

Researching online publics

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Abstract

This paper argues that people engage in deliberative processes through a multitude of different forms of communication that are not primarily deliberative. Through an interpretative close-reading of the user comments posted on three Scandinavian newspaper's Facebook pages to articles about the Alan Kurdi-photos, it demonstrates how these can be studied, and discusses why they should be.

Drawing on Hauser's (1999a) vernacular rhetoric model and Kock and Villadsen's (2012; 2014; 2017) notion of rhetorical citizenship, the paper argues that online discussions are relevant to study, although they may not be primarily deliberative, and although they may never have any traceable impact on political decision-making processes. As argued by both Hauser (1999a) and Kock and Villadsen (2017), studies of political rhetoric should also be attentive to everyday civic interactions between 'ordinary' citizens who practice citizenship in multiple ways – also in interpersonal and private settings.

Through the analysis, four different forms of participation are identified: 1) Reacting, 2) Critique of utterances, 3) Deliberation, 4) Epideictic utterances. In the paper, these are defined, their relevance in crafting and enabling citizenship is discussed, and the insights the researcher can gain from studying these are demonstrated. The paper also contains a short discussion of the ethical considerations that must be taken when studying online content produced by private persons, who probably do not anticipate being the object of study. How the researcher can maintain the participants' integrity, and at the same time not restrain the research to the extent that it misses valuable insights, is of particular interest in the discussion.

The paper, then, is a contribution to the development of new approaches to audience research in a complex media environment, in which the audience engage in civic questions in new ways.