome chore imposed by management, or to compete with other tasks for the journalists' attention, as has been reported in many other contexts [35]. However, the project seems to have suffered from high turnover and changes in leadership. The person who was leading the team when I first met them in January 2015 had relatively recently taken over the job, and was recruited to another position before our next meeting in June. None of the people working on the project in January 2015 are still involved with the project at the time of writing (June 2017).

Secondly, regarding "systematic participation channels that are clear for the users", this seems to have been one of the project's greatest Achilles heals. It seems clear that the dr.dk/debat website's strongest competitor is not an external site, but rather - surprisingly - DR's own Facebook pages. Many of the TV shows which are debated on the dr.dk/debat site have their own Facebook page where they promote the show by posting teasers, video clips and links, and ask users to voice their own opinions. The "Debatten" show routinely invites viewers to comment both on the dr.dk/debat site as well as on the show's Facebook page (Figure 7) - and they also have specially invited experts or prominent figures participating in the discussion threads, similar to the panel on the debate site. As my informants readily admit,

Figure 7: The TV host (Clement Kjersgaard) asks viewers to participate in the debate online - either on the dr.dk/debat site (top image) or on the show's own Facebook page (bottom image). (Screenshot 18 February 2016.)

the volume of comments is often much higher on the Facebook pages than in dr.dk/debat, and they cannot hide their frustration with this intra-organisational competition. This situation seems also to be confusing to at least some of the viewers, as one of the users commenting on Facebook during my observations remarked

critically that DR should facilitate debate on their own website - apparently unaware of the existence of the dr.dk/debat site. However, the DR Debat team claim that the quality of debate is poorer on the Facebook page, and see this as justification for their efforts on the dr.dk/debat site.

Third, regarding "curation" and highlighting of the best contributions: I observed several cases in which the journalists spent much time discussing problematic comments with each other. In almost all cases they opted for engaging with the participants by asking them questions or inviting them to dialogue, rather than using restrictive measures such as removing or editing comments. However, as noted above, their initial plan to highlight selected user comments had been dropped due to usability limitations.

Fourth, involving the users in management of comments: The dr.dk/debat site includes both systems for voting ("agree"/"don't agree") as well as a link for reporting inappropriate comments. However, the vote function is not used to filter or highlight comments, it is simply a way for readers to indicate their attitude towards a given comment.

Figure 8: Comments on the Facebook page of the TV show "Debatten". The main post for the evening's show had at this time received 106 comments, while the dr.dk/debat site had received 39 comments. (Screenshot 18 February 2016.)

It appears that the DR Debat team has struggled to adhere to the best practices suggested by Domingo. On a strategic level, their choice to prioritize editorial control is consistent with their ambition to raise the quality rather than the volume of the comments. However, they have also met significant challenges,

which seem related both to intra-organizational policies and coordination, as well as user involvement and user interface design.

8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The competition between the dr.dk/debat site and the Facebook pages of the TV shows may be considered in light of the main strategic models identified by Domingo [9]: "playgrounds" versus "sources". Given the emphasis on editorial control one might consider the dr.dk/debat site an instantiation of the "source" model, where participation is subjected to editorial control in order to increase the quality of contributions; while the Facebook pages of the TV shows align more with the "playground" model where the audience is invited to participate in a space separate from the main website, in order to allow more free experimentation while protecting the main brand. However, this interpretation is made problematic by the radical development in the use of social media since Domingo's study was published in 2011. The Facebook pages of DR's TV shows are controlled by the shows' own staff, and are therefore arguably closer to the TV journalists and their priorities than the dr.dk/debat site, which is run by a separate team. In fact, this is most likely the reason why the DR Debat team has not been able to avoid internal competition with the TV shows on Facebook. One could argue, rather, that in the current situation the TV show's use of the Facebook pages is simply part of the standard practice of contemporary journalism, while the dr.dk/debat site represents an experimental testing ground, albeit one where increased control and quality are the main goals of the experiment.

Perhaps Domingo's model should be updated in light of the increasing ubiquity of participatory formats, reflecting recent trends towards tightened editorial control. This new strategy could be considered as an attempt at constructing an online "salon", indicating an ambition to return from the anarchic ideal of the playground to a format closer to deliberative ideals. There are several examples of similar strategies in Scandinavian media, such as the "Ytring" website of the Norwegian Public Broadcasting Corporation, the "Verdidebatt" website run by the newspaper Vårt Land, and "Nye Meninger" run by the newspaper Dagsavisen. These websites all share some characteristics with dr.dk/debat: They are separate sites or sub-sites with interventionist editorial control strategies and ambitions to establish a better online debate. Given that the Scandinavian countries are advanced markets for online news, and indeed have been at the front of developments in this area in previous years, it is possible that the Danish and Norwegian examples mentioned here are early adopters of a strategy that will gain more followers internationally in coming years.

A striking observation from the present study is that while the challenges involved with developing the new website reveal a close interconnection between designerly, journalistic and technical concerns, one core design concept appears to have been conspicuously absent from the team's considerations: User involvement. The ambition to "improve" online debate seems to have been motivated primarily by ideals associated with journalism and public service broadcasting, although they also indicate an assumption about a user need: "a pleasant place to learn something". However, team members have not given me any indication about user involvement in the design process. And when they in our later interviews have argued for seeing the website as a success, they have done so without reference to users, other than the fact that they have had little need for sanctioning users for violating the debate norms. A higher degree of user involvement could have helped the team identify some of the usability challenges and limitations with the website - such as the inability for users to be notified about responses to their comments, making it difficult for users to engage in dialogue with each other.

However, the most striking finding regarding this design process has been the degree to which my initial expectations were confirmed by my observations: Working to facilitate a high volume of visitors and comments did indeed seem to fill a much larger portion of the DR Debat team's practical work than they would indicate in interviews when describing their own work. None of my informants would commit to specific success criteria for the debate site, and as such it is hard to assess analytically the degree to which the project has been a success. However, it was clear from my conversations with team members that they regarded the internal competition between the dr.dk/debat site and the Facebook pages of the TV shows as quite problematic, in particular because the Facebook pages seemed to receive a higher volume of comments.

This is in itself not a particularly surprising observation, but it points to a challenge that seems to set this kind of design work – media design, or designing for mass media – apart from the kinds of design most commonly discussed in interaction design and HCI: The need to engage a mass audience. In the words of Löwgren and Reimer: "…canonical beliefs on how to arrange interaction design processes are essentially off the mark when it comes to collaborative media […] in situations where use is fundamentally constituted by a critical mass of actual users and actual communicative practices, meaning that the whole notion of upstream explorative design preceding a set delivery date is voided" [24:88]. Regarding public debate in particular, it is fundamental to the concept that it is public: it is essential to the genre that the debate at least has the potential to reach a wide audience. DR's public service contract states that it shall ensure "substantial debate" (original: "væsentlig debat") [38:3], a requirement that should be understood to include both qualitative and quantitative ideals: The debate must live up to certain standards regarding deliberation and civility, but it must also have the potential to affect public opinion, otherwise it would be pointless (from a democratic point of view). This is part of the reason why the need to reach a mass audience is such an integral part of the professional norms and practices of journalists and media organizations, to the degree that it is often taken for granted and hardly even explicitly acknowledged. In commercial media organizations the interest in reaching a large audience also has a business side, while for public broadcasters such as DR audience volumes are important partly for fulfilling their public contract

and partly for legitimizing their existence towards the political system, defending their funding through taxes or public license fees.

It is a commonplace observation in media studies (and elsewhere) that the requirements associated with reaching a large audience are often in conflict or tension with the qualitative ideals associated with journalism as a societal institution – as demonstrated by the ubiquitous tensions between tabloid and broadsheet journalism. It should not be surprising to anyone, then, that balancing the qualitative and quantitative ideals associated with online debate in the context of a public broadcaster is a very challenging design task. These concerns also pose a broader challenge for design work in mass media institutions: While "canonical" approaches to interaction design may be inadequate, there is a lack of tried and tested alternative models that allow media designers to balance user needs and interaction design concerns with the concerns of mass communication and journalism. More work is needed to develop such models.

While this study covers a period of over one year, the process of planning and designing the new website had started long before my first contact with the project. As a consequence of this, my insights into the design process are limited to the particularly intense period of about half a year before and after the launch of the new website. I have not been able to interview or conduct observations with members of the team doing the technical development of the dr.dk/debat website. However, technical challenges were reflected in interviews and observations with the debate site team. The website had experienced several technical problems after launch, including a problem with handling the spikes in traffic that occurred when the TV host invited users to use the website. Having more information about the technical development, and in particular the negotiations between journalists, designers and developers could have contributed with further insights into the challenges involved with making the new website, and should be a priority for similar studies in the future.

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