The role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system

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Abstract

This master thesis aims to examine the role of opinion leaders in today's digital communication system. There are several Facebook groups with a flow of political information, each with its own political agenda. The rise of the internet and social media makes it possible for everyone to create large social digital networks, with their own boundaries, to get their messages out. The development of digital media, together with the social development in society, has created new social platforms for public debate, smaller public spheres, and new forms of network communication. Social media, with its many social networking pages and networking forums, has made it more convenient for people to seek information and for actors to spread information through their own social networks, to followers and their friends. In these networks, some appear clearer than others, such as opinion leaders who are active communicators of their own information, opinions, and as active contributors to a public debate. This study is based on interviews with opinion leaders from some of the largest political Facebook groups in Norway. The result of the study shows that opinion leaders use social network sites to for influence others. This presents several opportunities and challenges. Moreover, finings shows that opinion leaders influence the process of information sharing in these networks and topics of content.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Presentation of topic

This paper aims to examine the role of opinion leaders in digital networks. The changing field of media and communication is in close company with the field of political communication. In just a few decades, the structural changes in media systems have had a direct impact on the flow of communication in our society. Opinion leaders are a key group in the political communication process and whose presence on social network sites is vital.

 "*Opinion leaders*" were introduced as a term in one of the most significant contributions in political communication, the famous study by Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld in 1955, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by people in the flow of Mass Communication,* one of the most famous and significant contributions in the field of political communication. Their findings on opinion management introduced the concept in relation to network structures where some individuals appear more clearly than others, in the role of communicators of information to others. Opinion leaders had more of an influence than the mass media at the time. In the discovery of the "*two-step flow"* in communication it became clear that information flows from the media through humans (Watts and Dodds 2007, 441). This study became significant because it shed a light on the merge of mass and interpersonal communication (Walter 2017, 559).

The development of media technologies is central to understand the development of our society in general and the shaping of the public opinion (Rogstad 2016, 28). The growth from a society where communication patterns and political communication were seen as collective behavior, and where influence as something that was largely about influence on groups. Research and academia have pointed to a shift in power from traditional mass communication to the power of individuals. A shift in which actors who are of importance, and who are recognized for the academic contributions in the field, experience a change in the relationship between power and influence (Semetko and Scammell 2012, 1). At the same time, society today is affected by a break in faith in political institutions, experts, and elites, due to a growing distrust by people towards politicians and political institutions (Davis 2019, 8).

This skepticism towards experts and elites is not only reserved for politics but is a growing phenomenon in relation to other institutions as well. The research field is turning towards a new way of studying political communication, where research on the internet, social media and their links to democracy and politics becomes just as important as research on traditional mass media (Dahlgren 2005, 148).

Over the years, the digital society has undergone a structural change and is in a constant digital development, where new technology and the emergence of new social platforms are constantly changing the digital landscape (Rogstad 2016, 15). It is said that the emergence of different communication technologies has led to changes, challenges, and benefits in all segments of society. New digital tools such as smartphones and social media have changed people's relationship with media consumption, people's relationship with news and information, and new network structures have emerged (Davis 2019, 6). The new media environment simplifies news way of connecting and interacting across the globe, between communities, and from one person to another (Semetko and Scammell 2012, 1). This development contributes to new forms of network communication, which all actors in society are affected by (Rogstad 2016, 19).

"*The public sphere*" is where personal involvement civic engagement can be seen as political relevant (Enjolras 2013, 20). "*The public*" is a common area where people gather to be interested, moved, and provoked (Dørum 2017, 55). Social media is widely used by individuals and institutions and has become a central part to the everyday life. The function of democracy is at its best when citizens are politically informed (Aalberg and Curran 2012, 34). Today's digital society consists of a variety of of media platforms, both traditional and digital. Social networking sites stand out as a significant category on these media platforms. This is because of their socio-technical dynamics, which have played out as millions of people have embraced the technology, and use it to collaborate, to share information and content, and to socialize (Ellison and Boyd 2013, 161). In addition, social media has become an important political force. Social media platforms provide people with news, and shared political information and statements. Under the right conditions, "any spark can fire", but to fully know whether influence in society is driven by influential individuals or by other actors requires more insight through empirical studies (Watts and Dodds 2007, 454).

Communication between people is a fundamental prerequisite for all parts of society (Waldahl 1982, 11), especially for politics.

Social media platforms that serve as a space for daily chat and discussion introduces the idea that the platforms are part of opinion formation and the public sphere. Over the past decades, research has shown that there is a growing understanding of the internet as a place of political debate, and that the internet and social media function as a legitimate public sphere (Wright, Graham and Jackson 2016, 75). Social media has become a platform central for politics (Rogstad 2016, 7), and can be seen as a tool used by individuals to express their opinions in the public sphere. It serves as a space for informal political talk as well (76). In Norway, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in a democratic system that allows ordinary citizens to have their say through free elections and inclusive political spheres. Norwegian society is full of people who share their knowledge and opinions, and in this way contribute to the flow of information in society in general. In the decision-making process, from our personal to the political, the effect from contributions by personal influencers are still central (Watts and Dodds 2007, 441). Several of these individuals are known as "*opinion leaders*" and have a central role in the flow of communication.

1.2. Research Questions and Boundaries

The research theme of this thesis is the role of opinion leaders on social media platforms, and the role of social media play itself in the activity that opinion leaders have, or do not have, in influencing others. This topic is complex due to the continuous changes on social networking sites, which today have a large role in our digital opinion formation. It is interesting to see how the role of traditional mass media has changed, and how new voices are given space to convey their message with the help of new social platforms and through structures on the internet. This shift has made opinion leaders highly relevant and places them in key positions in the digital communication system.

In the field of *political communication and opinion leaders*, the focus is largely on the key role of opinion leaders in the flow of communication, as distributors of information in their personal networks, or their relationships with political parties or interests. This leads to several interesting questions. It is not very common to encounter research that provides a deeper insight into how opinion leaders influence their local environment and shape opinions

across a community (Watts and Dodds 2007, 442). It has been challenging to find research on individuals with influence, who do not have a political affiliation with a party or organization, nor a commercial interest or a commercial goal, individuals that simply want to have a role in opinion formation. This makes it interesting to investigate whether opinion leaders are aware of their own position, and whether they are trying to aim for a specific goal or interpretation for their own interest.

With a modern media system in mind, with new key players in the political communication system contributing to digital opinion formation, the following research questions are designed:

What is the role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system?

To answer the main question, I have formulated two specific sub-research questions:

1) *How and why do opinion leaders work to influence others in their digital networks as well as offline networks?*

2) *What opportunities and challenges do opinion leaders face on their social networking sites/pages or in their social network groups, and how do opinion leaders view the effect/purpose of their own network groups or network pages?*

The sub-questions aim to provide insight into what topics are to be found on social media, as well as opinion leaders' motivation to be part of a digital network. It is also interesting how opinion leaders use social networking sites, and whether they see these pages as beneficial to their own cause or message. A key perspective will be how opinion leaders perceive influence in general and their own relationship to social media.

To answer the questions, a qualitative interview study is conducted, which can provide deeper insight into the topics, and which can provide a broader understanding of opinion formers in the digital sphere. In the past, the field of research has focused on mass communication as the leading force in political communication. This has changed to a focus with a greater degree of individual approach and on the roles of the individual as consumers and participants in the

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digital communication world (Semetko and Scammell). 2012). Previous research on social media and political communication tended to examine the work and attitudes of formal political actors, institutions, or political events. In addition, there has been a lot of focus on political communication on various forums for discussion, while there is less knowledge about social media (Wright et al. 80). This study is limited to "social media", focusing on the social networking site of Facebook, which is the largest social networking site in Norway at the time of this study (Ipsos, 2022). Facebook works partly as a closed network. Facebook allows little access to its data and makes it difficult to retrieve data from them. Often it is required bilateral acceptance (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 354). As a result, we know little about the various power structures within the Facebook platform. The research questions for this thesis require insider knowledge of influencing individuals who contribute to the platform. The purpose is to investigate those whose purpose is to convey news through sharing and influencing the formation of opinion among other actors.

The Nordic countries have a strong media-centered public sphere, where media technology and media development have contributed to the shaping of these countries' democratic development. This makes the countries particularly interesting for media research. Media use in Norway is an interesting field of research because Norwegian society is known for a relatively high use of the Internet and social media (Karlsen 2015, 306). Recent observations made by the Norwegian Media Authority (Mediemangfoldregnskapet 2021, see Ipsos 2022) confirm that Norwegian society stands out in a global context through high use of digital platforms as a normal part of life, compared to the rest of Europe. The report also points out that it is very common to be connected to the internet in Norway and it is common to use several media platforms. Norwegians have a great interest in news, and in combining news sources. Eight out of ten use social media daily and 90% of the Norwegian population uses social media weekly. According to Ipsos, social media tracking for the third quarter of 2022 shows that Facebook is the most popular platform and is used by 67% and 3.48 million profiles daily (Ipsos 2022). It is likely and presumed that any average Norwegian has the opportunity and the ability to be a part of the public sphere, either as observants or as participants in the ever-changing flow of information, due to the large degree of media use in Norway.

The informants in this study provide information about their own experience of opinion management, and about their experience as moderators of public digital mini-spheres. Other research topics or research gaps related to the general topic or to topics that go beyond the findings of the study will not be discussed in this thesis.

1.3. The structure of the thesis

This master's thesis is structured in six parts. This first chapter presents the topic, previous studies on the topic and the research question. Chapter 2 consists of a literature review, where perspectives relevant to the research questions are presented. Chapter 3 first describes the methodological choices that have been made. After that, the various aspects that can affect the analysis and the results of the study are presented. Ethical considerations are also discussed. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study. All the major findings are summarized and discussed in Chapter 5 regarding the literature presented in Chapter 2 as well as a more general perspective. In Chapter 6, some final perspectives on the thesis questions, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are presented.

Accompanying the thesis are a series of appendixes that provide insight into the basis for the information retrieval, data, analysis, and findings, as well as for the conclusions that this thesis presents.

2. Literature review

In the following chapter, I will elaborate and present the theoretical framework of this thesis. The thesis, which aims to examine the role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system. This study presents a survey of some social moderators' attitudes and experiences as opinion leaders in their own social, and personal, digital networks. The purpose of the study is to gain insight into opinion leaders' experiences with their own expression in their efforts to influence public opinion, and their motivation to be an active contributor on social networking sites.

In the following, I will present theories and key concepts used to understand the main topic of this thesis and elaborate on existing empirical contributions to the field. The findings of the analysis and the later discussion will be compared with this theory in chapter 5.

The litterateur review consists of three parts. The first part introduces different aspects of a public sphere and public opinion formation. Media and media technology have played an essential role in the flow of political communication and are therefore crucial to these two concepts. I also refer to how media logic can be understood, to better understand the established knowledgebase that is the prerequisite for this study.

The second part of the chapter refers to how different the aspects of opinion leadership and opinion management in today's digital sphere can be understood. In the last part, social media, their functions, and their connection to political communication will be explained, as well as what opportunity these may have for those who contribute to the digital sphere today.

2.1 The flow of Political Communication over time – Communication processes impact on public opinion formation in the public sphere

In order to clarify the concept of opinion leadership in digital networks and the role and implication of opinion leadership in the formation of public opinion, it is necessary to take a closer look at the concept of opinion formation, and the significance of opinion formation in the public sphere. The understanding of what lies in the concept of "*the public sphere*" has

undergone considerable change over time. The process of change is closely related to the development of communication technologies and, the available space for public opinion formation.

In the following, I will present how the two concepts, the public sphere, and public opinion, have changed over time. I also present some milestones that have had an impact on communication processes up to the present day. To fully understand the concept of the public sphere and the public opinion today, both theoretical and historical perspectives are important, to understand the flow of communication and opinion leadership, and to understand the role and influence they have in a political public democracy.

2.1.1 The public sphere and public opinion formation

Throughout history, people have gathered in small or larger groups, and there has been a perception that there exists a space, a public sphere, where information is shared between actors. A public sphere can be defined as an imaginary collective space for information gathering, for sharing culture composure and for conversation. A place where people spend a lot of time for reflection among others (Gripsrud 2017, 15). Dahlgren (2005, 148) supplements this definition by arguing that the public spheres consist of communicative spaces, a space/room that allows the circulation of information, ideas and debates and a space of formation, political will, and public opinion (2005, 148). A public sphere is the space/room where the public, organizations and politicians can meet and discuss public issues (Haugseth 2013). The public sphere will function as an arena where both the citizens and those in power can communicate (Dahlgren 2005, 148).

The concept of the public sphere has undergone major structural changes over time. Dahlgren (2005, 147) claims that these changes have occurred alongside economic, social, cultural, and political changes in society, and have over several decades had a significant impact on the understanding of the role of the public sphere in relation to democracy and opinion formation. There are some common perspectives on this topic, where historical and theoretical perspectives have been that the public sphere can be understood as "*the imaginary space/room between the state and the public*". It is important to note the challenges in measuring the range of the public sphere, and that "rooms" are not actual/physical rooms available in society, but more of an abstract idea of an accessible imaginary space.

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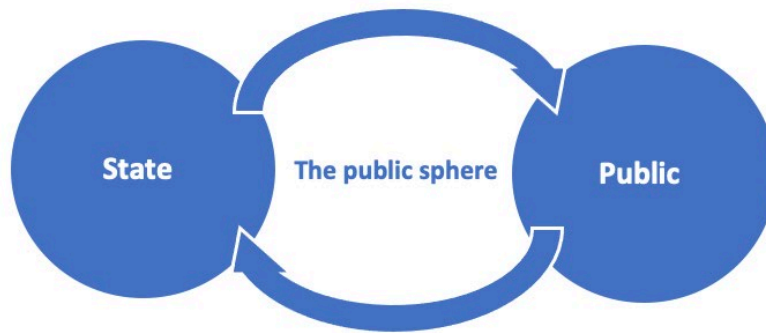
Figure 1: Aspects of the public sphere and public opinion formation (Madelen R. Kvadsheim)

A central cornerstone in theory of public sphere is the theory of Jürgen Habermas, who was the first to introduce the concept of the public sphere, in his work *Strukturwandel der Öffentligkeit* (1962), in English known as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Bruns and Highfield 2016, 56). Since then, the concept and understanding of the public sphere has undergone several changes. Eventually, Habermas also revised his own view (Dahlgren 2005, 148). In his initial assessment of the term, Habermas argued that the public sphere can be recognized as a space where all citizens gain *access* and *have a voice*. Public opinion, in Habermas′ view, is formed when citizens are allowed to freely interact with each other and speak freely without interference from other actors (Gripsrud et al 2010, 114). Later, the concept of *one* public sphere has been reviewed. A modern understanding, formed after an increased global contextual interaction, is that the public sphere consisting of many spaces (Dahlgren 2005, 148).

In the modern understanding of the public sphere, one variant of the public sphere contains the academic aspect of society, of the role of books and of the questions surrounding different qualities of society and the dilemmas that arise in the understanding of it. Another variant of the public sphere contains the political aspect of society. This is the space where public opinion is formed. The two terms can be placed side by side and are often used interchangeably. Viewed together, the public sphere can be seen as the very core of the formation of public democracy, as it acts as a facilitator of «*public opinion″*. Public opinion is one of the cornerstones of what we know as «*public* democracy″, *democracy* (Aalberg and Curran 2012, 3). One issue related to public opinion that is often discussed in academia is whether a public opinion really exists.   This is discussed because it is difficult to measure

what an opinion contains of (Gripsrud 2017, 35). Whether opinion can be measured or not, public opinion is an important aspect, because it is formed through everyday political talk between citizens, which in turn is one of the main components of democratic citizenship (Wright et al. 2016, 77).

In the next three chapters, I will present some milestones in theory and history related to the concept of public sphere, and some aspects that throughout history have had an impact on the flow of political communication.

2.1.2 Printed spheres and third places

To explore the significance of social networking sites and their relationship to the concept of "*today's digital sphere"*, Gripsrud (2017) refers to the importance of looking at the first clear signs of understanding the distinction that existed between the public and "*non-public* space ", the *private space,* in ancient Greek society, where there was an established culture for the public and private scene. The first understanding of a public sphere is found in the distinction that existed between the physical public scene and the private scene.

The distinction between the ancient Greek oikos - the home or household, and polis - the city-state and its citizen, is one of the oldest discoveries in the understanding of the concept of the private and the public sphere. In this old society, the public space was a place where trade, conversation and socializing took place, angora (Gripsrud 2017, 17). It is believed that the division between a public and private sphere is traceable throughout all times. The topic of interest to this thesis, is the process that occurs in development of political space, or more precisely, the space in which political opinion emerge in the public room and the private room.

Gripsrud (2017) refers to the 19th century as the century in which the flow of political communication gradually moved from private life to the public stage. Until then, political discussion of social concerns was reserved for confined spaces, where only the groups of powerful people such as royalty and the church, had access (Gripsrud 2017, 18). In the beginning of the 19th century, meaning formation and formal interaction took place in physical places, called "*third places/third rooms"*, located outside the home or workplace. In the third room, such as tea houses, coffee shops or associations, the opinion leaders could

meet and interact with each other (Wright et al. 2016, 79) The third room was a place for daily political conversation regarding any topic involving all layers of society, and for the exchange of news, opinions and debates (Dørum 2017, 55) The third rooms did not exist based on their physical qualities, but it was recognized through specific social and environmental characteristics. The third rooms facilitated informal public life, playing an important role in the development of society, strengthening citizenship, and being central to democracy because of the political public space it contained (Wright et al. 2016, 79). These third rooms can be said to be the public sphere of their time. Grimsrud (2017) points out that access to this public sphere and the opportunity to take part in opinion formation were limited to and reserved for an elite. The third rooms were traditionally limited by certain social expectations, norms, and limitations (Gripsrud (2017, 18). The public places of the 19th century, the coffeehouses, and the associations, were unattainable for most people.

The views on actors, "*representation"*, which are visible in the traditional public sphere are well documented. Gripsrud states that Europe's historical view of the political public sphere should not be seen as the same as the political public of today (2017, 18). Nor should the term "*representative*", understood as a public sphere consisting of people in position and where knowledge and debate are inaccessible to the general public, as constructed by Jürgen Habermas, be seen as the same as what we know today as a "*representative democracy*". This concept, also known as "*indirect democracy"*, describes a system of government or decision-making procedure in which the population elects representatives who in turn make decisions in individual cases (www.snl.no). Based on available theory related to the traditional view of the public sphere, it appears clear that the population was mainly excluded from influencing decision-making and opinion formation.

Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a gradual change in the space for opinion formation in society, from a communication that took place in the third room among an elite, into a media society, consisting of printed media as the main source of opinion expression. The printed news had a factual tone in debates and news (Eide and Larsen 2017, 184). With the implementation of printed media, such as newspapers, books and political booklets, the public sphere was gradually moved from the third rooms onto other physical arenas of communication (Davis 2019, 21). Even though the public sphere and the space for opinion formation were moved out of the closed third rooms, access to information was not

increasingly accessible to the public. Historical sources can be understood to mean that the public space, at that time, was not intended to accommodate everyone. The principles and rules of the third room followed into the world of print media, making politics and participation available only to those in position, and to the educated readers (Johansen 2017, 119). Several groups in society were prevented from participating in opinion formation. For example, there was no place for women in the new public sphere (Johansen 2017, 139), excluded as they were from education and political participation. Several ethnic or religious groups were also excluded. For example, Jews were not included as "valid" actors in this new public sphere. (Eide and Larsen 2017, 185).

Printed media, such as newspapers, pamphlets, and news magazines, became the main political platform, and the political parties made their own press releasees. It is believed that printed media have had an important impact on politics and opinion formation for decades (Eide and Larsen 2017, 108). With the emergence of access to print media, a political consciousness emerged in society, and a new phase characterized by large party memberships, with loyal supporters, developed (Davis 2019, 6).

During this era, the printed media generally gave citizens access to the opinions and views of opinion-makers. This had previously been reserved for the closed third room space. The change led to a central, and possibly necessary, prerequisite for the development of public democracy, as we know it today (Haugseth 2013, 17). Print media nevertheless and the circulation of information in society was limited until the mid-19th century. The general population was kept out of decision-making processes, and they had little opportunity to gain insight into the discussion on political issues (Johansen 2017, 117).

This closed form of information sharing changed significantly when the "rotating press" was developed in 1850. The rotating press was an innovative paper press, which printed large numbers of newspapers at a low price. This gave the public the opportunity to buy information at an affordable price (Rogstad 2016, 28). At the same time, there was a large growth in education and wealth among more than just men from the traditional elite. As a parallel development in increased education in the population, in the general wealth of society and with a gradually growing media industry, more citizens were exposed to news, the political discussion and informal conversations about society and politics.

Through the introduction of film at the end of the 19th century led to further development of the public sphere, and access to news and information became even more available to the public. Film became a strong competitor to reading and education. Small films were produced, which provided information about current events. Through the films, the overall opportunity to obtain information about current topics, news, and events, and to participate in discussions around the relevant topics increased (Rogstad 2016, 29). Films, such as small news films from current wars, and newspapers became media technologies that reached a large audience, they became "*mass media*" (Rogstad 2016, 29). Rotating press and film became the media technologies that formed the basis of a "society *based on mass information*", a society in which the media has gained a strong foothold. We also see the influence of the media today.

In the following period, Jürgen Habermas' theory of the political public is central. For Habermas, the public sphere is defined as the area in between the privacy of individuals and the state, with the media as the link between these two areas/spheres (Habermas 2010,114). Within this perspective of the new modern public sphere, newspapers and films can be seen as tools for mobilization, and as tools for opinion-makers to gain influence over individuals who possess power (Habermas 2010,116). A media environment consisting of several media technologies, with a spectrum of actors, was in the process of forming. This transition represented a shift in the communication process between individuals and state and became the foundation of the shaping of the field of "*political communication*".

2.1.3 The age of mass media - shift of power and mass communication

Research on mass media is central to understanding how democracy, sharing of information, network creation, individual and institutional power and identity creation emerge and are maintained (Haugseth 2013, 20). In the evolving industrialized democratic mass media society, the established public sphere changed. The public space, which up until now had been defined by a rational and critical public sphere, has been replaced by the public sphere we are familiar with today, where the media gradually has gained a stronger foothold (Bruns and Highfield 2016, 56). The late 1900s are referred to as the "age of mass communication", a period where debate and news became "*entertainment for the people*" (Habermas 2010,119). Communication changed within a short time span, from interpersonal communication in established physical spaces to mass communication through new forms of technologies,

newspapers, television, radio, and telegraph. During this period, the new media technologies had a change in characteristics, but more importantly, the new media technologies evolved a visible effect on politics and individual participation in the public sphere.

The format of the mass media was well suited for political messages, making them accessible and understandable to the population. Television was revolutionary for politics and news coverage, and television became quickly regarded as the most important mass medium (Rogstad 2016, 32). In its early days, television functioned mostly as a passive actor, conveying information about events, events, and current views from decision-makers. Much of the content was similar to the content of the traditional media, which had observed and informed about events and news (Rogstad 2016, 30).

This gradually changed as support and power increased. Actors began working as co-producers rather than having the passive observer role they had held over time (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumer 2016, 166). Eventually, the public broadcasting got a more spectacular packaging, which contributed to several actors gradually leaving their traditional partisan political press, with the strong editorial undertone (Davis 2019, 6). Public broadcasting and politics became complementary institutions, with an interdependence (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumer 2009, 165).

The emergence of national broadcasters, such as radio, newspapers, and television, made political issues generally more accessible to all citizens at a faster pace than before (Rogstad 2016, 29). In theory, this helped facilitate the process for individuals to take part in meaning formation. However, participation was only facilitated with the role as recipients of mass messages, not as senders of messages, their own opinions or news/information as important in one's own life (Haugseth 2013, 22) The public sphere was more accessible to ordinary people, but there are critical perspectives on what the effect the easy access would have on the people or society. Oldenburg, referred to in Wright (2012), was skeptical of mass media and the effect it had on political communication. Oldenburg suggested that the mass media could not be a source of neutral information and at the same time be open to individuals asking questions, protesting, or supplementing the information or news. He pointed out that these aspects are important basic elements in creating the right conditions for opinion formation, that they possibly contributed to turning people into "shut-ins" instead of active individuals,

and mass media into non-connecting spaces (Wright 2012, 8-9). The welfare system, a dominant part of the political system in Norway, was in a continuous expansion and change, which contributed to people ending up as observers rather than participants in the public sphere (Gripsrud et al. 2010, 92). The public space was also challenged by commercial influences.

An era arose with the emergence of commercial actors, which contributed to the transition from a media landscape dominated by state-owned media institutions as the main suppliers of news, to a media landscape shared with advertising-financed private media institution (Haugseth 2013, 22). Despite the statal and commercial actors, that made it somewhat difficult for the population to have direct influence, to comment or debate directly with the sources of news, mass media such as television provided a continuous shift in the public sphere. Politics and opinion leaders' statements were brought into people's homes, giving even more insight and understanding of politics to a larger group of citizens (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumer 2016, 166).

Mass media is considered to be the link between politicians and the public (Haugseth 2013, 26) As the shift in power progressed, the detachment from the traditional and the later independence from political and formal ties, mass media gained a position to influence the public in a considerable extent and gained a function as an agenda-setting institution in society. Rogstad (2016, 31) puts a light on the function of setting agenda, the "*agenda setting function*", from the work of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, where this process can be understood as "*the way mass media determine the ways in which news and issues that are important get through to the public*". Mass media do not necessarily *tell* people what to think about the topic in question but have the power to influence *how* topics are presented in public and *what issues* to present. This power contributed greatly to ongoing political discussions centered around the question of what the masses were exposed to through the media. Experience shows that it is important to look at the power and influence of mass media in order to understand opinion formation.

In 1940, a groundbreaking study in the field of political communication revealed, for some, surprising results. Up to this point, the mass media's view was that the masses were uncritically influenced as recipients of what was sent through the media (Rogstad 2016, 29).

During the US election campaign in the 1940s, Paul Lazarsfeld and a team of colleagues found that the public was more influenced by individuals in their immediate circle, known as "*opinion leaders*", rather than by media messages through the traditional mass media channels (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

The findings led to the "*Two-Step-Flow of Communication hypotheses*", which are the topic of Chapter 2.2. The discovery of the "*two-step flow*" in communication is considered one of the most significant changes in the understanding of political communication and has changed the understanding of flow in media networks. The study has the status of significance for researchers and has changed the perspective of individuals and groups in communication processes (Karlsen 2015, 302).

The emergence of mass media led to major changes in the media landscape, from a media landscape where the media functioned as arenas for political influence *together with* other institutions in society to a landscape where the media function as independent political opinion institutions (Rogstad 2016, 34). This change meant that the media acted as the main source of political information to the population and as the space where political conversation between actors took place. This resulted in individuals turning to the media for information and to gain influence. A system better known as mediated politics (Strömbäck 2008, 230). The power of mediated communication gained a strong foothold, and mass media increased its position as an influential player. This in turn led citizens, politicians, and social institutions to adapt to the agenda set by the media (Kalsnes 2016, 26).

At the same time, society and politics have adapted to the media format, which sets the agenda (Rogstad 2016, 34). The mediatization process can be explained through four different phases. Phase 1 is the phase where mass media is the main political source of information. Phase 2 demonstrates the independence of the media, from institutional influence and politics, centered around *media logic* rather than *political logic*. In this phase, media has become semi-independent, taking a greater control over its own material. In stage 3, the media serves as the main source of information. Contributors need to adapt to the media, and not the other way around. This forces contributors to tap into their own media management skills. In the final phase, phase 4, political actors depend on media logic to be newsworthy (Strömbäck

2008). I will provide more information on the topic "*the functions of media logic*" in chapter 2.1.5.

The traditional formats of the various mass media players retained a strong position as mass communicators until the late 1900s, when the formats were challenged by new digital information technologies. The introduction of the new digital information technology led to a channel multiplication and an increasing technological development, where the general public, "*the mass audience*", were left with even more choices when it came to *where* to search information, but also access to a great variety of content on these channels (Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumer 2016, 169). This introduction of new media channels and technologies was the beginning of what is known as the "*fragmentation of the mass audience*" and an era in which the population itself decides what content and information they want to be exposed to.

2.1.4 The rise of the digital spheres and mass-interpersonal communication

The introduction of the Internet and the World Wide Web (www) represents the beginning of a significant historical change in the political communication process, and in society in general. With the implementation of the internet and a "*new digital society*" came the idea that a separate public sphere can no longer be assumed to exist fully within the borders of a singular country (Bruns and Highfield 2016, 58).

The term "*public sphere*" had traditionally been perceived as a singular notion. But with the introduction of the internet and the digital web, the singular concept changed to the plural concepts *online* and *offline* (Dahlgren 2005, 148). The Internet and digital software in general quickly gained a strong position in public society, making the flow of information even more accessible (Haugseth 2013,21). During the 1990s, "*networked society*" became an established term, describing the global impact on the information society (Enjolras et al. 2013, 22). Over the course of a decade, information technology, computers, and the Internet became common in private homes and workplaces, opening communication that integrated the principles of both mass and interpersonal communication (Haugseth 2013,21).

The first networked communities were structured as social networking sites, called Web 1.0, as sources of information broadcasting online. This type of web structure was a *one-way* publication source, where individuals had to actively seek out information on their own, in

accordance with specific topics or interests (Enjolras et al. 2013, 12). This could, for example, be websites that belonging to political parties, newspapers, the state or the like (Karlsen 2015, 303). The new media technology was quickly regarded as an important news and information provider, by actors and the public. It was considered a revolution that information could be copied and multiplied, without the influence and management of official editors. An individual perception of the value of being in direct connection with networks were perceived as relevant to information and became important in the years to come (Haugseth 2013, 21).

Around the 2000s, the interaction on web 1.0 gradually changed into the web structure we have today, the Web 2.0. The new structure is recognized as *user-generated* through participation and sharing (Rogstad 2016, 15). Web 2.0 has given individuals the ability to co-create content online and to be interactive (Enjolras et al. 2013, 12). This network structure is better known as "*social media,*" and refers to several online communication platforms. Social media evolves around individual and collective users and their way of influencing and interacting, by creating and/or consuming information in a variety of individually created content (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 23).

Compared to mass media, where the consumer has no direct impact on the content, the content of social media is a mix between each participant's own preferences and feedback, as well as their own content, and their interest in following other participants' content in the network. Social media has given ordinary people the opportunity to create, edit and change media content as they wish, and the established boundaries between media producer and media consumer have been erased (Rogstad 2016, 35).

Social media has changed communication processes and the exchange of information in society (Enjolras et al. 2013, 19), and after a short time gained a position as the main supplier of public communication (Rogstad 2016, 35). Due to new digital technology, there is no longer a need for mass media to act as an intermediary between politicians and the public (Haugseth 2013, 26), and news flows easily between sender and receiver. The Internet and social media facilitate an expanded digital sphere, as they act as communicators between citizens and those in power in society (Dahlgren 2005, 148).

Through the dominance in political communication, social media has gained a leading position of communication, in the same way as for television and newspapers in the *age of the masses* (Davis 2019, 6). Social media rooms several forums, where different types of exchanges can take place. These forums are understood as "online public spheres" (Dahlgren 2005, 153). Social media, which in this study is limited to "*social networking sites*," has topics that are interesting to research." *It is the way* in which it *(read: social media) brings forward the interpersonal conversation, which traditionally would have taken place in the private lives of coffee houses, into today's digital public sphere that makes* it *accessible and inclusive for those who want it*" (Neubaum and Krämer 2017, 464).

Social media makes a significant contribution to the public sphere with its many political, public, and private websites and forums. Some pages and forums are focused on specific topics or opinions, but not all. Social media make a significant contribution at the local, national and the global level, with all types of information and debate in circulation, including political communication (Dahlgren 2005, 151). Social media also facilitates non-political online spaces, where political talk can emerge, the so-called *third places* (Wright, Graham and Jackson 2016, 80).

Digital communication has changed the logic of media. For many years, individuals in the elite, organizations and institutions had the final impact on the political sphere dominated by mass media logic. The introduction of social media has led to new media logic. Chapter 2.1.5 will provide more information on how *mass media logic* and *social media logic*, or *networked media logic*, work together (Kalsnes 2016, 26). Social media offer mass communication and interpersonal communication on the same platform or format, through the tools of new technologies. The public is exposed to, and interacts with, messages and information from the mainstream media side by side with ongoing interpersonal conversations online, directly to and from a source of interest.

This mixture of the two types of logics forms a possible new understanding of the modern ways of communication, a "*mass of interpersonal* communication*"* (Neubaum and Krämer 2017, 464). This implies that today's digital sphere contains the flow of information a system with both *one-step flow* and *two-step flow* in the same communication.

The rise of the internet and social media has led to a media landscape that is complex, with a its mix of media technologies, channel multiplication and the mix of roles and actors. Social media has challenged the established role of traditional mass media (Rogstad 2016, 35) and *the logic of media.* The digital society today represent a mixture of processes related to mass communication and interpersonal communication (Neubaum and Krämer 2017, 464). Society can be considered part of a "*networked hybrid public sphere*", operating in domains within and between a variety of institutions and participants. The public sphere is recognized by division, i.e., fragmentation. This entails both "*hybrid fragmentation*" and "*hierarchical fragmentation*" (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 353).

The hybrid media system, a system consisting of a mix of old and new media platforms, media organizations, political and news channels, the public and all actors in society who want to participate, is the expression of a digital platform in a digital sphere. It appears that there is no longer a clear boundary between mass media and the current communication media (Rogstad 2016, 16). At the same time, social media has given the public, individuals, organizations and so on the opportunity to connect and communicate with each other, forming the way of mass media communication. An interesting phenomenon is the interaction of media logic, mass media logic, and social media logic. The topic *social media* will be further discussed in Chapter 2.3.

2.1.5 Media Logics

The flow in political communication and the relationship between political communication and the media have varied over time due to development in structures and technological implementation. Media logic is a way of explaining the influence media have on other institutions and participants in the media platform, hereby also the political community (Kalsnes 2016, 24). The hybrid media system today is built on a mixture and symbiosis of old and new media logic (Chadwick, Dennis and Smith 2016, 8). This implies that traditional mass media and new online media interact in all parts and spheres of today's social life and is a prerequisite for the exchange of information and interaction between citizens and organizations (Esser 2013, 155). A study (Kalsnes 2016) argues that social media (network media) logic is "*a third space*", allowing communication in non-political spaces. Media logic can provide useful insight into the mechanisms that contribute to and strengthen the role of opinion leaders on social networking sites.

Media today, online, and offline, operates through a specific media logic that is influenced by economic and commercial rules and necessities, in order to reach a maximum amount of audience (Esser 2013, 156). As mentioned above, social media logic overlaps with mass media logic, adding to mass media logic new elements (Kalsnes 2016, 44-45). Media logic or news media logic (Asp 2014), consists of three dimensions, ideals called "*professionalism*" (Esser 2013), "*commercial imperatives*" and "*technology*" (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 27). These are all central to the understanding of how media logic works in the public sphere.

The ideal (professional) has its background in the news production that follows journalistic norms and criteria (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 27). *Professionalism* in the news media logic is a combination of acting as representatives of the public and gaining the public's trust, while at the same time working towards what is of interest. This means that journalism should serve a social purpose, by working as watchdogs and reporting freely in fidelity to the news value (Esser 2013) 167-70). Klinger and Svensson (2016, 27) add that the ideal in networked media logic refers to how media should be used, more specifically how content is produced and distributed.

Commercialization is the second major aspect of media logic and is closely related to the professional aspect (Esser 2013, 171). The commercial aspect points to the economic context of the content being produced, distributed, and used, and to the economic opportunities in the structures (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 27). Traditionally, the media system has a political connection to news media. This, in combination with political commercial forces, has had a central influence for centuries on the flow of political communication. Nevertheless, in a growing Western media system, traditional news organizations have lost their autonomy, due to competition with revenues, that have possibly given them a greater entertainment character.

These factors have contributed to more speculation and personalization (Esser 2013,71). The logic of mass media has become more dependent on the distribution, advertising, and subscription of news, due to costs. The networked media logic, on the other hand, has low production costs. Social media provide the opportunity for everyone to create content, and this logic depends on web connections, the popularity of the content and targeted and traceable use (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 31- 33).

Technology is tied to the way content is produced and distributed. Each form of communication technology operates slightly differently when it comes to shaping content (Esser 2013, 173). The technology is both enabling and limiting for news media in their own production, processing, and presentation of the content (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 28). For example, television is more visual and possibly give more of an affective influence than a printed medium (Esser 2013, 173). In mass media logic, the goal is to reach *one* single public sphere, while the networked media logic focuses on the fragmented public sphere. This affects the technology, the format of new content and possibly the room for creativity within the individual format (Klinger and Svensson 2016, 31-33).

In this field of communication, it seems essential to understand how new media shape politics and how new channels interact with political media logic (Chadwick et al. 2016, 10). In the previously described, I have pointed to some of the historical and theoretical aspects used to understand how media and politics interact through the public sphere and to understanding of opinion formation through time. The next chapter will address the *two-step flow* of communication and *opinion leaders*, with the intention of providing insight into the *role of influence* in the flow of political communication.

2.2   The Two-Step Flow of Communication and Opinion leaders

In the 1940s, new thoughts about the process associated with individuals' decision-making was introduced, the process known as the *two-step flow of communication*. Today, the two-step flow stands out as one of the most significant theories in political communication. The study, conducted in the 1940s by Lazarsfeld and Katz, came at a time dominated by powerful media and theories related to mass society. These theories were centered around the idea that media messages were received by the masses in an equal way.

The study on the personal influence in the flow of communication became significant for its way of understanding communication and society (Weimann 1994, 11). As described in Chapter 2.1.3, Lazarsfeld and Katz found that the foundation and role that mass media had functioned in the previous years, where the media was portrayed as a force with power over people, was changing. Up until this point, media research was oriented around the power of the content of mass media and the effect this power had on the audience. The common perception at the time was that media messages were distributed to an audience that was

immediately influenced by the message they received (Karlsen 2015, 301). With the theory of the two-stage flow of communication came a paradigm shift. During the same period, the impact of campaigns through traditional media channels such as radio and printed materials was highlighted, but it became clear through this study, that people were generally not influenced by the media when making their choices and decisions (Weimann 1994, 5).

In a study of people's choices when voting in elections, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) discovered that political information and content flow through a different network structure than the mass media structure, which was a ruling force in society and the dominant communication structure at the time. They found that people largely made up their minds ahead of the election period, and that those who changed their minds did so because of personal influence (Weimann 1994, 12). *Personal influence* became a groundbreaking new perspective on opinion formation and revealed that in individuals' decision-making, both on a personal and political level, are more likely to be influenced by other individuals than by the media (Watts and Dodds 2007, 441).

As the concept of two-stage flow implies, influencing others contains two processes. The first step in the two-stage flow model involves media messages being sent to the public through mass media. This has already been established through a mass media role. The second step refers to the media messages being interpreted by one individual or a group of people, *opinion leaders*, who then pass the messages on to their personal networks (Katz 2006, 15). More specifically, influential people, ie. opinion leaders, convey information that they obtain as consumers, also known as *mediation.* The passing on is usually to the person or the groups own personal network, as illustrated below:
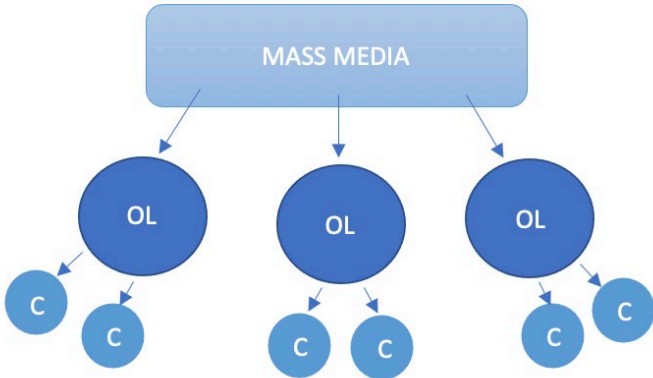

Figure 2: The Two-Step-Flow of Communication. OP: Opinion leaders. C: Civilians. (Madelen R. Kvadsheim)

Katz' and Lazarsfeld's main finding in the study, besides the importance of personal influence and discovery of opinion leaders, was that opinion leaders were larger media consumers than the average person, which possibly contributed to the role as influencer. Opinion leaders are more active applicants for information compared to others (Karlsen 2015, 305). Early studies on opinion leadership found that opinion leaders were from all levels of society and that gender had no importance. In addition to consuming more media content than others, they distinguish themselves from others through personal online activities. Opinion leaders were often active in numerous social activities or had a central position in their own network. Their position was often centered around expert knowledge in the field of influence. They were also highly committed to their field of knowledge.

Opinion leaders were for the most conscious of their own role as influences and as a source of information for others (Weimann 1994,23). It is important to note that opinion leaders, by some, not necessarily are considered as leaders in the social hierarchy. It was not necessary for them to hold positions of power as the head of a company or organization. Nor did they act as designated figures in the media or politics, who are influenced by their organization or political beliefs (Watts and Dodds 2007,441). Newer findings show that opinion leaders are not known for the people they influence other than for their high media consumption and their high level of expertise on a specific topic (Enjolras et.al. 2013, 159). This is believed to explain why opinion leaders exist at all social levels and fields, not just in the political field.

The discovery of opinion leaders in the study of Lazarsfeld and Katz and their clear definition of the role and importance of opinion leaders, stands out as the leading understanding of this phenomena. Since the study, conducted in the 1950s, more recent contributions to the field and a more modern view of the role of opinion leader, have made two-stage communication more in line with today's digital society. Karlsen (2015) elaborates on the original structure of the two-stage flow of communication. Karlsen also argue that an understanding of the importance of a central location in the opinion leader's own personal network is central to understanding opinion management today (Karlsen 2015, 306).

As illustrated in the figure below, there has been a change in the view of how the flow of communication in a digital network takes place. This change can be said to have come after

24

the implementation of new media technologies and the shift in the new digital spheres. This also affects opinion leaders' positions in the network structure:
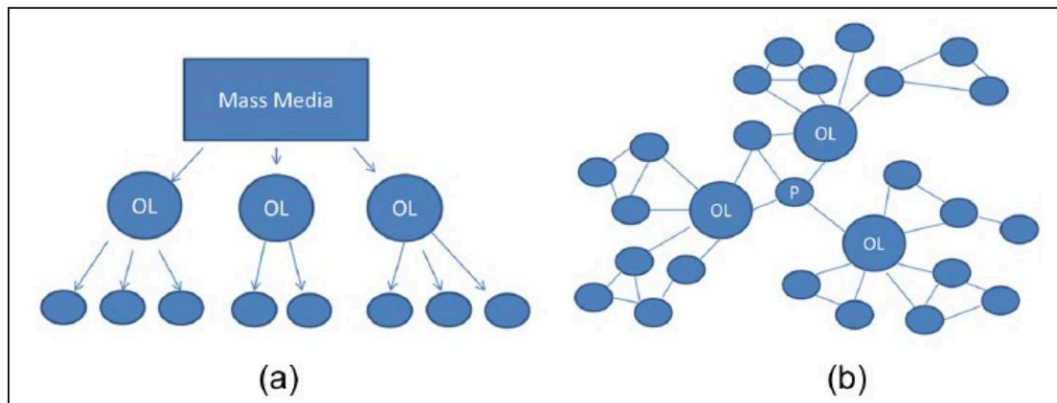
Figure 3: Figure (a) illustrates the finding of Lazarsfeld and Katz, with the original placing of opinion leaders in the society. Figure (b) on the other hand, illustrates the role of opinion leaders in today's digital society, a society where people are more connected through online networks (Karlsen 2015, 305).

Digital societies, such as social media and social networking sites, runs on individuals' disclosure of information and content, and that they share existing content with others. In a modern context, the findings of Lazarsfeld and Katz concerning opinion leaders have been implemented in a new digital structure.

The position of opinion leaders and their role in the communication structure, the two-step-flow of communication, has been challenged and question regarding its actuality. In a study conducted by Watts and Dodds (2007), the original understanding of opinion leaders is challenged. In their study, question the importance of opinion leaders, or *influencers*. Watts and Dodds (2007) pointed out the lack of empirical data and sufficient research concerning the two-step flow theory and influencers, on *how* or *if* they have the means to influence to the extent that previous research suggests. They suggest that there are few, or perhaps no, empirical studies as to whether influencers or opinion leaders *can* directly influence hundreds of other individuals. The lack of research is an important aspect that will be kept in mind moving forward in this study.

Another study (see: Bennet and Manheim 2006) suggests that other aspects such as social isolation, fragmentation of communication channels, and technologies related to *message targeting* have had an impact on each of us as recipients. Access to new communication technologies, such as social media, allows messages to be formed before they reach opinion

leaders who transfer the messages further on in what can be seen as a one-step communication flow (Bennet and Manheim 2006, 214). Other theorists question the return to the concept of the one-step-flow. It is reason to believe since opinion leaders convey messages in social networks, they are central to the flow of communication that is present today, for instance through social media (Enjolras et.al. 2013, 154). Social media is as shown earlier not solely based on a one-step flow; hence opinion leaders can be considered central to the communication flow today as an individual party. This topic will be addressed again later.

In this study, ordinary people receive political information or news through opinion leaders. Karlsen (2015, 304) points out that the flow of communication indicates that it is possible that opinion leaders influence others through the disclosure of information. This topic will be discussed more in the methodology chapter.

2.3   Social media

Social media has given ordinary people the opportunity to actively participate in the public sphere. People are no longer passive recipients of media reports but can influence the public agenda (Rogstad 2016, 13). The digital sphere consists of several arenas with a wide range of actors and groups. The hybrid media system offers new opportunities, and challenges with respect to how each individual can interact with politics and information. The hybrid media system is characterized by involvement, engagement, and mobilization, which the traditional mass media did not offer (Chadwick et al. 2016, 17). Social media, which contributes to interaction, engagement and sharing, facilitates a collective space with the aim of creating and expanding one's own personal networks (Enjolras et al. 2013, 21). This may also include participating in other people's networks.

Social media is as a set of platforms, facilitating political activity and communication, and works as a political infrastructure in democratic society (Rasmussen 2016, 7). Compared to other media channels that display information or entertainment, social media helps facilitate interaction and the building of one's own network (Enjolras 2013, 21). Social media also contributes to the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Margetts etc. 2016, 5). Rogstad (2016) explains that social media facilitates social networks, which combine different technologies and thus make it easier for more people to interact with each other. Social media works across web- and mobile-based platforms (Nahon 2016, 40). Networking and

connectivity are the cornerstones of social media in these definitions. In Haugseth (2013), these definitions are debated as imprecise. Haugseth defines social media as "*digital technology that facilitates public group interaction or participation and transmits personal or social markers along with a media message*" (Haugseth 3013, 48). In this understanding, the personal aspect of social media is present, as well the awareness of the public aspect of social media activity.

To further understand the general concept of social media, it is useful to take a closer look at the different channels within social media. The channels take different forms, and include blogs and Microblogs, Social Network Sites, Content Sharing Sites, Social Bookmarking Sites in addition to online forums and Virtual Word sites. The common denominator is that they are connected to the internet and form a kind of collective through interactions (Margetts etc. 2016, 5-6). Each platform has its own directions rules and its own special power dynamics. This makes social media a non-neutral factor in society, because of the significant political and social spaces it facilitates (Nahon 2016, 40). Much of the media merging presupposes the users to be active participants in apprehending the media content and in media production. This is particularly prominent in social media. Social media opens new ways to interact, co-create, edit, and share content through networks. As a result, social media acts as hybrid media platforms, integrating various media expressions and technologies. Social media as a medium, with the media convergence and the integrated affordance, has laid down a new form of communication through networks (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 24). In this study and in the relevant litterateur for this thesis, social media is often referred to as *social networking sites*. This thesis will further address theory and media concepts related to social networking sites.

2.3.1 Social network sites as the new network structure

When discussing the topic *social media*, it's often social networking sites we have in mind. As mentioned earlier, a social networking site is a subcategory of social media, that is mainly designed for relationship building based on common interests or activities and maintaining existing relationships (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 11). The purpose behind a social networking site is largely diverse. Some of the sites focus solely on maintaining existing networks, while others allow strangers to connect. Others again are designed to share or common interests, opinions, or beliefs (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 210). There are also numerous different sites that

bring forth information from the state, media organizations, public service, private business, hospitals and health care providers, humanitarian organizations and so on.

The prerequisite to be considered a social networking site was early on defined by Boyd and Ellison as:

> *Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (*Boyd and Ellison 2007, 211).

The purpose behind the websites is not only networking between strangers, but to make social networks of individuals visible to those who are in the individuals' personal network. This makes it possible for more people to connect with others than they otherwise would have contacted (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). This functionality has given social networking sites their uniqueness and contributed to them fundamentally changing personal network structures and the flow of communication. Boyd and Ellison's first definition stands out as classic in the field of communication but has subsequently undergone some modifications because of social developments and digital developments in the media landscape (Rogstad 2016, 16). Ellison and Boyd adjusted the definition and established a new definition where they included the social network as a result of the development in social networking sites over time:

> *A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consists of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site* (Ellison and Boyd 2013, 159).

A key characteristic of social networking sites is the mix of different media technologies that combine digital media (video, audio, and text) and information technology (computers, smartphones, and the internet) that make the sites both difficult to define and categorize (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 23). The mixture of technologies and media equipment leads to a form

of media convergence. Media convergence can be described as "*the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the collaboration of multiple media industries, and the media audience with migratory behaviors*" (Jenkins 2006, 2).

Social networking sites create digital networks that are cross-border, organizational and territorial (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 25). As a result, social networking sites contribute to change in all communication and structure, national and global, public, and personal. Social networks maintain weak relationships that otherwise would be difficult to maintain due to physical distance but can also strengthen already powerful actors and increase their influence (Rogstad 2016, 47). These two effects are referred to in literature as the "*little world effect*" and the "*rich get richer effect*".

The small world effect is the result of a network structures, where individuals are linked to groups of other individuals, which in turn are linked to each other through a set of, often few, connections (Enjolras et. al. 2013,26). In this way, "distance" between the individuals in the network is narrowed down (Rogstad 2016, 48). Rogstad points to Granovetter's view from 1973, that claims that this way of maintaining relationships is based on the concepts of *strong* and *weak relationships* or *ties*. *Strong ties* are the close and personal relationships in life, whilst weak *ties* are the links or relationships individuals have with others, where the bond requires little maintenance from the individual but offers an opportunity for more links and access to the information and private networks of others (2016, 48). As mentioned above, social networking sites facilitate relationship maintenance by easily connecting with individuals who one will not necessarily connect to in real life. This makes "the world smaller". The "*richer get richer effect*" results from the digital network structure and algorithms in search monitors (Enjolras et.al. 2013, 26-27). As for offline networks, digital networks are characterized by popularity and hierarchical structures. As a result, some individuals draw more attention. Hence, there is not an even distribution of power. In a digital context, these hierarchies are strengthened through algorithms that either sort out or collect content or news from each person on the Internet based on their online activity (Rogstad 2016, 48-49).

Although the premises associated with social networking sites have undergone some change, the basic function, content sharing within a limited group, remain the same (Ellison and

Ellison and Boyd 2013, 160). Above, some key characteristics of social networking sites have been highlighted. Both affordance and the effects these pages represent, make them attractive for political purposes and political engagement. This will be addressed in the following chapters.

2.3.2 Social Network Sites and Politics

As mentioned, there has been a transfer of power from traditional media to new actors. There have also been structural changes in network formations and the effect they have on the flow of information. So how are social networking sites used in political communication? Social media is not only a space for information sharing and networking, but it facilitates political marketing, discussion, mobilization opinion formation and agenda setting (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 350). Through several social networking sites, individuals are given the opportunity to express their opinion in the public sphere and influence the agenda (Rogstad 2016, 47). In the ongoing expansion of opportunity for group formation and contact with like-minded, social networking sites have proven to be a new political force (Margetts etc. 2016, 4). The new functions are not always clear or indistinguishable from each other. With political communication as a field in constant change, along with the possibilities that each platform provides, features, functions and influence solutions may look different in the future. Some functions such as agenda setting, and opinion formation have already been included. Further on, I will provide insight into some other possibilities that social networking sites offer to individuals and politics.

Social networking sites serve as information channels for both political actors and individuals. Social online/web and mainstream media are both part of the news cycle, but news is often "broken" on social media before traditional ones, either by a journalist or other actors close to the event (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 352). This is a way for political actors to inform and broadcast their message to the public (Kalsnes and Larsson 2015, 223). In addition, social networking sites are increasingly growing as a source of news to individuals. What distinguishes news distributed through social networking sites from other news platforms, is that social networking sites provide opportunities for individuals to engage with the news process, through commenting, sharing, and even posting online (Bergström and Belfrage 2018, 583-4).

The digital network also has a great impact on what kind of information and news the public is exposed to. The threshold for political and democratic participation on social networking sites is lower. The affordance of the digital network makes engagement and participation easy through available functionality, but the network structure also plays a role in making the threshold for starting a debate or commenting on news links on social networking sites even lower, thus ensuring further citizenship and democracy (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 24).

2.2.3 Facebook pages as a political third space

In addition to being the most popular social networking site in Norway, see introductory chapter, Facebook is also the most popular social media for politicians (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 354). Facebook stands out as an important social networking site for the research landscape (Boyd and Ellison 2007, 215). Facebook's position in the digital world, our daily lives, and the present political actors, makes Facebook interesting for further research. The Internet and social media are integrated in the established systems of politics and communication, challenging the traditionally established power structures (Dahlgren 2006, 151). In the following, reference will be made to some of these perspectives and highlight the role of Facebook as a social network site and as a source of political information.

Facebook holds a position as one of the most important social networking sites in the world and in Norway and is seen by many as the epitome of a social network (Rogstad 2016, 18). Facebook dates to 2004 but was not available to everyone until 2006. The web service was created with the purpose of making it easier to find friends and maintain contact with friends and acquaintances. Today, Facebook is not just a place to reconnect with others, but a marketplace for shops, businesses, volunteer profiles and public authorities (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 12). In other words, "everyone" is on Facebook, in all parts of society and throughout the population.

Facebook has certain features that make the platform stand out from other social media platforms. On Facebook, information and messages are easily transported through the networking page, through two specific functions. The first function is "*Like*" or "*Comment on*" a posting. This makes the posting more visible to the others (Karlsen 2015, 305). In 2006, the Like-button was updated to include the emojis (picture symbols): "love", "haha", "wow", "sad" and "angry" (Stinson in Kalsnes 2016). The second function is "*Sharing*" or

"*Forwarding*" a posting, either by sharing a link or by posting self-made content on your own private profile page, the "*Wall*". The reach of a shared post is huge due to Facebook's built-in technological solutions, which allows a posting that gets likes or comments to show up on the "wall" of others associated with the person, or someone in their network (Karlsen 2015, 305). This allows individuals to be exposed to postings and content that has not been published by individuals in their own network. Unless the range of the inserts is regulated by the original producer.

The individual's purpose of using Facebook is as varied as there are profiles. Findings made on Facebook use, showed that 22% of the Norwegian population uses Facebook to discuss political issues, making Facebook the largest arena for political debate in Norway (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 48). Social media could be understood as a "third space" (Kalsnes 2016, 24). A third space is a non-political online space where political talk can emerge (Wright et al. 2016, 80). Facebook's network structure facilitates political debate in semi-closed and confined spaces, and not in an all-public space (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 51). This may bring forth an obstacle in the opinion making of the general public.

2.2.4 Opinion leaders on social network sites

In Chapter 2.2, the concept of opinion management was presented. In addition, reference was made to how the understanding of the term has evolved throughout time, how social media has changed the network structure itself and what opportunities this development provides. In the following, some perspectives on the impact of opinion leaders in the digital flow of communication on social networking sites will be presented.

The general public's opportunity to participate in the established sharing opportunity in public opinion has been a long and demanding process. Mass media is often part in the process of conveying a message. In that process, the message can reach individuals in strategic positions, who in turn sort the message out of the process (Eide 1992, 51). For example, newspapers have given certain people unique opportunities to influence others through "*opinion sections"* (commentary articles). However, these sections have mostly been reserved for the elite, such as people employed in media or people in power (Habel 2012, 258). Such elites can be seen as opinion-forming individuals, but *they* are not in the spotlight in this study. However, the opinion sections of the newspapers in Norway are no longer reserved only for the elite, and

new voices are now shared in public. However, the availability to these sections can be seen as limited or closed to all participants. Mass media in general have "*gatekeepers*", which implies that not all messages that start the mass media process are the ones that are ultimately presented to the public. Social networking sites challenge the power of gatekeepers to define *who* and *what* is to reach the public sphere, by enabling anyone to enter, start discussions, or mobilize others in the public digital sphere (Rogstad 2016, 42-43). This possibly contributes to a different view on gatekeepers in respect to the digital flow of communication.

As highlighted in Chapter 2.2, social networking sites have transformed the public sphere by facilitating a new network structure that gives opinion leaders access to unique networks, where information can be shared in a simple and effective way (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 159). Studies done by Karlsen (2015) found that opinion leaders who followed politicians and parties online have a larger digital network than others. They tend to have a larger group of friends on Facebook, and more followers on Twitter. Moreover, they are good at maintaining contact with both digital friends and followers (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 163). This may be related to their strategic and central position in networks. Social networking sites are therefore an important tool for opinion leaders in their efforts to reach out to other people.

Opinion leaders are also important in the political communication process. Although they are not necessarily directly linked to a political party or a specific politician, research shows that they often are followers of politicians and parties on social media (See Enjolras et. al. 2013 and Karlsen 2015). This fits well with characteristics referred to earlier, such as "having expertise in their field" and "being well informed". They seem to be motivated by gathering information and meeting those whom they share interests (Karlsen 2015, 309). In addition to following political actors on Facebook, opinion leaders are, when compared to others, more active on social media with a tendency to have high activity on social networking sites through linking to and discussing news and politics (Enjolras et. al. 2013, 163). The position of opinion leaders in the network, their political interest and online activity indicate that these individuals are more active in the process of spreading political messages.

3. Method

This study aims to examine the relationship, position, and role of opinion leaders in the digital world, considering their impact on others and the impact of social media on the flow of political communication. Social media is constantly supplied with an overwhelming amount of new content. This study is based on interviews with opinion leaders in digital networks, where they talk about their own function on their own social networking pages.
Studying a concept that is constantly evolving is challenging, because the result will vary over time, across different digital platforms simultaneously with the nonstop increase of new activity. This may result in an outcome of this study that may look very different in the future, in other studies conducted at a different time or with the use of other informants.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the theoretical choices and the steps in this study, in order to make the study as transparent as possible. The chapter presents the choices made in relation to research method in the study, and the assessments that has been made during the process of the study. The chapter intend to explain the relevance of the method to this study, and how the analysis is performed. The work on recruiting informants is elaborated before presenting aspects that may have affected the study, the role of the researcher and ethical considerations. Finally, the validity, reliability and generalization of this study are discussed.

3.1   Choice of method

Research should aim to "*promote knowledge development and represent a potentially innovative perspective*" (Befring 2007, 16). The method is the tool to provide researchers who achieve this goal. Or more precisely, the choice of method should fit the research question in the most advantageous way. Tjora (2017) describes qualitative methods as «*research focused on the informant's experiences, opinion formation and consequences of opinions related to a phenomenon*». The purpose of qualitative methods is "*to develop an understanding of phenomena related to persons or situations in their own social reality*" (Dalen 2011, 15). This thesis aims to understand the role of opinion leaders in today's digital society. The qualitative method is useful for answering the topic of this thesis because it allows a deeper understanding of the topic through the informant's own experiences. Because of the time frame, the study is based on in-depth interviews with three informants. Befring (2007) points out that qualitative methods are beneficial when working with a small number of informants.

Qualitative interviews require a lot of preparation before conducting the interviews, and a lot of work on collecting and processing the material (Østbye et.al. 2013, 104).

Qualitative interviews are "*an important method for understanding and collecting data on people's beliefs, assessments and activities*" (2013, 101). Qualitative interviews seem to be very beneficial when researching topics in the social sciences. The interviews provide information that otherwise can be difficult to obtain, facilitating the mapping processes and the social relationships. The term "*informing*" (enlighten) is important to note when interviewing is used as the method of gathering information. The purpose of the conversations in qualitative interviews is for the researcher to be informed by the informant through insight, assessments, and reflections (2013, 103). In supplement to this matter, qualitative methods are valuable to use when a phenomenon is not well known (Johannesen, Tufte and Christoffersen 2016, 28).

The purpose of this study is not to collect data that are measurable, but rather to gain valuable knowledge about the topic. Qualitative interviews have been selected as method for this purpose. This does not mean that there are no other methods sufficient to study the topic. The technical possibilities of Facebook and other social media platforms provide new ways to study users' digital thoughts, feelings, and actions. It provides opportunities to study information networks, the division of meaning, attitudes and behaviors to a greater extent than was possible at any previous point in history (Murphy 2014, 789).

A content analysis that analyses opinion leaders' actual input onto the digital networking sites could also be interesting but is not subject in this study. A qualitative interview, on the other hand, gives the informant the opportunity to include considerations, topics of their own, or perspectives that the *informants* consider relevant. A survey or an analysis would not have provided the same opportunity (Tjora 2017, 30). The method used for this thesis is of a qualitative methodological nature, and data collection and analysis are characterized by this.

3.2   Methodical starting point

This study is inspired by *The People's Choice* study by Paul. F. Lazarsfeld and his collages in the 1940s. The study is part of the well-known *Personal Influence*, published in 1955 by Lazarsfeld himself, later including Elihu Katz. The study presents theory of the *Two-step-flow*

of Communication, as mentioned in Chapter 2 *Literature review*. This theory has a strong foothold in political communication. The study was conducted in several steps. First through strategic choice of location based on statistical measurements of factors, such as population composition, economic status, commercial structure, communication behavior and a general quality (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2006, 335-36). This contributed to the discovery of "*a typical American city*." Step two, the interviews, were composed of two sets of data. One from the original sample of the interviewees and a second from a group that had been singled out as influential people, opinion leaders. The opinion leaders seemed to have had an impact on people's decision-making, a process known through the concepts of "*influential-influencing*" or the "*two-step flow of communication*".

This study is inspired by the academic work of Lazarsfeld and Katz. Specifically, inspired by the two main identifying questions in *The People's Choice* study, used to identify opinion leaders: "*Have you tried to convince others with your political ideas lately?* " and "*Have anyone asked you for advice on a political issue lately?* » Other research contributions to the field (See Enjorlas et.al. 2013 and Karlsen 2015) have used these questions to identify opinion leaders in their studies. The questions   are in this study used as inspiration to identify the opinion leaders in the digital spheres.

Although inspiration is drawn from *The People's Choice* study, most of the research in this thesis is built on other theoretical perspectives. An important aspect of this study is to integrate the classic foundation of opinion management into the digital world of social media. The intention is to combine the methodological approach with theoretical perspectives in the field, to contribute with new insights around the concept of opinion formers.

3.3   Information retrieval – in depth-interviews

A way to study social media is to identify, localize, or interact with those who participate on the platform (Murphy 2014, 792). In-depth interviews can be used as a method for studying opinions, attitudes, and experiences, and is useful when the goal is to see the world from the informant's point of view (Tjora 2017, 114). The structure of the interview is close to a normal conversation but involves a specific approach and depth in the interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, 27). In the in-depth interviews, the questions are open, which gives the informant the opportunity to go into detail on topics they want to elaborate (Tjora 2017,

1144). In-depth interviews also provide the opportunity for follow-up questions, verification of information and examples (Østbye et.al. 103).

In-depth interviews are appropriate for this study for several reasons. I want to gain a deeper knowledge of opinion leaders' attitudes and opinions. Through in-depth interviews, my goal has been to gain a better understanding of the role of opinion leaders in today's media society and general society, their power and position in the flow of communication, and to understand the context beyond the informants as individuals. The purpose of the interviews has also been to gain insight into various aspects and experiences related to digital networks, news consumption, trust, and activity on social networking sites, on social media, and in their personal networks. In addition, there has been an opening with respect to improvised follow-up questions, where the starting point could be questions where the informants had other perspectives to add, or where I wanted the informant to elaborate further on topics. The interviews are based on a questionnaire. The interview guide is to find as Appendix 2.

3.4   Informants

3.4.1 Recruitment of informants

Informants to a qualitative interview study should be chosen based on whether the informants, for various reasons, can express themselves in a reflective manner on the topic of interest. In other words, the informants in in-dept qualitative interviews are not randomly selected to represent a population and represent themselves (Tjora 2017, 130). The topic of this master's thesis is "The role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system» and aims to research the role of opinion leaders in relation to their own social networking sites, more precisely their activity on the social networking site Facebook.

In the effort to find good candidates for the survey, I first had to identify the opinion leaders. I contacted networking site administrators, at first the associated with large Facebook groups, related to topics that are relevant in a Norwegian context. This limitation left me with a large number of possible candidates. To limit the selection further, I explored themes that were presumed to be the most important to the public in the last national election, in 2021. Aas (2021) has assumed these themes to be *social differences, health, taxes and fees, climate and environment*, and *district policy* to name a few. In addition, I established some requirements,

to help navigate through the large number of groups that exist. These requirements for the Facebook-groups were:

1. The group cannot be linked to one or more political parties.
2. The group cannot be sponsored by a political organization.
3. The group cannot be linked to a political candidate.
4. The group must be more than one year old.

The requirements for potential informants, identified as opinion leaders:

1. The informant had to be a member of the administrator team in the group.
2. The informant had to be active in the group.
3. The informant cannot not have a clear connection to a political party.

With these requirements, the search for groups of potential opinion leaders was narrowed down. I considered adjusting the requirements regarding the number of group members, to be able to compare groups, but maintained the original requirements to include regional and national groups.

The recruitment of the informants is done strategically, which means that the informants are selected based on specific criteria. All informants meet the criteria set before the recruitment process started. For example, they all have a role as moderator and administrator in their own Facebook group and they are active news providers or news distributors in their own network.

To recruit the informants, I contacted several administrators of groups who met the criteria, that were potentially qualified. I sent direct messages through Facebook Messager to a large amount of potential candidates, where I introduced myself and the study in my master's thesis. I added a question about whether they would like to contribute to the survey. It turned out to be very difficult to get answers via Facebook.

None of the candidates responded to the first messages. With no responses through Messager, a search on the internet for information on the candidates was conducted, through services outside the Facebook system. Results from these searches, gave phone numbers and email addresses of some candidates, but not all. I contacted several potential candidates again, by

calling them or sending an e-mail message, and re-introduced myself, the master's project and asked again if they might be interested in participating in the master thesis. Through this way of recruitment, qualified informants come forward, all from large groups/networks on Facebook. All informants who were contacted by phone or email were positive to participate, except one. There is still no response on the messages sent through the Messager/Facebook.

In retrospect of the recruitment process, I have reflected on the first form of contact through Facebook/Messenger. Facebook's technical features send messages from persons outside one's personal network, i.e., not one of their own Facebook friends, to a message request inbox, that is separate from other messages. This was the case for the messages that were sent out, confirmed in conversation with informants during interview. It is also possible that some would perceive the inquiry as impersonal, or they might not open messages from strangers out of principle. This is something I find understandable. By calling or sending an email, the informant could ask the questions they wanted, and I was reassured that I had been able to contact the desired candidates. During the conversation, I informed about the information form (See Appendix 1) and agreed upon the time of the interview.

The recruitment process resulted in a strategic recruitment of three informants from groups linked to from different areas. The informants are linked to groups where the core topics are either *climate and the environment, taxes and social differences,* or *immigration*. In addition to these informants, I planned a fourth interview with an informant who was associated with the group run by a one of the other participants. I ended after the first introductory part of the interview, as the informant did not meet my criteria. The results of this study are therefore based on in-depth qualitative interviews following a strategic recruitment of three informants. All interviews were conducted over the phone. This open up for the possibility of misinterpretation and lack of tuning in on each other, due to the lack of visual contact. This matter is taken in consideration under analysis and discussions later on.

3.4.2 Presentation of informants

As mentioned, all informants are administrators from different Facebook groups. I was in direct contact over the phone with Olav and Berit before the actual interview. With Christin, the contact was made by email. Before the interviews, the informants had received a short

presentation on the topics of the master's thesis, which is included in the request form, see Appendix 1.

Informant 1 – Olav Sylte

Main administrator of the group. He created the group in September 2019. Olav has worked as a lawyer for several years and informs that he is not active in politics. The group has over 621,200 members when this study is conducted.

Informant 2 – Christin Oldebråten

Created the group in April 2019. Much of the admin work is delegated to others, but she is still a part of the admin team. Christin has worked with communication and digital media for several years and is involved in an aid project that she has founded. She also leads expeditions. The group has over 118,200 members when this study is conducted.

Informant 3 - Berit – anonymous, with fictitious name

Has been an activist for many years and has worked within several institutions. She works with communication for several organizations. She is part of the group's admin team. She has been with the group since it was created but was not an administrator to begin with. The group has over 66,700 when this study is conducted.

3.5 Considerations that may influence the research

As mentioned in the chapters above there are several considerations that have been made throughout the work with this study. The next sub-chapters aim to bring clarity to the considerations that is evaluated before and under the study.

3.5.1 The role as a researcher

In all kinds of social science research, researchers will in one way, or another be involved in the topic being researched (Tjora 2017, 235). Studies can be influenced by the researchers' academic, professional, political, and cultural background, or the researcher can be influenced by the time the researcher lives in (Dalen 2011). Therefore, it is relevant to address my own connection to the topic this thesis aims to investigate. That way, the reader of this paper can make up their mind about whether my background will interfere with the research and results.

I have completed a bachelor's degree in media studies. This master thesis is part of the program Political Communication – Nordic Perspectives. In addition, I am connected to the topic through courses at the university in political science and sociology. I have no other academic or professional experience that seem relevant to the research question. It may be that my academic background can influence my study and analysis, through priorities and choices made during the study.

My interest in this topic comes from curiosity combined with interest awoken through the intriguing theory of the subject. My motivation for this specific study, was the possibility to gain insight into a topic I only had experience with through theory. It led me to want to explore the power that social media gives individuals. At the same time, I was open to new perspectives on this topic presented through the interviews by the informant. I have had the ambition to include the informants as much as possible in the interview and take their lead on perspectives and reflections. The interviews followed predefined questions, with the possibility of including, following up or removing a question if the informant raised the topic himself/herself. I would like to emphasize that I have no personal relationship with the informants or am involved in the issues they raise.

In the follow-up work with the collected material, I have reflected on my participation in the interviews through recognition of received information, reflection on the following up-questions and questioned if my way of conducting the interview could have been leading for the informants. I have tried to be as natural and as respectful as possible and taken into consideration the lack of person-to person connection in interviews conducted over the phone. My experience of the data material is that the informants' perspective emerges, despite possible influence from me and lack of being in the same physical room. Therefore, I perceive the data collected in this study as a sufficient contribution to an analysis.

3.5.2 Purpose and application

This study can give an indication on current and future research questions related to the role of opinion leaders in the digital political communication system. However, it can be discussed if the result of this study is applicable when the study is based on three informants.

The purpose of this study is to get a deeper insight on the topic and point out possibilities in the role of opinion leaders in their networks, and the potential challenges that follows with the role. The study also aims to address a research gap in the field of political communication regarding opinion leader's role as moderators of large social networks. The hope is to contribute to on-going discussions on this topic.

The possibility to fully explore to the theme is somewhat restricted due to the timeframe of this study, resulting in no time for more than one interview with each informant. Still, I argue that this master thesis raises interesting research questions and points out interesting results. I believe that the result of this study may be of use for the field of political communication.

3.5.3 Collecting data and processing the data material

The interviews were conducted over the phone after the informant's own preference. Ahead of the interview, the informants were presented with the options of meeting face-to-face, interview over the phone or a meeting on Microsoft Teams. Due to practical reasons such as geographical distance and the informant's tight time schedules, all the informants chose to conduct the interview as telephone interviews. Doing the interview trough telephone can lead to loosing important aspects, such as body language (Tjora 2017, 169). Therefore, it was important to compensate for the lack of facial expressions, body language, intonation versus voice quality in the net and so on similar to follow up during the interview with questions such as *«Do I understand you right…?»*, repeating their answers to makes sure the information was right and persist on creating a safe environment for conversation. Doing a phone interview be beneficial because it takes pressure of the informant, because the interview can be conducted in the informant's own surroundings. This can create a sense of safety, which in some cases can lead to broader information on sensitive topics or information (Tjora 2017, 170). All the informants conducted the interviews in an undisturbed place.

As mentioned, in-depth interviews need to be well prepared. Preparing the interview guide for a phone interview made it of great importance to secure a well worked out questionnaire. As a part of the preparation to the interviews, I did a test interview. During this first test interview it became clear that the original interview guide had to undergo some changes. In this first interview, the "informant" was a person that lack experience and knowledge from the field of political science nor the field of communication. Early on in test, it became clear that my

informant experienced all the questions as politically related questions. This may have been affected by the fact that this first draft had as set of questions which were mostly centred around news and information in the very beginning. The intention in the draft was to gather information on general media habits and information related to all sorts of interest in the beginning, to make an overall survey of general media habits. When the words *news* and *information* were put in the same sentence, the informant understood the question as if the words were related and not as two separate topics. The draft also contained several questions understood as "yes/no questions" and did not facilitate for an open conversation around the topics.

After a structural change and several changes to the questions, a new test interview was conducted with another person. The interview showed that the structure needed rearranging, due to the opening of the interview leading the informant on to a path of politics. The next changes included rewriting the first set of opening questions, to achieve a free speech and a freer thought process. This moved the interview away from the structure that I intentionally wanted. In the next interviews I opened the conversation by saying that the study did not seek to investigate the informant's political point of view or political party affiliation. At the same time, the informants were told that if their political view come forth freely as a part of the conversation, it may be included in the study. After this followed a review focusing on clarity in all the questions, specifying what kind of information that was to be explored. After the last review, I felt confident the questions would be understood and not lead any of the informants onto the "political path".

Before the interviews took place, the informants were presented with information about the topic and the routines for processing the data material (See Appendix 1). This information incorporated information that the data material would be processed according to the directions from *The Norwegian Center for research data (NSD)*. The digital material is password-protected, and the physical is kept in a private space out of reach for anyone else. The informants received this information at the start of each conversation for second time, along information about each of the informant's rights, and that the interview would be recorded but deleted after the end of the study. To record an interview gives the interviewer the possibility to focus on the flow of the conversation (Tjora 2017, 166). It is also helpful to make sure the

informant's statements was transcribed right. The recording of the interviews was done on two separate devices in case technical difficulties.

The interviews were semi-structured interviews, based on an interview guide (See Appendix 2), but there was opening for the informant's own perspectives. This is according to good practise (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, 31). Each interview lasted approximately forty minutes up to an hour. The interview guide was structured around Tjora's structure of an in-depth interview, with the three phases *a warmup*, *reflection*, and a *round* up (Tjora 2017, 145). In the first minutes of the interview there were loose conversation. I once again thanked each of them for the participation before I spoke of the practical information concerning the processing the material. I got consent to record the interviews. The small talk followed up on the informant's background and the point that their political perspective was not an issue in study. It felt like a safe and calm situation emerged, in accordance with the views of Tjora (2017, 146). The *reflection* in interview was structured after themes, with sub-questions under each topic. In this way, the informant was given time to *elaborate* (2017,146). All questions in the interview guide were included in the interviews. When the informant included answer in a "tangled" way, the informant were asked *"When you mentioned (..), did I understand you right when.."* After the first interview, I became more comfortable and familiar with the interview guide and was more capable to follow up with relevant questions. This shows the importance of test-interviews. As the main topics was fully addressed, the interview ended with three key questions. Then there was an opening for the informant to add something freely to the conversation. This was especially interesting, because it led to the informant's own reflections around the interview and thematic.

In the process of transcribing, which happened after the completion of the interviews, there at some points challenging to recognize all speech. By lowering the speed on the recording, this was solved. The transcription was done with the help of Microsoft Words "built in dictation". By lowering the speed on the recordings, I could listen to the recordings and re-tell the interviews. The dictation function typed the interviews onto the computer. This shortened the timespan used for processing the material. I made sure to include every detail in the transcription, a word pronounced twice and sounds in between words and so on. By doing so, the transcription takes longer time. But on the other hand, I made sure to include everything that could impact on the analysis (2017, 174). All transcriptions are in Norwegian.

3.6 Analysis and coding

The purpose of analysis is for the reader to gain insight and knowledge on the topic, without having to see through all the data material gathered throughout the study (Tjora 2017, 195). There are several methods for analysing a material. In this study, a *categorical division* is to analyse the data. With categorical division, the data material is sorted into topics that appears repetitively in the material (Johannessen, Tufte and Christoffersen 2004, 155). These topics are given codes. This is essential to analyse the meaning of the data (2004, 158). A central element to the coding, is to use categories that is already present in the data material, making the codes close to the information given by the informants (Tjora 2017, 197). The interview guide was structured in topics, to help structure the analysis. By using the same structure in each interview, the information was easy to categorize in the same way for all the interviews.

After categorizing the material into topics and coding them, the data material is sorted after each of the categories to reveal common stamens, *patterns, contexts, common features*, or *differences,* to be able to identify the underlaying data. (Johannessen, Tufte and Christoffersen 2004, 159). By comparing the categories to theory, the analysis is conducted. Throughout this process, there has been a *material compromised,* meaning that parts that do not appear relevant are not added to the analysis and discussion. At the same time topics that came up during the analysis were included gradually.

3.7 Ethical considerations

This study project has been sent to and approved by Norwegian Center for research data (NSD). In addition, the informants have received information form about the study, their rights and how the data is processed. This form did also include consent, which they had do agree to before the interview started (See Appendix 1). There are several ethical considerations linked to research by in-depth interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) points informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher as important ethical considerations to reflect on. Some of these have already been addressed in the chapters above.

All research relies on trust between the researcher and the ones researched on. This requires for each researcher to manage and respect the informant (Tjora 2017, 178). An important

aspect of this is confidentiality, which refers to the agreement about what may be done with the data conducted through the interviews in form of private data but as well as anonymity (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, 94). In addition to information about how the material was processed, I specifically asked if the informant wanted to be anonymized and gave them the possibility to do quote check their statements. Another important ethical consideration is to not harm or reflect badly on the informant (Tjora 2017, 175). The informant could at any point withdraw from the study.

3.8   Validity, reliability and generalizing

A study aims to collect data, to say something about the reality (Jacobsen 2022, 17). This thesis aims to provide new information and knowledge about the role of opinion leaders in relation to the public. To ensure the quality of this study, the three criteria *validity*, *reliability* and *generalizing* are lifted.

Validity is used to find out to what extent the data and the analysis is relevant to the research question(s) (Østbye at.al. 2013, 26). The validity criteria relate to whether the answer in the research actually answers what is asked (Tjora 2017, 232). *Internal validity* is centred around whether the result can be viewed as "right" (Jacobsen 2022, 240). There are some challenges connected to the process when researching on people. For instance, is there a risk that the information from informants given in interviews does not represent reality. A way to ensure the validity of the study is to reflect upon whether the informants are right for the research outcome and if these informants can give the right information. The informant's proximity to the research question should be in focus throughout the research (Jacobsen 2022, 240-41). Validity is strengthened by emphasising how the research is practiced, based on the questions in the study, how these questions are influenced by the topics of interest and the established research on these topics in the field (Tjora 2017, 234). By explaining the choices and considerations throughout the study, both theoretical and methodical, allows the reader to take make up their own minds concerning the relevance of the study and its position in the field.

Generalizability is connected to the relevance of the research beyond the actual study (2017, 231). This implies that generalizing is when "*conclusions is drawn based on statements, data, or facts which in some way can be transferred or documented to a more complete understanding, explanation, or theories*" (Østbye et.al. 2013, 231). In other words,

generalizing can occur if the findings in the analyse can be transmitting to the tendencies in society. This is referred to as the *external validity* (Jacobsen 2022, 228). The generalizability in a study is connected to two factors, the number of informants and the selection of them (Østbye et.el. 2013, 29). This study has a low number of informants which can make it hard to draw conclusions and generalize the study to all opinion leaders in same position. Nevertheless, parts of the results in the study *may* consist of common factors, common answers, or common challenges among the informants, which *may* show some relevance to tendencies in society. Hence, the study *can* support existing theory or other studies, and possible complete other studies' generalizability.

Reliability is about the quality in the information retrieval, the processing of the material and the analysis of the data (Østbye et.al 2013, 27). Reliability refers to the concept *reliable* and is connected to whether there are any factors in the study itself that can have created the end results (Jacobsen 2022, 250). An interview is sometimes formed solely by the one interviewing in the study (2022, 251). To be transparent about the role as a researcher, contributes to the reliability of the study. Other elements such as elaborate on the process, the handling of the material and the researcher's own analysis, are also central to strengthen the reliability if the study (Tjora 2017, 237). For instance, recordings of interviews will always strengthen the character of reliability because it allows to clarify what has been said or not. In most cases, a strong reliability will strengthen the validity as well, due to the given possibilities to put cases in context, to each other and opens for new interpretation.

4.   Analysis and results

This thesis aims to investigate *What is the role of opinion leaders in today's digital communication system*? To help answer this question, I have asked two sub-questions: 1) *How and why do opinion leaders work to influence others in their digital networks as well as offline networks?* 2) *What opportunities and challenges do opinion leaders face on their social networking sites/pages or in their social network groups, and how do opinion leaders view the effect/purpose of their own network groups or network pages?*

The analysis is based on the structure of the interview guide, and the presentation of the results is based on the two sub-questions. Each of the sub-chapters addresses the survey questions through a thematic structure that includes statements that can shed light on the relevant topic. In this way, the informant's unique experiences and perspectives are included. Other elements and themes also emerged during the interviews. Not all of these are included in the analysis. Some elements are included under other topics and are included in the sub-chapters below. The results are presented under the following main points: 1) the role of opinion leaders on social networking sites, 2) opinion leaders and their views on influence, and 3) opinion leaders in the digital communication flow.

4.1   The role of opinion leaders on social networking sites

This analysis starts by explaining how the informants view their own role in the digital networks which they have either established or where they have taken on a great responsibility. It is important to include it because it provides insight into and is a prerequisite for understanding other aspects of the analysis. It is also interesting to start the analysis by exploring the motivation behind the groups, because although this perspective varied between the informants, it was clear that the political aspect was present as an underlying factor.

The groups were formed based on various motivational factors. Nevertheless, they reflect some common features of the use of social media in connection with political communication. They are a place for information exchange and networking, but they also facilitate discussion, mobilization and opinion formation (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, 350). The motivation behind the groups reflects this. Berit describes that the motivation behind the group arose out of an urgent need:

"It's a very, very long story. [..] There was a concrete activity, concrete humanitarian need that arose and then, there was then a response to it physically. [..] There were no services, no plans, no preparedness for it all, so the organizations were not there connected. [..] serious things that in a way, a very loosely organized volunteerism tried to deal with it then. [..] Yes, that was that it was a network of everything that happened at once. [..]. And then on top of that, it was someone (another participant) who created this group to just get people to sort of talk to each other. [..] The goal was to mobilize people to help where it was needed then. [..] And after that, in a way, there was a need to organize more"

The statement expresses that Facebook can be perceived as a unifying resource when organizing political actions. For others, the goal was rather to gather public opinion and create public spaces for discussion and facilitation of political action. Christin says:

"The goal of this group is to stop [..] industry in Norway and so more people can see for them self."

For Olav, it was important to gather people in a room for information. He emphasizes that size is important:

"To bring in as many people as possible [..] influence political decision-making."

One of the initial questions in the survey was about the informants' view on their role in the group. The informants gave different answers about the tasks they performed. For some of the informants, Olav and Christin, the role of administrator was a natural part of establishing the groups. It was largely agreed that the role included practical tasks such as accepting posts and attending to other functions that come with the role of group admin on Facebook. In addition, it became clear that the informants viewed their role as mediators of the debate in the groups. Olav exemplifies this when he answers questions about his views on his role:

"It is, after all, to keep things factually tidy and focus on what the group is about".

This perspective is representative of all informants. Several times during the interview, the overall responsibility is mentioned and highlighted as an important aspect of the role. Maintaining a serious tone in the group is also important to attract different people. The informants stated that they would like to have a broad composition of members in the groups,

since the group represents the people. Christin points out that seriousness was an important aspect of the dynamic of the group:

> *"There are both opponents and supporters [..] who are in that group, but they must be important, and serious, at least try, and moderate so that there will be a serious dialogue."*

The informants, especially Christin and Olav, shared experiences that gave the impression of professionalism in relation to their role. The results showed that moderation was one of the main areas of responsibility. Christin had established the group herself, but in recent years she had changed her responsibilities to train and mentor new administrators:

> *"I have an advisor role in the group for the other administrators and the administrator team and makes sure that it works well and to make sure that the team thrive well, and they have the competence they need, and give some training. [..] My role is to make sure we have administrators and help and train them and give insight in the guidelines [..] and how we as administrators have to think then to do a good job".*

This shows that the informants have a more extensive role than just maintaining the flow of communication in the networks. The results show that the seriousness of the group is linked not only to the debate, but also to its roles and influence. Such findings strengthen the perspective that these informants have a central position in the networks, not only as communicators of information, but as individuals who influence other people with their mindset, and who convey experiences they perceive as important. This links them to the formation of meaning, as individuals who appear clearly not only in the flow of communication, but also in the structure of their own network.

One of the informants stood out with a different perspective on her role and how it had developed. Not everyone perceived their role as important as others did. Berit describes her role and perspective on the time when the group was established:

> *"In a way, it is not uncomplicated. [..] I mean, I was maybe not the administrator then and it wasn't like it was important who was an administrator... It was just people who created it and there were no limits to what you could post... the goal*

was to mobilize people to help where it was needed then."

This perspective is interesting because they show that it is not necessarily so obvious who ends up in the role of administrator or moderator. In her case, she went from being a participant to taking on a greater responsibility through being active in the group. Nevertheless, she also confirms the others' view that moderating the debate is an important task. But Berit does not relate to the administrator perspective:

"We do something else other than letting in the posts and deleting posts that are not relevant in a way… there is no administration whatsoever… [..] a lot of effort was spent on it before so… it is completely clear, the fact that you were in it to moderate a lot."

Another side of the role is about engagement. All informants were active in the groups by publishing posts, likes and comments. This was highlighted as important for keeping the group relevant and shifting the focus to relevant topics, as illustrated by Christin:

"I post form current news stories. [..] It happens that I am in to update people in the group to familiarize themselves [..] in the comment section."

This is also the case for other informants who actively contribute to the comment fields and who participate in debates etc. There was some variation between the informants. While some participated spontaneously and based on inspiration, daily activity was important to others. Olav had participated in activities in the group daily since 2019. He says that he contributes daily through posts and comments:

"I am at work, full time [..] you still have time to look at the phone. [..] In the last six months I haven't had much time for it, but I have tried. What I post myself is because I see that others haven't posted, Id rather that other post and stuff like that, So I need to post some things."

In summary, the informants operate as monitors of the public spaces they have created. Throughout this part of the interview, issues related to relevance, interest and knowledge are raised several times.

4.2 Social networking sites and opportunities

Facebook opens new opportunities for individuals to actively participate in public opinion formation. When it comes to the opportunities these sits represent, it is agreed that Facebook serves as a positive tool for engagement, sharing of views and networking (Enjorlas et.al. 2013, Boyed & Ellison 2007, Rogstad 2016). This section highlights the informants' own perspectives on these opportunities.

Among the informants, there was a positive view of the use of Facebook. Much of the informants' impetus is to communicate their commitment to the topic to others. Facebook is highlighted as a tool to achieve this. In the groups, physical boundaries or social differences do not matter. The groups work unifying. Christin says that she experienced this in a positive way:

> *"One can use Facebook to engage people in groups in a positive way. [..] I guess that's what really characterizes Facebook groups, it is that you have a commitment to something that interests you and something you think is important."*

The informants find that Facebook makes it easy to find like-minded people who have an interest in the same topics. It helps make the cause visible. It serves as a tool for mobilizing around the cause through simple sharing of content. Other perspectives emerged as well. Berit says:

> *"Facebook was very good for mobilizing and very easy for us to find like-minded people and very easy to, in a way, get the engagement going and take position… certainly as a communication platform [..] Very active as a tool because it was so easy to manage really. [..] but it is not particularly fun if there is no content that actually makes sense."*

Olav is even clearer about his views on the opportunities for mobilization that Facebook offers:

> *"There is no other possibility, physically it is not possible to collet 600 000 in one place [..] Using the internet is absolutely necessary today [..] that which applies to everything and everyone [..] It's the internet and it's the volume, it gives the*

opportunity inn all context, whether its trade or politics or communication, it gives volume, then it gives you the connection of everyone online, completely different possibilities of course."

These views on Facebook can be seen in the context of the opportunities that this platform offers. Facebook algorithms play an important role here. For example, likes, comments and sharing will make the content viable and draw more people to the groups.
Christin already had positive experiences with Facebook groups and knew the effect of this. Her experience was that the technology behind Facebook helps make it an effective tool that makes sharing content easy, and it gives the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the topic at hand:

> *"I use the group to tell [..] and I share pictures from what is happening and stuff. That is a very good example, I think, of achieving something positive to engage people and I talk with the people in the group, and it is a nice dialogue [..] people ask questions".*

This perspective reinforces the impression that Facebook's skills have contributed to a change in digital communication that has made it an attractive platform for political debate.
In addition to serving as a communication and dissemination tool, Facebook's network-building features make it even more appealing to administrators. Berit says that the technical solutions contributed to easier moderation if something unpleasant was going on in the group:

> *"So, it was in a way a tool as it worked just fine for a while and then it grew quite quickly. [..] If there is someone who has seen something they want to report, if someone who has commented on something or a post that is completely far-fetched, then a message will notify me. [..] Then I can in a way have the administrator role and be quick to remove what is a direct, yes, violation of any common decency."*

This built-in mechanism is a simple notification feature that provides quick response. The informants say that this can help prevent the publication of undesirable attitudes. This means that other people outside the admin team can also contribute to a healthy discussion climate through interaction.

The informants' own perspectives on the benefits offered by Facebook can be summed up in two clear possibilities: It is a platform for disseminating information and a tool for networking. These two main findings will be discussed in the following.

4.3   Source of information

The most obvious possibility that was highlighted in the informants' perspective was the groups' function as a source of information. This is also consistent with previous findings (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015, Kalsnes and Larsson 2015). One of the informants points out that they did not always agree with the coverage of the topic in the traditional news channels. Christin describes this as follows:

> "It has become better that it was then, it was very one sided, [..], now you see that it is not necessarily the case, it is the reverse side of the cause and I think it has become more balanced, there is not quite as many editors in serious Norwegian go out and applaud unreservedly for [..], but I see that [..] has a lot of founds."

Other informants supported this and agreed that specific information on complex topics could be difficult to understand or, in some cases, to access. Social media provides opportunities for individuals to produce their own content without any direct expenses. The Facebook groups not only contribute to a better flow of information, but also bring in other perspectives and immediate feedback on the topics. In contrast to coverage in other media, the information came from people with relevant expertise, as Berit describes:

> "It's great that you can read and spread information and it's great when I come to these specific actions [..] Then it is usually people who have information and knowledge from the inside who post here and say something about it."

This finding indicates that opinion formers are present in these networks, and there is a continuous flow of information on the topics. The extent to which what is published is informative varies. Some of the informants emphasized that this is not always the case. Nevertheless, it is not always the specific content of the information that is of greatest importance, as Christin highlights:

> "I think it is important to familiarize yourself with in all aspects. [..] So we also try

to do that and inform in such way that people can form an opinion and not just take

it [..] and then think and see different sides of the matter."

This statement underpins that such groups function as a mechanism for public opinion formation.

4.4   A platform for networking

The informants all put forth the possibilities in these group regarding the mobilization perspective. All informants agree that Facebook facilitate creating large network. As a social network site this lays in the function of the platform. An establish network, such as a group with a preferred perspective on social matters, can be attractive for other actors on the outside the network. This can be people of power as well. It is not always to get the advice of an opinion leader. Olav shares experiences with this thematic:

"[..] and it is for this reason, to the greatest extent, there are very many politicians

and there are groups at Stortinget here then [..] quite a few politicians both at

Stortinget and party politicians and private who made contact, but I didn't perceive

it as to get get advice, I experienced it more as to get access [..] I have no interest

in participating in any party [..]"

This result shows that the groups can be views as political resources. With politicians wanting access to the group not only as normal participants but through the administrators, can be seen as politicians wanting to get a "power" position in the group, taking advantage of the resources in the group mainly by its numbers or to actually "take over" the network. This can possibly force the informants to take a stand in a party affiliation.

4.5   Challenges

In addition to the possibilities do social media represents challenges. All the informants tell that the groups face challenges in terms of organization, related to information sharing, attitudes and resources. These challenges can lead to the informant getting involved in conflicts and had has an impact on their execution of the role. The following section will present the different challenges connected to social media

4.5.1 Administrating the groups

All the groups have several thousand members. This reflects the engagement each of these groups inhabits. Several of the informants are clear on engagement being a goal for the groups. The large engagement leads to a substantial workload for administrators and moderators. A consequence over time became that the informants experienced the administrate work to be to munch to handle by them self. This was especially visible in periods when the group was particularly popular, or members wanted excessive access to make new postings in the network. Olav describes the workload and to times daily activity he must go through in this way:

> *"[..]hundreds of posts can come in during a day, sometimes five hundred can come in in a day[..]"*

This workload does not represent all new post in on the group feed (the wall or discussion page), but it reflects on the workload of a single person in addition to the other activity that the informants do. Christin chose to seek out help to manage the group:

> *"[..] When I started the group, I [..]had to accept posts and write and things like that, but after a while it became so large that it became an administrator team. [..] Today there is another participant group which is also part of the admin team, they play an important tole there in relation to everything that happens [..] so many good people are there, I invited them. [..] It became a large amount of work to let in cases and in a way manage such a group, so it was not something I could manage alone."*

The informants find that getting help free time to do other activities. However, a shared workload is not without problems. The informants experience that including others bring new responsibility for administrating those who are the new administrators. There is a variation in challenges and obstacles causing a high workload, such as hight group activity and a flow of new members. Administrating the group and respond to new members takes a lot of time. One of the informants, Berit, had experiences with administrators pulling out of the team when the cause, in their eyes, did not serve an urgent purpose or other part of life became more of an importance:

> *"They [..] continue their lives writing books and running restaurants. [..] we were the ones who kind of took over then and it was then that we kind of took over that Facebook group."*

What's not visible here in this quotation, is that these were people of position. People who had contributed with a face to the cause, but later when life kicked in, had to withdraw from responsibilities because of time and other obligations. The time aspect is interesting here. Social media is related to be time-efficient and an easy tool. This shows not to be the case when the group, or network, grows to a certain size.

4.5.2 Information overload

Social media, the Facebook groups, made it easy to share information fast and in a large volume. The informants share that this has led to a stream of content, or posts, in the groups. One of the informants brought up the constant uploading of information led to important information was "lost" in the group for the members and hard to find again when it was needed. As a consequence, there arose problems with unclear information because of the unpractical format of the groups. Berit tried to create a page as a supporting mechanism for the group:

> *"Yes, a started that page maybe, maybe a few months into it then [..] so the page would in a way be one, I hoped that you could move... people over to the page so you could communicate common messages. [..] Creatin a page was not enough then, so it was, in a way, it was not possible to move the 70, 000 over onto a page then".*

This shows that the format of a group may not be most practical for important messages because important messages can get lost, but it points to the format of a group is preferable for the members.

4.5.3 Attitudes

A large part of the interaction on social media, in particular on Facebook, happens through likes and comments. All the informants point out that fragmentation and language is a difficult aspect to handle. An informant shares several perspectives on an unhealthy culture in

the debate climate makes it hard to administrate the group. Berit highlights attitudes as a challenge:

> *"You were, in a way, you were kind of in there to moderate a lot and there was a lot of debate, so people were in... and spent a lot of effort on it, I think there were a lot of people who went on a rampage because of it... [..] moderating the social debate in here... and what it was, it was simply too much job then. [..] In a way, I've been administrator in an incredible amount of stuff... and I know that group has been a pain in the ass for insanely many of the people. [..] There is so much arguing".*

Content on social media is challenging because often presents just a fraction or an impression of a cause. High engagement can also stand in the way for a factual debate. One of the informants point out that the attitudes in the group reflect the attitudes in the population as well. Olav tells:

> *"People are different and not everyone has parliamentary language"*

This could be the case, but social media also contributes to reinforce attitudes. Berit points to attitude can have a bad effect on Facebook as a tool if the debate largely has a negative outlook:

> *"If it not positive, then in a sense it is no longer a tool."*

4.5.4 Resources

As groups created from the informant's own initiative as private persons there was no economic force behind them. There was an agreement among informants about not having economical motivation for engaging. Their engagement purely the cause. Still was it made points about the force commercial actors, here illustrated by Christin:

> *"They have an extremely large amount of money and of course they use it to advance their cause [..] we don't have quite as much money for marketing, so it's still quite unbalanced."*

The results in the data material tells that that these groups are up against professionalized industries, partly compete against actors that have a set of other resources. This is reflected in

two ways. The first being industries working on building reputation through marketing. The other was the news coverage of the topics, this was particularly highlighted as a challenge for several of the informants.

Social media have presented more possibilities than challenges for the opinion leaders in the groups. Most obvious is the possibility to share, unite and mobilize, in a much higher speed than traditional media offered. The group, the network, also offers individuals access to sources, persons, or texts, that may be hard to reach in the real world. Everyone can access these groups which gives the possibility to participate in the public debate online. The next chapter in this analysis addresses this.

4.6   Opinion leaders and their view on influence

Influence is a central aspect of social media and for opinion leadership. Through the influence an aspect appeared in form of the informant's own responsibility to contribute to influence as a democratic function. The other aspect of influence is found in the moderators participating in the public opinion formation.

4.7   Responsibility

Social media has led to a shift in power. This shift in power is affected by a rage of causes. One of them is the development in information sources from traditional media to new digital platforms. The digital development has made actors and politics also move to other and new arenas. Politics, news and the social debate is moved from the frames of traditional news outlets to digital platforms with ordinary people in the role as editors, or mediators. It is an agreement among the informants that it follows great responsibility be being in a position. Olav explains that the responsibility is connected to the seriousness of the group:

> *"I have to be aware of the responsibility [..] it is very easy to abuse it and if you do, it won't be long before it is revealed and then everything is ruined, so to speak."*

The informants agree that a presence of responsibility contributed to healthy debate environments in the groups. If there was an absence of responsibility, it affected the functioning of the groups. Berit describes:

> *"It's not only positive that people have a place to argue. [..] At least not when they don't have an admin who is active and says things… who meets you and creates a fruitful discussion and sets boundaries and such."*

The statements support the findings that the groups have several functions. A prominent find is that Facebook groups have gone from being useful tools for most people to serve as a social space. The findings indicate that groups can be seen as *third spaces* and operate as meaningful spaces for various political topics, and that they have an indirect impact on society at large. Olav illustrates which responsibility the shift from *tools* to *space* has entailed:

> *"It is to ensure that everyone will be allowed to participate [..] Then a duty to actually also suspend, throw out, those who cannot behave [..] they then damage the group and its purpose".*

These findings are similar to those seen as significant in democratic societies. The responsibility can be seen in a democratic perspective and the informants have a role linked to ensure freedom of speech it the voicing of important themes. The groups ensure free debate, with the responsibility this entails for the individual moderator. The findings indicates that one way to secure responsibility may be in the form of suspension. This is not without problems. In these rooms, too, there is a conflict between freedom of expression and censorship. The ability to exclude people from the network is not only linked to the informants' sense of responsibility, but also to a built-in function in the platform itself. This accompanies the role of administrator and moderator, and it is up to each moderator to decide what they see as relevant or not relevant in the discussions.

There were also findings that indicated that responsibility for providing the right information to the group as central to such spaces. Opinion leaders operates as experts on their field. This was also visible in the communication the informant had with group members. This could be in the form of specific advice or opinion leadership. Olav have in cases given specific advice on the topics he believe to be important:

> *"The I wrote that everyone had to choose [..] no one thought it was a good idea and I have posted it several times afterwards [..] that was exactly what happened then, of course"*

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If one considers administrators/moderators of network forums as opinion leaders, this finding may indicate that there are deliberate attempts to influence public opinion by opinion leaders. The findings that specific tips or posts could be posted several times, to put the informant himself in a position as opinion leader surprised. At the same time, such an approach can be useful for gaining influence, as it supports the impression that the moderator is someone to look to for information and advice on the topic they are managing.

According to the informants, there is a particular responsibility associated with the role on social media. Social media ensures that everyone can participate in the public debate. Different views to an issue can be put forth more freely in the debate than in traditional news channels. The findings around responsibility suggest that this is not entirely problem-free. The debate is not entirely without limits, as one might get the impression in some comment sections on social media. The findings point out that censorship takes place, also in confined spaces. The censorship largely is the responsibility of the individual moderator, who follows, and often has to rely on, their own assessment. Another factor that comes to play is the responsibility to inform and inform correctly. This is central for they who "succeed" as influencers. In a diction room, it can be difficult to be heard. Opinion leaders therefore use instruments to be heard, and through this emphasize their own expertise in the field.

4.8   Gatekeepers – or moderators?

There are strong indications that opinion leaders act as sources of information for the public. They pass on knowledge through the dissemination of information on a current topic. The interest in sharing information is what has built up the Facebook groups, which have been given an extensive function as they function both as a source of information and an arena for discussion, engagement, or exchange of views.

4.8.1 Openness

One of the informants emphasizes that the group cannot only be viewed as a closed space and that the members are only an indicator of interest in the topic in question. Discussions and posts can be seen by others outside the group, so they can serve as a resource for others who aren't members. Nevertheless, if one has a desire for active participation, one must be allowed into the group by the administrator. Accessibility is central here. Olav says that his group reaches further with information than just within the network:

> *"It's not like there are only 600 000, it's a group that everyone can read, the only difference is that you can't post or comment if you are not a member"*

Social media activity is of importance here. The informants not only used Facebook to reach out with important news but were also interested in the work of actively including others in the process. Participation in the groups did not come without reservation. As the groups grew, the informants talked about the limits and rules for participating. This emerged slightly differently in the different groups.

4.8.2 Post moderation

The findings show that there are restrictions and rules for participating in the debate. Unlike establishing traditional news outlets where participation often goes through an editorial board, the decision is made in the groups of the individual moderator. As was pointed out at the beginning of the analysis, relevance has a particular significance for what activity the various informants pass through. Here, the informants agreed. For some, what was to be posted by others had to be related to the topic while others pointed out that they wanted a specific focus on a simple matter within the field. Posts that were within the field could still end up not being posted due to proven moderation. The desire for inclusive spaces led to records of different quality. Christin says:

> *"Yes, there is quite many posts we do not let through, so it is a lot of unserious that comes inn and it is important to have a serious tone in the group as far as possible. [..]. So, to have a positive reputation and a serious profile".*

This perspective is supported and supported by Berit. She points out that the frivolous tone can not only be reflected in what kind of information in the post's content, but also wording can disqualify group members from being allowed to:

> *"Deletes or hides or something like that if its somehow too special, if its somehow on the edge or racist or irrelevant. [..]"*

Language use is a recurring issue for the informants. Language often comes across as a source of problems, misunderstandings, and unwanted behavior. There were variations in the consequences of unwanted language and attitudes. In some groups, members were excluded. Others had a more in mindful approach. Olav says that the problem has different aspects:

> *"After all, it is a social problem [..] I understand well that people don't want to get involved [..] its mostly people who have never done anything wrong or written anything wrong who do it the first time because they get angry"*

Harsh language and controversial attitudes are one of the downsides of social media. It emerged that informants, in cases where they considered that the content had not been posted to harm, could issue warnings to members. It was temporarily not clear whether this was a fixed practice. There are many indications that this also involves discretion.

Another reason why posts did not qualify to be posted was because the same news story could be attempted to be published multiple times. Olav says:

> *"Very few get through for various reasons [..] then you shouldn't have the same thing repeatedly[..]if there is a post about the same newspaper article several time, it should not be spammed."*

Sometimes an informant edits and rewrite posts from other participants in the network. This makes it hard for an outsider to determinate who is the sender of a particular message. Both Olav and Christin do this on a regular basis. The informants justified this on the grounds that the posts were in poor writing. Christin exemplifies this:

> *"it does happen that people share things that we want published that are not written in a good way, it's not Facebook-professional, so it is a bad introductory text, have shared a link also without any intro text and then I often take if it's a good article, I share personally and create a good intro text for it and in a way contribute to it being read by more people and shared by more people"*

Because the posts must be approved before they are published in the groups, the group members do not have any prerequisites to see whether the post *they* see as valuable has already been attempted to be published or not. Several perspectives on a case go through a kind of evaluation process before publication. One aspect of this is that moderators are in a position where they can choose how they want a news story promoted to the other members. In this way, indirect influence can take place.

4.8.3 Exclusion of participants

The study shows that not only posts, but also members can be shut out completely. One of the functions of Facebook is called blocking. By blocking someone, the person being blocked can't see activity or actions related to the group. If one of the moderators blocks a member, the entire network becomes invisible to the person. One of the advantages of social media is that there are no requirements for participation. Olav says that blockage occurs primarily in extreme cases:

> *"Appears as so disturbed people then without the ability to see others than themselves, they are then excluded from the group, they have nothing to do in the group, maybe not on social media at all."*

The informants tell that some people apply to the groups to provoke and not for information or a constructive debate. In those cases, it was necessary to remove people from the debate, or mitigate them. This can also be done by excluding them from the comment fields. Christin says that in their case, this was a group decision that was made through the rules the administrators in the group had put together.:

> *"If it's a very serious violation, we remove it and can then supress people [..] who are only there to provoke and complain like that, so we have the group rules on that and have to enforce them then."*

In other cases, too, attempts are made to silence people or debates. Olav says that there may be cases of topics being muted. For example, he mutes when he doesn't have as much time available:

> *"Then I toned it down, I think that until the summer there I didn't let through very much, because the I didn't want to have any great pressure in the group."*

The group rules are highlighted as a useful tool for the moderators. They are useful in creating the expectations within the groups. Rules and restrictions for participating for members contribute to less conflict. Two of the groups have rules as a result of angry members. It also emerged that some of the groups follow principles from the "Be careful poster", which is the press's guidelines for journalistic norms. The guidelines and guidelines from the poster are crucial for group activity. Christin says:

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"We nailed that together ourselves ad, of course Vær Varsom, and source criticism, and what and how, you need help in a way to prioritize what you should actually focus on ad things like that, so its specific on what it does and doesn't do and stuff. So, we learned a little along the way what works and doesn't work and in a way builds the groups reputation and what doesn't and so on and so it's very important to have that arranged."

Nevertheless, the findings indicates that total exclusion enacted as an overall perspective is not always the case. Personal conflicts with group members and disagreements in viewpoints have been the reason for exclusion, but not always, as illustrated by Olav:

"The group appears impartial then [..] There have been various accusations and it is almost daily then [..] and then some are banned from the group [..] have been banned are dissatisfied [..] if [..] is like the first time [..] warning [..] you will always find someone who disagrees with you in their views."

These statements show that exclusion is a complicated topic. The results indicates that in some cases it is difficult to distinguish between viewpoints, case, or person. In cases where there are obvious disqualifying factors, it is easier for the informants to make an immediate decision. However, it seems challenging when people strongly disagree with the informants.

4.8.4 Other actors as senders

Common in the results from the informants is the belief that the sender of a post can have an impact on others whether it gets through to others or not. It is not insignificant whether the sender is an organization or person that the informants already know or are familiar with. The groups also act as arenas that can mobilize action by obtaining financial support for issues. The informants agreed on that point that for such posts to slip through, and to be considered at all, they needed to know of the sender. The actor perspective impact is well exemplified through Berit's statements about other's involvement:

"Some people like to share things [..] which is a bit on the side then or something that is commercial or a fundraiser [..] purpose we do not know and cannot necessarily trust, then we do not let or give feedback that it cannot be published [..] It is much more about the criteria that its relevant to and the topic then, but I'm

careful not to let Spleis-collecting like that go and all kinds of Vipps stuff.. We don't
let that go into the group because it becomes a bit like inflation like and we don't
know the quality, then if it is in a way obvious that it is in connection with yes if it is
the TV-aksjonen or if it is Redd Barna [..] I've probably let that through."

When assessing whether a source has sufficient purpose and weight to post information in the group web, great emphasis is placed on the perception of seriousness, devotion, and previous history. The informant decides in person who meets a norm and who does not. Christin confirms this:

"[..] both actors and non-serious websites from which we do not allow post news
from. There are constant invitations to events around Norway, for example it can be
gatherings, it can be local events, [..] or protests for example, we had a
demonstration for us at Stortinget so then we let it through when it comes from
serious sources, and so on, source criticism is important here."

The fact that moderators gain knowledge of the senders may indicate that source criticism is an important aspect of moderation of information in the networks. But this may lead to a situation where less known organizations or people with no obvious commitment to the group cause, is shut out of publishing. It may therefore be questioned whether some actors may be favored and have a better opportunity than others to post because there is a relationship between moderator and participant. However, the intentions of the participants are also emphasized. Olav tells about this:

"There is always someone who is either going to try to market a party or party
advertising and things like that, and party affiliation or maybe commercial reasons
[..] about the different motivations and that is terribly difficult to, and then it gets
because it also has various disturbances, which means that it may not be the right
person to be careful."

4.8.5 Who is in charge?

In this study, there were differences in how administrative teams operated. Some were organized as a team making joint decisions with a lot of communication between the group members. Christin explains how they distribute in between team members:

"We have created guidelines and a poster for ourselves, and we have a chat that we have an administrator chat on Messenger where we talk together if there is something we are wondering, if there are some the news moderators who are a bit unsure so, then you can ask the others and things like that. [..] We have a nice distribution of the working day within the group, distributed on different days and so on, there is always someone who on is following the activity."

With a larger admin team, more heads are involved in making decisions. This may serve as a support function for moderators, but it can also affect the outcome of which posts are accepted as different people decide this from day to day. A partially similar view emerges from Olav. He also receives assistance to moderate activity, but for practical reasons. He has others to help him if he can't keep an eye on his phone, but he makes it clear that:

"Only I am in charge [..] So everything has to be approved by me."

These examples highlight interesting perspectives. Based on the information, these statements can be linked to two challenges for participants in the groups in particular. The first is that different reviews may be made of posts depending on the person in charge on the day in question. The second is related to the fact that it is the moderator who decides what to post, and not the individual participant. It can then be difficult for group members to know where the responsibility lies and who the real sender is.

Moderation does not only take place towards members of the group. It also happens to other administrators. The interviews showed that this happened to varying degrees. Berit tells of cases where other administrators were not as critical of what they shared. This presented challenges related to whether everyone in the team can agree with the content. Berit says:

"And then there is another person who is the administrator and manages and she, it looks like, she lets everything in and then I have deleted it again [..] It must be relevant."

In other groups, commenting and posting only took place after active acceptance by the informant. This was linked to considerations of the submitters' judgement. Olav justifies his choice to ignore what the others post like this:

> *"It is incredibly difficult to find someone who has no motivation for their own interest [..] such large groups require some knowledge [..] must have knowledge on most things in society in order to understand it otherwise in order to be able to say something sensible."*

To recruit moderators or administrators takes place on the basis of assessment of expertise or competence. The administrators must as a group trust the person at hand and have confidence in the judgment that he or she makes for the group and their members. Christin says that if any of the aforementioned qualities are missing for admins, they would have developed a control mechanism to sort out other admins:

> *"We sort of have a trial period for it, so if an administrator somehow doesn't perform like that, and doesn't fully understand his role, then I can say that now we've been observing you for a while and I don't think this works quite well, so unfortunately then I can't have you with me anymore."*

The findings show that there are several factors that affect participation and discussions in social media, and therefore the opportunities to express oneself in public. There is widely agreed that social media enables debate and gives people the opportunity to exercise the power of definition themes, participation, and agenda setting. Nevertheless, social media presents challenges related to expressing oneself. Although social media makes it possible for individuals to bypass traditional news channels, gatekeepers who have control over who are allowed to enter are not necessarily removed. There are many indications that has instead been a shift in who has the power of definition.

4.9   Influence beyond Facebook?

All the informants appeared to be individuals who exert influence also outside the groups and in the digital network where they operate. They had different relationships with the use of other social media, but all of them were familiar with and had used other channels to inspire and influence.

When it came to influence beyond social media, there are findings that indicate that these informants also have a central role in their physical networks. Olav is clear that his

involvement is about the cause and not about the political conviction of others. This is also evident in arenas outside of Facebook:

> *"I have never had any general political involvement, but I have had special causes, and there has there been involvement in [..] I am not a front figure or anything and stepped in a couple of times in connection with, among other things, Debatten with Solvang because the person who was supposed to speak withdrew."*

Christin shares that she spends time talking about the current topic on the group. She highlights several arenas where she has a central position, and that the topic is a natural part of also in this setting:

> *"It happens that I talk to people about these things, of course"*

Other social media as well is as a topic. There are differences between how the informants use Facebook and other media. For example, Christin was very active on Facebook and a fan of the features Facebook has as an engaging tool:

> *"I had three Facebook groups form old days and I have several groups on Facebook. [..] can't be as active everywhere it as to be said [..] Well, I am an engaged soul and you have to think about how many things you can be engaged in at once [..] In relation to Facebook, and Facebook groups, and so on, do I believe that you should follow your heart and prioritize what you are really passionate about you can spend your time and energy on"*

Christin has a blog and Berit has also had several roles on other social media. Both have used social media as a work tool in a private context. Berit has experience with mobilization both through social media, but also from traditional organizational structures. She expresses that the downsides of social media have had an impact on her views on social media in general:

> *"I have a lot of tasks or have had a lot of tasks in social media in different ways [..] In a way, I'm most passionate about organizing in slightly more traditional ways and like use administration tools."*

Considering the information that emerged, it seems that social media offers both opportunities and challenges. Olav also has had different engagements before Facebook, in a completely

different area. The purpose was the same, a forum where people could discuss. Before Facebook, he experienced gaining support in major cases. Direct politics was not the central issue, but the topic of the group itself. Now he has established his own website in addition to activity in the group on Facebook:

> *"I have established a newspaper then last year at the groups newspaper [..] When posts are a bit too long, I post there [..] It's just a support function for the previous group, so to speak."*

The findings around influence give an indication that these individuals also have or have had roles as opinion leaders in offline networks. The desire to have a platform is central here. As experts on their field, the informants agree that social media, even beyond Facebook, is helpful in sharing engagement regarding issues they have a particular interest in. The use of Facebook as a platform has been particularly convenient for the informants because of the features.

4.10 Opinion leaders in digital flow of communication

4.10.1 The informant's own perspective on the purpose of the groups

The study shows that groups on Facebook have function as meaningful spaces in the digital sphere. The informant's motivation to create and keep groups going has not necessarily changed, the purpose of the groups has remained the same over time. The groups have had a unifying function. But the perspective on the way forward has changed from the beginning to the present. The groups have grown significantly in size. This entails great opportunities for influence and power of definition on a topic that many are engaged in. The groups function as a meaningful forum, in the form of bringing together so many people that through engagement and influence they can be used as an overt means of influence in political matters. Olav says:

> *"[..] satisfied with the government we have now, and it is much easier to pressure them than to pressure Erna's, but it is not the same as what should be pressured. [..] this is certainly a pressure group for politics in relation to [..] policy but not for any other politics."*

The survey shows that the informants operate as moderators of the public debate. Some of the informants perceive their contribution as important and draw lines to the fact that the role and that the groups can be seen in light of the new roles that media development has created. Olav points out why he thinks his group has succeeded:

> "This is a group that is for everyone [..] The group is managed in a decent way, I think. [..] there is probably a significant degree of media technical conditions that are the reason why the group has become so large".

The maintenance of a social profile is highlighted as a determining factor for the groups. They should be for everyone. The informants find a greater range in their own media than what they experience encountering in traditional media. Olav says:

> "more and more editorials are hiring editors with responsibility for social media, this debate and social media, and there is not a very big difference between that and what I have here which is non-profit [..] Traditional newspapers have problems crating engagement and readers in social media. [..] Humans are social beings. [..] then is the community that can explain [..] great success [..] participation in the social presumably that can explain this."

In the groups, you have a completely different proximity to target groups precisely because social media is very social. At the same time, Berit expresses that the group also has its own life. She claims that if the group loses direction and does not have a function, the community becomes insignificant. For instance, when the information from the initiators do not stand out as important to the group content. This has added a level of stress for some of the informants, and can make it difficult to continue the work of keeping the social network running:

> "So the point was that it is not a meaning-bearing kind of group.[..] We would essentially like to shut down the group [..] We want to remove that group because now it becomes in a way unnecessary to have a large group because people have found a way to organize themselves with small Facebook groups and small so to speak local teams then [..] The whole purpose was, in a way, our organization an it was, in a way, the humanitarian work.. Still there are relevant things that are posted but is even more so political [..] There is a nostalgic relationship people have with that group because many also says that it is, in a way, an important

commitment".

Berit says she is not initiating a shutdown of the group partly due to nostalgia and the founders' feelings.

5.   Discussion

The findings of this survey provide insight into several aspects related to the opinion leaders and their importance in the modern digital communication system. The theme of this thesis is about influence linked to opportunities, and opinion leaders' opportunities through digital media, here in this study represented by the online community Facebook.

The results of the survey show that there are many topics that can be discussed further. There is no room for that in this task. I have selected some issues that I find particularly interesting to look at in relation to the theory of political communication:

- What kind opportunities are there for influence to occur in social networking sites?
- Social networking sites have created new gatekeepers in terms of what are current opinions and what is not, and how do they see themselves in this respect.
- Can these two points above say something about whether social networking sites have contributed to an expanded public sphere.

The subsequent discussion is based on the findings of the analysis and the theoretical framework presented earlier in the thesis.

5.1   A summary of the results

The findings of the survey are both comprehensive and enlightening and can provide useful information about the role of opinion leaders. Not all the information provided by the informants was included in this analysis. Nevertheless, the findings reflect well how opinion leaders in digital networks affect others. The findings are to some extent discussed briefly under each topic. I will now partially summarize the findings from the three parts of the analysis, before discussing the findings in an attempt to answer the question *What is the role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system*?

The first part of the analysis was related to the Opinion leaders' role on social network sites. Here it becomes clear that they act as moderators of the discussion but have an advisory role to other administrators. It emerged that Facebook has a number of built-in features that informants benefit from when moderating. The Facebook groups function as a source of information, but also as a specialized group where networks and resources have been gathered

for the cause in question and made this available to people and other social actors. There are also a number of challenges linked to the platform. These are related to the organization of the groups, related to information sharing, issues related to attitudes and resources and competition. The informants believe that keeping the group relevant is an important prerequisite for influence.

The second part dealt with opinion leader and their view on influence. The responsibility is twofold, where one part is about facilitating discussion and the other is about sharing the right information. By shifting the public debate to new surfaces, opinion leaders have been given a role as influencers, informants, moderators, and gatekeepers of their own social community.

Last in the analysis opinion leaders in the digital flow of communication were elucidated through the informants' own perspective by seeing the function of such groups. It is consistent that the informants are concerned that social media should be social and open to everyone. Nevertheless, the findings also point out that the groups lose their function if the group is no longer relevant. The informants point out that understanding roles is central here both in terms of function and in terms of the opportunity to influence.

5.2 Social network sites, the possibilities for influence

Literature presented in Chapter 2 points out that in traditional society influence was reserved for the elite in society. These consisted of citizens from higher strata, priests, others in socially important functions and the like. The ordinary citizen had little influence on the life around him and did not take part in the public debate. The ordinary citizen was poorly educated, and discussions took place in a closed room with no access for all. Through a general development in society in the 1800s, through increased provision of education of citizens, and access to newspapers and pamphlets, citizens gained greater insight into the discussions of the elite. They were still not included in the discussions, other in that topics could be about them.

Gradually, modern newspaper presses, radio, television, and film appeared. Despite this, the ordinary citizen was still often a passive recipient of information and had little influence on the public sphere and opinion formation. This was despite the forthcoming of newspaper posts, so-called opinion pieces, available in the newspapers where citizens could express

themselves. However, these had a matter-of-fact tone, and were closed to others than those with knowledge of a field or with a heavy position in society. At the same time, one could not count on a one-sided influence from the elite and the media, as first assumed, which has been shown in the theory of two-step flow in communication, as described in section 2.2.

With the introduction of the digital web, there was a change in people's engagement and impact on meaning. While the first digital network developed had a more traditional expression, with the introduction of internet it became clear that people sought information on their own. Websites were created and society had a gradual shift away from traditional media to digital. And with this, media use also changed, and the media changed. With the introduction of the current technology, the possibility of participation has changed radically. With the emergence of social networking sites like Facebook, the interaction and mutual influence of others is almost complete. Messages are shared all over the web, pages are created with offers of news, goods, services, and interaction – both public and private, and there are opportunities for direct communication one on one. Rogstad 2016 writes: "Through several social networking sites, individuals are given the opportunity to express their opinion in the public sphere and influence the agenda".

This study also shows that there are opportunities for influence through the role of moderators and administrators on Facebook. Access to groups that deal with specific topics and topics is controlled by individuals, who decide whether to allow or deny access, and whether to participate or leave the group. In addition, the informants say that they siphon information that comes to them through requests for posts on the wall. Both Olav and Berit say that they take away posts that they do not perceive as relevant to their groups. People who do not follow the moderators' standards for how to express themselves may risk not being given the opportunity to assert themselves in the group. In this way, the network sites can both influence and not affect citizens – for now in the closed groups.

In the ongoing expansion of opportunity for group formation and contact with like-minded, social networking sites have proven to be a new political force (Margetts etc. 2016, 4). The new functions are not always clear or indistinguishable from each other. With political communication as a field in constant change, along with the possibilities that each platform

provides, features, functions and influence solutions may look different in the future. Some functions such as agenda setting, and opinion formation have already been included.

Social media offer mass communication and interpersonal communication on the same platform or in the format. This makes digital platforms ideal for political communication because it combines the personal aspect of a platform with the dissemination of news, so called third spaces where influence is extra beneficial (Kalsnes 2016). The combination of complex media technology makes social media contain features such as new media logic that help create entirely new spaces for political communication. For example, perspectives from traditional perspectives, ideal perspectives, can be the guiding principle, such as acting as representatives of the public and gaining the public's trust, while at the same time working towards what is of interest.

This confirms the findings of the study. Combined with new media technology that enables functions such as quick and easy distribution of information, we now see a completely different logic behind social media influence. In the study, other others emerge that give opinion leaders opportunities to influence others, but also to convince of their views. Social networking sites enable efficient sharing of information. The pages draw clear parallels to the phenomenon of "*richer get richer effect*" which is a result from the digital network structure and algorithms in search monitors (Enjolras et.al. 2013, 26-27).

5.3   New gatekeepers?

The phenomenon of gatekeepers is addressed in Chapter 2.3.4, which refers to the fact that the term gatekeepers is mainly known through the traditional media, newspapers. At the same time, Rogstad (2016) points out that this is changing through structures linked to social networking sites. "Mass media in general have "*gatekeepers*", which implies that not all messages that start the mass media process are the ones that are ultimately presented to the public. Social networking sites challenge the power of gatekeepers to define *who* and *what* is to reach the public sphere, by enabling anyone to enter, start discussions, or mobilize others in the public digital sphere.

The findings of the study point out that social networking sites, Facebook, are crucial for people who want to participate in an open social debate. Previous research suggests the same.

With new media technology that offers opportunities to publish directly even as private individuals, traditional news media are no longer needed to reach the public (Haugseth 2013).

As shown in the previous analysis chapter, the informants show that they are familiar with their role as gatekeepers within their own group. This does not affect them significantly. They point out that there are very many groups on Facebook, and that the demand for their group is great. This is also shown by the literature, which points out that Facebook is Norway's largest social networking site. The informants say that they have the opportunity to screen both members and content. They are aware of what this role entails in terms of access and active participation, but do not express that they problematize this very much.

At the same time, the informants mention freedom of expression, which they dismiss as taking place elsewhere if they feel that speech does not fit into their group. With this, they stop reflection and expression and participation in society, and through this possibly create a more oversimplified society. In this sense, one might ask whether they have a similar function to those of traditional gatekeepers, or whether the offer of groups on Facebook and other websites means that their "gate" counts little in the grand scheme of things. That everyone in principle has the opportunity to express themselves, in newspapers, on online forums, on messaging services, and on Facebook. Just not in the closed web groups they don't have access to. The question is, is there a fragmented gatekeeper role we get an insight into when we look at the role of moderator or administrator? This would have been an interesting topic to dig deeper into.

5.4 An extended public sphere?

As pointed out in theory, social media works function as suppliers to the public communication (Rogstad 2016). The informants state that they considered it important to offer a platform where information from multiple perspectives was clearly stated.

There has been an ongoing debate about the return to a one-step flow of communication system on the basis that individuals isolate themselves more through the use of social media (Bennet and Manheim 2006). From this perspective, information flows are linked to the fact that people find information themselves and attach opinions to information before it gets to them through others, a tendency one sees especially to the United States. Norway has other

qualities, here large parts of the population have access to the internet, for example, which makes it easier to participate in the public debate and receive grants of impulses other than just those who support their own point of view. It is therefore difficult to use research from, for example, the United States, which is much of the basis for the field of political communication.

The case Norway suggests otherwise. Here one sees clear tendencies to a two-flow of communication and a rich information discovery, but where one must question whether one also has an expanded public sphere. Yes, it has become an expanded sphere since more people have gained access to media where they can exchange opinions, but it is at the same time limited by the moderator's entry and others' views on what constitutes valid input into debates. This means that the public sphere may have some kind of false sense of expansion. One thing that seems certain is that murderers act as both gatekeepers and opinion-formers, through their roles as both enablers but also as limiters.

6. Summary / Conclusion

This thesis pointed to how technological development has facilitated new ways of communicating and sharing information. Social media has become a tool for opinion sharing. It was also highlighted how some individuals have a greater role in disseminating this information, so-called opinion leaders. Based on existing theory and my own findings, I have examined *What is the role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system*?

To help answering this research question, I formulated two sub-issues:

> 1: *How and why do opinion leaders work to influence others in their digital networks as well as offline networks?*

> 2: *What opportunities and challenges do opinion leaders face on their social networking sites/pages or in their social network groups, and how do opinion leaders view the effect/purpose of their own network groups or network pages?*

The study is based on in-depth interviews of opinion leaders from some of the largest Facebook groups in Norway. The background for the choice of research question was a professional interest in the topic, but also own observations of the influence of social media. Based on the analysis and the subsequent discussion, I will now try to answer my question:

> ***How and why do opinion leaders work to influence others in their digital networks as well as offline networks?***

The study found clear findings related to opinion leaders using social networking sites as a tool to promote their own causes. The results of this study show that opinion leaders try to persuade the other digital networks by influencing the process of information sharing and around topics in the form of content. This emerged in the groups in the form of moderation content, moderation of other participants, framing of issues and by helping to set the agenda.

What opportunities and challenges do opinion leaders face on their social networking sites/pages or in their social network groups, and how do opinion leaders view the effect/purpose of their own network groups or network pages?

These groups function as meaningful social spaces where people gather around the sharing of opinions and contribute to public opinion formation. These groups also provide choices. Opinion leaders in these smaller public spheres have the opportunity to bypass traditional editorial media to promote their views. This provides, first and foremost, opportunities for anyone to participate. The opportunities created and challenges. The study shows that there is a great responsibility attached to the moderation of these pages.

The main research question in the thesis:

What is the role of opinion leaders in today's digital political communication system?

This study concludes as follows: Opinion's leaders have a key position in larger networks, both as people who pass on information to others, but also as moderators of smaller digital publics. Social media, which in this study is in the form of Facebook, is an important arena for political talk and is a supplement to the traditional media structure.

6.1 Limitation of the study

The development of media technology is constantly evolving. An important question to ask is whether this phenomenon will look the same in the future. Berit, one of the informants, has this to say about Facebook and its future prospects:

> *"More and more people are critical of the use of Facebook and the functions and the commercial and the informational [..] the collection and the influence. [..] many will distance themselves [..] There is also a preponderance of… you can say… adults…you don't reach younger people there anymore[..] it is an escape in many ways and then there are some who are stayers [..] and over a few years now, I think people will migrate a lot more."*

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the results of this study cannot be generalized. The study was conducted on a small sample of informants. In the interviews, the informants only come up with their own perspectives. The informants are seen as credible sources for the related issue, but it is nevertheless difficult to determine how many they actually influence. This is also an issue Watts and Dodds (2007) point to. What emerges is that they *persuade* others.

Other factors that may have influenced are, for example, that all informants had taken part in similar interviews related to research, newspaper articles and other tasks. This may have influenced the responses they gave in the study when they were already familiar with the interview situation.

It may be hard for the informants to remember specific topics or to verify information given. Would have been beneficial to this study to interview the same informants again, to control their answers, and to see if something has changed and to find out the reason for change. For example, their use of social platforms and so on. On that note, this study and thesis meant for illustrating the theory of the two-step- flow of communication and for mapping the role of opinion leadership.

None of the informants were under the age of 35. It is known that age plays a role in social media and habits in terms of time spent and choice of platform. A sample with younger participants would have provided a broader insight into the topic and other findings. The study would have been further strengthened if information had been obtained that could also confirm the tendencies pointed out in this thesis. For example, from co-admins or people who actively use these groups.

6.2 Further research

There are still several topics related to opinion leaders and influence that have not been researched enough. A similar larger study would have been interesting to conduct to reveal whether this is a larger phenomenon. It would also be interesting to see if there is any correlation between the size of groups and the way they are run. And not least, it would be interesting to look at the size of digital networks in relation to participation in the population to see whether there are groups with such a large proportion of the population in similar groups. Furthermore, as pointed out in the section above, it would be particularly interesting to include participants, or members of the networks, as part of a larger study similar to the well-known study by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). Having a double set of informants would shed light on other aspects of the topic. The topic could and has been researched using other methods such as content analysis.

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Appendix 1 - Forespørsel om deltakelse i masterprosjektet:

" What is the role of opinion leaders in today´s digital political communication system?"

<u>Bakgrunn og formål</u>

Undertegnede er student ved masterstudiet Medievitenskap ved Universitetet i Oslo, men fordypning i politisk kommunikasjon ved Institutt for medier og kommunikasjon. Studien ser på enkeltpersoner rolle som opinionsledere på nett. I forbindelse med masteroppgaven ønsker jeg å intervjue administratorer av Facebook-grupper som engasjerer seg i dagsaktuelle samfunnsspørsmål.

Formålet med oppgaven er å kartlegge administratorenes opplevelser og refleksjoner rundt aktivitet i gruppen, motivasjon for å være administrator og hva rollen går ut på. I tillegg tar studien for seg spørsmål om nyhetsvaner og aktivitet på sosiale medier. Jeg kommer ikke til å stille spørsmål som går direkte på medlemskap i et parti eller politisk oppfatning/synspunkt, men dersom du ønsker å dele opplysninger om dette, kan det komme til å bli en del av oppgaven.

I din rolle som administrator tror jeg du kan fortelle om din og andres deltakelse i facebook-grupper og gi informasjon om rollen din som administrator. Jeg tror derfor du kan være en viktig informant for studien min.

<u>Hva innebærer studien?</u>

Det er frivillig å delta. En kan til hver tid trekke seg fra studien uten å oppgi en bestemt grunn.

Studien vil benytte seg av intervju som kartleggingsmetode. Deltakelse i studien innebærer et intervju som gjennomføres slik informanten foretrekker. Informanten får tilbud om fysisk møte, telefonintervju eller et digitalt intervju. Intervjuet tar under 30 minutter, men kan foregå lengere om informanten ønsker. Det vil bli gjort lydopptak under intervju.

<u>Hva skjer med informasjonen fra intervjuet?</u>

Prosjektet forholder seg til forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsfag og humaniora. Dette innebærer blant annet lydopptak og notater fra intervjuet vil bli behandlet konfidensielt. All data fra intervjuet er passord beskyttet, anonymisert og oppbevart på sikkert område på nett. Det vil ikke være mulig for andre å koble den enkelte informant opp til data i oppgaven. Alt av materiale til studien vil bli slettet så snart sensur på oppgaven har falt. Prosjektet er planlagt avslutt 1. desember 2022.

Konfidensialitet

Alt som kommer frem i intervjuet vil bli behandlet profesjonelt, med respekt og ydmykhet. Dette innebærer at:

- Alle data som kommer fra, under intervjuet vil bli anonymisert.
- Alle deltakere vil bli anonymisert, både informanten og arbeidsplassen.
- Alt materiale blir oppbevart sikkert og konfidensielt.
- Alt materiell blir slettet ved avslutning etter sensur.

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:
- *Universitet i Oslo* ved Rune Karlsen*, rune.karlsen@media.uio.no.

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:
- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost personverntjenester@nsd.no eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen
Madelen R. Kvadsheim
Tlf: 93 066 403

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *What is the role of opinion leaders in today´s digital political communication system*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐ å delta i intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix 2 - Intervjuguide

Fase 1: 5 min Løs prat.

Presentere meg selv og tema. Skape en løs og ledig stemning hvor deltaker slapper av, og det er rom for spørsmål før intervjuet starter.

Fase 2: Forklar taushetsplikt og anonymitet

- Informer og få godkjenning/signatur
- Start båndopptak
- Navn eller ikke navn:

Fase 3: intervju

Bakgrunn: Hvilken bakgrunn har disse menneskene?

Samfunnsengasjert? Du trenger ikke å oppgi politiske detaljer om deg selv, om du ikke ønsker det.

Jeg vil nå spørre deg om rollen som Admin i gruppen/nettverk:

- Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan og hvorfor ble du administrator for Facebook-gruppen du tilhører?
- Kan du beskrive hva du tenker er formålet med gruppen?
    - o Hvis ja, har dette endret seg noe over tid?
- Hva anser du som dine oppgaver i gruppen?
- Hvordan vil du beskrive aktiviteten i gruppen?
- Har dere som står oppført som admin av gruppen noen felles kommunikasjon om aktiviteten i gruppen, f.eks innleggene som postes?
- Setter du som admin noen grenser for hvem som kan delta i diskusjon og dele innlegg i gruppen? (Wright 2012).
    - o Hvis ja, er dette en felles avgjørelse eller noe som er opp til hver enkelt admin?
- Som admin av gruppen- har du noen tanker om hvorfor folk besøker akkurat denne siden?
- Når gikk gruppen over til å være motvind?
- Oppfordrer til handling?

Aktivitet innad i nettverket:

- Hvor ofte anslår du at du selv poster noe?
- Kan du forklare litt om motivasjonen til å poste innlegg i gruppen?
- Er du selv aktiv ved å dele, like, kommentere andres poster i gruppen?
    - o Hvis ja, kan du si noe om hva slags innlegg du legger merke til?

- Innlegg på siden; følger du med på respons og er du bevist på om eventuell respons er fra venner i ditt nettverk eller andre?
- Har noe aktivitet i gruppen noen gang fått medieoppmerksomhet?

Andre medievaner:

- Kan du kort beskrive dine daglige medievaner?
- Hva slags type medieinnhold klikker du deg oftest inn på?
- Hvordan/om bruker du tradisjonelle medier som avis, tv og radio?
- Hvordan bruker du digitale medier som nettsider, sosiale medier eller strømmetjenester?
- Hvis du skulle ha pekt ut noen av disse mediene som mer viktige for deg, hvilke ville det vært?
  - Hva bruker du disse til? Inspirasjon, informasjon eller tidsfordriv?
- Hva med mindre viktige?
  - Hva bruker du disse til? Inspirasjon, informasjon eller tidsfordriv?
- Bruker du sosiale medier og tradisjonelle medier ulikt?

Over til ditt nettverk utenfor gruppen:

- Generelt, liker du å snakke med venner og/eller familie om (samme tema som i gruppen)?
- Gir du samme informasjon om (samme tema som i gruppen) til venner og/eller familie?
- Er du aktiv på andre flater enn i gruppen?
  - Evt. hvilke?
- Er du aktiv i andre grupper på sosiale medier?
  - Ja, hvilke og hvor?
  - Nei, hvorfor?
- Deler du like aktivt andre saker og meninger i andre nettverk enn i gruppen?
  - Personlige kanaler?
- Deler du meninger og nyheter om andre temaer enn det som er relevant for det sosiale nettverket du er en del av på Facebook med ditt personlige nettverk?
- Har noen spurt deg om råd i en politisk sak i det siste?

Nå ønsker jeg å stille deg noen spørsmål om ditt forhold til sosiale medier generelt:

- Var du medlem eller deltok i noen andre Facebook-grupper fra før av?
- Bruker du mye tid på sosiale medier?
- Hvordan bruker du sosial medier?
  - (kontakt, meningsutvekslinger eller som nyhetskanal)
- I tillegg til å benytte deg av Facebook, hvilke andre sosiale medier bruker du?
- Er du like aktiv på andre digitale plattformer? (nettforum, kanaler eller debattinnlegg)

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- Politiske/ikke politiske nettsider?
- Hvilke muligheter eller utfordringer mener du at man har i sosiale medier?
- (Har du betalt for eksponering av innlegg i form av annonsering?)
- Hvordan fordeler du tiden din på de ulike plattformene, hvilken bruker du mest og minst, Kan du utdype?
  o Hvorfor bruker du ulik tid på de ulike? (Wright 8)
- Innlegg på siden; følger du med på respons og er du bevist på om eventuell respons er fra venner i ditt nettverk eller andre?

Medievaner, nyheter og nyhetsverdi:

- Hvor oppdaterer du deg på nyheter og/eller saker av interesse?
- Hva slags type saker vekker din interesse?
- Du deler selv nyheter på sosiale medier, har du noen tanker om avsender av nyheter har noe å si for nyhetenes troverdighet?
- Diskuterer du nyheter med andre utenfor gruppen?
- Har du noen tanker om dagens mediedekning av denne politiske politiske saken?

Tillitt og påvirkning:

- Opplever du at det er noen temaer/saker du deler som slår an mer an enn andre?
  o Hvordan påvirker det deg i delingen av slike saker?
- Med tanke på publikum, påvirker
- Privat ikke private sider? Er du medlem på lukkede nettverkssider og?
  o Kan du fortelle litt om aktiviteten din der?

Fase 4: Tre til fem nøkkelspørsmål

- Hvordan vil du vurdere din rolle i dette digitale samfunnet som har vokst frem i gruppen?
- Har du noen avsluttende tanker om deling av nyheter, meninger og/eller annet samfunnsengasjerende innhold på Facebook? --
- Er det noe du selv vil legge til?

Fase 4: Tilbakeblikk.

- Oppsummering. «Har jeg forstått deg rett...?»

- Sluttkommentar. «Har du noe du vil tilføye?»