Counterpublicness and Hybrid Tactics across Physical and Mediated Spaces

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Arriving at the Christiansborg Palace Square, I[1] spot Catherine, a COVID-19 sceptic and protester who I met at another protest organized by Men in Black a few weeks back, at the large statue of King Frederik VII in the middle of the square. She is unpacking metal trays from her backpack to prepare for the protest. As I follow many of the Facebook groups, including one whose purpose is to provide an overview of the coming demonstrations, I know that today's protest is a 'klinky klonky' protest – a protest where participators try to make as much noise as possible by, for example, banging pot lids together, which originates from protests in Iceland.

I greet Catherine and explain that I am again out to observe the protests. She points to a woman with long dark hair named Marie, who is the organizer of today's protest and leader of the 'Freedom Movements Council', another subgroup among the sceptics. I recognize her from one of the Facebook groups, where she was live-streaming from her car on the way here, urging people to join today's protest. As I approach her, she steps up onto the stairs of the statue and says, 'The plan is to make as much noise as we can, so they [the politicians in parliament] can hear we are dissatisfied'. She further explains that the time of the protest was chosen because the new 'safety legislation', which among other things gives the police more authority to disperse protests that are demonstrating unsafe behaviour. It is number 44 on the agenda in parliament today. The plan is to make noise throughout the entire session, but she emphasizes that it will be important to save energy for the moment when it is being deliberated. She points to a spot

underneath the window on the left side of the building, explaining that it is right underneath the room where parliament will be deliberating, so that is where they will place themselves during the protest.

She ends by saying that during the deliberation of the 'safety legislation', she and a few others will enter the parliament hall and hopefully get on live TV stating their dissatisfaction. … After a while, all the protesters gather back at the statue. Marie explains that they were now at number 38, so it was almost time for the safety legislation. 'I think it is so great. Like the epidemic legislation, we are going to knock them over with noise. Let's all go under the window and give it our all!' she says to the crowd of about 20 or 30 people. The intensity of the noise increases from a slow rhythmic klonk, klonk, klonk, to fast constant strokes, making it impossible to hear anything else – many of the protesters look towards the window. (Excerpt from fieldnotes, 1 June 2021)

Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, a general concern among many scholars was a decline in public engagement; Robert Putnam argued that the reduction of in-person activities in the US since the 1950s might result in an undermining of active civic engagement and thereby a less strong democracy (Putnam, 1995, 2000), and a few years later, Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham worried about UK citizens' weakened 'public connection', especially among younger people (Couldry et al, 2007). However, more recently, solid instances of civic engagement have played out, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic with anti-vaxxers and similar groups, as we will explore here, but also with protest movements like Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter and MeToo. Common to all these groups is that they must navigate a highly datafied, hybrid media setting where collective formation and action happen across different spaces – not only between old and new mediated spaces but also between mediated and physical spaces. This is also clear in the vignette, where Facebook streaming and event sharing were used to create awareness, while physical presence in front of parliament and noisemaking were chosen to make a statement that could not be ignored. Puncturing the idea of audience as passive victims of datafication, we in this chapter pick up on Sonia Livingstone's suggestion that 'the audience project … seemingly must be reasserted for each generation of scholarship, rearticulating their role in relation to each new phase of sociotechnological change' (2015, p 439). By following how the COVID-19 sceptics work with and against the datafication processes, we empirically show how these groups actively used different tactics across physical and mediated spaces to manifest themselves through acts of counterpublicness. We offer a typology of the hybrid public formation

tactics that we saw used in these processes, focusing particularly on how datafication materializes in the processes and argue that the ways people act is sometimes with the purpose of becoming datafied.

As a way of explaining how datafication is central in the public formation processes, we highlight how the tactics seem to be driven by an underlying logic, which we conceptualize as a 'hybrid quantification logic'. The importance of quantification is nothing new; strength in numbers has always been considered key for the legitimization of publics and their issues (Biggs, 2018). However, as many of the activities of publicness, particularly in the forming stages, take place on social media platforms today, we see how these traditional quantification logics are becoming intensified and take new datafied forms that complement existing measures of public presence. The fact that numbers materialize on social media through listed group sizes and engagement metrics, rather than being fleeting during a physical protest, produces new tactics by those who attempt to make themselves count in the public debate. Here, we use the term 'count' deliberately to connote the quantification element we see as essential in public formation processes, but which can take many forms, such as noise, numbers present and comments posted, and to highlight the struggle implicit in this process, where publics must convince society, media and politicians about the legitimacy of their issue.

This fight for legitimacy is further intensified when the moments of publicness are related to issues and viewpoints considered to be outside what is generally accepted. This is also the reason why we chose this case, as these sceptics, often labelled and degraded as 'tin foil hats', start from a marginalized position and must use all tactics available to them to make themselves count. Thus, the guiding question for this chapter is: how do marginalized groups attempt to make themselves count as legitimate instants of publicness in a society characterized by a highly datafied and hybridized media environment? With this question, we are less interested in whether these groups of people manage to make themselves and their issues legitimate in the wider public sphere; rather, we are interested in how they concretely try to get there and the tools and tactics they employ. We explore this by following online and physical activities and interviewing the sceptics, which proves to be a messy affair with many factions, internal squabbles and competition, but also one in which significant coordinated efforts take place.[2]

In the following, we first outline how publics have been researched as both physical and online phenomena. Then, we move on to describing how we engage with publicness across offline and online spaces, focusing on dissolving the often-upheld dichotomies between online/offline and new/old media. In the analysis, we first present a typology of public formation tactics that we distilled based on the empirical material, then provide an in-depth analysis of core examples of these tactics and their use. We conclude

by discussing how datafication reconfigures the ways in which these groups engage in public formation processes and legitimation practices.

Theoretical backdrop: researching publics and public formation

Over the years, multiple scholars have engaged in the study of publics and their formation, but even so, the concept of publics has remained elusive, and the approaches to studying it multiple. Modern theories of publics have, to some extent, been developed from or in response to classic understandings of the formation of publics developed throughout the 19th century, going back to the Dewey–Lippmann debate and Habermas (see Habermas, 1991; Lippmann, 1993; Dewey, 2012 for a good overview over the first conceptualizations and how they differ; for shared characteristics, see Calhoun, 2017). In this chapter, we primarily focus on discussions with newer conceptualizations of publics that specifically deal with the question of how publics form and how that formation has changed with the changing media landscape (for a full review of the approaches, see Hartley et al [2021] and Chapter 1 in this volume). However, before immersing ourselves in the rich qualitative case study, we will elaborate upon some of the current conceptualizations of publics and conditions for public formation that are important for the understanding of current public formation processes, namely *hybridity*, *datafication* and *normativity*.

The hybrid nature of the public formation processes

With the rise of social media, many scholars have turned their attention towards public formation processes and the new possibilities that came with these spaces, bringing forward concepts such as 'networked publics' or 'hashtag publics' (see, for example, boyd, 2008; Ito, 2008; Bruns and Burgess, 2015). These concepts have been influential in highlighting how specific dynamics or affordances on particular social media platforms allow publics to emerge in new ways – ways that circumvent the traditional gatekeepers. The openness of Twitter, for example, allows new possibilities for politicians, journalists and citizens to control the flow of the information they receive, while trending hashtags can also induce new actors to join a certain public by gaining awareness of it on Twitter.

However, as publics typically develop and act across different platforms and online and physical spaces, we need conceptualizations that consider this. To fully understand the dynamics, we argue that we must investigate the affordances of specific social media platforms, the interplay between these platforms, the constraints that come with these spaces and the movements across spaces, digitally as well as physically. Through a range of case studies,

Andrew Chadwick (2013) showed how new and old media hybridize, meaning that there is an increasing interplay and adaptation as stories from social media move into mainstream media and vice versa. Chadwick was not interested in public formation processes as such but studied political communication and how specific actors gained power and agency in the hybrid media system. Nonetheless, his fundamental insights provide a good foundation for this context and many others. Another work that can serve as an inspiration for conceptualizing public formation is Wendy Willems (2019), who emphasized the interplay between physical (material and spatial) and online strategies: 'Sites of publicness may shift from digital spaces to a physical location or vice versa because of particular constraints in circulation associated with either domain' (2019, p 194). Bridging these insights and using them when theorizing public formation processes helps us capture and describe the movements back and forth between different spaces and the hybridity between them.

Algorithms, information and datafication in the public formation processes

Another dynamic that provides both opportunities and limitations in relation to public formation processes is algorithms and the way they take part in organizing the flow of information (Gillespie, 2014; Bruns and Burgess, 2015). This has produced extensive scholarship on the power dynamics of algorithms, which both take part in sorting social life (Beer, 2013; Pasquale, 2015) and in moderating and censoring public debate (Gillespie, 2020; Cobbe, 2021). Studies using the term 'algorithmic resistance' show how users engage to either avoid or game the algorithmic dynamics, with users attempting to appropriate algorithmic dynamics to gain more visibility or to correct what is perceived as injustice or shortcoming in the algorithmic systems (Treré, 2018; Velkova and Kaun, 2021). Due to the opacity of the concrete workings of these systems, both for sorting and moderating algorithmic systems, users utilize what they know and experience in practice – their developed 'folk theories' of algorithms – in these acts of resistance (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). In conceptualizing public formation processes, examining these dynamics and their interplay with each other is necessary for understanding how and why these groups act the way they do, based on the affordances and constraints of both spaces. However, while the conceptualizations of publics have developed to encompass digital and algorithmic considerations, the way the dynamics of datafication also intervene and influence how acts of publicness occur still has to be more thoroughly explored. One explanation may be that datafication is rather difficult to grasp and describe because it is everywhere but invisible at the same time. Others have described datafication as something that permeates and fundamentally changes our everyday life, framing it as 'a form of

colonization' (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) or 'pervasive ideology' (van Dijck, 2014). Rather than try to conceptualize what datafication is, we in our work give attention to the role of datafication and attempt to describe its concrete manifestations. As a result, we consider datafication to be a general constraint for the formation of publics that can both hinder and enable the development of new, powerful actors and larger groups of people in the process. This provides new insights into how agency is negotiated in the datafied societies, by illustrating how datafication is both resisted and utilized via different tactics in the processes of public formation.

The good, the bad and what comes in between

Finally, the normative considerations that have characterized both previous and recent research are also relevant to address when researching 'publics' or what is maybe more precisely in this case described as 'contentious publicness' because of its highly controversial, dynamic and fleeting character (Kavada and Poell, 2021). In the 1990s, scholars building on Habermas' initial work began to conceptualize publics that were engaging with topics and causes outside the mainstream public debate. Here, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) and Nancy Fraser (1990) argued for a focus on the many unheard and often subordinate voices in the debate, theorizing respectively the concepts of 'counterpublics' and 'subaltern counterpublics', which represented publics that would form in response to the exclusion from and in contrast to hegemonic constructions of dominant publics. In her work, Fraser highlighted marginalized groups, such as women, the working class and racial or sexual minorities, as the social groups that become part of these counterpublics, 'where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1990, p 67). She uses the example of the late-20th century US feminist subaltern counterpublic as one of the clearest and most far-reaching examples, where a group of feminists invented new terms to describe the social realities, such as 'sexism' and 'acquaintance rape', which helped to recast the identities and needs of women.

Ultimately, Fraser offered a new language that, while not eliminating the disadvantages of the official public sphere, at least began to reduce these advantages by offering an alternative framing. While Fraser acknowledged that such progressive counterpublics were not the only type out there, referencing the republican counterpublic to the feminist movement that aimed at retaining women in traditional values, the concept was ultimately tied to a normativity of progressiveness and important fights from the margins. There is also evidence in how she countered it with the republican example that some counterpublics are normatively judged as better than

others. Interestingly, in the last couple of years, a range of new concepts addressing the opposite, namely 'bad' or antagonistic publics, has emerged, framed as 'dark participation' (Quandt, 2018) and 'uncivil participation' (Frischlich et al, 2021). These concepts are connected to the openness that the internet has offered and some of the same affordances as addressed earlier but focuses on how these affordances are utilized to spread misinformation and act in hateful and offensive ways towards others in these spaces. We find this normative turn interesting but also problematic, as it leads to an exclusion of what can be considered acts of publicness. While some acts of publicness are against the common norms of how to act in society (for example, violence) these negative framings of publicness also move into discussions of the cause, and what is a worthy cause to support. In our study of the COVID-19 sceptics, we saw that many of them were frustrated with their marginalization because it was based on the topic, not their actions, and some of them were highly oriented towards deliberation. In this chapter, we also discuss this 'dismissal' of certain modes of publicness by illustrating how the attempt to marginalize them in some instances fuelled their actions and in-group dynamics and for some of them this resulted in harm to democracy.

A hybrid ethnographic approach

In our approach to studying the public formation processes, we attempt to avoid the traditional dichotomies that have been dominant in studies of publics and strive to explore the formations across the different spaces in which the formations take place. We also discuss the different functions of these spaces. As a result, we do not follow the sceptics' activities on one specific platform, but a range of activities across several platforms and both online and offline activities, which can be termed 'hybrid ethnography' (Przybylski, 2021).

This overarching approach led us to collect several forms of empirical data.

As primary material, we conducted 12 in-depth interviews, including think-aloud elements, with COVID-19 sceptics who were engaged in the protests for different reasons (for example, anti-vax or anti-control) and who varied in their subgroup involvement (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015; Bengtsson, 2018).

We also carried out a digital ethnographic enquiry into selected open Facebook groups in Denmark, whose members were sceptical about the handling of COVID-19 in Denmark (including both thematic groups and organization-oriented groups) (Postill and Pink, 2012; Markham, 2013). The groups were chosen based on their differences in their wider focus and their significant size.

Finally, we conducted ethnographic observations at three physical protests in Copenhagen (Geertz, 1973; Emerson et al, 2011).

The fieldwork (both digital and physical) and interviews started in the spring of 2021, when the protests reached new heights again, spurred on by a violent protest by one of the critical sceptic groups called Men in Black in January 2021. It continued until the COVID-19 pandemic was declared over in Denmark in February 2022.[3] Many of the interviewees were recruited during observations at protests, through the social media groups or through the interviews themselves, where participants sometimes connected us with other relevant sceptics to talk to. In the choice of interviewees, we also focused on talking to sceptics from different subgroups who had varying reasons for participating in the protests. As this is vast material, in this chapter, we predominantly focus on the interviews and relate what was said to the concrete actions observed online and during the protests to qualify the findings.

We understand the sceptics as both an 'extreme/deviant' and a 'paradigmatic' case (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp 229–233). It is deviant because it is an extreme case of counterpublicness since the sceptics were highly marginalized and occupied a negative normative position from the beginning. As a group, the sceptics were widely considered 'nut cases', outsiders, and as having no right to protest due to the special circumstances of the pandemic; rather, they were considered a threat to democracy. However, it is also paradigmatic, as it allows us to speak more generally about how the conditions of public formation processes in society have changed. The extremeness allows us to see some of these dynamics more clearly, but we argue that the dynamics would, in most cases, apply to other forms of counterpublicness as well. This is not to say that the identified tactics would be the same if we had explored other cases, but rather that the underlying logics and ways of engaging with the physical and mediated environment would be.

Analytical framework: (media) logics and related tactics

As an analytical framework, we draw on the theory of 'media logics' (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Altheide, 2016), including 'social media logics' (van Dijck and Poell, 2013), 'network media logics' (Klinger and Svensson, 2018) and 'algorithmic logics' (Gaw, 2022). In our observations during the pandemic, we noticed how public formation processes characterized by counterpublicness were permeated by several underlying logics, such as the ones mentioned earlier, that the sceptics reacted to with rather advanced tactics that transgressed the classical divides between old and new media and physical and online settings. The theory of 'media logics' is a well-established tradition described by Altheide and Snow (1979). The theory of media logics originates from a traditional mass media setting studying processes of how news content is selected, produced and consumed. Altheide described

media logics as a 'general framework for understanding the nature, impact and relevance of media and information technologies for social life, as well as its use and appropriateness for investigating political communication' (2016, p 1). Furthermore, he underlined that 'media logic does not refer to just one logic for one medium, for example, television, but is a conceptual model of mediation' (Altheide, 2016, p 1).

In his work, Chadwick (2013) highlights how new and old media logics do not replace each other but hybridize. This is also why he argues that 'media logic provides a useful approach to understanding the power of media and the power relations within media' (Chadwick, 2013, p 23). In this chapter, we analyse how the sceptics engage with different media logics through their actions to make themselves count, but also critically discuss how mass media logics remain at the centre of their efforts as these are still key to becoming legitimized as a public (see also Chapter 6 in this book for an alternative analysis of logics, where the focus is on the power relations within media organizations rather than between different forms of media).

To operationalize our study of media logics, we combine it with the notion of tactics. Here, we draw on de Certeau (1988), who understood tactics as everyday life, bottom-up ways to deal with the 'strategies' of the system, strategies being ways for the (media) system to organize itself. In the analysis, we point to the logics as inherent or built-in rules and the tactics that we see as ways of responding to the logics. To conclude, we introduce and develop our own concept, namely, the concept of 'hybrid quantification logic', as a way of pointing to what we consider a transgressing, dominating logic in a hybrid setting across old and new media. Holding on to the concept of logics implies that we believe that some human agency is still at stake and that algorithms have not triumphed over human interaction.

A typology of formation tactics and the hybrid quantification logics

In the following, we present a typology entailing some of the most prominent formation tactics we observed when following the sceptics and their attempts to make themselves 'count' as an act of counterpublicness. Presenting the tactics in chronological order, we start by analysing the *mobilization tactics* in the initial phase of the public formation processes, in which the mobilization of fellow supporters seemed to be the initial imminent challenge. In our study, gathering as a critical opposition to the government's handling of the pandemic seems to be the common cause, but other causes, values and interests coalesced in a sometimes-blurred picture. Hereafter, we point to some of the *counter-tactics* that we saw later, when the emerging counterpublic – what in practice was an intermingle of diverse groups and people who tried to manifest themselves as a counterpublic – tried to navigate

constraints in the different spaces, digitally and physically, by shifting from one space to the other. We conclude by describing how all respondents, without exception, talked about how they struggled being recognized by traditional mainstream media, which we have labelled *publicity tactics*. Having followed the scholarly discussions praising the democratic potential of the internet and social media, it is striking how the recognition from traditional mainstream media of the counterpublic still is a cardinal point for the citizens in the public formation process. When describing these three types of tactics in depth, we move from an inward to an outward perspective (see Table 3.1).

Mobilization tactics

When following the sceptics, we saw a wide range of mobilization tactics – in the digital space, in the physical space, and in the intersections between them. Some of these tactics are similar to those existing in the non-digital era, but we describe them as they unfold across digital and physical spaces, emphasizing their relation to the underlying logics within this new hybrid setting. Social media was a highly important digital space for the sceptics, who would utilize the affordances of, for example, Facebook to make groups, share events, post information on their profiles or post comments to, for example, posts made by Danish politicians. In the Facebook groups, users would sometimes post calls to go and post comments on a specific post by a politician or to share events (interview, 2021). They also had a Facebook group dedicated to collecting all the upcoming protests around the country. As an interviewee explained, it was very much a shared and organized effort, where the network was mobilized with the aim of illustrating the size or to mobilize new interests in the cause:

> 'Well, it is about really collaborating on Facebook and the groups we have and try to promote each other content and spread the message. We have people who sit and comment on *Ekstra Bladet* [Danish tabloid] and DR [the Danish public broadcaster] site. They take the fight in there and try to recruit new people. … Then there are people like me who do physical protests. There are some that do live videos aimed to get people to participate in the protests and some who do the comments and share posts on Facebook. There are many ways to do it.' (Interview, 2021)

This quote helps illustrate how the different physical and mediated spaces each were important for the mobilization tactics. During physical protest the participants always referenced the importance of easily finding the events on social media, but they also expressed how the mediated spaces had certain constraints. Some of the constraints that the sceptics pointed to

Table 3.1: Public formation tactics

Mobilization tactics *Inwardly* ←	Counter-tactics	Publicity tactics → *Outwardly*
Consolidate main arguments Sharing content and ideas (expert statements/explanations and investigative material) in and across Facebook groups and Messenger to consolidate main arguments.	**Secure knowledge spread before deletion** Attempting to ensure reach of content before deletion by using intros such as 'SHARE SHARE SHARE' in Facebook posts that encourage others to spread the message.	**Make the cause relevant** Organizing protests across Danish cities and in front of the Danish parliament to illustrate the size of the group of sceptics.
Join us! Inviting personal Facebook network to join Facebook groups and attend protests as well as inviting bypassers at physical demonstrations to join physically or in Facebook groups.	**Cheat the 'Facebook police'** Avoid using words that it is believed the Facebook algorithm will react to, like 'fascist' or 'nazi' and using intentional misspellings (for example, 'mâderna' or '🦠rona') as well as doing live-streams to give visibility to banned users.	**Comments on posts from mainstream actors** Commenting on Facebook posts by mainstream actors, such as politicians or journalists, to get their attention.
Share and RSVP Sharing and pressing attend to events in and across Facebook groups and producing overviews of activities (for example, a specific Facebook group for that purpose alone).	**Save the network** Making backup Facebook groups and Facebook profiles as well as fake profiles to ensure networks remain in case of quarantine and banning.	**Invite for deliberation** Extending invitations to politicians to be present during protests or debates via email or Facebook comments.
Make it Instagrammable Using attention-grabbing means both *physically* (visual and auditory elements in protests, for example, making noise, shouting repetitive slogans, 'klinky klonky', fireworks, coloured smoke, soap bubbles, drawing with chalk, sitting in circles) and use these and other measures *digitally* to create support for future activities (for example, photos of protests, selfies, lives).	**Consider the channel** Considering the affordances of the different channels, for example, using Messenger instead of posting in the Facebook group when discussing potentially sensitive topics or doing stories or using lives or stories instead of permanent posts because stories and lives are ephemeral (typically 24 hours), whereas posts are permanent (at least until manual deletion) as well as avoiding sharing of specific content, especially videos; only watching.	**Force the political agenda** Formulating citizens' proposals, which are a Danish democratic tool where citizens can write proposals for changes in, for example, legislation and if the proposal gets 50,000 signatures, then it will be deliberated by the Danish parliament.

(continued)

Mobilization tactics	Counter-tactics	Publicity tactics
Inwardly ⟵	⟶	*Outwardly*
Call the comment army Asking people to comment on Facebook posts by politicians, news outlets, journalists and other mainstream actors and on the news sites' comment sections.	**Ditch the Facebook police** Moving conversations and groups to uncensored physical locations or alternative platforms, for example, Telegram.	**Seek press support** Pitching stories to Danish journalists (for example, about upcoming protests) or providing quotes to national or international media.
Advertise future protests Doing pre- and post-protest videos on Facebook to ensure visibility in the network and attendance during protests.	**Keep the groups tidy** Tidying by deleting posts not addressing what the administrator regards as the group's central issue – the logic being that the higher the number of posts, the higher the risk of something problematic happening and consequent banning.	**If you can't beat them, join them** Making new political parties (for example, The Freedom Party), who will have the right to deliberate.

were the unconstructive, person-oriented quarrels, the difficulties in getting in contact with strangers and the algorithms and perceived censorship. As a common way to solve these issues, the sceptics moved to physical locations. As one interviewee said: "I quickly went out to do something active and visual instead of just sitting and shouting on Facebook because with all these algorithms running, it can soon become the same people you reach, and you do not reach any new people, any strangers" (interview, 2021). Another said:

> 'To create something in the streets that people can look further into, read about, or ask questions about, was crucial because digitalization is everywhere today, but it has limitations regarding algorithms or stuff that get deleted or censored. You can't censor people who walk the streets in the thousands. You just can't.' (Interview, 2021)

In the movement back and forth between the digital and physical spaces, the sceptics seemed rather aware of the importance of making people present in both spaces – to make them count in both spaces. For example, one respondent talked about the enrolment of bypassers at physical demonstrations: "Every time I meet someone that I talk to during demonstrations, rallies, or events, we also 'connect' on Facebook" (interview, 2021). Another respondent talked about doing 'lives' on Facebook before, during and after a demonstration to encourage people to come to the specific event, but also to future activities.

In both the digital and physical realms, documenting the growth and consolidation of the group along the way seemed important as a way of archiving or materializing the messy and diverse actions in the forming collective. One interviewee described how he had several times commented on posts made by the Danish prime minister, but she had yet to reply to any of them, which he related to the size of the group: "She is yet to reply, and we are more than 100,000 people on social media who are against this. I know this because there are statistics about how many we know and stuff, and we have calculated that we are about 80–100,000 people" (interview, 2021).

Here, we see the importance of mobilizing numbers (illustrated via collected data by Facebook) only to legitimize the cause. The physical spaces also played a hugely important role in the aim of mobilizing more people on social media, as activities in the physical realm that could subsequently be used to create attention in the digital realm. We labelled this tactic 'make it Instagrammable'. One interviewee described her female group in contrast to the Danish Men in Black protesters, who self-identified as a 'protest movement' and demonstrated in the streets wearing black clothes, hoodies and masks to cover their faces (not COVID-19 face masks!), carrying roman candles, torches and playing loud music. She says:

'We make anti-propaganda, as we call it. We sensed that in the Men in Black protests, the press only took pictures of the hard stuff, so we went and took pictures of all the other stuff. We take pictures of people blowing soap bubbles and children writing with coloured chalk on the ground. You know – all the positive things instead of violence.' (Interview, 2021)

This respondent continued to talk about using colourful smoke and how this made people stop in the street, as well as how pictures of it were attention-grabbing online and supported a wider circulation – and, through that, mobilization. From these different examples of mobilization tactics, we can see how constraints in different spaces produce certain actions that are aimed at specific media logics and ideas of how content will circulate better. These ideas of circulation and mobilization are tightly interwoven with data, as physical spaces enable the illustration of size, but so does the number of group members and commenters. We, therefore, see how both old and new forms of quantification logics are at play in the tactics. What we also found interesting was the relationship between the physical and digital spaces, as well as the battle with the established media, which we will come back to when talking about 'publicity tactics', which are also related to mobilization tactics.

Counter-tactics

A common position among the sceptics was to understand themselves and act in opposition to, for example, fact-checkers, Big Tech and the algorithms used by these actors. An important part of their public formation process was also to resist and navigate these structures to secure their continued opportunities to deliberate the issues on their minds. Everyone we talked to had either themselves experienced, or heard of others who had experienced, censorship online, such as total or time-limited bannings on Facebook as well as loss of functions, such as the ability to comment. Many were unsure of the exact workings of the censoring mechanisms and tried to make sense of them via inferences of how the system worked and how to avoid future consequences. In the Facebook groups they would even engage in shared speculation over how the systems worked and share 'tips' for how to avoid being caught by the 'Facebook police', as they often referred to it, or, if penalized, the 'Facebook jail', as one sceptic framed his banning: "Many of the people I know get their Facebook profiles closed or restricted, and, every day I'll have someone go: 'Yay, I'm out of Facebook jail again, I got 30 days this time, next time I'll probably get 60 days'" (interview, 2021).

Other respondents reflected on the experience of suddenly being restricted in receiving and posting comments, and the possibility that the

lack of comments and notifications was also part of a penalty, referring to concepts like 'ghosting' and 'shadow banning' (interview, 2021). One interviewee said: "Look, no one has commented. I think it has to do with the algorithms" (interview, 2021). Another reflected on the connection between the promotion of an event and the inability to comment:

> 'I think it was just around May 1st when I started promoting the event a lot, and then, all of a sudden, Facebook restricted my account. But I did not get a "You have done this and that and therefore you have limited activities during the next three days" kind of message. I could not comment on anything!' (Interview, 2021)

As a countermeasure to avoid banning or other types of restrictions, the sceptics developed a wide range of 'counter-tactics', including local practices on specific platforms and moving across different digital platforms and from digital to physical spaces. In the following, we summarize some of these counter-tactics.

A widespread tactic was the encouragement of fellow sceptics to share and reinforce the circulation of specific content before it is deleted. Across several groups, variations of the same phrasing were used in many posts, often with capital letters to separate the metatext and the post, for example, 'SHARE, SHARE, SHARE', 'COPY PASTE', 'SHARE BEFORE DELETION', and so forth. Evidently, the sceptics worked with a range of imagined constraints in the digital space. They envisioned a fight played out in the digital realm against some controlling elite actors who prevented them from sharing important content and arguments. Who these elite actors are and what they do was not transparent to the sceptics, but because of earlier experiences with deleted material, they assumed that this might happen again. Therefore, they acted with constant fear of being suppressed. Pace became a key tactic to ensure they spread their content to as many users as possible before deletion.

Another tactic was 'cheat the Facebook police' where the sceptics used intentional misspellings or specific language to avoid triggering censoring mechanisms. One example of this was using emojis instead of words, such as using the cow emoji to write Covid, which makes sense in Danish, as cow is 'ko', which mimics the 'co' sound in 'Covid'. The tactic also includes more general considerations of what language to use, which we see in this quote by one of the interviewees, who describes how she uses certain references but leaves out specific words. As she explained: "I sometimes reference the Second World War, but I would never dream of writing, for example, 'Nazi' in a post. I think those who do are also the ones who get quarantined or stuff like that" (interview, 2021). As with the first tactic, the actors are acting against these hidden mechanisms of censorship controlled

by Big Tech, which they can only speculate about. Since the algorithms employed by, for example, Facebook constantly evolve and learn to detect these adversarial tactics, the concrete manifestations of this tactic constantly changed throughout the pandemic, based on ideas developed in the sceptics' group of what work best to escape the systems.

A third counter-tactic was the creation of backup or alternative profiles and groups. One interviewee described being banned completely from Facebook and how he created a new profile shortly afterwards using the fake name 'Frank Sølyst' (interview, 2021). The interviewee explained how he was also restricted in doing 'lives' from this new account and that he therefore arranged a demonstration in front of the Facebook headquarters in Copenhagen and would do lives via another sceptic's Facebook account on a regular basis. This is a good example of a cross-cutting activity; when constrained in the digital space, he first tried to navigate this space but moved to the physical space when it proved impossible. Other interviewees described preparing backup profiles on Facebook to ensure they would not disappear if banned completely. This was an important precaution as they strongly believed that it would be necessary; it was just a matter of time, as they knew banning was a widespread phenomenon among all sceptics (interview, 2021). One interviewee was amused when talking about one of her female friends, who operated from a new profile, taking the male name 'Claus' (interview, 2021). The same was the case with groups, where they would also make backup groups and have the members of the existing groups also join there to ensure the network was not lost in case their group got deleted.

A fourth tactic involved moving to uncensored physical locations, other platforms such as Twitter or LinkedIn, or 'alternative' platforms such as Telegram. While the former tactic was about 'cheating', this was a more bombastic act that we call 'ditch the Facebook police'. Again, the sceptics were aware of the constraints in the digital space and the audience in these different spaces. One interviewee talked about how he was able to share everything on his Telegram account without being censored but that he was 'preaching to the choir' and did not reach new people there, as Telegram is a less used platform in Denmark. Surprisingly, he also mentioned LinkedIn as an operating platform, and said that he had never been banned on either LinkedIn or Twitter (interview, 2021). Several of the interviewees also mentioned Messenger as a way of sharing content that they were unsure of because they experienced less censoring there. So, they would often discuss phrases with fellow sceptics before sharing it more widely (interview, 2021). Sometimes, this platform was also used for practical or organizing purposes not relevant for the entire Facebook group and was afforded smaller group conversations. In a Facebook post from the Facebook group 'We are the people! We have had it!', a member encourages fellow sceptics

to follow the group on Telegram if they want 'the newest, uncensored and fact-checked stories'.

Two of the interviewees were not only members of the Facebook groups but also administrators. They both expressed that they felt a certain responsibility for acting in hyper-strict ways so that their actions or the actions of others in the group would not cause trouble for the group, and as a result they would enforce strict regulation of the groups in terms of which posts were approved or not. They were both convinced that Facebook paid attention to them as administrators and to their compliance with Facebook's community standards. To counter this, they both used a range of tactics to avoid being censored or closed. One example was the continuous tidying of the digital space by deleting posts that did not address what they regarded as the group's main issue(s). The logic behind this is that the higher the number of posts, the higher the risk of something potentially problematic leading to consequent banning. Likewise, one of the administrators said that she sometimes passed on the warnings she received from Facebook about the circulation of the information shared in the group that the fact-checkers perceived as misinformation, showing us a concrete formulation of a heads-up: "Please, take it easy with the discussion about vaccines, because if you continue, we will be shut down" (interview, 2021). This mimics the tactics of language use discussed earlier. Here, we saw how the tactics used are responses to constraints in the digital space and all engage in forms of 'algorithmic resistance' (Velkova and Kaun, 2021), but based on self-developed ideas of what the system does.

Publicity tactics

Going into the streets was not just a way for the sceptics to avoid the Facebook police; it was also a way of showing 'outsiders' that they were a 'real public' with numbers, not just a small group online. The move to the physical realm was, therefore, not only a counter-tactic but also a publicity tactic oriented towards gaining recognition in the wider society. Moving to the streets was part of a tactic that we call 'make the cause relevant' because this tactic aimed at both rallying support among existing and new members and gaining recognition of the cause and its relevance by systemic actors. The move to the physical space was, therefore, partly a response to the constraints in the digital space, but also a way to engage with mass media logics. In this way, physical protests were also a means to demand attention from legacy media. In the following, we go through some of the publicity tactics used by the sceptics with the aim of being recognized by institutional actors, especially the media and politicians. The fact that so much effort was put into creating this connection implies that the constitution of counterpublics is still very much dependent on the recognition of elite actors and that to

gain influence, the counterpublics believed they had to contact the traditional system. One respondent spoke quite definitively: "We will not break through until we get broadcasted by DR1 or TV 2 and on the radio. They are the ones who are in power" (interview, 2021).

Besides demonstrating, which is one of the primary ways of getting media attention (especially if the demonstrations include violent episodes and confrontation with the police or if they involve many participants), a widely used tactic for getting in contact with systemic actors is commenting on their social media posts. As one respondent explained: "If I see that they [my Facebook friends] are on Mette Frederiksen's page [the prime minister], I check their comments, and then I also write some myself, and then there are several who see that I write, and then it rolls" (interview, 2021). The implicit logic here is that connecting to a politician is a way of contacting important elite actors as well as starting a deluge of comments that make them visible as a counterpublic. Similar tactics include inviting politicians to debates and actively seeking press support, especially before going to demonstrations (interview, 2021). One interviewee was amazed that the newspaper *The Guardian* had cited a fellow protester and referred to the number of followers on Facebook:

> 'Then there was this journalist from *The Guardian* who had quoted her by name and the whole shebang in *The Guardian*. And I said to her, "*The Guardian*, Stephanie, do you know what this means …". And then, I had to show her that they have 8.5 million followers on Facebook.' (Interview, 2021)

The citation by a large, well-renowned media outlet was for the sceptics like borrowing a catapult of agency. This reminds us that agency is relational. Agency is not something that you just have; it is something that you are awarded by others. Two other system-embracing tactics are making citizen proposals and creating political parties. The respondents do not necessarily believe that they will succeed in this, but it will certainly lead to increased attention, particularly from the press (interview, 2021). What characterizes the publicity tactics is an outward-facing focus on connecting with rather than resisting the system (as with counter-tactics). They also help to illustrate the different ways the spaces afford agency differently, as social media, while giving easy access, do not give access to the right mechanisms of power. On the other hand, the mass media and politicians would not engage in deliberation, therefore, the agency to act with these systems was limited.

When going through the tactics – mobilization tactics, counter-tactics and publicity tactics – a unifying component seems to be an orientation towards quantification (via data). To put it another way, the quantification logic seems to permeate all the tactics in the hybrid media system. All

interviewees talked about likes and shares and attached great importance to high numbers. As one respondent said:

> 'If you take TV 2 [Danish national broadcasting], for example, and the posts they make on Twitter, they get 50–100 likes. If they make a post on Facebook, they get around 1,000, 10,000 or 50,000 likes. Depending on the kind of post. Magnus Heunicke [Danish politician] is both on Twitter and on Facebook, and he might get something like 20–40 likes [on Twitter], but on Facebook, he can get 15,000.' (Interview, 2021)

That numbers were crucial for the agency can be seen in the negotiation of group sizes. Several respondents mentioned that the media always underestimated how many of them there were, which they saw as an attack on their legitimacy as a public, thereby limiting the effect their presence in the physical space could have on the wider society as reached through mass media: "We were around 3–4,000 people, but they wrote that we were only 400 people" (interview, 2021). Furthermore, some of the groups also collaborated in a common group to gain more visibility and power (interview, 2021). This was again driven by an underlying quantification logic of 'the bigger, the better'. One respondent ended by saying, "It is of no use if there are five people shouting. It is the number of people that is crucial for someone to bother to listen" (interview, 2021).

Conclusion

In this case, we see how agency is constantly at stake and fought for in the processes of public formation and how data becomes an integrated part of these processes. At the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the administrators of some of the now-large Facebook groups experienced that other people were highly interested in taking over the groups that had been central during the pandemic and using these to forward their agendas. The negotiations over such 'takeovers' were highlighted by the administrator of one of the largest Facebook groups for sceptics, who was worried about what the members would feel. The allure of the group was, of course, its metrics – its size, its frequency of posts and interactions, and its reach – all datafied proofs of the groups' societal relevance and ability to bring forward a legitimate issue. Our study shows how important the materialization and datafication of the activities were for the people involved; data of their numbers and activities were seen as a resource. The focus on datafication was part of the way they planned their activities, where they would leave data traces through photos of physical events and store event lists. They aimed to produce data traces in the way they commented and became part of multiple groups as a way for

the group of sceptics to seem larger than it was. They attempted to quantify their physical protests to counter the numbers presented in the press.

An overall (bridging) goal seemed to be the struggle for demonstrating a certain volume, showing that they were a larger group and should therefore be taken seriously, which is what we illustrated with the concept of hybrid quantification logic. This, however, raises an important discussion on how the agency of publics is intimately interlinked with data production, both as a resource and a danger, which was evident in the counter-tactics aimed at algorithmic and human moderators, where aims to leave limited or the right data traces became a concern and where agency manifested itself through resistance (see also Treré, 2018; Velkova and Kaun, 2021).

Christina Neumayer and David Struthers (2018) recently highlighted the role of social media as 'activist archives', but in a critical way, as the data processes of these 'archives' were not in the hands of the activists but controlled by social media logics. In this chapter, we showed how these logics become a resource for the counterpublics in formation, but also that much agency is tied up in this relationship. More research is needed to fully understand the implications of this highly datafied dance of publicness and counterpublicness, how the inherent logics of the platforms that collect data change the practices of publics, and how that data might be used in other ways than intended by the publics.

Notes

[1] Observations were carried out by the second author, Anna Schjøtt.

[2] We choose the framing 'sceptics' as a broad term for all people who act against the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. 'Sceptics' emphasizes their common attitude but does not entail a positive or negative interpretation on their actions. In this way, we avoid taking a normative stance towards the people and their actions. Furthermore, this framing leaves room for discussing the activities as part of a formation process in which the people, their activities and incipient formations do not necessarily yet take shape as a 'counterpublic', 'public' or 'movement', but are in process and might (or might not) develop as such.

[3] As part of another project, we also did historic scrapes in three of the open Facebook groups explored in this case study. The Facebook posts shared in these groups were collected during four two-week periods with three months between them (1–14 May 2020, only two months after the official lockdown of Denmark on 11 March 2020; 1–14 September 2020; 1–14 January 2021; and 1–14 May 2021) (see Bengtsson et al [2021] for details on the study). Therefore, we had some insights into how these groups had developed over time before the period of ethnographic enquiry.

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