

facebook

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Exchange of Views Presented on Facebook: Discussions and Their Participants

ABSTRACT

Facebook discussion threads are often associated with a controversial exchange of views. This study deals with these threads. In the theoretical part the author aims to look at Facebook as a separate internet medium that requires active interaction from its users. He deals with Marshall McLuhan's and Erving Goffman's theories and aims to work with the evolution of the social network. In the practical part the author focuses on Facebook discussion threads themselves and on their participants. To cope with his research problem, he employs two qualitative methods, discourse analysis of Facebook's discussion threads and semi-structured interviews with debaters. He tries to distinguish whether there are any interaction patterns, discourse terminology used by debaters within discussion threads and he also aims to describe Facebook discussion threads from an overall perspective. In semi-structured interviews with Facebook debaters the main goal is to reveal the motivation to present their opinion online and reflection of the social platform itself.

KEY WORDS

Facebook. New media. Internet discussions. Debaters. Interaction. Social media. Communication.

1. Changing the way we communicate: Facebook as an extension

In his *Understanding Media* published in 1964, Marshall McLuhan defined medium as a message. He works with the idea that individuals have embraced their environment to work in their favor. Every medium consists of information that gives a deeper meaning to the things around us. In McLuhan's theory, the medium works as an extension of the individual.¹

In various concepts, the medium could be characterized as transferring information from one point to another² or simply as a communication tool.³ But it was Joshua Meyrowitz who noticed that electronic media not only provides easier access to information but also creates entirely new situations and types of human behaviour.⁴ Meyrowitz works with the theory of Erving Goffman which examines interactions between individuals through their theatrical performances. Goffman deals with a front region (that he describes as a main stage), an audience, and a back region which is hidden to the audience.⁵ Meyrowitz points out that the electronic media are wiping out these spaces and creating something he calls the "middle region". In the middle region the audience can watch the moves of the actor between the backstage and the stage. The actor is aware of that situation and adapts his behaviour to it.⁶ According to Meyrowitz, the perspective in Goffman's theory is related to a physical location, but the nature of interactions is not defined by the physical environment but by the information flow pattern instead.⁷

Since Facebook was first launched in 2004,⁸ connections between individuals have become more visible. The possibility of 'adding friends' to someone's profile led to competitiveness among some users.⁹ We could state that relationships between people gained a more materialistic value. Over the years Facebook has implemented several features and functions (Groups, Pages, News Feed, Timeline, Reactions etc.) that led to a transformation of the way we communicate online.

However, the biggest milestone was the invention of the News Feed in 2006.¹⁰ It was not just any new feature; it was the whole algorithm that made Facebook unique for all its users. Facebook started to prefer information that was relevant for specific users. As Kirkpatrick, the author of *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World*, points out, Facebook has shifted the way information is exchanged.

*"Up until now, when you desired to get information about yourself to someone, you had to initiate a process or "send" them something, as you do when you make a phone call, send a letter or an email, or even conduct a dialogue by instant message. But News Feed reversed this process. Instead of sending someone an alert about yourself, now you simply had to indicate something about yourself on Facebook and Facebook would push the information out to your friends who, according to Facebook's calculations of what was likely to interest them, might be interested in the activity you were recording."*¹¹

Not only has the creation of the News Feed produced a different way of sharing information, it has also opened new possibilities for personalised advertising and has given users a space for an entirely new kind of behaviour.

¹ MCLUHAN, M.: *Jak rozumět médiím: extenze člověka*. Praha : Mladá fronta, 2011, p. 35.

² JIRÁK, J., KÖPPOVÁ, B.: *Masová média*. Praha : Portál, 2015, p. 23.

³ REIFOVÁ, I. et al.: *Slovník mediální komunikace*. Praha : Portál, 2004, p. 139.

⁴ MEYROWITZ, J.: *Všude a nikde: vliv elektronických médií na sociální chování*. Praha : Karolinum, 2006, p. 50.

⁵ GOFFMAN, E.: *Všichni hrájeme divadlo: sebezprezentace v každodenním životě*. Praha : Nakladatelství Studia Ypsilon, 1999, p. 108-132.

⁶ MEYROWITZ, J.: *Všude a nikde: vliv elektronických médií na sociální chování*. Praha : Karolinum, 2006, p. 50.

⁷ MEYROWITZ, J.: *Všude a nikde: vliv elektronických médií na sociální chování*. Praha : Karolinum, 2006, p. 42.

⁸ BRÜGGER, N.: A brief history of Facebook as a media text: The development of an empty structure. In *First Monday*, 2015, Vol. 20, No. 5. [online]. [2017-12-29]. Available at: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i5.5423>>.

⁹ KIRKPATRICK, D.: *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 92.

¹⁰ KIRKPATRICK, D.: *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 180-181.

¹¹ KIRKPATRICK, D.: *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 193.

Even though Meyrowitz's theory focuses mainly on the television era, Marie Pospíšilová applies it to Facebook. Pospíšilová points out that the interaction regions on Facebook are not always stable and change according to individual users' approach.¹² According to her, the space on Facebook itself is differentiated, users that were participating in her research were communicating both in the front and the back regions and more importantly they considered the main page of Facebook as the "middle region".¹³ However, Pospíšilová points out that the behaviour of users within each region was not automatic but was created through different phases of social networking. Strong links between individuals were created especially in the back region (such as through integrated chat) where users communicated on a more personal level.¹⁴

Marie Pospíšilová also addressed the motivation of individuals to start using Facebook in the first place. According to her, the reasons were heterogenic, but it was especially the curiosity, the urge of their friends or simply the features and benefits that Facebook offered at the time.¹⁵ The experimental phase itself, according to Pospíšilová, was manifested by the fact that users were experimenting more with their own identity. They also experimented with playing games or writing statuses (short updates about their lives). Self-presentation was very crucial at this stage though its larger measure could lead either to user categorisation or subsequent removal from a friend list.¹⁶

Facebook discussions are often associated with a controversial exchange of views. When commenting on Facebook, users enter something that could be called "public space", meaning the audience are not just friends of these users but any person on Facebook that is interested in the same page, group or topic. It is also important to mention that even the commentary section is sorted by Facebook's algorithm. Jiří Homoláč focused on internet discussions more closely. He did a discourse analysis of the comments published online and distinguished several tendencies that were occurring in these comments. He noticed that discussions are available on the internet for a longer period of time, that the debaters do not know who is online at the time (whether the conversation is active or not), that the debaters use nicknames, that vulgarisms may appear, that the discussion is managed by an administrator, and that trolls appear in discussions.¹⁷

On Facebook, users are forced to use their real names,¹⁸ but there are also people who pretend to be someone else. Research conducted on the topic of fake identities in social media showed that users are very likely to add a person they don't know in real life to their friend list if the person is either a woman, or has some friends in common (even though they do not have to know them in real life either).¹⁹ Fake profiles could be used for several reasons. One of them is spreading fake news in the "public space" such as the comments section. Fake news is described as articles that are deliberately false and aim to fool their audience.²⁰

Once a Facebook profile is created, users are tempted to interact with each other. Such pressure is first and foremost manifested by sending friend requests to "People you may know". Facebook is not only a communication tool but goes much further by absorbing multiple functions of the internet itself. It is constantly developing and providing new ways of self-presentation (live, stories, AR, etc.). As Marie Pospíšilová found out, the reason why many people want to use the network is primarily the self-presentation mentioned above. This may lead to the assumption that the main priority is not the shared content but the features that Facebook is providing.

¹² POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 58.

¹³ POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 59.

¹⁴ POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 61, 64.

¹⁵ POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 81.

¹⁶ POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 82-83.

¹⁷ HOMOLÁČ, J.: *Internetové diskuse o cikánech a Romech*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Nakladatelství Karolinum, 2009, p. 46-52.

¹⁸ *Terms of Service*. [online]. [2018-02-23]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/legal/terms/update>>.

¹⁹ KROMBOLZ, K. et al.: Fake Identities in Social Media: A Case Study on the Sustainability of the Facebook Business Model. In *Journal of Service Science Research*, 2012, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 185-199. [online]. [2018-03-16]. Available at: <<https://sba-research.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/krombolzetal2012.pdf>>.

²⁰ ALCOTT, H., GENTZKOW, M.: Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. In *Journal of Economic Perspective*, 2017, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 213. [online]. [2018-03-16]. Available at: <<https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>>.

In our research we focused on public discussion threads on Facebook and the users who participated in such discussions. We intended to look at their interactions and also aimed to explain the reasons why they enter the imaginary public podium shared amongst a broad audience. I consider Facebook to be one of the most popular social networks in the Czech Republic. Based on research conducted by CVVM in April 2018, 70% of respondents that were using internet had a profile on Facebook as well.²¹

2. Methodology

The research consists of two qualitative methods, the first being the discourse analysis of discussion threads shared on Facebook, and the second being semi-structured interviews with the debaters analyzed through grounded theory. The main priority of the research was to find out how users interact with each other on Facebook and to reveal who these users are and why they publicly share their opinions online to discuss topics with other Facebook users.

Research questions

To cope with the research problem, we examined two main research questions. They are linked to several sub-questions that were either based on the main research questions or emerged during the research.

How do the interactions in discussion threads on Facebook look?

How do Facebook users interact in debates with each other? Are there any similarities between interactions that create more general discourse patterns such as the use of terminology, shared assumptions, or ways of responding to other users? Is there a possibility that interactions can be quantified to sort debaters into groups based on their type of interaction? Is it possible that the discussion environment affects the quality of the discussions themselves?

Who are the debaters commenting in discussions on Facebook?

How do Facebook users reflect the Facebook environment? How do they reflect other debaters? What is the main motivation to express their opinion and what is the intention to respond to other users? What do the debaters feel when other users have a different opinion? And how do they react?

Sample

In order to make sure the debaters would exchange opposite views on particular topics, it was necessary to choose three *different* topics that were dividing society at the time. Based on the analysis of daily press that was conducted by Šafr and Špaček, the readers of different titles were also different.²² We supposed that online media readers, as well as online discussion participants, may also differ. To prevent the debate being influenced by the culture of expression of the chosen medium, we also decided to choose three *different* media providers:

Names of Facebook pages in alphabetical order:

ČT24 – A part of Czech Television which is a public service broadcaster in the Czech Republic. The article,²³ which is found on ČT24's Facebook page, is summarizing the last presidential debate that aired on Czech Television the day before the electoral vote. It was one of the first articles to address the presidential debate. In our opinion, the topic is an elevation of the political disunity of Czech society.

We joined the discussion on Facebook on January 26th, 2018. There were 83 Top Comments that contained sub-comments. Shared post had 204 reactions.

²¹ Sociologický ústav (Akademie věd ČR). Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění. [online]. [2018-08-13]. Available at: <<https://www.soc.cas.cz/en>>.

²² ŠAFR, J., ŠPAČEK, O.: Volný čas, sport a kulturní vkus: rozdíly podle společenského postavení. In MAŘÍKOVÁ, H., et al. (ed.): *Jaká je naše společnost? Otázky, které si často klademe...* Praha : Sociologické nakladatelství Slon, 2010, p. 94-96.

²³ ČT24: Prezidentští kandidáti o Andreji Babišovi a kauze Čapí hnízdo. Facebook. [online]. [2018-01-26]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/CT24.cz/posts/10156244535679009>>.

iDnes.cz - A news server that belongs to MAFRA, a. s., media group. It is the online version of the daily newspaper Mladá Fronta DNES. Another shared article,²⁴ whose comments I chose to analyze was about a YouTuber who published a video with a dead body found in the “Japanese suicide forest”. The selected topic connects the social networks phenomenon while opening a discourse on the moral values of individuals, as well as the concept of suicide and how social network viewers discuss it.

We joined the discussion on Facebook on January 19th, 2018. There were 190 Top Comments that contained sub-comments. Shared post had 687 reactions.

Týdeník Respekt - The internet version of the weekly magazine that belongs to the publishing company Economia. The article²⁵ We chose deals with the #MeToo. A campaign that highlights sexual harassment of women and which started with the affair of American film producer Harvey Weinstein. The topic is questioning gender inequality, which has become a general problem in recent years, and opens a general discourse on what is considered to be rape.

We joined the discussion on Facebook on January 24th, 2018. There were 27 Top Comments that contained sub-comments. Shared post had 228 reactions.

The Facebook algorithm first displays the “Most relevant” comments but other options could be chosen manually. These other options are “New” and “All comments”. Therefore, in each of the three cases, the “All comments” option had to be chosen in order to get unfiltered content.

All comments are still accessible, meaning Facebook users can still comment, edit or delete them completely. For easier coding performed in the program Atlas.ti, We’ve been forced to save Facebook posts to PDF format. That is the reason why our analysis does not consider changes in content of the individual discussions that took place after the date when the data corpus was used for the analysis. From the ethical point of view, Facebook considers all comments to be public information. Moreover, the public information can be even associated with someone outside the Facebook.²⁶

The process of choosing a sample of respondents for semi-structured interviews was made more difficult by outdated comments posted on Facebook. The original intention was to directly address users that took part in the analyzed discussions. However, by the time the interviews were conducted, discussions were not up to date anymore. Another complication was the social network itself. Facebook sorts messages from “strangers” (i.e. from people who are not friends on Facebook) to a specific and less visible folder. We were therefore forced to re-evaluate the situation and address respondents through connections on our own Facebook profile, while the selection conditions remained the same. Most participants were chosen using a snowball sampling technique. In the spirit of the snowball sampling technique our first respondents suggested other individuals to participate in interviews. Users had to be active in commenting and they had to post comments in a certain way. In total we chose eight respondents. The chosen group consisted of four women and four men aged 25-39 years old. Half of them had tertiary education and the other half had secondary education. In one case, the participant had secondary education without a school-leaving examination. All participants agreed to take part in our research and remained anonymous. We are aware of the small sample, but every participant represented one group that emerged from the discourse analysis. Exchanging views on Facebook turned out to be something I could call a phenomenon - a large proportion of Facebook users are following the comments. Moreover, some of them use the commentary section to help them form their own opinions.

²⁴ iDNES.cz: *Více než 45 tisíc lidí podepsalo petici za úplné smazání účtu youtubera Logan Paula z Youtube.* Facebook. [online]. [2018-01-19]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/iDNES.cz/posts/10155320869471314>>.

²⁵ Týdeník Respekt: *Respekt: Někteří lidé se obávají, že po kampani #MeToo se muži budou bát dvořit ženám....* Facebook. [online]. [2018-01-24]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/tydenikrespekt/posts/10155896640936103>>.

²⁶ *What is public information?.* [online]. [2018-02-23]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/help/203805466323736>>.

3. Discourse analysis: Topics dividing society. Who are the debaters and are there any communication patterns?

As a part of the analysis of debates, We have discovered many general discourses and views on each of the topics that were dividing society at the time. However, within this study We only intend to take a deeper look at the resemblance and patterns that have begun to emerge in the discussions. Even though the topics might seem different, the debaters act in a similar way in many cases.

Desire for interaction

All users that participated in the discussions on Facebook showed the same intention to express their opinion or attitude to the presented topic in some way. However, in many cases one common feature emerged. In addition to expressing their opinion, users often targeted their posts to get feedback from other users. In other words, comments that were controversial in some way or contained a question trying to make others interested in expressing themselves occurred more frequently. Such “desire for interaction” raises the question whether users are either looking for interaction with other debaters, or whether they are in need of some support to help strengthen their opinion in order to confirm that they are right, or if the main goal is a desire to publicly be involved in an argument with someone they can possibly intimidate.

Controversies and questions in the main comments produced the most frequently commented-on threads. In general, the more controversial the post was, the more likely other users responded. But Facebook’s algorithm helped it as well. As mentioned above, Facebook selects the most relevant and interesting comments for its users. The comments showed at the top are the comments that received the greatest appreciation from others, whether passively or actively being discussed. Whether it is a reaction with a built-in feature (i.e. Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry) or a number of answers to the main comment. This can result in a false impression that comments on social networking are always “offensive”. But this is not entirely the case. Facebook shows the “most interesting” comments first and the rest stay hidden in the background. Another factor that played a crucial role in the “desire for interaction” was the option to tag someone. Debaters could tag either their friends to share an article or to engage with a specific person within the discussion (they didn’t have to be friends with that person). The users who were most commonly referred to were those who needed reactions to their comment from others. There was an intention to send them a warning and to let them know that another user is interested in their opinion. It especially appeared in the controversial comments mentioned above or in disagreements when there was an offensive encounter with someone else. It should be noted that when users joined the discussion, Facebook sent them an alert right away. This meant there was no need to tag a person to get them notified. “Desire for interaction” appeared within all discussions we analysed. The tagging itself was the most common manifestation of any interactions between users on Facebook.

Comments should be humorous

“Desire for interaction” is only one of the many tendencies that occurred in analysed threads. Then there were humorous comments. Users often aimed to write funny and witty comments in order to entertain other users and gain their positive feedback. In this case, their desire for recognition and appreciation exceeded their desire for interaction, which would have otherwise been indicated using the “tagging” feature. In some cases, the specific humour of the comments could serve as a tool to ridicule other users or to use as a weapon in more heated exchanges. In other cases, users shared humorous videos, memes, stickers (integrated images on Facebook, mostly referring to pop culture or random characters), or gifs. Even a reaction in such a way could cause the desire for interaction among other users.

The opinion creation and its presentation

Not every comment primarily served as entertainment. Some users were more likely to comment on a subject that corresponded with their own point of view and they were greatly concerned about how their comment would appear. In most cases, users expressed their own attitude to the topic or promoted and explained their point of views. Such comments were, in most cases, more extensive than others and they attempted to present the most important arguments or counterarguments that arose on the subject. Despite

its length, the overall impression suggested some kind of “request for empathy”. Users who wrote more detailed comments and cared about the seriousness of their opinions tended to care about validation from other users and their empathy or understanding.

Distrust of the media

Another common aspect that occurred was that the users across the analysed comments showed a certain degree of distrust of the media. Some have questioned the objectivity of the media. Others have shown a general distrust of the media, but have also shown doubt about individual articles, television broadcasters or misleading titles. Distrust and exaggerated media criticism may be related to the fact that some users are unable to accept a different opinion, do not want to believe in shared information or fail to correctly disclose fake news and are sceptical of some media providers.

Conflict with a person that has a different point of view

In the case of interaction between users, they either endorsed each other with similar opinions or disagreed with each other. Such activity can be divided into passive (liking posts, adding integrated responses, images, gifs, etc.) and active categories (when users reacted directly with their comments). We will focus on the active interaction. Disagreeing user behaviour can be interpreted as offensive or defensive. In a case of verbal attack, users were likely to argue with their opinions, use vulgarisms, insult other users or even exaggerate certain opinions. Disagreements also appeared in a defensive form when users attempted to defend their opinions. In many cases, defensive comments occurred in response to an attack when users were looking for arguments to defend their views.

Users trying to act superior

Interactions between users did not take place without manifestations of superiority. Mostly it was a part of offensive disagreements, but in many cases manifestations of superiority also appeared as defensive disagreements. This could have been caused by the fact that users were more likely to respond this way in case of arguing. The manifestations of superiority, unlike previous ways of communication, were split into several ways of interaction. One of the most common manifestations of superiority was the devaluation of another user’s opinion. In essence, users completely discarded any view different from theirs. Some users even consciously attacked hobbies of other users which they either found on their profiles or sourced from the discussion thread. Grammar became another expression of supremacy. In some cases, users corrected the grammatical mistakes of other users. They used proper grammar to manifest their superiority. Discussions also included an aspect of moral condemnation of other commentators. The topic dealt with the idea of “normality”, which worked as a sign of superiority over someone else. As a result, users judged others on the basis of their published opinions.

Who are the debaters

Based on the discourse analysis, We were able to sort users according to the way they interacted publicly on Facebook. Noticing similarities in their comments and reappearing trends, We managed to sort users into 8 categories. Even though these categories appear independently, they should be understood as mere roles individuals play and change according to the current course of an ongoing discussion.

- **Taggers**

The term Tagger refers to the user who intentionally tags friends or users outside of their friendship circle, in order to show them the post or to get feedback. Users that tag other people in their comments are more likely to desire interaction than users in other groups. Such desire can also be related to their self-presentation because if they tag someone from their Facebook friends list, this event will also be shown to other Facebook friends.

- **Comics**

Users who act as Comics try to write funny or witty comments. In most cases they presented their opinion in a way that allowed them to reach and engage with as many people as possible. Such posts will receive more passive feedback from other users. People who belong in this group of Comics

include users who contribute funny pictures to the discussion, or share memes, gifs, or funny videos. Their main goal is to entertain themselves and others.

- **Trolls**
Comics sometimes manifest as Trolls. They tend to write sarcastically, ridicule a topic of discussion, or even mock individual users. Trolls can also post their posts as satire or attack other users. However, they primarily enjoy themselves at the expense of others.
- **Critics**
Critics appeared in every discussion we analysed. Their main goal was to negate the topic or the debate itself. Based on the published content, the criticism lacked a humorous sense. It could be stated that the comments posted by Critics were rather serious. Criticism worked as a way of presenting a dissenting opinion. Critics may not only criticize the topic, but they can also assess the objectivity of the media.
- **Moralists**
Moralists tend to judge the topic, or even other users based on the concept of normality, and most of all, their perception of normality. Unlike Critics, Moralists do not want to negate the topic or opinions of others, but rather morally condemn them. Moralists mostly share their personal experiences and present alternative approaches to the behaviour of the individuals or to the presentation of a subject.
- **Experts**
Experts not only overestimate their knowledge of the commented-on issue, they also genuinely believe they know more than the participants of the discussion. They tend to show their alleged intellectual skills and are more likely than other groups to refuse different points of view.
- **Attackers**
Attackers verbally challenge other debaters in the discussion threads. They are more likely to attack other users when they have no arguments left or when a strong disagreement with the other person occurs. Attackers can even deride the hobbies of other users. For example, they use information obtained from the profile accounts of the other debaters to make their attacks more personal.
- **Fans**
Fans are primarily involved in the debate because the topic reflects their personal beliefs. They usually agree with the article and published opinions which they tend to defend and further discuss in the discussion threads. Fans can therefore act as “defenders” of the topic in case the topic is attacked by an attacker.

4. Grounded Theory: Reflection on the content shared on Facebook. Exchange of views presented on Facebook

Our first intention was to select participants for semi-structured interviews according to the groups that emerged from our analyses. This intention proved wrong since every participant was talking about situations where they held more than just one group characteristic. Groups, therefore, should be perceived as roles that debaters play in a particular moment. Just as in Goffman’s concept, it was a form of self-presentation where the roles of individuals shaped their own personality. As a result, it depended on the type of discussion and the mood of users themselves. The debaters could play more than one role, even within the same discussion.

Reflection on the roles that appeared in the discussion threads

Based on semi-structured interviews, *Tagging* was mainly perceived as a means of attracting the attention of others, especially friends of participants. The function itself was mainly considered an effective way of transferring information on the social network. Users were aware that tagging was a form of involving others in the discussion, but it also served as a way to avoid interaction with other users. By tagging a user, it is easier to share the information with your friend or opponent without the risk of involving others. The tagged user is suddenly a part of the discussion (mostly unwillingly). Moreover, the post where the users are tagged is then displayed to all their friends. *Taggers* can also use the feature to support and express their own views or beliefs. However, it is primarily used to attract the attention of other users.

Humorous comments on Facebook can be easily misunderstood and spark another exchange of views, which may then have an impact outside the internet. This is mainly because the internet lacks the context of face-to-face communication. *The Trolls* ridicule others for their own amusement. But they have a lot to do with *Comics* as well because they share comments containing a humorous tone that are mainly aimed to reach a wider audience. “Trolling” can be a form of attack, criticism, ridicule or degradation of a different opinion. It can also be a form of defence of any personal attitude.

Critics and *Moralists* also have much in common. *Critics* tend to belittle different views and opinions of others and they often display their distrust of media. Their views are limited by their own narrow perspective. *Moralists* defend the notion of normality and tend to morally condemn others. The criticism of other users’ comments may be based on impulsiveness or the lack of constructiveness. Some users can condemn other debaters based on the way they present their points or simply because of specific communication ethics. The moral condemnation of users is closely related to the concept of normality, in other words what other users perceive as normal. If the perception differs, it is very easy to condemn others.

When users act as *Experts*, they respond in a distinctive way whereby they present themselves as superior in knowledge about the topic they are debating. They either pretend to know the topic very well or truly understand the issue. They usually comment on current topics and try to form an opinion that they continue to present afterwards. The main characteristic is the desire to comment and spread their views. It is usually the dissemination of information from a source that coincides with the opinion of the individual user.

The Attacker is a role that no one wanted to be identified with because of its negative perception. However, most of the respondents had experience with acting offensively within the discussion threads. In most cases, these attacks were somehow provoked by other Facebook users. Attacks were mainly manifested because of strong emotions within the thread. Conflict with a different view, and possible provocation from the other side, also led to aggressive attacks. John Suler has dealt with the phenomenon of online disinhibition. Individuals behave more openly on the Internet and tend to present themselves in a different way than they would do outside of the internet. Online attacks may not correspond to their real-life behaviour.²⁷ Based on our interviews with otherwise non-conflict users, We believe that the same thing could be assumed about Facebook attacks.

The Fans are mainly interested in the topic because it is close to their own beliefs. Once the topic was questioned, they tended to act as its “defenders”. Users who presented themselves as Fans followed the topics they were interested in and that were close to them. As soon as someone presented a different view on the topic, they were more likely to participate in commenting. The line between The Fans and The Attackers was thus very thin and The Fans could easily resort to attacking other views and opinions.

Perception of Facebook’s environment

All interviewed users have been actively using Facebook since 2009. Their main motivation for joining the network was either the initiative from users that were already using Facebook, or the number of benefits Facebook provided at the time. Users often talked about the declining trend in their Facebook activity. While the first years of use were rather active (i.e. posting statuses several times a day, using most of the features), they now reflected on their activity in rather passive engagement. Mark Zuckerberg also noticed the declining trend in users’ activity and promised to change the platform in his open letter shared in January 2018.²⁸ However, the declining trend in activity does not correlate to declining communication with friends and acquaintances on the integrated chat or Messenger app. Users mainly understood Facebook as a communication tool. Communication and social networking were considered the main reason why they spend most of their time online. Some users stated that they use Facebook constantly. Interaction and easier transfer of information is one of the reasons people are constantly returning to Facebook and why the social network is still a relevant and popular tool despite the decline in user activity. Some users

²⁷ SULER, J.: The Online Disinhibition Effect. In *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2004, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 321-326. [online]. [2018-03-20]. Available at: <<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c70a/ae3be9d370ca1520db5edb2b326e3c2f91b0.pdf>>.

²⁸ ZUCKERBERG, M.: *One of our big focus areas for 2018 is making*. Facebook. [online]. [2018-01-12]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10104413015393571>>.

have agreed that they spend most of their day on Facebook, despite knowing that it is time-consuming. Facebook was considered a part of their lives rather than an entertainment platform. Moreover, they did not talk about Facebook as a mere social network but as something that affects their lives. In McLuhan's terminology, they talked about Facebook as an extension of themselves. Users also reflected on the fact that Facebook not only serves as a tool of communication but also as a marketing tool to generate specific content or even profit. Despite knowing some of Facebook's deficiencies, such as time consumption, privacy, or the spread of false information, everyone evaluated Facebook rather positively. In one case there was a negative social assessment of the social network. However, that could have been caused by data leakage since the interview was realized shortly after the 2018 data leakage affair.²⁹

The content on Facebook consists of posts that users share. Moreover, the content is always unique and personalised for all users thanks to the News Feed algorithm. Users usually see posts that are relevant to them. It turned out that the content users said they saw on Facebook's main page also corresponded with their personal interests. Even though users were interested in different topics, some of them had one in common. It was politics. Interestingly, not all users were actively interested in politics, yet political posts on Facebook have come to them. As Facebook users gradually switched to passivity, a similar trend occurred in discussion threads. The active form of commenting was the formation and publishing of the comment itself. The passive form was mainly reflected in the evaluation of the comments based on the built-in reactions on Facebook. Some users were commenting in their groups of interest because the groups had a limited audience (though in some cases, they were open groups to which every Facebook user was able to join). Users have reached a certain paradox. Publishing opinion "publicly" in discussion threads was followed by greater fear than posting opinions in a group. But the group could also be public. We therefore think that users in a certain group feel that they are surrounded by people with similar opinions and find it easier to seek support. Users often reflected on Facebook discussions as a great opportunity to sort out information, find individuals who have similar opinions, and in some cases the discussions had a great impact in forming their own opinion.

Exchange of the views presented on Facebook

Discussions on Facebook caused different feelings in every user. Some reflected on them as a tool to form their opinions, whilst others saw them as a chance to present their attitude or as an instrument to persuade other users. There were also those who tried to avoid discussion threads because they did not understand the meaning, or because they reflected on them as a cause of negative emotions. However, it turned out that even these users, despite their reluctance to join the discussions, had been involved in some cases.

Weight of individual opinions

Everyone agreed that each user has the same right to express their opinion, whether they agree with it or not. However, they did not value every opinion fairly. Users tended to show confirmation bias. Opinions that somehow correlated with their own attitude were more important to them than opinions that were diametrically different.³⁰ On several occasions, users even talked about situations where a different opinion had no value to them. However, more general characteristics of individuals such as education or success influenced the weight of published comments as well.

Active and passive engagement in discussion threads

Users agreed that the main impulse to engage in the discussion, whether in active or passive form, were emotions that the discussion or topic raised. As soon as the discussion elevated attention, they started to seek comments that corresponded to their own beliefs and were more prone to "like" them. The "like" function therefore represented a consenting way of showing their attitude towards the subject. If they disagreed, they were likely to use other Facebook responses or actively participate in the commentary

²⁹ INGRAM, D., HENDERSON, P.: *Trump consultants harvested data from 50 million Facebook users: reports*. Released on 17th March 2018. [online]. [2018-03-20]. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-cambridge-analytica/trump-consultants-harvested-data-from-50-million-facebook-users-reports-idUSKCN1GT02Y>>.

³⁰ LORD, Ch. et al.: *Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence*. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1979, Vol. 37, No. 11, p. 2098-2109. [online]. [2018-03-24]. Available at: <<https://www.unc.edu/%7Efbaum/teaching/articles/jpsp-1979-Lord-Ross-Lepper.pdf>>.

section. When users were forced to think about the Facebook reactions (i.e. Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, Angry), they reflected their dual meaning. Some users used the “Love” and the “Haha” reaction in both positive and negative ways. The negative impact could then represent an attack or ridicule of another user.

Active engagement in discussion had various motives and reasons. Users wanted either to stand up, convince other debaters to change their opinions, share their own experience, criticize or to ridicule. In most cases it was impulsiveness that played a big part in publishing comments online.

Reflection on conflict with a person that has a different view

When users were exposed to a diametrically different opinion, they usually experienced negative emotions. Negative emotions were the main cause of engagement in the debate. Once users actively debated with a person that had a different view, they were primarily inclined to refute their opinion in some way. Participants stated that they were likely to argue with an opposing opinion once they were active in the discussion. In some cases, despite negative emotions, they tried to ignore the comments because they were aware that the exchange of views does not lead anywhere.

What the participants thought about the discussions and their actors?

When Facebook users were reflecting on what characterises a good and bad discussion, they agreed that good discussion should contain strong arguments, be factual, and be relevant. It should not be based entirely on emotions and impulsiveness. However, not only did users themselves admit that emotions are noticeable in most of the discussion threads, they also stated that emotions are the key factor for joining the discussion. The cause of such emotions could be explained by the fact that when individuals enter public debates, they are more likely to see diametrically different opinions than what they are used to on their own personalised main page. Bad discussions were reflected on as debates where individuals let themselves be carried away by emotions, attack each other, and do not use strong arguments. Participants were also asked to reflect on other debaters. They perceived them as more extrovert types with an inclination to impulsivity. Some respondents also felt that other debaters are not afraid to express their opinions and they assumed that they are more likely to have spare time and tend to have a weak social capital.

5. Conclusion

Users who participated in discussion threads on Facebook showed a “desire for interaction”. In most cases, the desire was caused by sharing controversial posts, questions, or by tagging other users. Their comments were either humorous or on the contrary, they tried to act seriously. In some cases, users showed distrust of the media. Interactions between users could be divided into active or passive behaviour. Active interactions were either affirmative when users were mutually supportive or dissenting, either offensive or defensive. In many cases, users acted superior or ridiculed other users’ interests. However, passive interactions between users may also be affirmative or dissenting but were mainly reflected in the form of liking posts, sharing memes or gifs. The behaviour of debaters within discussion threads showed similarities that led to the division of users into eight groups: *Taggers, Comics, Trolls, Critics, Moralists, Experts, Attackers, and Fans*. Based on semi-structured interviews, groups should be understood as roles that debaters play because participants were mentioning situations where they acted in different roles. They could play more than one role in each debate. They reflected on Facebook as a tool for communication, marketing, and easier access to information. Interviewed debaters reflected on the declining trend in Facebook activity. Similar findings emerged from research conducted by Marie Pospíšilová. She found out that shortly after the creation of a Facebook profile the user activity was most frequent. It was a phase of experiments with features and self-presentation.³¹ Facebook users that participated in discussion threads were either active (commenting) or passive (using built-in Facebook reactions). The weight of other users’ opinions varied according to how it corresponded with their own personal beliefs. The main motivation to join the discussion was caused by emotions. While different opinions elevated negative emotions and efforts to participate in discussions with

³¹ POSPÍŠILOVÁ, M.: *Facebooková (ne)závislost: identita, interakce a uživatelská kariéra na Facebooku*. Praha : Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelství Karolinum, 2016, p. 82-83.

the hope of changing the debater's point of view, emotion-based discussions were characterised negatively. On the other hand, users reflected that good discussions should be based primarily on good arguments, not just on emotions and impulsiveness. Despite some objections, Facebook and its discussions were mostly reflected on positively.

At the beginning of this study we opened the question whether Facebook is changing the way people communicate online. Surprisingly most of the interviewed users understood Facebook as an extension of themselves instead of mere communication tool. The features that Facebook is providing not only happened to be part of their everyday communication, but part of their lives outside the social network as well. Based on both analyses we conducted, we can state that Facebook is helping to transform communication to a higher emotional level. Emotions are not just the main motivation to present opinions online but also the driver for posting any content.

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