

# Bridging the Divide:

## How Facebook is Bringing Faroese MPs Closer to their Constituents.

Word Count: 14522

Anonymous code: Z0946456

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## **Introduction:**

The history of mankind is rich in defining moments where new discoveries or technological breakthroughs have drastically altered the present and the future of the entire race. The discovery of how to start a fire, the invention of the wheel and the many inventions and changes occurring during the Industrial Revolution are examples often cited as events that have changed

the direction of humanity. Though it is difficult to judge what in fifty years will remain as the defining invention of this era, there may be little doubt that these last twenty to thirty years have witnessed an extraordinary development and advancement in human technology which has had widespread implications for humankind. During this time period, probably nothing has had a greater effect on mankind than the invention of the internet. An increasingly larger part of people's everyday life is now being influenced by the newest trends online, as the internet is connecting people all over the world and presenting a whole host of new possibilities, as it has transformed the landscapes of business, social life, financial markets, dating, media, teaching, banking and many others. Yet perhaps no area has seen greater changes in this era of rapid development than communication. The mass spread of mobile phones, laptops, tablets and the internet have laid the foundation for whole new ways of human interaction. Only in the last thirty years the number of media devices has tripled (Coleman and Price, 2012, pp. 30). Technological advancement and globalization in its full effect are whispering away the boundaries of time and space (Barney, 2004, pp. 61) and even the farthest corners of the globe are now accessible through a few touches on an iPad. Even the social life has to a certain extent been moved to the internet, as in the last decade big social networks like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, Snapchat and numerous others have become an ingrained part of the life of most human beings. From the youngest kid to their old grandparents, from the poor students to the mega rich Hollywood stars, from backpackers in the Far East, to the tribes in Amazonas; people everywhere are now connecting because of the wonders of technology. In the words of Clay Shirky, humankind is: *"living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations"* (Shirky, 2008, pp. 20-21).

Such a development has also had its effect on politics, as politicians now possess better tools to communicate with citizens and vice versa. Whereas the television presented politicians with the opportunity to step into people's

living rooms and deliver their messages, today's technology equips the public with the opportunity to respond to that message. The relationship between politicians and citizens becomes highly interactive, as the audience is no longer only passive receivers, but is able to respond to the message (Barney, 2004, pp. 66-67).

The ease with which a voter can contact his MP at any given time in the day, is unprecedented in the history of mankind, and may well bring politicians closer to the public. More than ever, voters are now in a position, where they can give instant feedback and input on how a new bill will affect or has affected their lives. Seconds after hearing about a bill on the radio or reading about a topic on the internet, voters are able to state their opinions, show their support, share their reflections or voice their disapproval in YouTube videos, Twitter updates, on politicians Facebook walls or send them private messages through one of several social media platforms. This also presents the politicians with whole new opportunities to get input and feedback on bills at the same time as they are debated in the political system. By presenting their ideas or bills on a social network platform, they are able to instantly get the view from several different people, ranging from the worker to the stay-at-home moms, and from the professor in economics to the high school student. The possibility of involving people from all classes, age groups, geographical location and so on in the decision making process has now become easier than ever before, and the impact of it may be the greatest democratic advancement in decades.

And it is just in time, because as citizens in Western Europe are increasingly getting more connected to each other, politicians seems to be surprisingly disconnected from their voters (Dahlgren, 2009, pp. 12). Furthermore, surveys conducted by the European Social Survey show that in the period from 2002 to 2012 there has, in several European countries, been a decline in voter confidence in politicians, a decline in their confidence in parliament as

well as a decrease in voter turnouts in the last election (European Social Survey, 2002 and 2012). At a time where politicians regularly are accused of being too distanced from voters and not listening to their concerns, social media may very well be the key to change that, by giving unsatisfied voters an opportunity to be heard.

Nevertheless, it still remains to be seen whether the effects of the internet will be as positive and wide-ranging as some predicted, and if it really manages to bring voters closer to the decision making (Chadwik, 2012, pp. 45). This dissertation will examine, from the viewpoint MPs of the Faroese parliament, Løgtingið, whether social media is a tool for MPs to get closer to the voters, and how the relationship between the two has changed in the last decade. Even though the voters turn out in the Faroe Islands is still quite high, 86,6% voted in the last election (Kringvarp Føroya, 2014), the Faroese society has other challenges, where a stronger relationship between politicians and voters may very well be beneficial.

One the greatest of these is the problem of youth migration. Because of the limited opportunities to undergo higher education in the Faroe Islands, most of the young people leave the country in their late teen or early twenties in order to acquire it in other countries (Føroya Landsstýri, 2013, pp. 9). In 2003/2004 65% of all Faroese students were studying outside the country (Wreber & Björk, 2006, pp. 45) and it is estimated that every second young person leaving the country never returns (Olsen, 2010, pp. 113). Only in Denmark, there were, at the turn of last year, 11.696 people living in Denmark who were born in the Faroe Islands (Samuelsen, 2014). In a country where only around 48.000 people live, that is quite a substantial proportion of the population. A consequence of this is that youth issues are in danger of not getting the focus they ought to receive in Faroese politics, as they become underrepresented. Social media may however change that, as the concept of time and space is removed, and people can partake in the public sphere which social media creates. On social media, the location becomes secondary to

whom one is talking too and what one is saying. It is now possible for young people studying in other countries to contribute to debates and raise their concerns to the right people in the right places, thereby becoming a part of the Faroese society and discourse through social media.

A lot has been written about the internet and its influence on politics. Some of this research includes how social media is a tool for democratic activism (Shirky, 2011), how voters got involved in the writing of the new Icelandic constitutions through the use of social media (Valtysson, 2014, pp. 52), the internet usage of MP's (Williamson, 2009, pp. 1), how the new technology has changed parliamentary activity (Leston-Bandera, 2008, pp. 62), comparison between Big Brother UK and the House of Commons (Coleman, 2003, pp. 734) and many more. But there seems to be a gap in how MP's themselves think their work and their relationship with their constituents has changed as a result of the new possibilities to communicate, which social networks like Facebook offer.

### *Research Question:*

The main question of the dissertation is: *“How has the relationship between members of the Faroese parliament and Faroese voters been affected by the social media site Facebook?”* The dissertation will also examine two other questions, the first being: *“Has the role of the Faroese MPs changed in this last decade, as Facebook is presenting new opportunities for communication? And if so, how has it changed?”* and: *“Has the increased possibility for the Faroese public to keep an eye on the activity of MPs, fostered a stronger sense of accountability amongst MPs?”*

### *Structure:*

The dissertation begins with a chapter about the methodology. That chapter will aim to give an understanding of the research topic and method, including

why Facebook and the Faroe Islands have been chosen, the choosing of interviewees and a list of the questions asked.

Thereafter a chapter follows with the theoretical framework of the dissertation and a literal review, wherein the main relevant theories will be presented and discussed, as well as some of the work already done in the area of MPs, voters and the effect of the internet on their relationship will be reviewed. This chapter will examine central and relevant concepts including the public sphere, deliberation, representation and the democratic potential of the internet.

Thereafter a chapter will present and analyse the interviews done with the Faroese MPs. The subjects discussed in this chapter will include accountability, the quality of online debates, new varieties of representation, the self-perception of MPs and whether they are influenced by their activity on Facebook.

### **Methodology:**

The methodological approach for this dissertation is an interpretivist approach based on qualitative research. The qualitative research consists of structured interviews made with Faroese MPs, with the purpose being to get an insight into how politicians themselves view their relationship with voters and how Facebook may have changed it. Seven parties are represented in the parliament, so seven MPs were interviewed, thereby ensuring that the interviewees are representing most of the relevant political views and ideologies in the Faroese society. Because the main purpose is to analyse how Facebook may have changed the relationship between MPs and their voters, time and experience were two significant factors when considering which MPs to interview. Therefore, those who have been interviewed were, as far as possible, current MPs, who have held a seat in parliament since 2004 or

have combined parliamentary experience of ten years. In two cases this was not possible, nevertheless, none of the interviewees have less than 8 years of experience as MPs.

The reason for conducting the interviews is to gain access to one of the groups directly affected by the topic of interest. The aim is that through the interviews their thoughts and concerns regarding social media, deliberation and other topic will shed some light on how social media may have changed the relationship between them and their voters. This knowledge which they possess is unique and would be difficult to obtain, except through personal interviews. The aim of the interviews is therefore to collect relevant data from the first hand experience and thoughts of the MPs and interpret, describe and analyse the central themes of the topic (Gbrich, 2013, pp. 7).

In the interviews I am dealing with conscious, interpretive and reflective subjects, which, together with my own interpretation of the answers, will have an effect on the result. This is one of the main criticism of qualitative research, that the data collected will never be truly neutral, as the interviewer is a part of the process (Harrits, Pedersen and Halkier, 2010, pp. 146). The topic is however of no controversial nature and there would as such be no reason for the MPs not to answer truthfully, as they have nothing to win or lose in this case.

The interviews were structured with thirteen fixed questions, which the interviewees received through email at least a week before the interview itself took place. In the same email they received information about the topic of the dissertation and the purpose of the interview. They were likewise informed that their participation would not be anonymous, as they are public figures, but if they wanted anonymity, it would be granted. None of them requested this. Furthermore, in the email I requested the interviews to be audio recorded,

to which no one objected. All the participants were also made aware in the email, how the information gathered from the interview would be used and stored. Also, they were informed that up to four weeks after receiving the audio recording themselves, they could retract any given statement in the interview or altogether withdraw their participation. All this information was repeated before the interview started, and the participants were requested to sign an approval for participation in the interviews and granting permission for the recording of them and the use of them in the dissertation. After the interview all participants received a copy of the recorded interview through email. All participants will also receive a copy of the dissertation when it has been handed in.

The questions were as follows:

- Do you have a Facebook account?
- To what extent do you use it to promote your own political ideas and profile?
- How would you describe your use of it as a political tool?
- Have you ever been influenced or persuaded to vote in a certain way, because of a debate or message on Facebook?
- Have you ever raised a question in parliament, which was influenced by a debate or message on Facebook?
- Have you ever proposed a legislation, after being persuaded or influenced by a debate or message on Facebook?
- Have you ever been in dialogue with people on Facebook, regarding a topic, which at the same time has been debated or voted on in parliament?
- How would you describe the development in communication between constituents and MP's, since the emergence of Facebook?
- Could you give your opinion on whether it is easier for voters to contact a MP today than 10 years ago?
- Are more people getting in contact with you now, than when you were first elected?

- Do you feel you are better equipped to communicate with your constituents and the public now than when you were first elected?
- In your opinion, has Facebook given voters better opportunities to keep MP's accountable for their actions?
- Could you share your experience on whether Facebook has made it easier for you, to get feedback on legislation and the consequences of it?

### *Facebook:*

Facebook is today one of the largest social media sites and it was estimated that in January 2014 it had 1,23 billion active users worldwide (Rushe, 2014). That Facebook is also big in the Faroe Islands, is revealed by a survey done by the Faroese public office of data security “*Dátueftirlitið*” in January 2010 amongst third, fourth, eighth and ninth graders which showed that 83% of them had a Facebook profile (Dátueftirlitið, 2010, pp. 23). This is very much in line with the rest of the Faroese society, as it is estimated that there are 34.000 Facebook users in the Faroe Islands (Statistic Brain Research Institute, 2014). Considering that there were 48.387 inhabitants in the Faroe Islands on 1. May 2014 (Hagstova Føroya, 2014), this implies that approximately 70% of the population are on Facebook.

A strength of Facebook is its interactivity. It provides users with the possibility to connect with people and share, debate and talk about whatever is on their mind. There are various ways for users to interact with each other on Facebook, as users can poke each other, like each other's posts and comments, write their own posts and message each other in private. Moreover, Facebook provides a good platform for politicians and voters to meet each other on equal footing. And considering one of the main criticism of governmental attempts to involve citizens in the decision making process has been that the governmental sites and platforms which have been launched, have failed to attract more than a small number of users (Shane, 2012, pp. 4), Facebook provides the opposite. The strength of Facebook is exactly that it is not set up by a government, the users interacting with each other are there

on equal grounds and in the case of the Faroe Islands, the users are already there in large numbers.

### *The Faroe Islands:*

The Faroe Islands are a small country situated in the North Atlantic, between Norway, Iceland and Scotland. Since 1948 the Faroe Islands have been a self-governing part of the Kingdom of Denmark with their own flag, language, parliament and prime minister (*Lov om Færøernes Hjemmestyre, 1948*). The Faroe Islands employ a democratic parliamentary system of government resembling the Westminster model, with a separation of powers between the juridical, legislative and executive (*Stýrisskipan Føroya, 1994*).

What makes the Faroe Islands such an interesting study is the high number of active politicians on Facebook. A research conducted some years ago showed that British politicians were not likely to adopt an active approach online and on social media (Williamson, 2009, pp. 17). This is not the case of the Faroe Islands. By looking through the list of the thirty three parliament members of the Faroese parliament (Føroya Løgting, no date) and searching for their Facebook accounts, it becomes clear that at least 30 of the 33 have a Facebook account. This figure may be higher, as it is possible for Facebook users to opt out of people seeing them on a search engine (Facebook, no date).

In addition, all seven ministers have a Facebook account, including the Prime Minister who actively uses Facebook to debate political topics on a nearly daily basis. His usage of Facebook and the political views which he displays on his profile, are regularly picked up by the traditional (Holm, 2014; Løgmaður tvær vangamyndir á Facebook, 2013). This makes the case of the Faroe Islands interesting, as the Facebook accounts of the politicians are not run by skilled staff or spin doctors, but by the politicians themselves. That

the traditional media covers what is written on Facebook underlines the relevance of Facebook in the Faroese political discourse.

*Weaknesses:*

As the Faroe Islands are one of the smallest countries in Europe, it makes it difficult to compare with other countries or attempt to generalise. Furthermore, because of the small size of the country, there is a lack of political research, with the lack of data making it difficult to compare data across countries. Besides, because of the lack of research, which in turn leads to fewer published scientific papers and articles, most of the information about Faroese matters will be acquired through media outlets and governmental web pages.

Another challenge which has been encountered during the research on the topic is that social media and politics is quite a new area of interest and one which is rapidly developing. Therefore, there has not been much written about social media and its effect on political representation and what has already been written about social media and the internet often tends to be outdated, as the internet is in an ongoing technological development.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review:**

The internet has been an area of interest for political theorists for some years. However, as social media sites like Facebook are relatively new and under constant development, there is a lack of academic resources on the exact topic of how social media is changing the relationship between MPs and voters. There are though some much debated concepts that are connected to the topic, including deliberation, public spheres, representation and new forms of political representation. This chapter will examine these concepts as well as some of the debate regarding the democratic potential of the internet.

*The democratic potential of the internet:*

In a speech in 2002 the then leader of the House of Commons Robin Cook argued that:

*“The internet offers us a tool of participation without precedent in democratic history. It is different from the traditional communication of government to governed explaining and justifying their policies. By its very nature it provide a two-way flow of communication and instant response”* and he continued: *“Democracy is richer than the right to vote every four years. Democracy must also offer the right [to participate] in between elections and the opportunity to shape the policies pursued by those who are elected”* (Moss and Coleman, 2013, pp. 412).

Cook is just one of many, who have regarded the democratic potential of the internet as the chance to reinvent the world of politics. Philip Norton and Xiudian Dai even claim that it is: *“the largest and most democratic system that human beings have ever created”* (Dai and Norton, 2008, pp. 1). These are big words and reflect some of the optimism which is found in academic circles concerning the internet and democracy. Amongst those are Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler who claim that there are three things that are needed for people to get closer to democracy. First the political institutions must understand the language of the people. The normal citizen does not express their concern in ideological language or well made speeches, but presents it in values and fragmented accounts (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 166). This is an interesting point, as people's voice, desires and concerns are more likely to be presented through social media sites than in political debate letters, or contacting their local representative. Second, the link between voters and democracy must be strengthened. Democracy is for the people and therefore people ought to be consulted more than just every fourth

year. And third, when voters voice their opinions and concerns, it should be visible in future policy making. Voters must get the sense that the political system is listening to them and acts on their concerns (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 166).

Furthermore, in the article *Democracy, Distance, and Reach*, Coleman this time together with Vincent Price, advocates certain ideas for how new interactive communication technologies may be helpful in bringing about a political system, where voters inhabit a more consultative and direct role in democratic governance. Five ideal conditions are presented for what is necessary for narrowing the gap between voters and their representatives. The first condition is the free access to information. The internet presents users with a wide source of information, which is diversified, free from any controlling interest and is there for the user to decide themselves how to use. Second, citizens must be given the opportunity to voice their views on political topics, so the best and most logical answers can be reached. Third, the public space where such interaction should occur, must be protected and supported or risk the danger of being undermined by other spaces where corporate or political elites are in control. Fourth, elected politicians and officials must listen to the voters and respond to the input and feedback that they receive from citizens. The last and fifth condition is how to achieve political representative section of the population, including those who traditionally are not represented (Coleman and Price, 2012, pp. 27-30).

The internet has the potential to fulfil some of these points and much research has been done on the matter. Nevertheless, it has far from proved to be a success, with maybe the strongest criticism being that participations in such projects tend to be quite low (Barney, 2004, pp. 135-136; Shane, 2012, pp. 4). This is of course a problem, as that, which is supposed to encourage voters to get more involved in politics, should at a minimum achieve just that.

There is, however a point to be made about the effect of the circumstance in which voters are expected to engage. There is a difference between asking voters to log onto an official webpage to give their feedback and voice their opinions, and then for governments or politicians to engage with voters where they already are, for example on social media sites like Facebook. There is even a theoretically and empirically reason to expect that online democracy works best when it is out of reach of governmental control (Coleman and Blumler, 2010, pp. 116). In that case, Facebook and other social media sites are the ideal forum for such a situation, as the discussions there are not controlled or started by governments, but by the users of the sites.

And Facebook at least appears to justify some of the optimism connected to the democratic potential of the internet. Leigh Ellen Gray has examined Facebook as a tool for political participation. According to her:

*"Facebook users are more likely to participate in the political process than individuals in any other constituency, including non-Internet users, non-SNS users, and individuals who use other SNS but not Facebook."*

(Gray, 2013, pp. 458)

Furthermore, continuing the comparison between Facebook users and other social network sites, Facebook users were 43% more likely to vote, they are 57% likelier to try persuading others to vote for certain candidates and they were much more likely to go to a political event (Gray, 2013, pp. 459).

Jane S. Schacter also acknowledges the impact that social network sites like Facebook had in involving people in political issues in the 2008 presidential election in the United States. 40% of Facebook and Myspace users claimed to have used their page to communicate political information, while 32% of all eighteen to twenty-nine-years old claimed to have used a social networking site for political reasons during the last election. What social

networks do add to the political arena is not as much a renewal, but rather a new channel for information according to Schacter. A channel which is interactive and creative and can reach those voters who would normally seek political information in other places (Schacter, 2009, pp. 660-662).

*Representation:*

*The second charge against the House of Representatives is, that it will be too small to possess a due knowledge of the interest of its constituents... It is a sound and important principle that the representative ought to be acquainted with the interests and circumstances of his constituents.*

(Madison, 1788, pp. 286)

James Madison in his letter to the people of New York, touches upon one of the core concerns in the debate regarding representative democracy, how the chosen representatives should relate to the interests of their constituents, considering that it is difficult to know all of their concerns and interests. And according to Coleman, it is exactly the representatives ability or knowledge of publics concerns and interest, which reflects its effectiveness:

*“The effectiveness of parliament is best judged not in terms of its ability to initiate or shape policies and laws, but as a forum in which public aspirations, anxieties and complaints can be aired and addressed, and the public voice can be heard in all of its pluralistic diversity”* (Coleman, 2006, pp. 372).

This grand ideal of Coleman’s of what parliament is supposed to be like, would necessitate that the representatives took measures to ensure some sort

of dialogue, so they would be fully capable of speaking on behalf of their constituents in all matters. And that is where the internet and social media has the potential to, at the very least, intensify and strengthen the already existing communication between those concerned. And many countries have already adopted new internet policies in just this belief that the strengthening of communication lines for the flow of free information between voters and representatives is necessary for democracy to work (Livingstone, 2007, pp. 104).

It is however not only policy which has changed as a result of the new times, but new theories regarding political representation have also been proposed. One of those is Thomas Zittel who proposes two different models of representation in accordance with the new interactive world. The first model is the technological model, which argues that the technological changes which have occurred in the last decades, now enable politicians to have a more direct and individual relations to their constituents, whereas before they relied on their parties as a means to connect with their constituents. As communication has become cheaper and easier, politicians are now able to use the new tools to interact and explain their views directly to their own voters, without relying on the resources of their parties. Zittel however, claims that this model may first be realised when there has been a generational change, and the size of the digital constituencies has expanded (Zittel, 2003, pp. 35-38). In this model the representative embraces the technological changes and new communication channels and uses them to connect with the constituents in a whole new way.

The other model is the constitutional model. According to Zittel this model does not view the Internet as a new way to interact with constituents, but rather it is just another communication channel, which will be added to those already existing, and is a model, where the party handles the communication. The reason for the lack of change is because of the view that the existing party system is a part of a greater system with governments and electoral

systems at its foundation. For an individual politician to start communicating with his constituents, would be to break with the established tradition and would therefore be unconstitutional (Zittel, 2003, pp. 39).

These are two very broad models, which seem to reflect a political view on how to relate to voters and as such, has not really been altered by the Internet and new communication channels. It is a view, whether the individual politician should interact with his voters or if that should be controlled first and foremost by the parties. The former model is more embracing of the changing times, as it seeks to redefine the relationship between voters and politicians. The latter view, which is the one under pressure, as it has become easier for voters to contact their representatives, seeks to maintain the status quo by using the internet to strengthen the already existing situation and communication practices.

There are though other authors than Zittel, who have proposed new models of representation to fit the new Internet era. One of those is Philip Norton, who criticises Zittels models for being insufficient and proposes himself four models of representation. They are the traditional, party, representative and tribune models (Norton, 2008, pp. 15).

The traditional model is one, where the politicians reject any use of new technologies. In that sense it is even a stricter model than the constitutional model proposed by Zittel, as it completely rules out the use of the new technology. Norton claims it to be out of either fear, which stems from lack of knowledge, or lack of comprehension, which is a failure to understand what it is. The citizens have therefore no possibility of directly contacting their representatives, as they are completely excluded from any interaction with them (Norton, 2008, pp. 15).

The party model is similar to Zimmels constitutional model. In it the new technologies will be used to strengthen the position of the party. Similar to Zimmels theory, the new technology will be used, but used for the benefit of the party as an addition to already existing communication channels. The citizens are in this scenario passive, as there is no real interaction, but only one-way communication, with the citizen being restricted to being the receiver of what the party offers on the internet (Norton, 2008, pp. 15-16).

The representative model is one, where the politician challenges the party line, by presenting his own views through the new communication channels. This model is used primarily for those representatives, who wish to distance themselves from the party in certain matters, by presenting another view, through channels which the party does not control. In this the voter is reactive, as he has some contact with the representative, but is normally restricted to only react to messages from the representative (Norton, 2008, pp. 16).

The last model proposed by Norton is the tribune model. In it the MPs and the voters are in a direct interactive connection. His actions are influenced, if not directed, by the voters. As Norton writes: "*The Internet offers the opportunity for structured and direct interaction of MP and electors not possible since the days of a small population and a very restricted franchise – that is, before the advent of mass democracy*" (Norton, 2008, pp. 16). In this model the voter is interactive, as they have the possibility to voice their opinions and give feedback to policies, as well as MPs have the possibility to explain and debate their own opinions (Norton, 2008, pp. 16-17).

In addition to the models presented, Norton conducted a study to test which models were most in line with the practices of MPs in the UK. He found the party model to be the most common one, as the Internet is mostly used as an extension of already established communication. The internet was used to

publish speeches, press releases and other promotional information, in order to promote the party and the MPs (Norton, 2008, pp. 25-26).

Although I do expect to find some form of party model in the Faroe Islands, I believe that the use of social media, by Faroese MPs, has resulted in them taking a more personal and interactive approach in their political communication. Therefore, I assume that most of the MPs being interviewed will take on a role that can be compared to the tribune model. However, I do not expect Faroese MPs to have abandoned their parties in an effort to interact with their constituents, but find their use of social media to be a mixture of tribune and party model, in the sense that political communication on Facebook is very personal, however they still are aligned to the party line and use their party web page and Facebook pages, in addition to their own personal Facebook accounts.

*The deliberative public sphere:*

According to Barney democracy is deeply communicative. The ability for citizens to hold officials and politicians to accountability, to scrutinise their decision, to debate matters which are of common concern, exchange viewpoints, encounter each other in rational, critical debate are all aspects of what defines them as citizens and the society as democratic. But for this they need a public space or a public sphere, where they can interact with each other on an equal footing (Barney, 2004, pp. 132-133). The concept of the public sphere is often associated with Habermas. He defines the public sphere as:

*The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the*

*basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason.*

(Habermas, 1991, pp. 27)

Furthermore Habermas claims that for there to exist a public sphere, three institutional criteria must be fulfilled. He models the criteria for what he perceived to be public spheres in the coffee houses, societies and saloons in England, Germany and France some centuries ago (Habermas, 1991, pp. 3234). First, there is the need for a forum where status is disregarded. It is the strength of the arguments which should be valued, not the wealth, social status or political power of those voicing them. Even though this may not have been entirely true in the public spheres in France, it was at least something which was strived for. Second the duopoly that the church and state authorities had in interpreting the common concern was broken, as cultural products became available for everyone. People should be able to voice their own opinion and interpretation of art, literature and other areas. Thirdly, the public sphere is inclusive. Everyone should be able to participate and all topics should be general in accessibility (Habermas, 1991, pp. 36-37).

Another similar definition of the public sphere is offered by Peter Dahlgren, who claims that: "*a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates – ideally in an unfettered manner – and also the formation of political will*" (Dahlgren, 2005, pp. 148). Both of the definitions emphasize the freedom of the participants of this forum, in setting their own agenda without restriction, debating and forming their own views, as equal participants.

At the centre of this public sphere is the opportunity to exchange views, and closely related to the concept of the public sphere is deliberation. Bohman defines deliberation as “*a dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and cooperation*” (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 18). This definition is similar to the definition offered of the public sphere, however, it seems to be more restricted, as the purpose of deliberation is not only to debate, but to actually find solutions through dialogue. This emphasis on finding solutions, with some even claiming that true deliberation must be connected to the decision making process, is disputed. Some argue that deliberation also should cover over public discussions which are not tied to decision making and problem solving, while others propose other concepts to define public communication not connected to decision making (Dahlberg, pp. 87, 2009).

There exists, however, a hope that a more deliberative form of democracy would lead to higher engagement from the public, as citizens would be drawn into the political process and at least get the sense that someone is listening to them (Coleman and Price, pp. 28, 2012). Such a claim though is doubtful, as there are many critics who have pointed to numerous weaknesses in deliberative theories, as well as there are several failed experiments with deliberation. Amongst those problems are low participation numbers in online-consultation efforts, a lack of support from officials and bureaucrats tied, to the decision making process, who are hesitant to implement deliberative online-consultation in their operations (Chadwick, 2012, pp. 48-49). Furthermore, when randomly selecting people for representation, only a few of them are knowledgeable, while most tend to be uninterested, ignorant and not capable of taking decisions (Price, 2012, pp. 126) and then there is the problem with forced silence in the sense, that citizens hold back in participating in debates because of other stronger participants who dominate the discussion and devalue their experiences, as well as the discomfort of disagreeing with others and thus choosing rather to be silent (Price, 2012, pp. 128-129). Furthermore the politicians and officials who make the decisions,

tend not to partake in online deliberation (Coleman, 2012, pp. 390) and perhaps most importantly, research shows that participants rarely change their opinions on topics (Price, 2012, pp. 139).

Despite its faults and failings, political deliberation is still one of the biggest themes when the democratic possibilities of the internet are discussed, and according to Coleman and Blumler most theorists agree that deliberation has three benefits. First is that in a competing democracy debates should be fair, with the aim being to agree on the best decision. Second is that everyone should be able to participate in debates and it should not be restricted to the political elites. Third, if the public through discussions feels some kind of ownership over the decisions being made and policy passed, they are more likely to accept and understand them (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 17).

These three points are also very close to the four conditions that Habermas sets out for democratic deliberation which are 1) free discussion where everyone can partake with their opinions and criticize each other. 2) Everyone must be equal and therefore social status should have no bearing on the discussion. 3) Arguments built on tradition and dogma must be revealed. 4) It is through consensus that truth should be found (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 18).

The question then remains whether social media and Facebook perhaps is the public sphere and can play its part in drawing politicians and voters together in deliberation. Although Facebook to a certain extent fulfils the institutional criteria of Habermas, it does not fulfil what is necessary for it to be labelled a deliberative public sphere. Yes, Facebook offers the public to interact on an equal footing, apart from a few restrictions, such as a 13 year age limit and no acceptance of hate speech, pornographic material and so on. But Facebook is first and foremost a social media. Its aim is to connect people and it does

not have a specific aim of being a public sphere for political deliberation. Compared to the four conditions set out by Habermas for democratic deliberation, it does fulfil the first one to a certain extent. Everyone who has the right to vote can join Facebook, however, if one is not friends with the politicians and decision makers on Facebook, one is excluded from any potential debates. Regarding the second one, all users are equal on Facebook and their social status plays no more role there than it would in any other forum. Third, as Facebook is a contested place where many debates are ongoing, there should in theory be enough people who could reveal this kind of arguments. There is, however a concern that online debates may balkanize political discussion. The concern is that like-minded people will listen only to other people of the same mind, ignoring opposite views (Wright, 2012, pp. 154). Facebook may very well fall into that pit. Because users decide themselves who they add as friends, it means that they are essentially controlling what kind of information they receive. And if they do not agree with the viewpoints of some of their friends, they can always hide that user and everything that user writes. And therein is what Dahlgren calls a danger to democracy, that when people are only encountering views, that they agree on, they will lose their capacity to debate opposite views (Dahlgren, 2013, pp. 61). This surely lessens Facebook's role as a forum where people are encountering different opinions. The last point, that truth shall be found through consensus, is also affected by a balkanizing debate, as it is easy enough to agree with those who are of the same mind, but much more difficult when opposing someone of different opinions.

### *MPs use of the Internet:*

There has been some research conducted on the subject of interaction between members of parliament and voters in connection with e-mails and interactive governmental websites. An interesting study has been done by a research team consisting of Dr Andy Williamson, Dr Lauren Miller, Beccy Allen, Karishma Desai and Jonathan Goodstone. It concerns how British MPs are using digital media to get into contact with their constituents. In the

foreword of the report, Paul Morris states that it is crucial for members of parliament to keep in contact with the rest of the population, who today are more likely to get their news on the internet, than to sit down on the sofa after a day's work to watch the latest news on the TV. The key, he claims in keeping politics relevant to the population, is the growth of new technologies and ways, in which the population can engage with their MPs (Williamson, 2009, pp. ii).

The report describes the result of a survey where 168 MPs have taken part, followed up by a focus group consisting of members of parliaments and parliamentary staff. The team discovered that the internet has become a part of the daily life of most members of parliament. What is surprising is that emails and personal webpages seem to be the most common communication tool. Social network sites are on the other hand not that common, and are mostly used to inform constituents, rather than communicate with them (Williamson, 2009, pp. 1).

According to Williamson the very nature of communication, engagement and conversation has been changed by new network technology. In politics this has, according to him, an impact in three areas for the members of parliament (Williamson, 2009, pp. 3), which are:

*As electorate representative; as party representative; and as national legislator'. MPs are increasingly likely to communicate their views to constituents collectively (via email newsletters, a website or blogs) and individually (via email).* (Williamson, 2009, pp. 3)

Williamson points out that the public appreciates the open communication with politicians, especially when that communication goes both ways. There is also a generally positive public reaction to the internet use of members of parliament, as it is seen as a sign that parliamentary democracy is getting

more in touch with civic life (Williamson, 2009, pp. 4). In conclusion the research paper reveals that most members of parliament use other forms of communication than social networks, with Williamson predicting that even though there has been a big increase in the number of members of parliament using social network sites, that number will stabilize at around a third of the members of parliament (Williamson, 2009, pp. 9).

Other research done in the area of how the internet and its new communication technologies may change the relationship between members of parliament and voters are Cristina Leston-Bandeira research on how ICTs are changing the relationship between voters and Portuguese members of parliament. The paper centred mostly on emails and did not involve social media, but none the less her conclusion was that ICTs had a limited impact on the relationship, as citizens became more likely to contact their members of parliament. MPs themselves also found the increase in direct access to them as gratifying (Bandeira, 2008, pp. 75). Furthermore, she states that emails brought a new dimension to the relationship between voters and their representatives (Bandeira, 2008, pp. 77).

Another interesting research project was conducted by David Lazer, Michael Neblo and Kevin Esterling where they conducted a series of online meetings based on the American concept of town hall meetings. Twelve U.S. Representative and one U.S. Senator participated in twenty-one sessions with participants (Lazer, Neblo and Esterling, 2012, pp. 273). The results, even though mostly concentrating on the experience of the voters, showed that representatives can through present day technology enter into people's living rooms and there encounter them in dialogue (Lazer, Neblo and Esterling, 2012, pp. 277). Furthermore, voters were pleased with the experience and it showed that the political knowledge of the participants and their engagement in other forms of political participation both rose, and the participants were more likely to vote for the politicians and adapt their opinions after having

been in a discussion with them (Lazer, Neblo and Esterling, 2012, pp. 275-276).

However, none of these works focus on the use of social media and its effect on members of parliament. And according to Williamson, most of the pre-existing data regarding politicians and the internet has focused exactly on political campaigns or other people's assessment on how members of parliament are using the new technologies that the internet offers (Williamson, 2009, pp. 4). He claims that:

*“A gap clearly exists in the body of knowledge for a broader analysis of how MPs themselves perceive the internet, their use of web-based media in the broadest sense and the impact that they perceive it to have on their communication with constituents.”* (Williamson, 2009, pp. 4)

It is that gap which this dissertation will try to fill, by interviewing Faroese MPs on their use of social media and how it affects their work and relationship with their constituents. The research done by Williamson and his team in the UK is very similar, as the topic of research is the same. Williamson, however, found that most members of parliament use other forms of communication than social networks, and predicted that even though there has been a big increase in the number of MPs using social network sites, that number will stabilize at around a third of them (Williamson, 2009, pp. 9). So even though the topic of the research is the same, this dissertation takes a narrower view, by only focusing on social media, which Williamson tends to discard as something which most MPs do not even use.

## **MPs, voters and Facebook in the Faroe Islands:**

The conducted research interviewed seven MPs from different parties of the Faroese parliament. This chapter will look at and evaluate some of the thoughts and concerns that the MPs had on Facebook and how it affected their relationship with voters.

### *MPs self-perception:*

The last chapter presented some theories of new kinds of representation which have been coined, as new communication technology has altered the perception of the relationship between voters and politicians. When the MPs were asked how they used Facebook and how they would describe their use of it as a political tool, there were several different answers, which suggest that one model would not be sufficient to describe Faroese MPs new role. Out of the seven, one of them, Poul Michelsen, took a position of distancing himself from social media. According to him, social media is a platform that would be best reserved for normal citizens. Politicians have enough of platforms in traditional media and those media outlets should be just as efficient as social media to bring the politician's messages out to the public. Politicians should therefore stay away from the political debate on Facebook, as citizens can perceive a politicians involvement as intrusive. He does stress, though, that purely political profiles, like party accounts and political profiles of candidates, are fine, but politicians should not mix their personal Facebook profile with their political person. Thereby he advocates that social media can be used to strengthen the already existing channels of communication where the voters receive information, but he opposes the concept of a politician taking an active role in the political discussion on Facebook. This view is similar to both Zittel's constitutional representation model and Norton's model of party model, as the already existing channels of communication are strengthened and individual politicians should not engage in active discussion. However, in those models the voters are viewed as passive, as they only receive political messages. Michelsen doesn't view the voter as passive, as he acknowledges that voters use Facebook to discuss relevant political

matters, but he claims the politicians should try not to get involved (Michelsen, 2014).

Kári P. Højgaard did not share the same concerns as Michelsen about politicians being active, but he adopted a similar party stance, claiming his political views were mostly shared through the party's own profile on Facebook (Højgaard, 2014). It should be taken into consideration that Michelsen and Højgaard are the only representative of their respective parties, Progress and the Self-Government Party. Therefore, it may be the case, that they become affiliated with their parties in the mind of the voters. For an MP in one of the small parties, his opinion is more easily identified as the party opinion. Therefore, it may be expected, that politicians in bigger parties, see an individual Facebook profile as more personally beneficial, as they must share their party's profile with other MPs, with the result that their voice may not be as audible to the voters, as for those, who belong to parties with a single or two MPs.

The others were divided. Høgni Hoydal and Bill Justinussen stated that the reason they created their Facebook accounts was political, both using it actively in sharing and discussing political matters (Hoydal, 2014; Justinussen, 2014). This was also the case for Eyðgunn Samuelson and Helgi Abrahamsen, though the latter two claimed that their profile was half private, half political (Abrahamsen, 2014; Samuelson, 2014). Only Bjarni Djurholm claimed that he didn't really use Facebook and when he did, it was mainly for social purposes. He added though that he sometimes comments on relevant political issues, but described his use of Facebook as an ad hoc approach (Djurholm, 2014). These five explanations reveal MPs that are comfortable in approaching the voters and engaging them in discussion about relevant political matters online. None of them shy away from the use of social media, but every single one does to some extent open themselves up to an interactive relationship with other Facebook users.

These five MPs resemble the tribune model of Philp Norton, as the voters are interactive and have the possibility to provide input and feedback to the MPs, who are directly involved in the decision making process. There is though a problem with this model, as Norton claims that the actions of the MP would be influenced, if not directed, by the voters. This seems not to be the case in the Faroe Islands, where none of the MPs claimed that online discussions changed their opinion or how they voted in any way. Some did acknowledge that online discussion is a resource to know what the general will was among the people, and one did conceive, that it could in the long run influence his perception of a topic, but they all underlined that how they voted was deeply rooted in their ideological conviction, and was therefore not really something which would change because of an online debate. This is also in accordance with studies which indicate that people tend not to change their minds because of online debates (Price, 2012, pp. 139). And if that is the case with ordinary citizens, then it should not be a surprise that politicians are even harder to move opinion wise.

The technological model which Zittel proposes, fits better. As it is a broader model and does not go into specifics, it manages to encompass all of these five MPs' use of Facebook. The MPs in question have a more direct and individual relation to their constituents by embracing the new technology. The only difference from Zittel's model would be that there has not been a generational change, with some of the MPs having hold a seat for 16 years or more, but seem to have no noteworthy problems in adopting new ways to interact with their constituents.

### *Influencing MPs:*

Three of the questions were directly related to whether MPs had in any way been influenced by online debates or private messages. When asked if they had ever been influenced to vote in a certain way, the answer was quite clear.

All MPs claimed that Facebook debates do not change their views, as they tend to be more grounded and not easily changed.

When asked if they had ever raised a formal question in parliament for the Prime Minister or one of his ministers as a result of interaction with voters on Facebook, the answers were quite different. To clarify, in the Faroese parliamentary system, there is the possibility for MPs to raise formal questions to ministers. That is the subject of this question and not just any regular question that would be raised during a normal parliamentary debate. Most of the MPs said yes, even though they could not recall a specific question. They were however also keen to stress that there was nothing new in that, as they had always been inspired by the people they came in contact with (Abrahamsen, 2014; Højgaard, 2014; Hoydal, 2014; Justinussen, 2014; Samuelsen, 2014). Only Djurholm and Michelsen claimed never to have raised such a question (Djurholm, 2014; Michelsen, 2014).

The third question about voters influence was whether they ever had proposed a bill in parliament as a result of private messages or online debate on Facebook. All except one answered no. The reasons for answering no were quite different, with three of them referencing the political agreement in a coalition government. One of these, Djurholm answered:

*“No, if you are a part of the coalition, you are bound to the agreements that already are in place..... Those in opposition can display a kind of irresponsibility, because they are not bound to any agreements, except with their own party and themselves. So if you are in opposition, you are free to raise any question or propose any bill, but I have never done this.” (Djurholm, 2014)*

This reflects the political system in which MPs find themselves, as it is not common for MPs in coalition to propose bills in parliament. This is reflected if one looks at the parliamentary records for the years from 1995 to 2012, a period of 17 years when 2211 bills were proposed in the Faroese parliament (Føroya Løgting, no date). Of these, only 22 were proposed by MPs in coalition or 1,9%. Although most bills were proposed by ministers - 1468 bills in total, MPs in the opposition proposed 587 bills during the same period. Therefore, it is hardly a surprise that the MPs in the coalition are answering no to this question, as they are in general not used to propose bills at all, but rather let their ministers do that work. However, even though MPs in the opposition are used to propose their own bills, it is not common for them either to be influenced by voters online, as Hoydal, Højgaard and Michelsen all claimed that it had never occurred that they had proposed a piece of legislation as a result of a private message or a discussion on Facebook. The only MP who answered this question positively was Samuelsen. The lack of concrete results in the proposing of bills underlines, that even though Faroese MPs are listening to the voters and some actively taking part in the debates, there is a lack of real influence on MPs, and as such there is no real change in the relationship between MPs and voters in this regard.

Although there is, according to MPs, very little that voters can do to influence or change their votes, there seems to be at least one area in the work of MPs which has experienced a change. All MPs are given an iPad from the parliament, which they use for parliamentary work. This has enabled them to be in a much closer contact with the outside world, as they can communicate with voters simultaneously as they are partaking in a parliamentary debate. Asked if they had ever discussed a topic on Facebook, which at the same time was debated in parliament, all of the interviewees except Abrahamsen, answered yes. This is also what Hoydal claims is the big difference between Facebook and emails and adds:

*“The result of this is that while a particular topic is being debated in parliament, you may receive a private message or a public comment on Facebook, where people are claiming that what is being said is wrong, or you are encouraged to ask certain questions. And I have done that several times.... It has had a direct influence. It can happen just as I am on my way up to the podium, that I receive a private message, which I will use in my speech.”*

(Hoydal, 2014)

Justinussen also drew a parallel between other communication devices, pointing out that it has been possible to use the mobile phone to contact MPs during the debate, but Facebook gives the possibility for several users to communicate at the same time, so the ongoing communication is broader and more people are involved. He also added that: *“It is quite common when the parliament is sitting, that several of the MPs are on Facebook, where the users voice their opinion on the bills that are being debated. This is a new world, debating in parliament and at the same time getting reactions from the public* (Justinussen, 2014).

#### *Availability:*

Some of the questions were designed to examine whether MPs are more available now than before. This was done by asking if it is easier for a voter to contact them today than 10 years ago, and if they had experienced an increase in the number of people contacting them since the first time they were elected. Most of the MPs agreed that it is easier for voters to contact them today, as communication is much faster and more direct today. Some of them also pointed out, that they to a greater extent communicate with other voters, whom they agree with, rather than just their own voters (Abrahamsen, 2014; Djurholm, 2014; Hoydal, 2014; Højgaard, 2014; Justinussen, 2014; Michelsen, 2014; Samuelsen, 2014).

### *Accountability:*

One of the areas, which new communication technology is expected to improve, is the accountability of MPs. It has been speculated that with the rise of the Internet and the increase of public information and data, the policy process would become more transparent, and citizens would be able to hold their politicians accountable for their actions (Moss and Coleman, 2013, pp. 416). Furthermore, new interactive media allows voters to respond to the messages from politicians, enabling the voters to hold politicians accountable (Coleman, 2006, pp. 374).

Yet, when the Faroese MPs were asked whether they thought that Facebook had equipped the voters to better hold them accountable, only two of them answered favourably, while the other five were sceptical, with many criticizing the quality of online discussion. Hoydal talked about Facebook as being a threat against democracy and pointed out that in principle it should be easier for the voters to hold politicians accountable, however, the sheer amount of unfiltered information makes it difficult for the voter to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. The main problem being that the traditional media is no longer present to act as a filter and separate what is necessary from what is not and uncover what is not truthful. Michelsen talked about the same, and worried about the vast manipulation in the use of online information. Djurholm expressed similar concerns, claiming that voters were not as much holding politicians to accountability as mocking them. Justinussen raised the point that it is quite difficult to keep an eye on politicians and the decision making process, as most of it is done away from the public eye, in committees and coalition negotiations and therefore much of the criticism focuses on the persons and not the policy (Djurholm, 2014; Hoydal, 2014; Justinussen, 2014; Michelsen, 2014).

These responses are in accordance with a study conducted by OCED, which showed that despite citizens getting access to more information and

governments adopting new internet based communication tools, the indications are that it has failed to increase transparency in governmental decision making (Barney, 2004, pp. 135-136).

*The value of online debate:*

A recurring theme in the interviews, was the quality of online debate. Most of the MPs expressed dismay and disappointment at the low standard of debate, and concerns that it was not really strengthening democracy, but weakening it. This affected their views on their ability to communicate with voters online as well, as they felt that debates on Facebook simply lead to name calling and propaganda rather than any resolution of issues. Højgaard warns that people can get fed up with politics because of the way that people write on Facebook, and therefore it is important that politicians do not get involved, when debates deteriorate to being just name calling and unconstructive (Højgaard, 2014). On a similar note, Abrahamsen warned against the danger of MPs losing the dignity of their standing if they are not careful in what they write or share on Facebook (Abrahamsen, 2014).

Justinussen, Djurholm and Hoydal all stressed the pitfalls of debating politics on Facebook. Justinussen points out that even though Facebook is a strong communication medium, there are some people, who constantly enter debates and ruin them, by talking off topic and targeting certain people with abuse, with the result that the debate is derailed and ruined (Djurholm, 2014; Hoydal, 2014; Justinussen, 2014). Djurholm, talking about the quality of online debate, claimed that:

*Facebook is like a double-edged sword. You have the chance to be online and voice your opinion, yet much of what is written and said on Facebook is not beneficial for democracy, in the context that it very often becomes a part*

*of the defamation of persons, parties and the political system.* (Djurholm, 2014)

Hoydal was also critical and compared the Facebook debates to fireworks on New Year's Eve. A rocket will fly up in the sky and explode and it will catch everyone's attention. But only for a short while, because it fades away quickly and is replaced by another exploding rocket which steals the attention. It is the same with the political debate, since Facebook became the dominating media for political discussion according to Hoydal. The communication becomes more and more reduced as the message becomes lighter. Everyone just shouts out into cyberspace, hoping that someone will hear their message and remember it. This situation has, according to Hoydal, made it much more difficult to actually communicate with people. And the big issues which should be debated over time and with a certain depth, become trivialized as they seek to gain their short moment on the night sky amongst the rest of the fireworks (Hoydal, 2014).

As online discussion is often at the centre in theories advocating a more democratic system connected with internet, it is interesting to see that the Faroese MPs, based on their experience, have such a negative view of it. Nevertheless, it is nothing rare. According to Price, some claim that deliberation is not the solution for democracy, but is harmful, as the debates are alienating weak groups. Stronger people will take over a debate and act in a way which threatens weaker people who will be forced to silence, as they feel undervalued and ineffective. Moreover, citizens are not as reasonable in their arguments as expected and often talk past each other (Price, 2012, pp. 127-129). Geert Lovink also warns against this new debate culture dominating the social media, warning that only the most opinionating and loudest voices will survive, as everyone tries to voice their own opinions, but nobody is listening to each other (Lovink, 2011, p. 7). This is in line with the criticism by the Faroese MPs, who seem to be genuinely concerned about the quality of the online debates. Some understanding of this situation may be

found in Coleman and Blumler's evaluations of the British government's efforts in bringing the public closer to the decision making process, where the point is made that there is a critical difference between a debate where people hold different views and discuss them and then a debate where people just state their fixed positions on a subject. The problem with the latter scenario, is that it normally will not lead to anything constructive, as it only sums up peoples stand on certain issues (Coleman and Blumler, 2011, pp. 361-362). This seems to describe the impression which several of the MPs have with the online debate. That it is not constructive, as people are not interested in listening to each other and engage in a debate to find solutions, but are more interesting in stating their own opinions and connecting with others of like minds. Deliberation requires a level of respect or tolerance for other views, which, according to the MPs, is in short supply in online debates on Facebook, making every debate an exercise in who can shout the loudest.

Furthermore, Samuelsen expressed a concern that it was those who are already strong, who are the big winners in the new era of online interaction. It is those who are already comfortable with new technology, who know how to use it and have access to it, who will gain the most. This becomes a democratic problem, as increasingly more of the debates are taking place online, as politicians use the traditional media and debate letters to a much lesser extent than before. The consequences are that those who are not strong in a technological sense or do not own a computer, are neglected and become weaker, as they are not able to take part in the political discourse (Samuelsen, 2014). Samuelsen concern is similar to what Henry Jenkins calls the participation gap. He claims that those who do not have access to the technology in the same way as everyone else, are falling behind, as the rest of the people are becoming more empowered (Shane, 2012, pp. 6) and Pippa Norris claims that those, who do not possess the basic computer skills or computer access, are in danger of being marginalized and losing out of amongst other good careers, educational opportunities and personal advancement (Norris, 2001, pp. 68).

There are though some positives with online debate, which the MPs also mentioned. Hoydal, Justinussen, Abrahamsen and Djurholm all mentioned positively the online debate on Facebook between MPs. This could in a sense be seen as an extension and expansion of the Assembly Hall of the parliament, as MPs go on Facebook to debate each other with the possibility of other people taking part in that debate (Abrahamsen, 2014; Djurholm, 2014; Hoydal, 2014; Justinussen, 2014).

Højgaard, Michelsen and Abrahamsen also pointed out that MPs, who normally would not get media time in the traditional media, could write something on Facebook which could catch the attention of the traditional media. Michelsen claimed this was maybe effective for especially newer MPs who normally are not the most vocal and therefore not so visible in the media. Højgaard also mentioned how Facebook had made it easier for smaller parties to make voters aware of their opinion on a range of issues, as the media most often tend to only ask the four big parties for their opinion on different issues (Abrahamsen, 2014; Højgaard, 2014; Michelsen). Facebook then basically gives a voice to those who normally are not being heard in the traditional media.

### *Deliberation:*

It is interesting comparing the questions of direct influence on MPs through Facebook, with the question of whether they have ever debated a topic on Facebook at the same time as it is debated in parliament. Taking into account that most MPs are worried about the quality of standard of the Facebook debates and that none of them claim that they have ever voted any differently because of a debate or private message on Facebook, it becomes clear that it would be a far stretch to claim Facebook as a deliberate public sphere.

If Habermas's four criteria for democratic deliberation are compared to the answer of the Faroese MPs, then it can be assumed that Facebook fulfils the first point; it provides free discussion where everyone can partake with their opinions and criticize each other. It also checks the second point that everyone must be equal, and therefore social status should have no bearing on the discussion. It is though the two next points that Facebook falters in. Number three, that arguments built on tradition and dogma must be revealed, and number four, that it is through a consensus that truth should be found (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, pp. 18). As mentioned, several of the MPs expressed a concern about how easy it was to manipulate and spread propaganda on Facebook. Hoydal likened it to the political situation thirty years ago, when each party in the Faroe Islands had their own paper, which wrote political propaganda for the benefit of their own parties. Facebook, he claimed, becomes the same, where people of the same mind gather together and exchange opinions and views with people that are basically the same (Hoydal, 2014). In such a scenario people would never be challenged. On the basis of this, and the fact that MPs themselves would not change their mind because of a Facebook discussion, it seems that Facebook fails to fulfil the third and fourth point and thereby fails to live up to the criteria set out by Habermas for democratic deliberation.

*A new kind of representation:*

There is a case to be made by pointing to a weakness in the representation theories of both Zittel and Norton, as it seems that they are coined to describe representations in political systems dominated by two main parties. However, the Faroe Islands employ a multi-party system, with no single party being able to form a government on their own in modern times. At the last election the traditional four big parties *Republic*, *Union Party*, *People's Party*, *Equality Party* and three smaller parties, *Progress*, *Centre Party* and *Self-Government Party* were elected into parliament and a coalition was formed which at the present time consists of the Union Party, the People's Party and the Centre Party. Such a system naturally demands a different kind

of discipline than a two party dominated system. MPs can very well face a situation where they must vote against their own opinion on a matter if the coalition has an agreement that they themselves disagree on.

Exactly that scenario was mentioned by the three coalition MPs, Justinussen, Abrahamsen and Djurholm. All three of them voiced the opinion that the restrictions of being part of the coalition had the effect that they would not propose a bill in parliament, as that is something which is not acceptable when one is in a coalition. However, they stated that if they were not in coalition, they would in theory be free to raise questions and propose bills that were inspired or influenced by the Facebook communication with voters (Abrahamsen, 2014; Djurholm, 2014; Justinussen, 2014).

Especially in Justinussen and Abrahamsen cases this raises a theoretical problem with existing representation theories, as they claim their Facebook profiles are used first and foremost to engage with voters about politics. In the presented representation theories, there is no such scenario where politicians are actually engaging personally in an interactive communication with citizens, but will not use their parliamentary tools to propose bills or raise questions in order to help the citizen, as they are first and foremost loyal to the coalition. This scenario does not occur because they disagree or do not want to help their voters, but because they have an obligation to their coalition that they value more. In this case there is certain loyalty towards their parties, as the MPs honour both the agreement that their party and they have made with other parties. It is however not party loyalty which is being stressed as the reason by the MPs, but loyalty towards the coalition.

It becomes even more complicated when it turns out that even though MPs debate and communicate with voters on Facebook, there seems to be an agreement that the quality of online debate is bad, with several of them

pointing to the problem of balkanizing and how easy it is to spread propaganda online. Furthermore, when the MPs themselves claim that online discussions does nothing to change their minds, their role becomes very different from any of the models proposed by Zittel and Norton.

Summing up, most of the Faroese MPs are active users of Facebook and taking part in online discussions. They do raise questions in parliament as a result of this new interactivity, but they don't value online discussion, and their own voting behaviour does not change as a consequence of online debate, as they are already ideologically founded.

Placing it in the representative theories, it is only Zittel's broad definition of the technological model which could fit most of the Faroese MPs. Faroese MPs have welcomed the new communication channels and are trying to use them to full effect. The main reason why Zittel's definition fits is the broadness of it. In the case of Norton, there would have to be a new definition combining the party model and the tribune model. From the tribune model it would borrow the interactive relationship between voters and politicians. From the party model it would borrow the MP's party loyalty, which would be changed to loyalty towards a coalition. This would leave a model with politicians who are faithful to the coalition, but would at the same time be highly interactive in their communication with their voters, though they would neither be influenced by them, raise questions for ministers or propose bills on their behalf.

### *Is the gap being bridged?*

The main purpose of the dissertation was to examine if social media, in this case Facebook, can bring voters closer to their MPs. How then does the use of Facebook by Faroese MPs relate to some of the criteria presented earlier in the dissertation for narrowing the gap?

Coleman and Blumler claimed there were three points that needed to be fulfilled for voters and MPs getting closer. First the political institutions must understand the language of the people, second that the link between democracy and voters should be strengthened by consulting voters more regularly and third, voters must see that their participation leads to results (Coleman and Blumler. 2009, pp. 166). In the first and second point, it seems self-evident, that Facebook fulfils these criteria, as MPs and voters are both using Facebook, and through Facebook more people than ever before are contacting MPs. It also seems that MPs have become more accessible and to a certain extent understand and communicate in the same manner as voters. As an example, Abrahamsen mentioned how his writing style has changed. Whereas he used a formal written language when he wrote debate letters to the papers, he now has adopted a more informal manner when writing on Facebook (Abrahamsen, 2014).

The third criteria is more difficult, as it is the claim that the voter must feel that his opinion counts in the decision making process. As the MPs claim that they do not change their minds because of Facebook debates, it may seem that this point is not fulfilled. It is necessary though to take into account how some MPs claim to have asked questions as a result of Facebook activity, and especially how nearly all MPs claimed that they are debating issues online at the same time as they are discussed in the parliament. In that case, voters get a sense of their participation resulting in at least a question during a debate, though it is very unlikely that it would lead to anything more than that.

There were also five conditions proposed by Colemand and Shane on how to bring voters and representatives closer together. Number one was free access to information. The second point was to let citizens debate political matters in order to arrive at the best and most logical solution. Third, a public space was needed which must be supported and protected from the risk of being undermined by corporate or political elites. Fourth, politicians must listen to citizens' concerns and opinions and include them in the political decision

making process. The last condition is to give a voice to all sections of the population, including those who normally are not represented (Coleman and Price, 2012, pp. 27-30). The second and the fourth point were similar to Coleman's and Blumler's conditions. Regarding the first, all parliamentary meetings are streamed online on their webpage as well as most of them being shown live on the Faroese national television, KVF. Furthermore, everyone can go to the webpage of the Faroese Parliament and read the various bills, see how MPs voted, follow the committee's work and so on. In that sense, information is free for everyone.

The third criteria seems to be lacking, as it already has been pointed out that several MPs are concerned about how easy it is to manipulate on Facebook, and that there is widespread mockery of people and their opinions. In that sense Facebook is a weak public sphere, as there is no real authority to ensure that the level of debate is of a high quality, where every user can feel safe in the knowledge, that it is the strength of the arguments and nothing else which decides how they are received. The last condition, giving voice to those who are normally not represented, is quite straight forward. As almost everyone can create a user on Facebook, it does make it more representative than most other forums. In front of the screen everyone is equal, and as Højgaard pointed out, it seems to be easier for those who are normally not asked for their opinion, to voice them on Facebook and be noticed.

In conclusion, although Facebook does not seem to fulfil all the necessary conditions that are set out by scholars, there is some positivity to be found. MPs are indeed communicating with their voters, and it is easier than ever before for voters to contact their MPs. Even though it may not be visible in the decision making itself, there seems to be no doubt that MPs actually listen to the voters, and some are willing to pick up on topics and concerns and raise them in parliament.

There is no doubt either that the Faroese MPs have, in the last ten years, become closer to the Faroese voters, as both groups have become represented on Facebook. Facebook provides users with the chance to get to know their MPs better, and to directly ask them questions and debate with them online. One may also suspect, that the increase in MPs communication with voters through Facebook, is a sign that voters at least get a sense, that MPs are listening to them and that they have an influence on the decision-making process. Even though it has not resulted in any direct influence, it should not be ruled out that this may gradually change in the future, as new generations, who have been brought up with social media, will be elected into parliament. The relationship between MPs and their constituents is ever changing. Whereas five years ago, Faroese voters, did not have the chance to get in direct contact with their MPs online or partake in a debate with them on a Facebook thread, it is now quite common. That is a new aspect of the relationship, a new channel of communication which is a highly interactive one. That is quite encouraging for those who advocate a more direct form of democracy, as it shows how fast the relationship between MPs and voters can adapt to new technological changes.

### **Conclusion:**

This main aim of the dissertation was to examine how Facebook has changed the relationship between MPs and voters in the Faroe. In order to do so one main research question and two sub questions were posed. The main question was *“How has the relationship between members of the Faroese parliament and Faroese voters been affected by the social media site Facebook?”* The subquestions were: *“Has the role of the Faroese MPs changed in this last decade, as Facebook is presenting new opportunities for communication? And if so, how has it changed?”* and: *“Has the increased possibility for the Faroese public to keep an eye on the activity of the MPs, fostered a stronger sense of accountability amongst MPs?”*

Some of the main theories regarding the topic of how the internet and social media may affect political representation and narrow the gap between politicians and citizens were presented. These theories were then compared to how MPs of the Faroese parliament perceived their use of Facebook and their relationship to their voters.

It has been established that the relationship between MPs and their voters has, to a certain extent been changed by the use of Facebook. Compared to ten years ago, citizens are more often contacting their representatives, as well as Facebook has given them the chance to interact and debate with their MPs online. The bad quality of debate has, however, been a concern for MPs, who claim that it at times may be a threat against democracy, as rather than being constructive and helpful, it often leads to abuse and name calling. It is therefore not surprising that none of the MPs claimed that any debate or private messages on Facebook has ever made them vote in a certain way. For the voters this points at a lack of real influence on the decision making process.

In the case of questions some MPs claimed that they had raised formal question in Parliament, as a result of their interaction with citizens on Facebook. This is though mostly the case for MPs who are in opposition, as MPs in coalition demonstrate a loyalty towards the coalition by not raising formal question or proposing bills on their own. In the case of regular questions, those raised during a debate, all the MPs acknowledge the input they receive from citizens through online debates or private messages on Facebook. So even though voters do not have a direct influence on the decision making process, in the form of being able to influence the voting behaviour of MPs, Facebook has enabled them to contribute to the parliamentary debate.

On the issue of accountability, I expected the MPs to acknowledge that voters were in a better situation to keep check on them, as the internet had increased the transparency of the political system. This was not to be the case, as every single MP rejected this notion. Many pointed to the lack of a third party, like the traditional media, to sort which information was relevant and trustworthy. So instead of voters keeping a better check on MPs actions, the general perception was that Facebook led to an increase in personal attacks and slandering of politicians, as the quality of debate got significantly worse.

There is no doubt that representation has changed, as MPs are enjoying a closer relationship to their voters, as new interactive technology has made communication cheaper and less dependent on time and space. This is maybe best demonstrated when MPs are able to debate matters in parliament while at the same time being active on Facebook. It is difficult to make a general theory of representation which could fit the seven interviewed MPs, but there are indications that Faroese MPs are embracing the new possibilities of communicating that Facebook offers. There are though two points, which separate Faroese MPs in different categories. The first is if they adopt a personal approach or a party approach in their communication with their voters. The second is if they are in coalition or opposition. But no matter which approach, the MPs are now open to a much more direct and interactive relationship with their voters, than has been the case in the past.

In conclusion, Facebook has changed the political scene of the Faroese society. Voters are more likely than ever before to contact their representatives, as Facebook offers them unprecedented access to the core of the political decision making process, the MPs themselves. More important yet, the MPs are likely to respond and engage with citizens in online debates. Unfortunately, those debates tend to be no more than exchanging of views, as they are not able to change the MPs mind on different matters. It should though be emphasized, that social media sites like Facebook are still a relevant new concept. Ten years ago, today's relationship between MPs and

citizens would be hard to envision. It should therefore not be easily dismissed that this relationship may take on a new form or lead to a more direct form of democracy in the years to come, as the world and the people living in it, are getting increasingly more connected, even the politicians.

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