

Original article

“Friends Call Me Racist”: Experiences of Repercussions From Writing Comments On Newspaper Websites

Abstract

Based on a survey among contributors to the online comments sections of four Norwegian newspapers, we investigate the following research question: How do contributors describe their experiences of repercussions from writing comments on newspaper websites? Employing quantitative and qualitative analyses, we explore the influence of four variables: Gender, anonymity, attitudes towards editorial policies and issue controversy. We find no influence from gender. However, regarding attitudes we find that the experience of repercussions is particularly prevalent amongst those who oppose strict editorial control with regards to reader comments, as well as among respondents who write comments on a radical right-wing website. Studying free-form answers which describe incidents of repercussions experienced by the respondents we find no sign of gender differences, but rather a strong dominance of statements related to issue controversies, and particularly regarding immigration and Islam.

Keywords: Online comments, repercussions, harassment, journalism, audience participation, user experience.

Introduction

Online comments systems have given ordinary people simple ways to share and discuss their opinions in public forums. However, there has been disagreement in the scholarly community about the democratic value of online comments (Dahlgren, 2005; Janssen and Kies, 2005; Kies 2010; Wright and Street, 2007), and several claim to see a deterioration of public discourse, pointing to issues like “echo chambers” and increased polarization (Sunstein, 2017), "flaming" (Lee, 2005, 2012; Santana, 2014), "trolling" (Coleman, 2012; Hardaker, 2010; Phillips, 2015), harassment of women (Biber et al., 2002) and hate speech (Erjavec and Kovacic, 2012; Gelber and McNamara, 2016; Glaser et al., 2002).

In this article we explore the negative experiences described by participants in online debate. We ask: *How do commenters describe experiences of repercussions from writing comments on newspaper websites?* In particular we study whether gender, anonymity, attitudes towards editorial control and issue controversy impact such experiences. We believe it is important to get better insight into how problematic online behavior is expressed by those who actually comment. Arguably, more knowledge about how users express and explain negative feedback from partaking in online discussions may shed light on the costs of being an active online citizen, and could furthermore be a valuable contribution to academic as well as professional debates concerning editorial strategies to minimize the types of repercussions under discussion here.

The study is based on an online survey conducted one year after the two terror attacks carried out in Norway the 22nd of July 2011 by a right-wing extremist. The attacks created shockwaves in the Norwegian society, and several studies have investigated the events from a media and communication perspective (Eide, 2012; Figenschou and Beyer, 2014; Hervik and Meret, 2013; Jakobsson and Blom, 2014; Kammer, 2013; Lund and Olsson, 2016). Of particular interest for this study is the high attention given to online comments in the time

after the attacks, by scholars as well as media, politicians and other public figures (Author, YYYY; Eide et al., 2013; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou, 2016). In light of reports about the terrorist's online "compendium", as well as his activities in various online forums, many public figures and scholars criticized what they saw as a destructive culture in online debates - as well as too lax editorial control in online media (Bangstad and Vetlesen, 2011; Eide et al., 2013; Skogerbø, 2013). Some even suggested that this negative culture might, more or less directly, be to blame for the attacks (Brandtzæg, 2011; Øgrim, 2011). Others expressed concerns that online discussion forums might provide a platform for extremists to develop and amplify radicalized views together with like-minded (Strømmen, 2011). The backlash against online comments gained sufficient prominence to dominate the prime minister's 2012 New Year's address, in which he urged citizens to act as "digital watchdogs" against online extremism (Stoltenberg 2012).

We put forth that this backlash provides a particularly interesting context in which to study these issues. Arguably, the attacks created a situation in which issues that previously had been mainly discussed among scholars and media professionals now became common points of reference in the broader public debate, such as "cyberbalkanisation" and "echo chambers" as well as questions regarding editorial administration and responsibilities (cf. Author, YYYY; Author, YYYY; Singer et al., 2011). Furthermore, since the terrorist was inspired by extreme anti-Islamic ideology, the climate for discussing issues of immigration, multi-culturalism and Islam was particularly sensitive. In recent years, there have been similar controversies about online comments in other countries and contexts (Ahva and Hautakangas, 2017; LaBarre, 2013) leading the technology magazine *Wired* at one point to proclaim "The End of the Comments" (Finley, 2015). Recent political events such as the "Brexit" referendum in the UK and the 2016 US presidential elections have raised issues relating to online comments high on the international public's agenda. Thus, the case studied in this

article may have relevance for the ongoing controversies about online comments in many countries and contexts.

Controversies about online comments

Research on online comments in newspapers has often focused on the quality of debate in such forums. Several studies have explored the challenge of incivility and harassments (Coe et al., 2014; Hmielowski et al., 2014; Muddiman and Stroud, 2017; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Ziegele et al., 2017) and how design features and editorial policies can impact the deliberative quality of comments (Author, YYYY; Author, YYYY; Canter, 2013; Jensen, 2003; Kies, 2010; Trénel, 2009; Stroud et al., 2015; Toepfl and Litvinenko, 2017; Wright and Street, 2007). Others have questioned the concept of “deliberative quality” in such novel forms of debate and instead applied counter-public theory to understand the dynamics of user behavior (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015).

Another strand of research has explored what motivates participation and what triggers interactivity (Author, YYYY; Chung, 2008; Lee and Tandoc, 2017; Springer et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2008; Ziegele and Quiring, 2013; Ziegele et al., 2017). Ziegele et al. explore the influence of so-called “discussion factors” on people’s willingness to interact with other users - including the level of aggression, controversy, facticity, unexpectedness, negativity, personalization and uncertainty - and find that posts characterized by “controversy, unexpectedness, personalization and uncertainty” were the most likely to get responses by other users (Ziegele et al., 2014).

Turning to the commenters' motivation for posting comments, a recent study indicates that commenters are motivated by “the desire to interact” with journalists and to discuss with other users (Springer et al., 2015). Furthermore, the study points out that commenters often do not obtain “cognitive gratifications” from their involvement. While the study provides useful and interesting insight into why commenters chose to participate, it is, we argue, also

necessary to investigate the negative experiences of participating in online discussions. We believe such perspectives are essential to get a wider understanding of how commenters, who are often accused of contributing to a more hostile debate culture, describe how it is to be an active online citizen.

In the following, we will outline some of the dimensions that we believe might affect the experience of repercussions: gender, anonymity, attitudes towards editorial control and issue controversies. That being said, the study at hand takes an exploratory approach in that we are not always certain to what extent or even how these suggested dimensions will emerge as having had influences on the experiences of our respondents.

Gender

Studies have shown that gender can be an important dimension when it comes to different forms of online engagement: men are more active on Twitter and in online newspapers' comment sections, while women are slightly more active on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat (Enjolras et al 2013; Pew Research Centre 2014). In an international study covering Facebook users from 10 countries, Brandtzaeg (2017) found that women to a lesser degree engaged in political linking activities than men. Surprisingly, and relevant for our current context, Brandtzaeg finds that the gender gap is larger in countries characterized by a high degree of gender equality, such as Norway, compared to more male-dominated cultures such as Iran and Brazil. Brandtzaeg suggests this might be caused by the widespread use of Facebook in the former countries, leading the Facebook users there to be more representative of the population at large than in the latter countries (2017: 117). An earlier study by Enjolras et al. (2013) similarly shows that fewer women than men discuss politics through comments on newspaper websites, and also that women tend to understand their social media activities as more private than men. The authors connect this with earlier

research suggesting that women to a larger degree than men prefer to discuss politics with their friends and family, rather than with strangers in a public forum.

Recently, much media attention has been given to the harassment of women online. In a recent analysis of comments to the Guardian website, the newspaper revealed that the level of abusive comments directed at column writers appear to be unevenly distributed: "[O]f the 10 most abused writers eight are women, and the two men are black" (Gardiner et al., 2016). Research has documented the ways in which gendered harassment occurs in social media (Fox et al., 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan, 2016; Marwick, 2013; Megarry, 2014), and the so-called "gamergate" controversy has cast attention on online harassment directed at women in gaming cultures (Chess and Shaw, 2015).

While it is often claimed that women are more vulnerable to online abuse than men, recent studies have suggested that women and men experience approximately the same level of harassment online, and that men are more vulnerable when it comes to receiving direct threats. Women are, however, more likely to experience gendered and sexual harassment than men, and tend to limit their own utterances to a higher degree (Enjolras and Steen-Johnsen, 2014; Hagen, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014; Staksrud et al., 2014). In summary, previous research is inconclusive regarding the influence of gender on the experience of repercussions from writing online comments; however, the attention given to gender in debates about online harassment suggests that gender warrants attention also in our study.

Anonymity

The question of anonymity has been of central concern within studies of online deliberation. Scholars have compared comments posted on sites that allow anonymous activity with comments from sites that do not allow for this type of participation, finding that sites which allow anonymity tend to attract a comparably higher amount of uncivil comments (Coleman

and Moss, 2012; Elgesem and Nordeide, 2016; Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014). Proponents for allowing anonymous comments argue that identification mechanisms make participants vulnerable to harassment or other forms of repercussions outside of the comment fields – seen as especially problematic for vulnerable or marginal groups (boyd, 2012). Based on the literature our expectations are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, it is probable that commenters who have participated anonymously may have more negative experiences, since incivility and harassment occur more often in forums that allows for anonymous contributions. On the other hand, users who participate using their real name might be more vulnerable to attacks because they are sharing their identity, making it possible for others to attack them through other online or offline channels.

Attitudes towards editorial control

Studies have indicated that newspapers which facilitate online comments have spent much effort developing control mechanisms and moderation policies, balancing between questions of quality, economic interests and restrictions, technological possibilities, and legal and ethical considerations (Author, YYYY; Singer et al., 2011). A previous study carried out by the authors indicated that commenters differ in their experiences of editorial interventions depending on their attitude towards editorial control (Author, YYYY). The study identified that those users who supports a non-interventionist, laissez-faire model towards editorial control, more often reported having had their comments edited or deleted by moderators. Furthermore, they also felt more strongly that their freedom to speak their mind had deteriorated after the 2011 terror attacks. With these previous results in mind we find it interesting to investigate to what degree commenters' attitudes towards editorial policies and control affect their experience of repercussions. We do not have a clear suggestion regarding the nature of this relation. On the one hand, one might expect that those who have experienced repercussions such as harassment or threats would be more likely to call for

stronger editorial control and stricter rules, in order to be protected from such experiences, thus setting up a positive correlation between those who support strict editorial policies and experiences of repercussions. On the other hand, there might be other factors at play. For instance, participants who favor less editorial control may tend to have controversial opinions, preferring particular websites, topics or modes of discussion that feature more heated exchanges, thereby increasing the chance that they experience repercussions that they find problematic.

Issue controversy

Several studies have indicated that the topic of discussion can impact on the deliberative quality of online forums, as well as levels of flaming and harassment (Janssen and Kies, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2007). A study by Berg (2016) suggests that issue controversies play an important factor when it comes to levels of incivility, indeed that the topic of concern is more significant than anonymity. Other studies have in addition pinpointed that immigration in particular is understood as particularly problematic from an editorial point of view and could lead to incivility (Richardson and Stanyer, 2011). In the aftermath of the 2011 terror attacks much public debate was directed at the problematic aspects of online forums in general, and in particular on issues of racism, anti-immigration sentiments and far-right positions online, and the climate for discussing such issues was highly sensitive. We therefore expect that commenters that wish to address such topics may be more likely to report troublesome experiences.

Method

Based on the interview study about editorial strategies after the terror attacks outlined above, an online survey was conducted among participants in the online comments sections of the four newspapers discussed previously. The participants were invited through a link from each newspaper to the online survey system Questback, where the survey was hosted. The survey

was open from 17 September – 3 October 2013 and received 3470 answers. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-form questions, and this paper is based on a series of quantitative and qualitative analyses of a selection of the included questions. As our data represent a self-selected sample of participants who responded to an open invitation to an online survey, we cannot draw conclusions about the general population. Nevertheless, we argue that the reported correlations provide useful insights into these tendencies as they relate to what could be considered as a highly interested group of respondents. Through a regression analysis, we investigate whether the experience of repercussions is more prevalent among certain groups. In the analysis, we will be using the following independent variables:

- **Age** (measured in categories 1-5, 1 = “Under 18”, 2 = “18-29”, 3 = “30-44”, 4 = “45-60”, 5 = “Over 60”)
- **Gender** (1 = “Female”, 2 = “Male”)
- **Education** (1 = “Elementary school”, 2 = “High school”, 3 = “Up to four years of university”, 4 = “More than four years of university”)
- **Frequency**: “How often do you participate in online discussion, writing comments or posts or making other contributions?” (1 = “Never”, 2 = “Sometimes, but less than once a week”, 3 = “Once or several times per week”, 4 = “Once or several times per day”)
- **Anonymity**: “Do you usually comment using your real name, or anonymously/with a made-up name (pseudonym)?” (1 = “Real name”, 2 = “Anonymously/made-up name (pseudonym)”)
- **Editorial control**: “In your opinion, are the limits for what is allowed to write in online comments on the sites where you yourself participate appropriate, or too strict, or too permissive?” (5-point likert-type scale, 1 = “far too permissive”, 5 = “far too strict”)
- **Website**: “In which online newspapers/online media have you participated with online comments?” (Multiple options allowed. In the regression analysis, this is recoded as a set of binary variables: 0=Respondent does not debate on this site, 1= Respondent debates on this site)

Three of these variables (gender, anonymity and editorial control) can be mapped straightforwardly to the corresponding dimensions we have presented earlier. Regarding the fourth dimension - issue controversy - we do not have questions in our survey which can measure this directly. However, the variable called "website" does give some information that can be used to assess the importance of this dimension. This variable indicates which websites

the respondents usually write comments on. As we shall see below, the measurements on this variable seem to indicate that issue controversy plays an important role.

For the analysis of the open ended questions in the survey, two independent coders first coded the responses following a codebook developed by the authors. In the second step of the analysis the authors performed a close reading of the text material in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the respondents describe and explain experiences of repercussion in their own words, and search for insights that may not have been captured by the quantitative analysis.

Quantitative analysis

In order to gain insight into respondent experience of repercussions from writing comments online, we asked the following question in the online survey: "*Have you ever experienced problems in your everyday life as a consequence of something you have written in an online comments section - for instance problems with your employer or colleagues, harassment, threats, etc.?*" Answers were given as "yes" (11%), "no" (85%) or "don't know" (4%). While the vast majority of respondents report no such problems, the relatively large minority that answered yes is still worrisome.

Table 1 presents results from a logistic regression analysis where this question is treated as the dependent variable, and tested for the influences of the independent variables listed in the previous section. The dependent variable was recoded as 0=no negative experiences reported, 1=negative experiences reported, while those who answered "don't know" were excluded. Each independent variable is presented with its corresponding significance value and exponentiation of the B coefficient – labeled as 'Exp(B)' in the table. This latter value, sometimes also understood as an odds ratio, helps us gauge the influence of the independent variables. In essence, if an Exp(B) result reaches over a value of '1', and if

this result is significant, the independent variable has had a positive effect on the dependent variable. Conversely, if the significant $\text{Exp}(B)$ fails to reach a value of '1', this can be interpreted as a negative effect in relation to the dependent variable.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Using the measures in Table 1 to assess the expectations outlined earlier, we see first of all that the gender variable yields no significant correlation, which is in line with findings from previous studies. If women generally receive more harassment we would have expected to find a significant and small $\text{Exp}(B)$ coefficient here. We also note (perhaps unsurprisingly) that frequency has an effect: Those who participate more often experience repercussions to a higher degree than those who participate more seldom. As for anonymity, the positive coefficient shows a connection between negative experiences and participating anonymously, **lending support to the hypothesis that sites that allow anonymous participation attract more uncivility.** The score for the editorial control variable indicates that the respondent's attitude towards editorial control has a significant and positive correlation with the experience of repercussions: Those who find editorial control too strict report to have experienced negative everyday consequences to higher degrees than those who find the rules too permissive. As outlined above, this might indicate that there are some aspects of the discussion practice of those that support liberal editorial policies that leads them to more often experience problems.

Regarding the list of websites in the lower section of Table 1, it is interesting to note that the only significant predictor in this section proved to be engagement on Document.no, a website which stands out regarding its editorial profile and thematic focus. All the other websites mentioned belong to large mainstream media organizations: seven Oslo-based newspapers of national or regional importance (VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Nettavisen, Vårt

Land, Dagsavisen, Høyr Online) as well as the two largest national broadcasters (NRK and TV2). Document.no, however, is a niche web site dominated by radical anti-islam and anti-immigrant reporting, which gained notoriety in public debate after the 2011 terrorist attacks when it became known that the perpetrator had been an active commenter on the site. This website was included in the list as a prominent edge case due to its role in public controversies about online comments after the attack. If we presume that those who write comments on this website tend to identify to some degree with its far right political profile, it seems reasonable to suggest that their heightened tendency to report problems is connected with their political views and preference to discuss issues that are considered controversial.

Turning our attention to the types of repercussions commenters report to have experienced, we move to a conditional follow-up question that was asked of the respondents who answered affirmatively to the former question. In order to provide a breadth of answers, respondents were allowed to answer the following question in free-form: "*Can you give an example of problems that have occurred as a consequence of online discussions (as mentioned in the previous question)?*" Two independent coders analyzed all 316 responses received. Employing an iterative approach for coding the different themes touched upon in the answers, an initial 18 codes were collapsed into six final codes (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.76$):

- *Negative responses* (30%): These answers mention uncomfortable confrontations, criticism from friends, colleagues or other people in one's everyday environment, and other descriptions of negative experiences that were deemed too general to fit into any of the other categories.
- *Threats* (23%): This code refers to any mention of threats, regardless of the content or context.
- *Harassment* (14%): This refers to any mention of harassment, vandalism or similarly transgressive behavior that does not include threats or physical violence.
- *Problems with employer* (10%): This category includes answers that mention problems involving the respondent's employer, whether they are informal (e.g., bad mood, being passed up for promotion, etc.) or formal (e.g. complaints, reprimands, etc.).
- *Violence and crime* (2%): This code includes any mention of physical violence or serious crime against the respondent.

- *No relevant answer* (22%): This code featured answers in which our coders could not find any mention of problems that the respondent had experienced as a consequence of writing comments on newspaper websites.

As the diagram shows, a number of respondents claim to have experienced threats, harassment or trouble with their employers, whereas very few mention experiences of violence or other serious crime. It could be considered as remarkable that around half of all the answers fall in one of the two broad categories that do not entail any mention of such serious problems: *Negative responses* or *No relevant answer*. The former of the two includes answers coded as “unwanted discussions”, “uncomfortable confrontations”, “spreading rumours/backstabbing”, “negative feedback from friends”, “general problems with everyday surroundings”, as well as “problems with colleagues” and “other”. A few examples might serve as enlightening here:

- “Uncomfortable email from strangers” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “Uncomfortable comments on Facebook, from people with other political opinions than me” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “Nasty stares etc., and ‘goddamn you’re childish’” (Man, 18-29 years)
- “Not really problems per se, but unflattering comments” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “A colleague started ignoring me at work.” (Woman, 18-29 years)

Constructing a separate variable, the coders identified any mention of problems that led the respondents to involve police, lawyers or other forms of formal protection or help. Only 2 respondents (of 316) reported any such incidents.

In order to investigate any possible gender differences we separated the answers by gender, as shown in Figure 1 below. This analysis yielded no statistically significant difference between the genders. Similar analyses for education and age also failed to show any significant differences.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Qualitative analysis

In order to get more nuanced and detailed insights into the commenters' experiences, two of the authors performed a qualitative reading of the answers classified in Figure 1. We sorted the answers according to gender and read all the answers from male and female respondents separately, in order to look for differences in the answers from each gender. In the following, we will explore the findings from the qualitative reading in more detail, taking as our starting point the two categories in Figure 1 where there appears to be some difference - although not statistically significant - between the two genders: *harassment* and *threats*. Focusing on these categories, we provide some examples of statements from male and female respondents below. Both male and female respondents often refer to 'harassment',¹ mentioning uncomfortable text messages, emails, phone calls, or face-to-face confrontations. However, our reading did not yield any clear insights indicating that male and female respondents describe their experiences of problems differently. In particular we did not find any clear tendencies that female respondents reported sexualized or gendered harassment to a large degree, such as reported by Staksrud et al. (2014). Rather, through our reading we noticed that a different topic stands out in many comments: namely, the respondents' remarks about their own and/or their harassers' political leanings, pointing to how issue controversies in particular lead to negative experiences. Consider these examples of responses from women, coded as harassment:

- “Someone found out my identity under pseudonym and ridiculed my opinions on Facebook because they coincidentally saw a connection between an opinion I had as status, a comment in a blog debate about hijab.” (Woman, 18-29 years)
- “Got dog shit in the mail after I wrote a comment expressing skepticism towards immigration.” (Woman, 18-29 years)

¹ The (Norwegian) words most often used were "trakassering" or "mobbing".

- “I received daily messages which said ‘whore’ from someone who claimed to be the leader of an Islamist party. All malaise has come from Islamists or leftists. I am roughly in the center, politically speaking.” (Woman, 45-60 years)

The following examples are from male respondents, coded as harassment:

- “Became a social outcast at work [...] because of a FrP-style comment.” (Man, 45-60 years) [FrP = the Progress Party, a populist right wing party.]
- “I’ve been called anti-Semite by Christian groups, nazi by ‘anti-racists’, and generally a whole bunch of nasty things as a consequence of my views.” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “Mocked on Facebook, blocked, etc.” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “In particular in debates where I ask why people are expressing themselves so hatefully and hostile [...] there often comes answers like ‘socialist asshole’, ‘marxist communist’, ‘multiculturalist’ and often references to the red-green [centre-left] government...” (Man, 30-44 years)

Perhaps what is most striking about the statements coded as “harassment” is the broad range of problematic experiences mentioned by respondents. Some, such as having feces dropped in one's mailbox, becoming an “outcast” at work or having one's identity disclosed when trying to remain anonymous, exemplify that the respondents’ utterances in online comments have consequences in other everyday contexts. But many other examples point to experiences that take place in the context of online debate, such as being “mocked” or being the target of political name-calling. Such experiences may well indicate that the norms for civil debate (cf. Elgesem and Nordeide, 2016) are being violated, but they don’t include any indication of consequences for the respondent outside of the context of the debate. As such, it seems that even a large number of the answers coded as harassment represent relatively inconsequential experiences, even though they might be uncomfortable. In the examples above, such experiences are primarily visible in the answers from male respondents; and one might argue that the types of harassment mentioned by some of the female respondents seem somewhat more serious than what is reported by male respondents. It is perhaps also worth noticing that while there is mention of political name-calling among both genders, the only mention of a gender-based slur (“whore”) is among the examples from female respondents. However, we

cannot conclude that these differences represent a general tendency in the answers from male and female respondents.

Examining the "threats" category, we find several respondents referring to such incidents happening through phone calls, emails, text messages and face-to-face confrontations. Several also point out that this has discouraged them from using their real names when writing online comments. Respondents often refer to their political views and/or those of their opponents; but rarely mention sexualized threats or other gender-related behaviour. The following examples are responses from women coded as describing threats:

- “I have received threats and uncomfortable phone calls (in the end I had to change my mobile phone number and block it from the phone registry) from other debaters who disagreed with my arguments. This is a part of the reason why I now also choose to comment anonymously.” (Woman, 30-44 years)
- “I received anonymous threats over the phone” (Woman, 18-29 years)
- “Messages in my inbox from muslims describing what they will do to me, my children, my mother etc. Lots of nasty threats. Mocked as a ‘right wing extremist nazi’ because I support Israel in debates (believe it or not...)” (Woman, 30-44 years)

The following examples are from male respondents, coded as threats:

- “Getting stopped on the street by opponents and threatened, after that I changed to anonymous persona. The left wing has many similarities to the NSDAP’s SA and many Ernst Röhm copycats.” (Man, under 18 years)
- “I have been threatened with murder by a man of non-western background. This because I wrote that it was about time that Norway systematized immigration and started doing background checks on those who arrive” (Man, 30-44 years)
- “Threats from religious extremists in debates about Islam, freedom of expression and human rights.” (Man, 18-29 years)

In the examples listed above, we can identify a similar dimension as that noted in the answers from the “harassment” category: Some of the answers describe threats communicated in the context of online comments, whereas others describe threats occurring outside of this context, such as on the phone, on the street or through email. The examples from female respondents above all point to threats occurring outside the online comments context, whereas the answers

from male respondents vary in this respect. However, again our material does not allow us to make any clear conclusion as to whether or not this is a general difference between males and females. It should be noted that many of the answers coded as threats are less specific than the ones cited above, often just simply stating “threats” without giving any further detail; such non-specific answers are found both among male and female respondents.

While our qualitative reading was initially directed towards differences between the genders, what instead stood out in our reading was the high frequency of references to political affiliation and issue controversies. When describing their negative experiences, our respondents tend to bring up political viewpoints more often than any other aspect of the problems they have experienced. These views are typically seen in relation to a right-left axis, and primarily in regard to questions about immigration and Islam. Some express a sense of polarisation and antagonism towards the people representing the other side of the controversy, whether those are seen as "racists" or as the "politically correct". Consider the following examples:

- "Friends call me racist." (Male, age 30-44)
- "Some friends expressed that they do not like my positive attitude of Document.no" (Male, age 30-44)
- "Colleagues have turned their backs on me because I'm not politically correct" (Male, age 45-60)
- "I was laid off for 14 days from my job at the [NN] school because I had argued that we should have stricter policies on immigration and less political correctness from Norwegians concerning our cultural heritage" (Male, age 30-44)
- "In general, you get associated with [the terrorist] Breivik if you are critical towards immigration or Islam as a religion. That is unpleasant" (Male, age 30-44)
- "People who don't like my opinions have given sarcastic comments or tried to patronize." (female, age 18-29)

The abundance of such answers seems to indicate that a large number of respondents share a feeling of being in opposition to, marginalised or even censored by, a "politically correct" elite which is typically associated with the left side of politics, and which includes

professionals in the news media. Previous studies have also pointed to the feeling of alienation and mistrust from people who place themselves on right and far-right of the political spectrum, often sharing a common mistrust of immigrants, Islam, the news media and elites in general (Holt, 2016; Moe, Thorbjørnsrud and Fladmoe et al., 2017; Thorbjørnsrud, 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article we have explored how people who comment in online forums describe experiences of repercussions as a result of their participation, in relation to four dimensions: Gender, anonymity, attitude towards editorial policies and issue controversies. It is worth noting that a large majority of those participating in the study do not report any experiences of repercussions. However, the fact that a sizeable minority (11%) did report such negative experiences is still of concern.

Regarding gender, the quantitative analysis did not yield any significant effect. These results should be interpreted with some caution, but they nevertheless lend support to those studies which have indicated that gender does not significantly affect the extent of negative consequences from taking part in online debates. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis also failed to bring out any clear differences in the kinds of repercussions men and women report to have experienced. This contradicts earlier studies that suggest women receive more gendered and sexualized feedback (Staksrud et al., 2014; Hagen, 2015). The explanation might be found in methodological differences. Our survey did not specifically ask about gendered or sexualized forms of repercussions and the open-ended answers provided by the respondents were in general quite short, often consisting of just one or two sentences (although some answers were much longer). It might be that the brevity of the answers has prevented us from seeing nuanced differences in the experiences reported by men and women.

Another possible explanation may be that the difference between our findings and those of other studies may be related to the specific types of media channels we have studied; that is, it is possible that gender influences negative experiences differently in different types of online media and social media platforms. However, the lack of any clear finding does shed some doubt on the widely discussed belief that female contributors to online comments are targets of harassment and other forms of negative experiences in a way that differs strongly, either quantitatively or qualitatively, from male contributors.

For the latter three dimensions included in our study, we find significant correlations in our quantitative analysis indicating that those who comment anonymously and those who are skeptical of strict editorial policies tend to experience repercussions more often, as do those who comment on the far-right anti-Islamic news site *Document.no* - indicating that issue controversy does increase the likelihood of experiencing repercussions. The qualitative reading furthermore supports the claim that issue controversy plays a significant part of the respondents' experiences of repercussions. Many of the problematic experiences described by respondents seem to reveal a self-conception as belonging to a marginalized group in opposition to the mainstream, "politically correct" and liberal elite. Other studies have also highlighted how those supporting stricter policies on immigration in Norway feel stigmatized as "evil" by the "moral left-wing" and that sharing such views has consequences for their social life (Thorbjørnsrud 2017). It seems reasonable to suggest that such feelings of marginalization could also contribute to these respondents' opposition towards editorial control, which is associated with "politically correct censorship". At the same time, they see their opponents in debates as belonging to the "politically correct mafia". Such sentiments do not apply to all respondents. However, it could help explain the observation that those who report having experienced problems as a consequence of writing comments in online newspapers, are more likely than others to desire less strict rules for what one is allowed to

write. Future research should explore the relation between political viewpoints, issue controversy and experiences of repercussion in further detail.

The context for the study should be taken into account when interpreting these results. In particular it is likely that the respondents have been attentive to the public backlash against online comments after the terror attacks in 2011, and that this awareness has influenced their responses. Indications of this effect can be seen in comments where respondents speak of discomfort with being associated with the terrorist and his extremist views when presenting critical arguments against immigration or Islam. It is possible that this may have given more weight to the dimension of issue controversy in our study than it would have if data were collected during a different time.

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| | Exp(B) |
|---|----------|
| <i>Socio-demographics</i> | |
| Age group | 1.03 |
| Gender | .76 |
| Education | 1.09 |
| <i>Views and practices related to online debate</i> | |
| Frequency | 1.79*** |
| Anonymity | .64** |
| Editorial control | 1.304*** |
| <i>Web sites for online debate</i> | |
| VG | 1.05 |
| Dagbladet | .92 |
| Aftenposten | 1.24 |
| NRK | 1.15 |
| TV2 | 1.34 |
| Nettavisen | 1.45 |
| Vårt Land (verdidebatt.no) | 1.66 |
| Dagsavisen (nyemeninger.no) | 1.17 |
| Hegnar Online | 1.65 |
| Document.no | 2.09** |
| Others | 1.31 |

Table 1: Logistic regression predicting negative everyday consequences of engaging in online debate (N=1877). Significance levels are reported at the *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$ levels respectively. Cox & Snell R Square = .071, Nagelkerke R Square = .143.

Respondents answering 'both anonymous and non-anonymous' (accounting for 29 %) or 'don't know' (accounting for 4 %) in relation the anonymity variable, as well as respondents answering 'don't know' for the frequency variable (1%), were removed before entering the variables into the analysis.

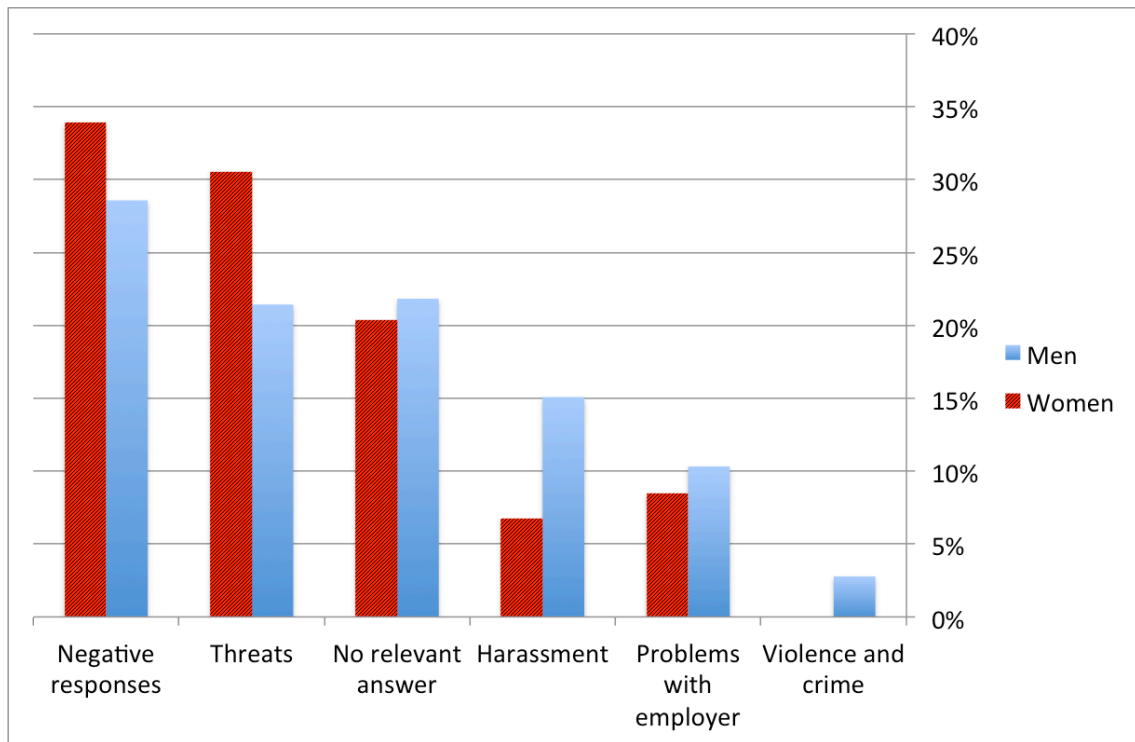


Figure 1: Types of problems separated by gender. N=311. X-squared = 6.450, df = 5, p=0.26.