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Use yourself, kick yourself! Learning from a newspaper how (not) to do good public debate

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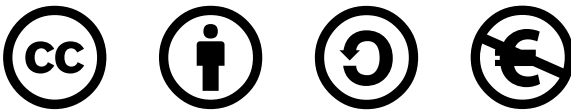
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USE YOURSELF, KICK YOURSELF! LEARNING FROM A NEWSPAPER HOW (NOT) TO DO GOOD PUBLIC DEBATE

Andreas Birkebæk

INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING TO THEORIES OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, PUBLIC DEBATE IS a cornerstone of democratic politics. It is in public debate that individuals are thought to emerge as citizens and contribute to the formation of public interests (Habermas 1989). How can this idealised notion of public debate be grounded and specified in concrete democratic situations? In the autumn of 2013, I enrolled in something called the ‘School of Debate and Critique’, initiated by the Danish newspaper *Politiken*. According to the organisers, the purpose of the school was to educate a ‘new generation’ of participants in ‘public debate’ in Denmark. I joined 149 other students below 30 years of age, selected based on written applications. Once accepted, we could participate in half a year of fortnightly evening talks given by the newspaper staff and various high-profile guest speakers. In addition to attending these ‘inspirational evenings’, as the organisers called them, the school involved a series of written assignments, a couple of full-day workshops, a diploma upon completion and the prospect of writing a letter to the editor that was ‘sharp enough’ to be printed in the paper.

On my first evening at the school, I found myself sitting on a black folding chair in *Politiken's* building across from the City Hall in the centre of Copenhagen. The large, square room could barely hold 150 people. Moments before, I had been part of a long and crowded line on the pavement outside, where we waited to be individually admitted by two security guards. Their presence reminded me that security at *Politiken* had been dramatically increased after the Muhammed cartoon crisis in 2005. Once inside, I had a sensation of being one of the chosen few – despite the fact that the room was crammed. I had been admitted into the halls of one of the oldest and largest newspapers in Denmark, which cultivates an image of being a pillar of Danish democracy. I also sensed hesitation and scepticism in my own chest, and among my co-participants: Would this 'school' be worth our time, or was it simply a marketing stunt? Soon, the editor-in-chief entered the stage, and the room settled down. From the podium, he explained that the school was a project designed to 'improve the quality' of 'the debate out there in our democracy'.

I find this short statement to be indicative of a certain way of thinking about public debate, where it is assumed to always already exist in an abstract and idealised way. Modern liberal democracy in its mainstream version seems to depend on this narrative of a civic sphere with its own existence, independent of the state and the market (Somers 1995a, 1995b). In this chapter I am interested in a different way of thinking about public debate, which considers it to be not primordial, but completely artificial in the constructivist sense that public debate is staged with the help of specific technologies and arrangements (Latour and Weibel 2005, Barnett 2008). Such a perspective can draw on work in STS on public participation, which has studied the enactment of publics with techniques such as focus groups (Lezaun and Soneryd 2007), surveys (Law 2009), and citizen hearings (Jensen 2005, see also Krabbenborg 2020, Pallet and Chilvers 2020, in this volume). However, my case also differs from these, since it is about how media dynamics rather than social science techniques establish a reference to 'the public'. Media actors such as *Politiken* explicitly seek to not just represent the public or public debate, but also intervene in how public debate is organised, as the school initiative illustrates.

Specifically, *Politiken* expressed a wish to intervene by including more young people in newspaper debate, because they perceived young people to be under-represented (as well as interesting as potential future customers). At the same time, *Politiken* wanted to qualify newspaper debate and make sure it lived up to certain editorial standards long cultivated by *Politiken*, such as being well-written, eye-catching and able to spark further debate. In the following, I will explore *Politiken's* dual ambition of including a 'new generation' in public debate and improving a public debate that is thought to already exist 'out there'. I will argue that there is a tension in this agenda between trying to come to terms with a new and, for *Politiken*, apparently rather exotic phenomenon ('young people today') and already knowing what the proper technique and arena will be ('sharp' and 'improved' newspaper debate). To what extent is *Politiken* willing to adjust itself in order to connect with these youngsters who have caught its attention, and to what extent will it remain in a business-as-usual mode of doing newspaper debate in the way it already believes is right?

What is at stake here may be explored with Isabelle Stengers' distinction between governance and politics (Stengers 2010). For Stengers, governance is the continuation of the existing 'majority repertoire' (ibid.: 23) or, differently put, conformity with the existing public order (ibid.: 16). Politics, on the other hand, involves a *hesitation* with respect to what is of importance. As indicated, *Politiken's* aims were twofold: to include new actors in public debate and to ensure a proper public debate. As such, there is no reason to believe that *Politiken* was prepared to restrain itself to only practise hesitance. To the contrary, *Politiken* was seeking to define and demonstrate its version of good public debate against the backdrop of less well-informed and well-written contributions on social media, for example (see Birkbak 2018 for a comparison of debate on Facebook and debate in *Politiken*). From the onset, then, it seemed that *Politiken* veered toward 'governance' rather than 'politics', in Stengers' terms.

Yet the question of Stengersian politics and hesitation is crucial, because this is arguably where democracy is at stake in the sense of expanding political agency through moments where hitherto muted actors are taken into account on their own terms (Stengers 2005). In addition to describing the democratic situation of *Politiken's* school, I wish to raise the question of to what extent *Politiken* in the

process stumbled upon opportunities for hesitation that might have allowed it to learn something about young people on their own terms. To the extent that moments of hesitation took place, *Politiken's* school may be said to have contributed to democratic politics in a Stengersian sense, whereas if hesitation and learning did not happen, *Politiken* remained in a mode of governing the status quo of newspaper debate. The purpose of raising this question with Stengers is to avoid the assumption that 'high quality' newspaper debate is automatically a contribution to democratic politics. Instead, I wish to use the specific democratic situation of *Politiken's* school to open up scrutiny into how exactly newspaper debate can be said to contribute to democratic politics – or not.

In the following, I will first describe and discuss the recruitment of participants, then move on to the ideas taught at the school, and finally turn to a few aspects of how the school was organised in daily practice. I base the analysis on my field notes from the autumn semester of 2013, interviews with participants and organisers at the school, and newspaper content (see Birkbak 2016 for an overview of the material).

RECRUITING A DIVERSE ELITE

From the beginning, *Politiken's* staff emphasised that they wanted the process of securing a spot among the 150 participants at the School of Debate and Critique to be highly selective. As a result, the organisers were anxious to receive enough applications. In order to attract participants, *Politiken* issued an open call for written applications through its printed paper, various social media channels, and through a network of 20–30 young people who it already knew and understood to be well-connected. The organisers ended up receiving around 300 applications, which they saw as an acceptable number. Here is what the assistant hired by *Politiken* to help run the school told me about the selection process:

Those who have shown an amount of creativity or an exceptional language ability [in their applications], they have landed a spot, so that has actually been the first round of selection. That is not very many. Then there is a lot in the middle, where we have tried... in part, there is a gender-related balance,

where we preferred fifty-fifty. Luckily that turned out to not be so difficult, because the applications have been almost fifty-fifty. Then there is age. We filtered out many of the younger people who applied [...] Apart from the age factor, there was a geographic factor and a demographic factor. If there is anyone who have applied from Aarhus or Aalborg [other major cities in Denmark], then let them get in [...] If there were anyone who were not university students, but electricians or primary school teachers, then we would probably give a little more weight to their application [...] There was also the ethnic factor, which we took into account.

This quote suggests that the organisers of the school saw the recruitment of the 150 students as a balancing act between talent and representativeness. This reflects an ambition expressed by the main organiser of the school to assemble ‘the sharpest minds and the sharpest pens’, while also reaching for diversity in relation to a conventional set of variables: gender, age, geographical location, education level, ethnicity. The two ambitions first seemed opposed to me. However, the organisers found the two things to be connected, since they found texts written by demographic outliers more likely to be interesting and suitable for publication due to these writers’ supposedly ‘unique perspective on social life.’ The school assistant explained how pursuing not just a talented, but also a diverse, group of young people was connected to what *Politiken* is trying to achieve with its opinion pages more generally:

There needs to be something for every taste when you make a debate section; the editor of debate cares very much about that. There needs to be something related to one agenda and something related to another agenda. There needs to be some heavy politics, but there also needs to be something lighter. Lifeworld, trends, and so on. There should also preferably be some men and some women represented, some older and some younger. It is these kinds of balancing exercises that you try to take into account all the time in order to catch the attention of different readers, because *Politiken* has quite a lot of readers. It is the same balance we have tried to... there is a very strong connection between the debate section and the School of Debate and Critique.

In other words, the organisers saw the school as part of a more general effort to provide a varied newspaper diet and cater to different segments of *Politiken's* readership. The school organisers were worried about recruiting a cohort of students that was too homogenous, not so much due to a social scientific concern with representativity, but because of a more practical concern that a homogeneous group would not deliver newspaper content deemed extraordinary and varied enough to be printed. In other words, while *Politiken* tried to achieve broad representation in a way that resembles how citizens are recruited for public participation events like consensus conferences (Jensen 2005), it also broke with this logic and sought to actively include demographic outliers because of their qualities as 'obviously interested parties', to quote Jensen (2005: 226). In a sense, 'bias' was a good thing at *Politiken's* school, at least against the backdrop of a core readership and pool of participants sharing similar upper middle-class ideas and values.

As suspected, achieving the desired diversity turned out to be difficult. Many of the applications came from what the organisers saw as the same group of people: Copenhagen-based social science students at the university level, deeply interested in current affairs, but all with quite privileged backgrounds and similar ambitions. In order to compensate for this, the recruitment process prioritised students who 'stood out', as the organisers put it. As the school commenced, the organisers continued to highlight the value of the few demographic outliers among the participants, such as the one participant who attended a vocational school, and the one who flew in from Aalborg more than 300 kilometres away.

Here, it is useful to know that *Politiken* understands itself as part of a 'cultural struggle', as several of the editors put it when talking at the school sessions. The struggle refers to a liberal reform movement dating back to the 'Modern Breakthrough' in Scandinavian literature and education in the 1870–90s (Bredal 2009). The landscape of Copenhagen intellectuals at that time included two of *Politiken's* co-founders, Viggo Hørup and Edvard Brandes. To this day, *Politiken* remains a social-liberal newspaper catering to the urban, educated upper middle-class located on the centre-left of Danish politics. The fact that the school organisers actively promoted students who were either right-wing, workers, not from Copenhagen, or belonged to ethnic minorities, indicates that

they were concerned with being inclusive, yet in a specific way that continued their identity as an open-minded urban elite newspaper.

I would like to highlight the failure to recruit a more heterogenous group of participants as a first opportunity for Stengersian ‘learning’. *Politiken* did ‘hesitate’ in the sense that it was concerned with how to recruit participants from under-represented backgrounds. However, the hesitation did not translate into action. The failure could have prompted *Politiken* to slow down and hesitate more in an attempt to consider why so few young people with unskilled, ‘provincial’, right-wing or other-than-Danish backgrounds applied. However, starting the recruitment process with 20–30 young people who were already ‘friends of the house’ comes across as the opposite of trying to reach beyond the urban elite. The open call for written applications also favoured young people who were already well connected and confident writers. As such, the recruitment process never really broke with *Politiken*’s own terms. This is, however, not the only way to go about recruiting participants for a debate school. Other organisations in Copenhagen have set up initiatives similar to *Politiken*’s, which specifically target people usually under-represented in a newspaper debate, such as those with a vocational background (CEVEA 2019). For *Politiken*, the main emphasis seems to have been on assembling an elite group capable of ‘quality’ writing. Indeed, one of the organisers put it this way during one of the school evenings: ‘The school is elitist – and all the better for being so’. In short, some demographic outliers were included, but on the terms established by *Politiken*.

By assuming to already know what constitutes quality newspaper debate and by not trying to learn from under-represented groups how to reach out to them, it may be argued with inspiration from Stengers that *Politiken* missed an opportunity to learn something new about young people as a central target group of, and contributor to, public debate. *Politiken* wanted to reach what for it counted as ‘minorities’, but in practice only welcomed those that were well connected and able to take part in an elitist project. To contribute to democratic ‘politics’ in Stengers’ sense, the school would have had to involve minorities on their own terms. It follows that when it comes to recruitment, *Politiken*’s school was more an act of governance than of politics. Moving on to the content of the school teaching will allow me to explore this further.

LEARNING TO 'KICK INWARDS'

During the first evening, we were told that there would be a series of writing exercises with different themes. The first theme was 'the underclass'. Two public figures, who had both grown up in underclass families, were invited to come and speak as a source of inspiration. We were then instructed to each write individual letters to the editor of maximum 800 words in length, on the topic of the contemporary Danish underclass. Two weeks later, when the next meeting took place, we learned that *Politiken* planned to move seven or eight of the letters forward towards potential publication, which could indicate that the writing assignment had been a success. However, the exercise also came across as incongruent with *Politiken's* idea that school participants should speak from their personal 'perspectives on life' – the very perspectives on the basis of which they had been recruited. Instead, 150 young people, most of whom had no direct experience of the living conditions of the lower classes, were asked to write about the rather crude theme 'the underclass'. Moreover, those invited to talk on behalf of the underclass were those that had 'made it' and become public figures. So, while the choice of topic (the underclass) was somewhat aligned with the ambition found in the recruitment process of bringing under-represented voices and themes into public debate, *Politiken* continued to stay within the existing 'majority repertoire' of those already present in the media and the elite (Stengers 2010: 23).

The theme for the next writing exercise was 'the biggest problem for our generation'. This was arguably more in line with the logic of writing from personal experience, since all participants could claim some sort of direct experience with being a member of 'the younger generation'. At the same time, we were explicitly asked to generalise about *everyone* in our age cohort rather than write from our specific standpoint. In a way, we were asked by *Politiken* to perform the vague phenomenon of a 'new generation' that they sought to give a voice in public debate.

I found the first two writing assignments difficult, as did many of the other students I talked to. I dutifully invented an opinionated argument about the underclass and about my generation's biggest problem and wrote 800 words

about each, but the writing processes did not connect well with any of my personal experiences or concerns. At the third evening meeting, we were told that, moving forward, the assignments would no longer have a fixed theme. The argument made by the main organiser of the school, who was also the editor of debate at *Politiken*, was that we ‘should not feel tied down’. So far, many of the opinion letters submitted by the students gave a ‘too strong feeling of responding to a fixed question’ and of ‘trying too hard to live up to the expectations of *Politiken*’. In the eyes of the organiser, this resulted in ‘a lack of originality, focus, and a lack of a clear stance’.

This shift can be understood as another opportunity for ‘hesitation’ on the part of the organisers, in the sense that the quality of the written assignments was not as high as they had hoped, which made them reconsider their setup. But the moment of hesitation did not last long. The main organiser swiftly concluded that the problem was an overly fixed task, and decided to abandon the pre-given topics. The organisers could have slowed down more and asked themselves why exactly the two first writing assignments did not deliver enough texts that *Politiken* could recognise as being of high quality. The more specific problem may have been that we were asked to write about topics that did not affect us, and, as such, we were not able to draw on personal experience in our writing in a convincing manner.

While *Politiken* did not explain its shift in tactics in this way, it seemed aware of this line of thinking in its general writing advice to us. The instructors said they were looking for texts that were ‘more personal’ and ‘less predictable’. A good letter to the editor, we were taught, is not only well argued and timely, but it is also written from a deeply personal vantage point. As one of the participants at the school expressed it in my interview with him:

They ask for personal voices. Hyper-personal. Some who speak from their own standpoint. I have an impression that they say they go for sharp opinions, but they really go for the personal standpoints, a mass of [personal] experience. If [an applicant] just wrote an impersonal application... I do not at all think [they] would get through with [it].

It seems that the staff at *Politiken* understood the importance of cultivating different voices speaking from their own particular standpoints, but at the same time they insisted on defining the terms for how to make this happen, rather than slow down and try to learn from young people on their own terms. This argument can be expanded by looking more closely at the instruction we received at the school. The recommended form of an opinion letter was to start with a deeply personal experience and then broaden out towards a societal issue. To be sure, making the jump from private to public matters of concern is a stable part of the craft of opinion letter-writing (Boltanski 2012). However, a high premium was put on arguments which the instructors characterised as ‘kicking inwards’ in the sense of criticising or going against the grain of one’s own socio-demographic group. For instance, when a participant wrote a piece on being genuinely but secretly interested in religious questions, this was held up as surprising and as an example to follow, because the organisers perceived ‘the young’ to be generally uninterested in religious matters. Another letter that was put forth as a good example was written by a person of Muslim heritage who wrote critically about childrearing in Muslim families. Yet another letter claimed that there were an increasing number of ‘castrated males’ in today’s society dominated by ‘feminine values.’ This letter was foregrounded as ‘kicking inwards’ because it was written by a man who included himself in the category of (figuratively) castrated males.

These letters, held up at the school as examples to follow, indicate that *Politiken* was looking for a certain kind of argument, perceived to have the specific quality of being able to surprise the reader of the newspaper. Against predictable statements from predictable sources – such as the business leader arguing for lower taxes, or a left-wing politician arguing for reduced CO₂ emissions – the key to catching the eye of the reader was to make oneself vulnerable by drawing on personal experiences and going against the grain. During our interview, the debate editor explained that at the newspaper, they were amazed by how much traction personal stories were able to gain, especially on social media (Bennett 2012). In 2013, *Politiken* was perhaps in the process of discovering – together with many other media companies across Euro-American countries – that identity politics can be good for business in a world where getting many social

media reactions means increased readership and ad revenue. This can also be seen as a defensive move, since social media jeopardise the business models of newspapers, and since the rise of identity politics in Denmark in recent decades arguably threatens the elite liberal outlook of *Politiken*.

The hyper-personal, against-the-stereotype letters that we were encouraged to write offer a quite specific vision for good public debate which differs from, for instance, the Habermasian idea that good arguments come from a disinterested perspective and concern the general public good. In *Politiken's* vision for high-quality public debate, personal attachment did not disqualify participants as 'biased' by personal interests, but qualified their contributions in valuable ways (see also Papazu 2017). Following Stengers, *Politiken* seemed to be interested in setting up a situation where readers could learn things about young people and their attachments that they could not have predicted. At the same time, however, we were asked to embody and write from the vantage point of generalising and trite categories, such as 'the Muslim minority' or 'young people' or 'females/males' that *Politiken's* staff and readers could quickly and effortlessly recognise. This is not just my assessment. While *Politiken's* school was running, a professor of rhetoric went on record in another newspaper to criticise this tendency to stereotype:

It is as if it is the media who tells you what to do to break through [in public debate]. And it is often by being extremely aggressive and typically by writing letters that are very generalising and dominated by what we call straw men. Which is to put up a caricatured and generalising image of the attitudes of a whole group (Christian Koch, quoted in Abrahamsen 2013).

In fact, the teaching at *Politiken* not only emphasised the need to write in an aggressive and generalising way – what teachers called a 'sharp' manner – we were also taught to prepare for the backlash. While speakers emphasised that if we did not have something antagonising to say, we might as well remain silent, a number of guest speakers also told us stories about how they had received hateful comments after being published in the paper. For the organisers, the point was clearly not to scare us away, but to prepare us for what it could mean

to become a figure in newspaper debate. *Politiken*'s staff repeatedly referred to public debate with mechanical metaphors such as 'the debate mill' and 'the debate train', suggesting it is hard to stop or escape once it has commenced. This was not portrayed as a bad thing *per se* – after all, the slogan on which *Politiken* was founded in the 1870s, and which was often reiterated at the school, holds that 'it is the *clash* of opposed opinions that makes us think'. In this light, some amount of personal sacrifice was simply considered to be 'part of the game'.

By staying with, and locking the participants to, a pre-existing repertoire of antagonising identity categories, however, *Politiken* arguably missed the chance to learn about emerging ones, and worse, missed the chance to learn about issues that did not fit the 'hyper-personal', individualised style promoted at the school. Here is another instance where Stengers' distinction between governance and politics becomes relevant. *Politiken* to a large extent stayed in a mode of governance based on the categories already perceived to be in circulation among its readership and staff, rather than enter a mode of politics by hesitating with respect to which categories and issues might be of importance. Indeed, the daily cycle of receiving a large stack of letters and having to quickly find out which ones to print does not accommodate hesitation very well (Czarniawska 2011), as some of the *Politiken* staff indicated in the way they spoke about their work. This brings me to the practical organisation of *Politiken*'s school, including some of the material constraints that were present.

ORGANISING AN EFFICIENT SCHOOL

In my interview with him, the main organiser of the school asserted that one thing that *Politiken* had achieved was to assemble a crowd of participants who could attract guest speakers from the 'highest shelf':

What we can offer right now is that we can get somebody like Helle Thorning-Schmidt [the then prime minister] to come [to speak at the school]. That is simply because it is an interesting group. If you say that there are 150 interesting opinion formers, the voices of the future, who

sit here, the sharpest debaters of their generation, then generally speaking no one has said no.

It is noteworthy how the organiser relies both on the argument that the participants represent the absolute elite and on the magnitude of the number 150. As it turned out, the volume of 150 students may have been more important than the selective recruitment process, because while it continued to be difficult for many of these supposedly elite 'voices of the future' to actually get published in the newspaper, the number could have been a deal breaker in the eyes of the editor of debate:

Someone has said, why can we not just be 30-40 who really get nursed? But then we would certainly not have had Helle Thorning-Schmidt here today... or the others. When they come, when it is an attractive group for them, then it is because there are 150.

Somehow the number 150 was perceived as striking the right balance between an elite-enough group and a large-enough group. However, the quote also shows an awareness that the teaching at the school came across as too hierarchical and unidirectional for some participants. As one of the participants I interviewed put it in a critique of the material arrangement and the opportunity for feedback at the school:

[There was this] laughable concept where you must bring your letter and discuss it with the person next to you. 'You [only] have five minutes, because now [name of a famous politician] will be speaking on stage'. Sometimes I did not even finish reading the other person's letter before... also before people started chatting. It was useless. If you wanted to do it seriously, then you would need different facilities. Because there are 75 people speaking at the same time.

Here, the trade-off between a high number of participants and the work it requires to develop good writing comes to the fore. The facilities at the

school were limited to 150 seats in rows, facing a stage, in a cramped room. There was no real space for group work or peer feedback sessions, not to mention interaction between the students and the speakers. To illustrate this, during the first three-hour long evening at the school, I counted only six times a student was able to say something in plenum, and all six comments were solicited by the organisers in a carefully controlled manner. In general, the feeling I had as a student was that of attending a show rather than participating actively.

When the organisers became aware of this problem half-way through the semester, they tried to compensate for the one-way communication by putting us into smaller study groups that were encouraged to self-organise and meet outside 'school hours' to work on our materials together. However, it varied a lot whether these groups actually managed to meet (my group never met), and the process was not facilitated. As students, we were in practice (though not always in discourse) treated more like another segment of readers or customers than as a group worth listening to, and even when time was set aside for students to contribute actively, there was always another important guest speaker waiting to take the stage, as the quote above also suggests. Although the main organiser of the school showed awareness of the problem of the overly hierarchical setup, the key indicator of success for him continued to be his ability to convince famous guest speakers to talk, not to cultivate participation. One might say that if famous and powerful people were convinced that *Politiken* had assembled a relevant sample of 'the new generation' and successfully made itself the gatekeeper of this entity, then it did not matter much how the students felt about it. This raises the question whether *Politiken* was out to promote itself more than to reinvigorate public debate. The narrow scope for participating shaped the kinds of contributions students were able to make, which again calls into question the kind of contribution that *Politiken's* school as a whole was able to make to public debate and democratic politics in Denmark. *Politiken* may have supplied newspaper debate in Denmark with more letters from young people, but as long as these young people were addressed in a mode of one-way teaching, any contribution to *politics* in the Stengersian sense of challenging the existing majority repertoire is doubtful.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the Danish newspaper *Politiken's* 'School of Debate and Critique' as a democratic situation worth paying attention to. In short, the school is *Politiken's* attempt to demonstrate and renew 'high quality' public debate in practice. I have unpacked three aspects of these efforts: The effort to recruit a 'diverse elite', the teaching of the craft of writing opinion letters that 'kick inwards', and the pros and cons of having as many as 150 students. Overall, the analysis suggests that although public debate is often considered a democratic aim in itself (Barnett 2008), in practice public debate does not necessarily contribute to democratic politics in a Stengersian sense. It depends instead on whether well-established institutions such as *Politiken* are willing to 'hesitate' and *learn* from otherwise muted actors how to treat them.

Politiken missed its chances most of the time. The capacity for 'slowing down' and 'hesitating' with respect to important issues was very limited at the school. It is clear that *Politiken* from the outset considered itself an important actor in Danish public life and wanted to present itself as a competent institution with certain standards based on a long history of cultivating newspaper debate among the urban elite. The result was a highly controlled process of eliciting arguments from the young people it recruited, which included drawing on pre-existing majority language categories and encouraging an antagonising rather than hesitant argumentative style. To a large extent, the style of debate found at *Politiken* prevented learning anything from its young students.

It may therefore be tempting to simply dismiss *Politiken's* school as a continuation of the existing public order – as governance rather than politics. However, it may be more valuable to practise a bit of scholarly hesitation here. My account suggests that *Politiken's* staff were at least somewhat aware that hesitation could lead to 'high quality' newspaper content. This is visible in the wish to attract young people from under-represented backgrounds who can say surprising things due to their hitherto unaccounted-for personal experiences. It is also visible in how *Politiken* eventually wanted us participants to

bring unexpected arguments to the table rather than write about pre-chosen and generic themes.

Such opportunities – even missed ones – should be foregrounded and expected to be present in events such as *Politiken*'s school, in so far as practice always overflows pre-existing ideas. To be sure, any public debate 'depend[s] upon pre-existing infrastructures of communication and circulation' (Barnett 2008: 15, paraphrasing Warner 2002: 105–6). But this also means that there are no 'pure' situations of democratic politics to resort to elsewhere. A situated understanding of democratic politics means, among other things, taking into account how practices related to the enactment of democracy are always shaped by infrastructures and socio-material dynamics located at different sites and prior in time (*ibid.*). At the same time, these infrastructures must also be constantly renewed, which means there is a constant potential for openings towards non-majority terms and perspectives that may be attended to and explored by STS scholarship.

As shown in this chapter, *Politiken* operates such an infrastructure, albeit subject to certain routines and constraints, such as being Copenhagen-based and coming from a social-liberal tradition of elitist public debate. *Politiken* started its school with a specific hypothesis that public debate might benefit from including young people to a greater extent. The opportunity for democratic politics that the school event represented was shaped by specific ideas, such as asking young people to write about personal experiences and identity politics, partly because this content circulates well on social media. The opportunity was also shaped by specific constraints, such as *Politiken* only reaching a somewhat homogeneous and privileged body of students and deciding to keep teaching relatively unidirectional. However, these processes also sparked moments of hesitation and opportunities for learning along the way, such as the organisers of the school pondering the aridness of generic headlines like 'the underclass' or 'my generation'. If properly attended to, such reflections may inform future experiments with public debate. As such, *Politiken*'s newspaper debate may provide one imperfect infrastructure among many for emerging democratic situations that instigate public surprise and learning.

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