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Legacy media as anti-issue machines: Does datafication change anything?

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Following a pragmatist conceptualization of democracy, technopolitical issues lend a dynamism to public life that can be democratically generative. However, this requires publics to be multiple and shifting. Based on fieldwork at the social-liberal Danish daily *Politiken*, I start by suggesting that newspaper debate constrains the development of issue publics by framing debate in relation to a pre-given national public. Even though legacy media such as broadsheet newspapers tend to self-identify as servants of democracy, they sometimes work as anti-issue machines.

I then move on to current datafication processes, noting that they have the potential to upend such anti-issues machineries, since users may congregate around issues and explore them in ways that are not punctuated by news deadlines or shaped by generic imagined audiences. Based on ongoing fieldwork among professional 'issue constructors', I observe that while considerable democratic potential is indeed assigned to new digital platforms, social media publics and digital data sets are put to work in ways that reproduce static notions of the public.

My first round of interviews further indicates that what enables professional issue constructors to stage public issues in an era of datafication is not digital data itself, but a host of relations between data sources, journalists, institutionalised interests, analytical acuity, and technoscientific knowledge. Recovering these relational qualities opens the question of how issue construction may put the public at stake too. While my main argument is that the ongoing datafication of publics and public debate does not do enough to upend existing anti-issue machineries, I end by discussing ways in which datafication does afford new kinds of public inquiry that may allow issue politics to unfold further.