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Johannessen, Marius Rohde

Department of Business, History and Social Sciences at University of South-Eastern Norway

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Genres of Participation in Social Networking Systems: A Study of the 2021 Norwegian Parliamentary Election

Marius Rohde Johannessen

School of Business, University of South-Eastern Norway.

Po Box 4, 3199 Borre, Norway

marius.johannessen@usn.no

ORCID ID 0000-0001-6343-3207

Abstract. eParticipation covers a range of activities, from online voting to deliberation. In this paper, I examine the activity called e-campaigning, political parties use of digital channels during election campaigns. Norwegian political parties have used digital channels for campaigning since 2001, and social media since 2009. In this study, I present the findings from the Norwegian parliamentary election campaign of 2021. Using genre theory, I examine how Norwegian political campaigning in social media has evolved between 2009 and the latest election in 2021. The findings indicate that social media use has stabilized between the 2017 and 2021 elections, with communication genres established in 2017 being similar to the ones found in 2021. Finally, I discuss how the way social media is currently being used reflects the constitutional goal of including citizens in political participation.

Keywords: eParticipation, social media, online campaigning, social networking systems, genre theory, Norway

1. Introduction

Participation, whether digital or offline, is not one thing. Rather, participation and eParticipation describe a wide range of different activities, from voting in elections via campaigning to dialogue between citizens and politicians or between different groups of citizens [1, 2]. Dialogue, or deliberation, where people meet and freely discuss political matters is arguably the "highest" form of participation [3], along with actual power-sharing between politicians and citizens [4]. Democratic theory varies in how participation is understood, and what part participation should play in democracy. Ferree and colleagues [5] outline four different models; Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist. These models refer to different normative criteria for democracy in terms of who should speak, the content of the process (what), style of speech preferred (how), and the relationship between discourse and decision-making (outcomes) that is sought (or feared) [p.290].

In the Norwegian constitution, article 100 states that "the authorities of the state shall create conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse." [6].

Norwegian democracy is thus closer to what Ferree and colleagues call the participatory liberal model, where democracy is rooted in representative traditions, but citizen participation and dialogue is wanted also between elections and public debate is seen as a strength for democracy.

Despite this focus on participation, the Norwegian public sphere is not immune to the recent trends of fake news, polarization, and disinformation. Several recent theses have found examples of disinformation in relation to the covid-19 pandemic, aggressive echo chambers for "male culture" as well as polarization and distrust related to far-right groups in social media [7–10]. In this paper, I apply genre theory to examine the Norwegian social media election campaign of 2021. While campaigning is a distinct form of participation [2, 11], the emphasis on dialogue in Norwegian democracy can be said to provide normative guidelines for communication in the election campaign. I also draw on data from my previous studies of the campaigns in 2009, 2013 and 2017 to examine if and how social media campaigning in Norway has changed over the duration of four election campaigns.

This paper thus responds to the call for more research on the current changes to the public sphere [12] by examining communication genres in the 2021 Norwegian parliamentary election. By following the same research design as I did for previous elections, I seek to answer the following research question: *Which genres were used during the 2021 election campaign, and how have they evolved compared to previous elections?*

2. Related research

1. Theoretical lens: the public sphere - Participation through campaigning

A cynic would perhaps see political campaigning as a form of marketing, as it is all about getting the message out to the public, telling people about all the good parts of the political party's program. The election campaign has a very big influence on the outcome of the parliamentary election. More than 40 % of Norwegian voters wait until the final weeks of the campaign before deciding who gets their vote, and many change their mind several times during the campaign, and since the sixties the trend has increasingly moved towards not voting for the same party twice [13]. Younger voters are more likely to cast their vote differently from one election to the next. Historically, Norwegian newspapers belonged to one of the two major political parties (Labour and the Conservatives). When the Norwegian newspapers became politically independent, political parties lost the power to decide what should be on the public agenda [14]. Since then, the media has taken over the agenda-setting role, and are trying to write about the things they believe voters are concerned about [13, 14]. Taking back control was one of the reasons why Norwegian political parties started using the Internet for campaigning in 2001 [15], and in 2007 first began experimenting with campaigning in social media [16]. In the 2017 election, traditional media such as TV

news and newspapers were still the most frequently used media, but social media (Facebook) was for the first time on the list. In the last week of the election, 48% reported watching TV news daily, 26% read the online newspaper VG and 23% visited Facebook daily searching for political content [13].

While campaigning is a distinct form of participation [2, 11], the emphasis on dialogue in Norwegian democracy can be said to provide normative guidelines for communication in the election campaign. Thus, we can evaluate the election campaign in terms of liberal participatory democracy [5] and the deliberative ideals of the public sphere, where participation should be rational, relevant, polite and allow everyone to speak [17]. To apply the public sphere in the current fragmented media landscape means we should discuss this not as one, but as several sometimes-overlapping spheres [18], which can be both representing the majority, counter-cultures or a mix of both [19]. Further, today's public sphere has moved us away from being passive spectators of a media-controlled public debate. We have become active participants on social media, but at the same time more pessimistic voices claim we have seen the public sphere move from rational discourse to "noise. Senseless memes, "one-liners", half-truths (and many lies), vulgarity, insults, and of course, cheap partisan propaganda" [20].

2. Analytical lens: Genre theory

A genre can be defined as "a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action" [21]. Genre theory can be applied to classify communication practices, and has been a valuable tool for studying online democracy [22], as well as for modelling potential democracy systems [23]. Genre theory provides us with a lens for detailed understanding of political communication [24]. Genres are recognized by having similar form and content, where form refers to physical and linguistic features, and content to themes and topics of the genre [25], and with digital communication also the functionality of the medium [26], as the affordances of the medium influence the ways in which actors engage in meaning-making [27]. Genres can be defined by examining form, functionality and content, by using the 5w1h-method [28]: *Where* tells us where the communication takes. *Why* explains the purpose of the genre. *When* refers to the time where communication takes place. *Who* defines the actors involved in communication, the sender and receiver of the genre. *What* is the content of the genre and *How* describes the technical needs for delivery of the genre. The genres used by a given community can be seen as a genre system [29], and this system can reveal the communicative practices shaped by community members in response to norms, events, time pressure and media capabilities [24]. By studying communication genres and communicative practices instead of the technology used to communicate, we can discover how communication changes and evolves over time [24], and by including the technological functionality of the medium the genre is enacted within, we can better understand the interplay between the social and the technical [26], allowing for a deeper understanding of communication situated in a specific medium.

3. Research approach

The objective of this paper is to examine the genre system found on Facebook during the 2021 Norwegian parliamentary election, compare this with findings from previous elections and to discuss if and how the political parties' Facebook use contribute to realize the objective of reasoned debate, as presented by the constitution.

Data collection: Data for this study has been collected over four periods: The elections of 2009, 2013, 2017 and 2021. Data for the 2009 study was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives from the seven political parties that were represented in the parliament before the election (Socialist Left, Labour, Center Party, Liberals, Christian people's party, Conservatives and the Progress Party). In the following elections, follow-up interviews were done electronically, using e-mail or online meetings to confirm findings from 2009. The follow-up interviews had an average of six respondents, bringing the total number of interviews to 25 over the four elections.

Further, social media content (posts, comments and interactions from the pages of the political parties represented in Parliament) during the main campaign period in June to election day in September, has been archived and analysed using Nvivo and Tableau software. For the 2021 election, Facebook's researcher tool CrowdTangle was used for data collection and initial analysis. In addition, statistics from Likealyzer.com, the European Social Survey, and the polling company TNS Gallup has been used to examine trust in media and politics.

Data analysis: The combination of interviews and content analysis made it possible to compare what informants say with what we can observe happening. This is used to map the genre system in social media political communication. For this study, only Facebook data has been analysed since Facebook remains by far the most used channel in Norwegian politics. The genre systems have been analysed using the 5W1H method presented in the section on genre theory. Of the around 6500 posts collected, a selection has been coded until saturation (no new genres emerging from further study). When no new genres were identified, the remainders of the posts were quickly scanned to see which genre category they matched. Due to space limitations, the findings are presented using the "form/function/content" constructs [24].

Below is an example of how the genres were coded using 5W1H:

Genre: Debate

Why (purpose): Contribute to a rational deliberative discourse

When: Continuous, examples found throughout the campaign

What (content): Text-based. Conversation where participants use rational arguments to discuss a concrete issue.

Who: Politicians, party members, but mostly citizens discussing with each other.

Where: Facebook posts from the various parties

How (form, tone and style): Encouraging dialogue. Rational arguments. Invites others to reply. Tone is respectful and there are no attacks on person, straw-man type arguments etc.

4. Findings

1. Objectives and channel use: Same, but different

In the interviews made in 2009 the political parties agreed on three objectives for political communication in social media: Dialogue with citizens, contributions from citizens, and involvement in party activities. When asked if these objectives remained the same, the parties agreed in 2013. In 2017, they still agreed that these were the overall objectives, but several respondents pointed out that they have evolved and developed a more fine-grained set of strategies, objectives and goals for different channels. In terms of channel use, blogs were popular in 2009, almost gone in 2013. Facebook emerged as the most important channel, and there were some experiments with Instagram. One of the parties said social media communication had been moved from communications to marketing, indicating a stronger shift in objectives than reported. The objectives are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Political party objectives for social media participation

Objective	Purpose	Form	Content/functionality
Dialogue	Involve citizens in debate about political issues	Encourage dialogue. Open and personal language. Citizen-generated content	Conversation between citizens and politicians
Contribution	Knowledge about citizen concerns	Q&A sessions, Invite voters to share their stories	Encourage contributions and questions from voters
Involvement	Raise funds. Get people to volunteer, Mobilize for action.	Competitions, membership forms, information and links to registration sites etc.	Competitions, theme sites, cross-publication
Agenda-setting and informing	Set the agenda for political debate. Inform and educate citizens	Pointed messages designed to get attention and engagement	Informative, short posts. One post – one message. Images and video content

The follow-up interviews in 2021 had similar results to those of 2017. The overall objectives remain the same but have evolved even further and branched out to a multi-channel approach where different social media have different objectives. The overall objectives dialogue, contribution and involvement are supplemented with a new objective called "agenda-setting and informing". Several of the 2021 respondents point out that the perhaps most important objective, at least for Facebook, is to inform (or convince) citizens, and to move the political agenda to issues the party see as their own strong points. While the respondents say the "old" objectives remain equally

important, their answers indicate that getting the party's message out is somewhat more important.

Facebook remains the biggest channel in terms of followers and attention, but the audience is getting older, and the parties see other channels becoming more important, especially to reach the younger voters. For example, one respondent said Facebook now was a channel for informing, while they used Instagram as their preferred platform for live dialogue sessions, because Instagram has a more friendly atmosphere. Others mention experimenting with TikTok, as the newest popular social medium. Apart from that, YouTube and Twitter remain popular, with Twitter more frequently used by individual politicians than the party. But what about how these channels are used? In the next section I present the evolution of communication genres on Facebook, from 2009 to 2021.

2. 2009-2013: Genre system evolution.

Table 2 presents an overview of the genres identified in 2009 and 2013 and shows how the genre system evolved between elections. A full description can be found in my papers from ePart 2010 and ePart 2014. The third column shows how the genres from 2009 and 2013 evolved into new or similar genres in 2017/2021.

Table 2. Genre system evolution

Genre	2009	2013	2017-2021
Policy comments	Comments from citizens on approved party policy	Present to a lesser degree, movement towards support/-non-support and disgruntlement.	Present, but not much
Call for action	Parties call for volunteers, or for action by citizens on specific issues	Still present, and more frequently seen in 2013 after Q&A backlash from 2009.	Evolved to contribute
Q&A	Questions from citizens, often unanswered in 2009.	Still present, and parties tried to engage more with citizens.	Disappeared, users can only comment on posts, not write their own.
Appeals to party	Citizens asking what the party intends to do on a specific issue	Evolved into support/non-support and debate	Disappeared, users can only comment on posts, not write their own.
Greeting	Greetings and well-wishes on politicians' birthdays etc.	Still present	Still present

Personal accounts	Politicians ask citizens to tell their stories on selected issues	Evolved and split between several genres (call for action, debate, policy comments)	Evolved. Now only between politicians, not asking citizens to share
Video responses	Citizens or politicians use video instead of text. Back and forth exchange	Disappeared	Disappeared
Debate	Not present	More users and more activity led to several rational debates on various issues	Some examples, but very little
Support/non-support	Not present	Citizens show support, or lack of support, to parties and party policies.	Very much present, both in comments and reactions
Disgruntle	Not present	Sarcastic comments about the party, unpleasant comments about the party and its politicians	Still present, and growing
Link	Not present	Parties link to news articles and other sources. Often accompanied by a short statement or question	Evolved into Slogan genre

3. 2017-2021: Towards a stable genre system and one-way communication.

In 2017, we saw a marked difference from the election campaign of 2013. While the 2013 election had a lot of interaction, feedback and two-way communication, the 2017 election was a step backwards towards more traditional one-way communication. The same trend is visible in 2021, and there have been no new genres emerging for this latest election.

If you look at table 2, *policy comment* is the only genre that emerged in 2009 and is still (somewhat) present in 2017 and 2021. In 2013, the new genres *debate*, *support*, *non-support*, *Disgruntlement* and *Link* appeared. *Link* evolved into the genre *Slogan* in 2017, and the other genres are still present. The most important finding when looking at this evolution is the gradual move from dialogue and feedback to a more simple, one-way form of communication where most of the feedback consists of disgruntled comments, non-support (or to a lesser degree support), and only a few examples of rational debate.

This gradual evolution of genres has given us the following current genre system on Facebook:

We want to is the most commonly used genre from all the parties. The content is directly related to the party program, with statements such as “we want to [do something] because [of some reason]”.

We have is only used by the current governing parties. In this genre, the ruling parties present their accomplishments from the last parliamentary session. Sometimes accompanied by the phrase “you know what you have, do you dare vote for something untested”. Video and images are frequently used.

Support are common replies to posts on a specific policy, typically short comments stating, “I support/don’t support this proposal”. However, more and more of these comments are moving towards disgruntlement.

Non-support is frequently used by most parties. In this genre the party attacks the policy and policy consequences of other parties. Political parties have always done this, but the tone is harder than in previous elections. Making fun of the other parties has become a lot more common, as exemplified by the Conservative’s image of sun lotion with the text “don’t be red this summer, vote Conservative”

Slogan is related to we want to, but in place of concrete policy issues and references to the party program the slogan is more idealistic in nature and is not supported by arguments as to why the statement is true: “We are the best party for young people!” or “Vote for us if you want change”

Personal accounts come in two forms: One is promoting popular politicians in the party, the other is “interviews” with typical voters from large voter groups.

Contribute is where parties ask voters to participate. This can be in the form of Q&A sessions or, more commonly, by asking voters to register for updates, become members of the party or act to support the party.

Society & Context involves parties posting links and updates about current affairs they somehow believe reflects on the values and ideology of the party. For example, the greens post quite a lot about global warming and the conservatives wish people happy pride or post content about the importance of reading.

Experiments is a genre where parties try out different formats of communication, using podcasts or live streaming, giving someone a GoPro to document a day in their lives and similar. Not all parties try this, and the genre is not frequently used. However, this is a sign that there is still some experimentation going on in social media.

Greetings is still a popular way of showing support. Popular politicians celebrating their birthday or other major life event get a lot of attention still.

Disgruntlement is another genre that emerged in 2013 and is sadly growing both in 2017 and 2021. There is a lot of sarcasm and outright hostility towards most of the parties. In fact, most comments and user posts fall into categories arguing for or against the party. This can be interpreted as a sign that polarization is occurring also in Norwegian politics and could indicate that Facebook algorithms show posts by a political party to those who show a preference for opposing parties, in order to generate (negative) engagement.

Debate and **policy comments** are present, but very little compared to the three genres above. There are a few examples of users attempting to start a debate based on evidence, facts and arguments, but most often these posts are taken over by non-supportive or disgruntled comments.

4. Growth and saturation – the link between Facebook and votes

As social media has grown, so has the number of followers and importance of social media as a campaigning channel. In 2017, 23% of the population said they visited Facebook daily to follow the election, on par with the major news media and only beaten by the public broadcaster NRK [13], while in 2009 and 2013 social media was less important as a channel for political news. When using CrowdTangle to examine growth and decline in votes, all the political parties grow by several thousand followers in the month prior to the election. After the election, some of these new followers disappear, while some remain. The number of followers seems to have reached saturation in 2017, with growth between 2017 and 2021 roughly on par with population growth.

There is little correlation between the number of votes a party receive and their number of followers. The Progress party remains the most followed party on Facebook, while they have lost almost 270.000 voters from 2009 to 2021. Labour gained 6.000 followers on Facebook, but lost 20.000 votes between 2017 and 2021, while the conservatives gained 20.000 followers, but lost 125.000 votes. The Center party has seen a massive growth in votes, but only limited growth on social media. The Greens have the fourth largest number of followers, but has failed to reach the 4% threshold which gives supplementary seats in parliament in two consecutive elections, mostly because their sympathizers are young, and young people tend to have a lower voter turnout [13]. The only party with a clear correlation between Facebook and voter growth is the far left Red party, which has seen a doubling in both followers and voters between 2017 and 2021. Figure 1 shows the development in followers and votes received between 2009 and 2021 (for Red and Greens the starting year is 2017).

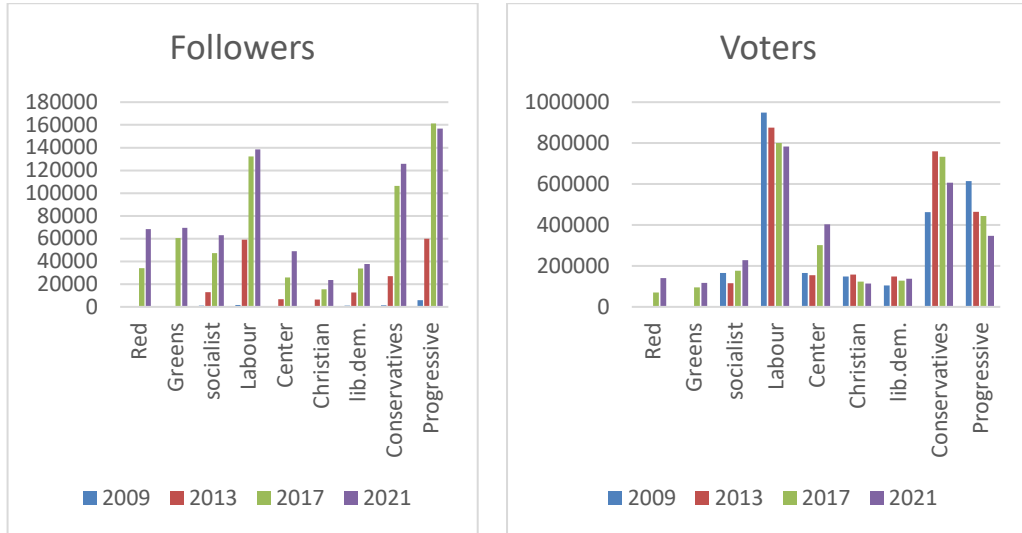


Fig. 1. Followers and votes 2009-2021

Demographic variables might be an explanation for this. For example, The Center party has a lot of rural, older voters, who are less likely to be active social media users, while parties such as the liberal democrats and Greens typically attract an urban and younger electorate.

The trend seen in the past two elections also continues: The leaders of the largest parties have more followers than their respective parties, confirming the increased focus on person over party. Politicians' Facebook pages have an interaction rate of 3.9% between July 2021 and the election day in September, while the political parties have an interaction rate of just 1%.

5. Interaction and effect of genres

While there is little correlation between social media and votes, there is no doubt that social media is engaging voters. In the period from 1 June to election day 18 September, the political parties and party leaders had a total of 3.8 million interactions. An interaction is either a "reaction", what we used to call a like, commenting on, or sharing a post. With 3.9 million people eligible to vote, and 3 million voting, this is an impressive number. However, when drilling further, we see that of these 3.8 million, 362,000 are comments and 125,000 are shares of posts.

The distribution of engagement between party leaders and parties is close to 50/50, but if we also look at other members of parliament, we find several individuals who have a lot of interactions, especially from the two parties who argue about climate and environmental issues, where several politicians from the Greens and the Progress

party generate a lot of interactions, as well as nationalist/national romantic posts about Norwegian nature from the agrarian populist Center party.

Looking at the genres for the top posts with the most interactions, there are three genres that emerge as the most effective: the *slogan* genre (statements about what the party wants, with little or no arguments attached), and the *personal account* and *Greeting* genres (personal content, naming other politicians or personal anecdotes). This is of course a reflection of how the Facebook algorithms work, as content receiving attention is spread to more people, receiving even more attention. We also see that most of the top posts have video, image, or links in them, and have few words. Most are limited to two or three short sentences. When scrolling your feed, it is simply easier to stop and like or comment a post with a simple, short message and a picture, compared to a long-complicated text listing a range of arguments. This is also acknowledged by the 2021 interview respondents, who state the importance and difficulty of balancing short posts with a clear stop effect on the one hand, and working with moderation, tact and tone on the other.

Thematically, the posts that generate the most interactions cover either controversial or personal issues. Personal issues range from condolences to recently deceased former politicians to birthday and wedding anniversaries. The reactions here are mostly positive and supporting.

Controversy reflects common dichotomies in Norwegian politics. Climate vs growth, rural vs urban, left vs right ideology and rich vs poor, or the consequences of inequality. Posts cheering climate change mitigation and green transition receive a lot of negative feedback both in comments and angry/laughing reactions, while posts cheering the continued use of fossil fuels, industry over environment and petrol cars receive support. Climate change is perhaps the single issue generating the angriest reactions. Facebook algorithms can be partly to blame, but it might also reflect the fact that the media tends to talk positively about the green transition, while many Norwegians still are not convinced that climate change is an issue, or that Norway, with its renewable energy should do as much as other nations [31]. Other examples include far left vs far-right issues, where one side shouts about socialist danger and the other right-wing extremism, or discussions on public spending (the need for doctors, nurses and teachers) vs public waste of money (heavy bureaucracy and regulations). The growth of the far left Red party, with communist roots, has renewed the left vs right debate in recent years [30], and after eight years of conservative rule the opposition was naturally eager to play on inequality and "the common man vs the rich urban elites". Immigration is traditionally a controversial issue, and one of the top engagement posts discuss immigration, However, this was more of an issue in 2017, after the Syrian refugee crisis.

5. Discussion and conclusion

All in all, the 2021 election confirms the indications from 2017. Success on Facebook and social media does not guarantee success in the election, even if a lot of media commentators seem to draw a line between the two. Social media is rather part of a complex public sphere ecosystem, where media, social media and people mutually reinforce what we are concerned about. The Red party for example, is surfing on a wave of resentment towards increased inequality, while Labour is suffering from the same reason, as the traditional left-leaning voters move further to the left. On climate change and related issues, we see that even if there is scientific and mostly political consensus about the green transition, many people disagree and voice their concerns on Facebook. Climate change, inequality and rural concerns can of course be seen as part of the current discourse of people feeling disenfranchised and fighting against the elites, but to answer this, more research is needed into the attitudes of active social media users.

There has been a gradual evolution of the genre system found on Facebook. 2009 could be seen as the pilot, with experimentation, few readers but a lot of attention and learning. 2013 showed that the genres were maturing, and there were a lot of attempts at engaging citizens in dialogue, receiving feedback and using the interactive functionalities of social media, while in 2017 and even more so in 2021, we saw a further maturing of genres and no new genres emerged in 2021. The experimental mood from 2013 disappeared, and political parties went back to traditional campaigning using one-way communication, with citizens either cheering or booing from the side line. Some of the explanation for this might be the growth in followers, making it difficult to maintain a deliberative atmosphere in a "space" with people from all walks of life and with little mutual understanding? One interesting avenue for further research could be to examine this further. Is it at all possible to maintain a rational debate following Habermasian ideals in a forum where participants do not share a similar background, do not attempt to understand each other and have no ques about the motivation, reasoning and experiences of the other participants?

All in all, the election campaign of 2021 mostly confirms the findings from 2017. It seems that the genre system on Facebook has matured and stabilized, and while there are several genres in use, those that make use of stop words, controversial slogans and with a focus on personal issues generate the most reactions. In terms of Facebook acting as a public sphere, the answer depends. Applying the criteria of reasoned, rational debate, it is difficult to say that Facebook delivers, and the political parties are more concerned with informing than facilitating debate in this channel. On the other hand, Facebook remains the most popular social medium, where citizens can state their opinion even when it does not strictly adhere to prescribed rules for rational debate. So in conclusion, §100 of the Norwegian constitution is at least partially fulfilled by the political parties' use of Facebook, but there is room for improvement.

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