

## **Expectations and experiences with MyLabourParty: From right to know to right to participate?**

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### **Summary**

Social media are often argued to change political communication, decreasing the distance between politicians and citizens, and increasing citizens' influence on policymaking. This paper presents findings from a study of how the Norwegian Labour Party uses social media, focusing on the community platform MyLabourParty. Interviews with politicians and a survey with citizens as respondents were conducted to examine the experiences of online political discussions. Findings show that citizens and politicians expect MyLabourParty to strengthen citizen participation. Yet, citizens still experience communication asymmetry and politicians may find it challenging to participate to the extent citizens expect. Means for bridging the gap between expectations and experiences are called for, in particular redefinition of the offering, changes of user-practices, and system improvements.

### **Introduction**

The objective of this article is to examine the potentially empowering possibilities of social media in politics. Expectations are high and rising as to the potentials of social media with regard to mass collaboration and innovations, and the political sphere is one of the areas where the potential and actual significance of social media have been regarded as high. As a consequence, political parties are increasingly employing social media as a way of communicating with citizens.

This article presents findings from a case-study of how the Norwegian Labour Party uses social media, with a particular focus on the community platform MyLabourParty (<http://mittarbeiderparti.no>)<sup>1</sup>. Social media sites and applications are services with a designated offering. When applied to organizational contexts, the offering can be seen as a triangle: one side representing the offering as perceived and experienced by the organization, one side representing the offering as perceived and experienced by the internal members of the organization, and one side representing the offering as perceived and experienced by external users. The strategy for implementing social media functionality might easily fail if the offering is analyzed from the point of view of the organization only (e.g. the organization will gain valuable input “for free”). It is consequently crucial to identify the offering as perceived and experienced by internal and external users, as well as by the organization as such. This points to the importance of examining whether the organizational aim of using social media complies with how internal users (e.g. politicians) and external users (e.g. citizens) perceive and experience the objective of social media for political purposes.

Before presenting the theoretical and methodological framework, the architecture and system of the MyLabourParty will be described.

### **MyLabourParty**

MyLabourParty consists of more than one hundred interlinked Labour Party-communities. Some of these are local, and some are larger political sites devoted to discussions of particular political topics (e.g. climate/environmental issues, welfare, international politics). Most of the MyLabourParty-communities are open for anyone, yet members of the party can access additional sites, information and functionality. The purpose of establishing the community has been to decrease the threshold for participation, and to simplify organizing political activities and meetings. The platform is also intended as a tool for developing the organization in an open and transparent manner. The purpose of the site thus extends far beyond being a tool in election campaigns, and the focus of this article is hence on the importance of MyLabourParty *between* elections, and not explicitly as a campaigning tool *in* elections.

MyLabourParty is based on the social media platform Origo (<http://origo.no>). Origo enables members to verify their identity via the National Population Register in Norway and to verify party-membership and political commitment (if any). Verified positions will be made visible next to profile pictures and names. Origo is partly owned by the Norwegian newspaper group A-pressen. This means that A-pressen’s 50 local and regional newspapers

all over Norway have integrated Origo as part of their online publishing system, enabling Origo-users to easily publish content on the their local newspapers' readers' online communities.

### **Literature review: Towards a more participatory political system?**

The discourse surrounding social media in the political realm typically raises the question of whether social media invigorate public spheres and enable a more participatory form of democracy. What counts as “political participation” varies according to different normative models of democracy. Teorell (2006) suggests distinguishing between three models of democracy: responsive, participatory and deliberative. According to a responsive democratic model, political participation is conceptualized as citizens' attempts at influencing policy-makers. Citizens can for example vote, take an active part in election campaigns, initiate contacts with government officials, and become involved in organizational activities to deal with social and political problems (Verba & Nie, 1972). In the participatory model of democracy, participation refers to taking part in the actual decision-making process, often in small-scale local settings, and through a combination of direct and indirect mechanisms (Vitale, 2006). Finally, in the deliberative model, political participation refers to the value of participating in political discussions as a process of opinion formation (Teorell, 2006). In the next two sections we will present the theoretical perspectives that constitute the framework for the subsequent analysis of the empowering potentials of social media. This discussion demonstrates that the use of social media in politics is closely aligned with a deliberative model of democracy, emphasizing participation as taking part in political discussions. Yet the innovating potential of social media is arguably only fully realized if participation in political discussions translates into actual influence.

### ***Social media as facilitators of interaction between citizens and between citizens and politicians.***

Whereas new media technologies have often ignited assumptions about their democratizing power - given that new media are actually in the hands of people (Enzensberger, [1970] 2003), the democratic potentials of the Internet in general and social media in particular appear more obvious than with previous mass media. Citizens are already seizing the opportunities to share their points of views and even take political action (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). This is crucial, as citizens engaging in talk with each other can be said to be an inherent feature of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005: 149; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

Discussions about the impact of social media on politics often relate to how social media increase the opportunities of citizens to take part in political discussions, echoing deliberative democratic principles similar to those introduced by Habermas ([1962] 1989). The public sphere, as envisaged by Habermas, is made up of private people coming together. Participants in the ideal speech situation convey rational-critical arguments, articulating the needs of the society (Habermas, [1962] 1989), confronting the state with demands arising from their life worlds (Habermas, 2006: 417). However the reality does not always live up to the ideal public sphere as depicted by Habermas. Whether offline or online, speech is not necessarily rational, tolerance may be low, and interaction may not be civil and is moreover characterized by multiple communicative modes such as the affective, ironic and poetic (Dahlgren, 2005). With regard to social media as facilitators of deliberative public spheres, *interaction between citizens* is nevertheless crucial, yet expectations to the character of these interactions should be realistic

We are also witnessing the emergence of e-government spheres where politicians and MPs interact with citizens, and where information about political processes is made available (Dahlgren, 2005). Research suggests that interaction between citizens and policymakers positively affect the quality of online discussions (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). *Interaction between politicians and citizens* should hence also be studied when examining social media-facilitated public spheres. The advantages seem palpable: Citizens are provided with opportunities to participate in political deliberations, discuss politics with politicians, and influence decision-making processes. Politicians access citizens without having to rely on the mass media; they can tap into the opinions, experiences and knowledge of citizens; and they can make political decision-making more transparent. Citizens become more informed and stand a better chance of influencing policy, whereas politicians become better informed about societal issues. As a result political processes should become more legitimate.

Social media initiatives for increasing the political participation of citizens flourish. The UK-based not-for-profit company mySociety runs some of the best known examples, such as <http://WriteToThem.com> where citizens can contact councilors, local politicians and MPs. Such initiatives, whether initiated by public entities or NPOs, should be understood as part of a long-term effort in Western democracies to increase citizen involvement (Hanssen & Askim, 2008). However, efforts to increase citizens' involvement in policy are not always successful (Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2008), particularly not if the aim is to involve a more heterogeneous mix of citizens. Instead online public spheres have a tendency of empowering

those already in power (Dahlgren, 2005), and create echo-chambers with likeminded people gathering together in separate information cocoons (Sunstein, 2007).

### ***Social media as tools for innovating political processes***

Politicians are elected to represent citizens, and are also consequently expected to pay attention to them (West, 2005). Listening to and interacting with citizens can be considered a first step in involving citizens in policymaking. The next step is taking a more explicit advantage of citizen-created content and sharing of information online, arguing that the full potential for social-media induced innovations in the political system is only realized if citizen participation in political discussions leads to citizens having a greater influence on political decision-making. That is, social media as facilitators of deliberative public spheres are clearly valuable (and innovative), yet are social media also used for involving citizens in policymaking (*doing* politics and not merely *talking* about it)?

In the context of politics, participation and open access to political processes represent fundamental values of a democratic system (Sevland et al., 2006). Mayo and Steinberg (2007) recommend that government administration apply social media to reach common societal aims and, *with* the help of citizens, create information that is experienced as more relevant *for* citizens. Similar claims and findings are echoed in a number of publications (Dutton & Peltu, 2007; Henman, 2010; Osimo, 2008). Concepts such as open government (Ruma & Lathrop, 2010), wiki-government (Noveck, 2009), government 2.0 (Eggers, 2005), and open source government (Tapscott & Williams, 2010) all point to the value of co-innovating with citizens and strengthening the transparency of public operations. Yet, citizen participation in decision-making processes precedes the era social media, and reverberates Dahl's (1989) criteria of effective participation in liberal democracies: all citizens ought to have equal opportunity to influence political decision-making by adequate and equal opportunities for agenda-setting and for the right to express reasons for preferring one outcome rather than another.

This emphasis of the virtue and assets of openness and participation is found also in organizational life and industry (Chesbrough, 2003; Leadbeater, 2009; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). The rhetoric is strongly persuasive, preaching the arrival of a new era, where actors need to make use of the collective wisdom of the crowd. Wikimodels of communication are claimed to be crucial in the future, suggesting a competitive advantage for actors who know how to harness and cultivate ideas from below (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Successful businesses in the era of open innovation make use of external (and internal) ideas, and they

allow their users to improve on their products and services (Chesbrough, 2003). Inviting users (whether consumers or business partners, or in this case citizens) into the innovation process allegedly increases the chances of designing products and services that users actually want and need. In the context of open innovation, social media are increasingly used for managing user input and feedback in open innovation processes (Di Gangi & Wasko, 2009). Similar initiatives of open online ideation exist in politics, with President Obama’s Open Government Dialogue brainstorm<sup>2</sup> in May 2009 being among the most well-known examples.

***Assumed benefits of social media for politics and political participation***

When applied to politics, social media are considered to facilitate participation, openness and transparency, bringing more symmetry into the relationship between politicians and citizens, as well as providing citizens with the opportunity of shaping the content of politics. Based on the above discussion, assumed benefits for different actors can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: Assumed benefits of social media for the political party, politicians and citizens

<b>Social media benefits</b>	<b>Assumed benefits for the political party (organization)</b>	<b>Assumed benefits for politicians (internal users)</b>	<b>Assumed benefits for citizens/voters (external users)</b>
Facilitates communication between politicians and citizens and between citizens.	Legitimizes the political system by increasing participation and transparency.  Makes organizing meetings/events and activating political members and citizens easier.	Provides politicians with access to multiple public spheres and the opportunity to observe and communicate directly with citizens.  Enables politicians to present and explain their points of views without having to rely on mass media as mediators.	Includes citizens in deliberative public spheres with nearly unlimited freedom of speech.  Enables citizens to more easily communicate with politicians and thus potentially to influence decision-making processes.
Innovating political processes by increasing citizen influence	Citizens can provide input that can be used to improve the politics of the party, and make politics more relevant for citizens.  Citizen participation can lead to new solutions to societal problems and challenges.	Politicians can use social media to ask for advice and input.	By participating, citizens get to influence politicians and politics also between elections.

With assumed benefits for all actors, use of social media should facilitate a win-win situation. It could consequently seem as if democracies are moving from a “right-to-know” to a “right to participate”-doctrine.

## **Research questions**

Taking the above assumed benefits as a point of departure, this article discusses to what extent actual experiences among politicians and citizens match their respective expectations. More specifically this paper addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent are political discussions at MyLabourParty perceived and experienced as symmetrical by politicians and by citizens?
2. To what extent does participation through MyLabourParty empower citizens in influencing the politics of the Labour Party?

## **Methodology**

Experiential data providing rich and detailed accounts of actual experiences are required for answering the above research questions comprehensively. Our study analyzes the experiences of 15 parliament and local government politicians with data obtained through qualitative interviews, as well as the experiences of 90 MyLabourParty-community members (citizens who are not necessarily members of the Labour party) with data obtained through a survey.

### ***Qualitative interviews with politicians***

To understand the experiences Labour Party politicians have with the political discussions at MyLabourParty, 15 members of the parliament and local government politicians were interviewed during the fall of 2009. Qualitative methods are appropriate for analyzing the experiential aspects of online social interaction and processes. Interviews were semi-structured following an interview protocol with a series of themes and suggested questions yet with openness to changes of sequences and questions in order to follow up the stories told by the interviewees (Kvale, 1997). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Length was purposely kept short, given the busy schedule of the politicians. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The politicians were promised anonymity, and their names are therefore not included in the analysis. The interviews were reviewed several times for identifying overall themes and findings. They were subsequently coded and analyzed with Nvivo 8.

### ***Survey with citizens as respondents***

In order to examine how users experience MyLabourParty, a survey was conducted in April 2010. 204 participants, who had all contributed with one or more comments on either the Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's blog, the Education Portal, the Labour Portal or the International Portal, were invited to take part in the study. 90 respondents agreed to

participate in the survey. 57 % of the respondents are members of a political party (not necessarily the Labour Party), but none of the invited users were central members of the Labour Party, and only 17 % attend political meetings. With the majority of respondents being members of a political party, the findings presented in this study should nevertheless be interpreted as representing citizens who are particularly interested in politics and political participation.

The survey included five open-ended questions on why respondents commented; on how they experience MyLabourParty; on how MyLabourParty might increase their interest in politics; how MyLabourParty can be improved; and suggestions as to how more users could be motivated to take part in the discussions. This article will only report from the answers to these open-ended questions. These answers were studied and sorted according to the experiences and opinions of the respondents and later analyzed, compared and contrasted with the experiences that were extracted from the interviews with the politicians. The answers from the survey have been analyzed as texts and have not been quantified. Hence, the below analysis does not present any figures in terms of how many respondents were of particular opinions. The analysis is instead qualitative, emphasizing patterns of experiences.

### **Findings: Expectations and experiences with MyLabourParty**

Overall, the interviewed politicians emphasize that they regard social media to be useful for communicating with citizens and voters, and potentially also useful for acquiring valuable input in political processes. These opinions and experiences concur with the assumed benefits presented in table 1. The politicians additionally mention that social media are useful for acquiring visibility within traditional mass media. That is, social media do not merely provide them with the opportunity to bypass the mass media, but also enable policymakers to gain easier access to traditional mass media spheres.

The external users who answered the survey perceive the main value of MyLabourParty to be the opportunity to participate in political debates that might potentially influence politicians and the politics of the Labour Party. An emphasis of the general value of participating in debates with other citizens is also apparent, yet respondents strongly emphasize the opportunity to interact with politicians.

MyLabourParty as perceived by internal and external users may hence seem congruent. However, this is not as straightforward as it initially may seem, and actual experiences do not necessarily match the initial expectations. Findings will be discussed in the next two sections. First expectations and experiences with regard to potentials for improving political

discussions will be discussed. Next, to what extent MyLabourParty empowers citizens and increases their actual influence will be addressed.

***Improving political discussions by facilitating symmetrical interaction?***

Social media technically enable more symmetrical communication between politicians and citizens, and the politicians typically emphasize that social media are valuable for communicating with citizens, particularly citizens who are normally difficult to get in touch with. Facebook is regarded as particularly important, as a majority of Norwegians are registered Facebook-users<sup>3</sup>. MyLabourParty is emphasized as valuable not so much for reaching out to the masses, but in terms of a higher quality of communication when compared to Facebook-discussions.

Politicians stress that it takes quite an effort to create a vibrant political community online. They typically regard good discussions to be factual, with progress, engagement and with broad participation (involving many different types of people). Based on their own experiences good quality discussions can be achieved if the person who initiates the discussion continues to participate in the discussion and if comments are concise and focused on suggesting solutions. However, as the subsequent analysis will show, politicians may find it difficult to live up to these requirements.

Whereas the politicians can be regarded as the internal users, participating citizens are the external users, necessary for creating a vibrant and dynamic site for political discussions. The answers from the respondents indicate how “ordinary” participants experience political discussion in MyLabourParty. Participating in political debates on MyLabourParty is typically perceived to be about *interacting* with politicians, thus making the relationship between politicians and citizens more symmetrical. Respondents expect they can influence policymaking, particularly when they see themselves as knowledgeable within a field. They participate when they are passionate about the topic, and when they believe they have important knowledge and experiences.

*I'm involved in particular topics: health and welfare. I have also challenged authorities on the subject matter. The great thing with [MyLabourParty] is that I reach out to socially engaged people, as well as politicians (respondent).*

*It is inspiring to participate in discussions where the leaders of the party also participate. If I write a letter to a newspaper, it will probably not be read by the leaders of the party, but here you get that opportunity. This makes it more interesting to participate (respondent).*

When citizens are invited into the political process and participate with comments and suggestions, they will also experience a greater involvement and ownership with the political decisions that are made. Politicians in our study emphasize this point, arguing that for an open political party, people should be given the opportunity to participate. Participating is regarded as a value in itself. However, they also emphasize that citizens and “ordinary” members of the party can sometimes make significant contributions, which could be utilized for improving the politics of the party. Their points of views here parallel deliberative democracy-theories on the value of public debate. Decisions will be improved when discussed in public and when different points of views are welcomed. Answers from the survey-respondents indicate that they too are likely to perceive the offering to be about ordinary citizens sharing their opinions and experiences and as such to make discussions more elaborate and complete.

The value of participating in an arena where one’s voice can be heard and considered is regarded as crucial. One respondent introduced the metaphor of “lobbyism of the people”, but of a positive and completely open kind. This exceeds what we would normally expect in a representative democracy where the electorate chooses their politicians based on pre-defined politics, but do not get much power in defining the actual politics and party programs. One of the respondents explains:

*I regard MyLabourParty to be a new mode of working, which will slowly and irrefutably become part of the societal discourse. Combined with increased access to the debates taking place within political parties and in the organizations overall, societal debates will belong to everyone. Debates and decisions have for a long time taken place in closed arenas that citizens cannot influence or access. I am of the opinion that MyLabourParty may invigorate political involvement and secure democracy for the future. Stoltenberg and Støre’s blogs [the prime minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs] strengthen my political involvement and my respect for politicians in general. Democracy is access and participation (respondent).*

The problem is that while the respondents typically perceive access to debates and influence on decisions to be the offering of MyLabourParty, they do not necessarily experience this to be the actual case. When describing the challenges, a typical answer is that politicians need to be more involved in the debates, replying to or at least recognizing comments. In MyLabourParty, users can choose to “like” contributions and comments (corresponding to “like this item” in Facebook), and recognition can take this simple form. However, actual replies to comments are valued higher.

*[I would be more involved if] the party was more visible in the discussions and participated with comments. (...). I think people will lose interest if they get no response. MyLabourParty has a strong visual expression that might deceive you into believing it is something it is not: that Labour Party politicians take an active part in the discussions (respondent).*

Politicians are aware of the challenge, and typically emphasize the need for replying to comments. They know this is what the participants expect, and they also agree that participants deserve to be seen. Yet, fulfilling these expectations is demanding.

*We haven't been very good at dialogues. That we reply when we receive comments, and that it doesn't end up as... that we just publish our post, receive comments and then nothing. There has to be a two-way dialogue if you want to make this work (politician).*

One of the politicians explains that she no longer has time to respond: after being appointed as a leader of one of the Parliament-committees, combined with a busy family life with small children, she finds it impossible to devote the necessary time and effort to respond to comments. She emphasizes the need for a systematic approach and sharing the responsibility among several politicians, taking turns at being involved in the discussions. There are moreover significant differences between politicians. The prime minister receives more comments, making it virtually impossible to respond to each and everyone. Contributions to MyLabourParty from regular members of the Parliament do not prompt as many comments from citizens, potentially enabling a more symmetrical communication.

In principle, replies are not required for comments and input to make a difference. Most people who read comments will not respond in the form of explicitly replying. Reading without replying does not mean comments are regarded as unimportant. Yet normative expectations with regard to the symmetry of social media imply that users expect initiators of discussions to participate. It hence seems commentators need to be assured their input is acknowledged.

The quality of the discussions is also assessed critically by respondents and politicians. None of them are completely happy. When party-members do reply to comments, respondents expect these replies to be of a certain quality. They are particularly critical towards what they perceive is an attempt to close down on controversies. Respondents want politicians to respond also to critical comments, and to allow people to disagree with established truths.

*Do not constantly defend the viewpoints of the Labour Party. Instead be a listening post. Required corrections should be allowed, but [MyLabourParty] is no longer interesting if reduced to a defense mechanism for the party. Instead, listen to the opinions people have. (...) Consider the contributions (respondent).*

Politicians emphasize the same points, arguing that they indeed recognize and appreciate commentators with conflicting opinions. They know they should respond to critique, aiming for debates that closely resemble ideal speech situations:

*In my opinion, if you commence a discussion, you need to meet counter-arguments in a factual and proper way so that it will be a genuine debate about the problems to be discussed and not a debate where the purpose is to defeat those with another opinion (politician).*

Politicians on the other hand also expect citizens to present rational arguments, not to stray away from the topic and avoid flaming. They want participants to take discussions seriously, commenting upon the politics and the problems to be addressed instead of attacking individual beings.

*Good discussions are characterized by high involvement, conflict of opinions with high-quality language and respect for other opinions. But not just that, too much respect is dreary. It has to be a little harsh, and I don't mind people disagreeing with the party and the beliefs of the party (politician).*

As with most online discussions, MyLabourParty communities have their share of participants who do not adhere to such requirements for rational-critical debate. Instead some politicians sometimes experience that commentators use the discussions as “rubbish heaps” for biased and irrational claims. In some cases, comments have deviated strongly from what politicians regard as acceptable, and censoring comments has been considered necessary.

*Quite a few of those who comment are, maybe people we don't really want comments from. Not because they criticize us, but because they do it in a way that we consider editing or censoring necessary. But I don't know how we can get the right people to participate. It must be by being visible (politician).*

Politicians want rational political discussions that resemble Habermas' public sphere. But whereas Habermas originally depicted rational-critical debates founded on the participation of the educated elites of the society<sup>4</sup>, the politicians typically stress the importance of

inclusion. They are concerned with participatory divides, and emphasize that they need to reach out to people regardless of their socio-economical status.

*It is a risk in that the most affluent and capable are the ones who participate, and their voices are heard anyway. It is difficult to say how this will evolve, because the younger generation uses the Internet anyway. It doesn't matter if you don't write perfectly, which means that some barriers that exist among elderly disappear, and I hope that more people will participate regardless of their socio-economical status. However it could reinforce the power-structures we already have, and enable resourceful people even better opportunities to make their voices heard. This is an important discussion, how can we achieve democratization and not only a reinforcement of existing power structures (politician).*

The politicians therefore emphasize the need to engage people in more traditional ways, involving local party units and face-to-face ways of working with people. As long as they are conscious of the people who are not present online, the politicians regard social media to strengthen the democracy.

As a final point with regard to political discussions, it should be noted that politicians emphasize the interdependence between discussions in MyLabourParty and discussions in mass media. It is increasingly becoming clear that the relationship between social media and old media is symbiotic, with old media finding news-stories from social media. Journalists accordingly keep a close eye on the activities of politicians online. With the integration of MyLabourParty with the social media platform Origo, this symbiosis is part of the system. For the Labour Party members who were seated in the Parliament, the opportunity that MyLabourParty provides for easy access to the local media was regarded as very important.

### ***Innovations in the political system: citizens influencing politics?***

The next aspect to be addressed concerns the innovative potentials of MyLabourParty in increasing citizens' involvement in and influence on policymaking. Even if the Labour Party explicitly attempts to innovate how they work by means of for example crowd-sourcing campaigns, taking the step from allowing citizens to talk about politics to doing politics is particularly challenging. Respondents typically expect that their contributions will potentially make a difference, but some express disappointment with current practice. They are particularly concerned with lack of feedback on how contributions, suggestions and comments are assessed within the party, arguing that in order to encourage citizen

participation, citizens also need to know they might actually influence politicians and policymaking.

*They have to create the impression that your contributions are assessed, and that you actually have some influence (respondent).*

*They need to demonstrate that contributions can actually influence the policy of the Labour Party and what the party fights for (respondent).*

Respondents express that they do not know how comments and input are treated in the Labour Party. If politicians, and particularly central politicians, do not participate in the discussions, respondents regard the chances of their input actually making a difference to be minor. Some respondents consequently question the point of being involved.

*I find it difficult to get through to the party as long as no-one actually responds to my comments. I think this is a democratic problem: whether we are taken seriously and whether we are acknowledged for wanting to participate in order to create a better society (respondent).*

These concerns pinpoint challenges that are often neglected in discussions of the benefits of user participation. How should comments and suggestions be systematically addressed and considered so that citizen participation might actually influence policymaking (or products, services and processes in other societal and economic fields)? Actors who apply social media for “tapping into the collective wisdom of the crowds” might initially feel a slight apprehension for whether or not users will actually participate. Yet whether user participation is minor or over-whelming, actors need a systematic approach for how user-inputs are treated. This approach should moreover be made explicitly visible for external users for example in the form of guidelines or a policy for how user-input is treated. As explained by one of the politicians, the ideal system for taking care of suggestions does not yet exist in MyLabourParty. She suggests improving the technical system:

*It is a crucial responsibility, when you believe somebody has a good point, to take this point further into the process. (...) This should be designed into the system. That I could report it directly to the party centrally when I receive input and suggestions. Then I wouldn't have to make a note and bring it further into the party program process or to the annual meeting where resolutions are made. Hence, if it could be possible to do something with MyLabourParty where we could bring good suggestions further. Like, if I get a comment on a*

*blog-post, or if I notice an interesting suggestion in the thread of another blog-post, if I could click on something that would like, make it go, “swoosh”, into the big inbox for The Labour Party then that would be fabulous (politician).*

Not all politicians share the opinion that MyLabourParty is intended as a tool for innovating how the Labour Party works with policymaking, yet the party have had several specific online campaigns where citizens have been invited exactly for this purpose. They choose certain topics and problems, present these for citizens and ask for input.

*We use it [MyLabourParty] to commence discussions on current issues. Like with the sick pay and sick leave debate this winter, we wrote blog-entries on MyLabourParty and asked for input. And with the Inclusive Working Life-agreement<sup>5</sup>, we discussed it online. We try to be systematic with regard to current issues and encourage online discussions (politician).*

The Labour Party is systematically initiating crowd-sourcing campaigns, but does not clearly communicate how inputs and comments are handled. Similarly, politicians state that citizen input affect them on a day-to-day basis, yet as there are no official guidelines for how citizen input should be treated, individual politicians are left with the responsibility of following up on comments and suggestions. Thus, when one politician stresses that “you get input and user-experiences on how laws and regulations affect people”, to what extent such input actually influences policymaking depends on how she as a politician acts in response. One of the other politicians explains how input and suggestions might affect policymaking processes:

*Sometimes we receive really excellent suggestions that might result in us adjusting or changing our politics. It happens. Or we receive suggestions as to what we should discuss in the cabinet or in the Ministry. I believe that these sites strengthen our ability and opportunity to be an ombudsman for our voters and follow up on their suggestions. You can also receive valuable input prior to discussions in the government that actually shapes the conclusions we make (politician).*

Whereas the politicians explain in general how comments and suggestions might affect policymaking, few mention specific examples of how they involve citizens. One exception is a politician who is a member of the Foreign affairs and defence committee in the Parliament, and who regularly contributes and participates in political discussions, particularly at the International portal (one of the MyLabourParty topic-communities). She explains how she uses MyLabourParty as a tool for acquiring valuable input to her tasks in Foreign affairs and defence committee:

*I just recently had an interpellation in the parliament about NATO's new strategic concept. Sounds technical, but I posted it on our International portal and asked for input and suggestions. So it is a way of gathering input and communicating about your work as a politician (politician).*

She published the interpellation she filed to the Minister of defence on the International portal of MyLabourParty, and explicitly asked for input on what readers regarded as particularly important priorities in the upcoming revision of NATO's strategic concept. In the following discussion, she makes sure to be visible, assuring readers that their points of views are considered. In the interpellation in the Parliament three weeks later, she briefly summarizes the arguments and opinions from the commentators at MyLabourParty, emphasizing that she particularly concur with the comments made about the importance of NATO being a defence-alliance where reciprocity is important.

After the Parliament-debate, she posts a brief comment on International Portal with a link to the debate on the Parliament websites (where videos as well as transcripts of all Parliament-debates are published) and thanks the commentators for their inputs and points of views. As such she is an MP who has already taken an important step into a new and more participatory political system, inviting and making use of citizens' points of view in her work. As explained in the introduction to this section, the respondents expect politicians to participate and to assess and acknowledge the comments that are made. However attempts to involve citizens do not characterize the overall participatory strategies of Labour Party politicians, and demonstrate that participatory practices depend on the efforts and creativity of individual politicians.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented in this article demonstrate some general points about a potential participatory turn in democracies (and societies overall), and the potential citizen-empowering affordances of social media. These points concern the normative expectations that dominate popular and dominating discourses about social media as well as the practical challenges in achieving what is expected. Citizens as well as politicians appear to have internalized the belief that social media facilitate symmetrical communication and opportunities for all to participate in political discussions and policymaking. Social media are seen to promise the realization of increased political participation, both in the form of a deliberative model of democracy and by endowing citizens the opportunity to do politics in collaboration with MPs and local politicians. It is however a fallacy to equalize social media

with symmetrical and dialogical conversations (Lüders, 2007, 2008), and with actual political influence. Whereas social media technically enable users to interact (more so than traditional mass media), the users themselves need to utilize these affordances. To what extent they do so depends on contextual conditions such as the character of the discussions (e.g. number of comments) and the interest and devotion of the thread-starter (in this case, the politicians). In the case of MyLabourParty, discussions tend to be modest in terms of number of comments, and it might seem viable for politicians to participate and reply to comments and suggestions from citizens. Yet, for various reasons politicians typically experience it as difficult to participate to the extent they know is expected by the contributing citizens. Whereas politicians acknowledge the value of reading comments and suggestions, there is no systematic or formalized way of how they should react in response, or how input from citizens should be handled. This in turn may make citizens unsure of whether there is a point in participating. Table 2 recapitulates these findings.

Table 2: Assumed benefits vs. experiences of social media for politicians and citizens

<b>Social media benefits</b>	<b>Assumed benefits vs. experiences of politicians (internal users)</b>		<b>Assumed benefits vs. experiences of citizens (external users)</b>	
Facilitates communication between politicians and citizens and between citizens.	Provides politicians with access to multiple public spheres and the opportunity to observe and communicate directly with citizens.	Politicians expect citizens to present rational arguments when participating in political discussions. They are sometimes disappointed with the actual character of the interaction.	Includes citizens in deliberative public spheres with nearly unlimited freedom of speech.	Citizens expect politicians to take part in discussion, but do not always experience this to be the case.
	Enables politicians to present and explain their points of views without having to rely on mass media as mediators.	Politicians acknowledge the challenge in being sufficiently active in discussions with citizens.	Enables citizens to more easily communicate with politicians and thus potentially to influence decision-making processes.	Some citizens experience that controversies and critical comments are not dealt with in a constructive way.
		Politicians experience that social media provides them with easier access to mass media.		Lack of participation from politicians may cause citizens to question the point of being involved.

Innovating political processes by increasing citizen influence	Politicians can use social media to ask for advice and input.	It is challenging to follow up on input and suggestions from citizens, and turn citizen participation into citizen influence.	By participating, citizens get to influence politicians and politics also between elections.	Some citizens are uncertain with how input is being handled and do not experience that they have any real influence.
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The offering of MyLabourParty as perceived and experienced by the interviewed politicians compared to how the offering is perceived and experienced by the respondents is hence somewhat conflicting. The respondents expect dialogue and influence. And whereas the politicians also emphasize communication with citizens as part of the offering, they may not be as involved as the respondents expect. Conflicting perceptions and experiences of the offering need to be addressed and solved, and there are (at least) three strategies for solving this problem: (1) re-define offering: clarify for internal as well as external users what kind of service MyLabourParty is intended to be for each of them; (2) Change user-practice: e.g. should politicians take a more active role in replying to user-comments? (3) Improve/change the system: is it possible to make system-iterations which meet the expectations of users?

A service will always be designed in a way that affects how the offering is perceived by users. It is subsequently necessary to identify how the offer is perceived and experienced (by internal and external users), and based on these findings re-define or clarify the offering. Should citizens expect politicians to always take an active part in discussions, or is MyLabourParty more a venue for politicians to inform about political processes in a more one-way manner? If the purpose indeed is to facilitate more symmetrical forms of interactions, the Labour Party needs to assess how to achieve this. Yet, attempting to change user-practices is challenging and not always achievable. Not all politicians can be expected to find the time to participate in user-debates. Moreover, the level of citizen-participation is modest on MyLabourParty. With a potential increase in the level of participation, this challenge increases in scope, requiring a strategy and culture for nurturing the dialogue. Other representatives of the party will need to participate or politicians might share the workload of responding (as also suggested by one of the politicians). Finally, it is important to look for how the technical system can be improved. The suggestion made by the politician who wanted a system-option for redirecting interesting comments and suggestions to a central “in-box” could be a possible design-solution to this end.

The challenges of citizen participation in politics are consequently significant, though should not be interpreted to imply that a more collaborative form of governance is not

possible. The problems identified are challenges and not limits. In particular, the distinction between providing an arena for political discussion and an arena for political influence is difficult. Clearly, access to public arenas for expressing political opinion implies the possibility to influence. However, systematic utilization of citizen contributions requires more than such public arenas; tools and processes are needed to combine contributions, to implement contributions, and to provide feedback on the impact of contributions to the contributors.

In MyLabourParty citizens are invited to political discussions. The citizens typically perceive this invitation as a promise of the potential impact of their contributions. However, they are not directly involved in collaborative processes returning political documents. Such collaborative processes may well involve citizens as exemplified by Noveck's (2009) conceptualization of a Wiki Government and the process to draft the new Iceland constitution (<http://www.stjornlagarad.is/>). However, collaborative approaches in themselves represent a democratic challenge in that these will typically exclude the majority of citizens as only a few self selected enthusiasts will be able to invest the time and effort needed to make the required contributions.

## **Conclusion**

Social media sites such as MyLabourParty represent a fundamental difference to political discussions proceeding the era of participatory media venues, yet expectations should be adjusted to account for the challenges pinpointed in this article. Findings were discussed to address assumptions made about the empowering and democratizing power of social media. The expectations of citizens and politicians concur significantly with the popular discourse surrounding social media. The affordances of social media are perceived to be democratizing and symmetrical. As a result social media are expected to invigorate political discussions, enable interactions between citizens and politicians, and to empower citizens by providing them with means to influence policymaking. With such high expectations, the actual experiences made might be disappointing. Citizens still experience a considerable asymmetry in terms of power and find that their actual influence is limited. Politicians find it too demanding to participate to the extent citizens expect, and are moreover disappointed with discussions not always meeting the requirements for rational debates that they expect.

Social media have attributes that facilitate a more equal participation, yet democratizing implications do not follow by default. In designing social media for participatory political purposes, mapping user-experiences for iteratively improving the functionality is crucial. The

results from our study demonstrate the importance of understanding the people who employ the technology. The rhetoric of popular proponents of social media is strongly persuasive, often simplifying the causality between social media, participation and democratizing effects. Yet in the end these assumed implications depend fully on how users utilize the inherent affordances of social media. Citizens outside the core of political parties might now have a right to participate, but not necessarily the right to make a difference.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article was completed in August 2011, just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks on 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011, when a right-wing terrorist bombed the executive government quarter of Norway killing eight people and later shot down and killed 69 attendees at the summer camp organized by AUF (the youth division of the Labour Party) at the island Utøya. The loss for the Labour Party is tragic and immense. This article will not analyze the use of MyLabourParty and other social media following July 22 even though social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have played a significant role both during and after the tragic attacks. Social media were used to share information, and perhaps more importantly, to take part in the public mourning. Several in-memory-of pages have for example been created on Facebook and a memory-book has been created at MyLabourParty (<http://minnebok.mittarbeiderparti.no/>).

<sup>2</sup> <http://opengov.ideascale.com/>

<sup>3</sup> In 2010, 61 % of Norwegians with access to the Internet visited Facebook at least once a week: <http://www.tns-gallup.no/?did=9091935>

<sup>4</sup> As explained by Craig Calhoun (Calhoun, 1992: 3) the early public spheres were composed of educated, propertied men, who conducted a discourse prejudicial to the interests of those excluded.

<sup>5</sup> Agreement on a More Inclusive Working Life (IA-agreement) is an instrument aimed at preventing sick leave, increasing focus on job presence and preventing “expulsion” and increasing recruitment to working life of persons who do not have established employment.

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