

What a story! 😱

Interpretative rhetoric in news media's Facebook updates

Yngve Benestad Hågvar

OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

yngveh@oslomet.no

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Introduction

On Norway's Liberation Day 2017, Erik (42) and four friends decide to polish memorial plaques all over Trondheim city, in remembrance of Holocaust victims. The effort is covered in a traditional news story by the Norwegian tabloid *Dagbladet*, in which the journalist quotes her sources and leaves out her own opinion. However, *Dagbladet* also publishes a Facebook update with a link to the story, and this update includes the newsroom's subjective evaluation: "Great initiative!" Suddenly, the news story gets a touch of opinion journalism. Does this mean that journalists feel more free to guide the readers' interpretations of the news in social media? And if so, does it matter?

To find out, I collected two random weeks of Facebook updates from the tabloid newspaper *Dagbladet* and the Norwegian public-service broadcaster *NRK*, and compared them to the corresponding stories on their respective news sites. I also interviewed the head of social media in both newsrooms. The analysis and interviews were guided by these research questions:

1. To what extent do *Dagbladet* and *NRK* change the presentation of their stories when they publish them on Facebook?
2. Which rhetorical strategies do *Dagbladet* and *NRK* apply on Facebook that transgress the text norms for their own news sites?

The findings confirm that both newsrooms frequently add their own attitudes or suggest certain interpretations when presenting news on Facebook. This tendency increases the less controversial the story is. We could view this as a problematic blurring of the distinction between news and views, but we could also consider it a more transparent approach to journalism.

News in social media

There are a number of reasons why journalists might want to change their rhetoric when publishing news in social media instead of on their own news sites. Facebook in particular is a crucial traffic driver to the news sites. About 15–20 % of those who read news on *Dagbladet*'s or *NRK*'s websites have followed links from Facebook. In order to make the

news visible in social media, it is crucial to get the readers to react to the updates by sharing, commenting or liking them. The novel concept of *shareworthiness* is therefore as important as the traditional ideas of *newsworthiness* (Trilling, Tolochko, and Burcher 2017). We know from previous research that readers are most likely to share stories that evoke high-arousal emotions like joy or anger (Berger and Milkman 2012; Eberholst and Hartley 2014). Further, soft news are more shared than hard news, and opinion pieces even more than news (Kalsnes and Larsson 2017). What has rarely been investigated, though, is how these stories are presented rhetorically in social media, and how the presentation affects the shareworthiness. Welbers and Opgenhaffen (2019) have recently found that newsrooms' Facebook updates statistically contain more subjective words than the traditional headlines and leads do. However, we also need more qualitative – interpretative – studies like the one in hand to understand the evolving rhetoric of news in social media.

This is also a matter of genre. The Facebook update has a communicative purpose different from the news article and will therefore deviate from ordinary news in form and content. As a young genre, the norms for news media's Facebook updates are still in the making. On the one hand, the Norwegian Press Complaints Commission has declared that standard norms for press ethics apply even in social media. On the other hand, being dislocated from the proprietary news site and traditional genres opens a space for adjusting the presentation to the rhetoric of social media, in order to encourage sharing. There is a vast grey area between the conventional ways of presenting news in online papers, and the formalized ethical borderlines that go for all kinds of media. *Dagbladet*'s tribute to Erik and his polishing friends would probably not be condemned by the press complaints commission, although it transgresses the traditional text norms for news stories.

A wider range of speech acts

Most Facebook updates from the newsrooms consist of a headline that links to the full story, a picture above the headline, and a Facebook-specific promo text above the picture. While the headlines are quite similar to the headlines in the online papers, I found that the promo texts often deviate from the traditional journalistic style, taking on features we associate with private status messages in social media. More specifically, 31 percent of *Dagbladet*'s promo texts and 18 percent of *NRK*'s clearly reframed the story or addressed the readers in a different way than the online papers. The most obvious difference is that the promo texts performed a much wider range of so-called speech acts than the original stories. While the journalist's voice in traditional news rhetoric limits itself to statements that can be proven true or false (assertives), the promo texts on Facebook could ask questions or give orders (directives), express emotions (expressives), define reality (declaratives) or state subjective points of view (evaluatives).

Five rhetorical strategies

The promo texts that differ from traditional news rhetoric, apply five distinct rhetorical strategies. These strategies are likely to enhance the shareworthiness of the stories. My interviews revealed that the strategies are not explicitly articulated or consciously applied in the newsrooms, but both interviewees recognized them as recurrent ways of presentation.

The first strategy is to add emojis. None of the newsrooms uses emojis on their own news sites, but both use them on Facebook. The tabloid *Dagbladet* includes emojis in 13 percent of its updates, while the public-service broadcaster *NRK* provides one single example during the two analysed weeks. Emojis strengthen the emotional aspect of the message and often suggest how the reader is supposed to react to the story. In some cases, the promo text consists solely of emojis. When fans revealed that the rapper Bow Wow were lying about travelling in a private jet, *Dagbladet* merely adds three monkeys covering their eyes with their hands, and a laughing smiley with tears: 🙄🙄🙄😂. With no words, then, the newsroom encourages the readers to read the story with malicious pleasure: How embarrassing for him, and hilarious for us!

The second strategy is to ask the readers a question. The questions can be apparently open (“Good or bad idea?”) or include disputable presumptions (“What should we do to stop this?”). They can trigger the readers’ curiosity for the story (“How and why is a viper radiomarked?”) or encourage them to tag their friends (“Do you know anyone this would be perfect for?”). Some questions are purely rhetorical. When Norway’s biggest airport was hit by an unexpected, massive snowfall in the end of April, the traffic was delayed while the crew cleared the runways. The news story on *Dagbladet.no* leaves the impression that the airport dealt professionally with the problem. On Facebook, however, *Dagbladet* asks: “Can we not cope with a little snow in Norway?” Consequently, a lot of readers interpreted the story as a scandal and posted sarcastic comments below the update.

The third strategy is to make a request. Often, these are merely appeals for sharing, like “Please tell your friends who need to hear this”. However, in some cases the journalists take over the voices of their sources. In an *NRK* story, the police warns against picking up poisonous ampullas from the war at the seashore. On Facebook, *NRK* reframes the warning through their own voice: “In you see one of these at the beach, you need to stay away!” *Dagbladet* provides a similar example in a story about dangerous dog food. This practice challenges the traditional norm of separating the source’s voice from the journalist’s.

The fourth strategy is to express an emotion. On Facebook, journalists explicitly celebrate celebrities’ birthdays (“We congratulate! 😊”) and mourn the deceased (“Our condolences”). In the corresponding stories, only the interviewed sources are allowed to make such statements. Moreover, Facebook updates may even include national-romantic outbursts like “Oh, Norway! 😱❤️” or baffled comments like “Some detour! 🤯”.

The fifth strategy is to state an explicit opinion. These are often moral judgements, like the “Great initiative!”-statement mentioned in the introduction. Another example belongs to a story about an American girl who was surprisingly honored by her late father’s police colleagues when visiting his grave: “Incredibly nicely done! ❤️” Stating subjective points of view in this way marks an obvious violation of traditional news rhetoric.

A model for news rhetoric on Facebook

Common for all five strategies is that they are applied to stories that are rather uncontroversial. Few readers would disagree that honouring Holocaust victims is a great initiative, or that people should be warned against poisonous ampullas. The more diversified attitudes the readers are expected to have to the news in question, the more traditional news

rhetoric is used on Facebook. However, the newsrooms have no explicit guidelines for which kind of rhetoric applies to which degree of controversy. This means that the text norms are implicitly negotiated by trial and error, adjusting to the readers' implicit or explicit reactions. For instance, *Dagbladet*'s head of social media made a guideline of not to use the angry face emoji anymore when a particular update was ridiculed on a satire show on TV.

The tabloid *Dagbladet* goes considerably further than the public-service broadcaster *NRK* in challenging the traditional news paradigm on Facebook. The most important explanation is that *NRK* needs to retain the image of "the trustworthy alternative" in the readers' news feeds. For a licence-financed news provider, there is a fine line between being gaining legitimacy by acting innovatively and losing legitimacy by acting "tabloid" and "commercial". *Dagbladet*, on the other hand, leans on its cultural-radical legacy and is less afraid to challenge the traditional paradigm.

Despite differences in degree, however, both newsrooms seem to apply some connection between a continuum of controversy on the one hand and a continuum of interpretative rhetoric on the other. More or less instinctively, the journalists evaluate their story on the controversy scale before picking a corresponding degree of interpretative rhetoric. Figure 1 illustrates how the two continuums work in parallel. I emphasize that the genres and strategies that are listed on the respective scales are mere examples – obviously, certain sports news may cause massive controversy whereas certain hard news may not; certain emojis might be more interpretative than certain explicit opinions in a given context, and so on. The main point is that journalists seem to agree that it is OK to apply a more subjective and interpretative rhetoric on Facebook than on their own news sites, but that the acceptable strategies will depend on the degree of controversy they expect the story to cause.

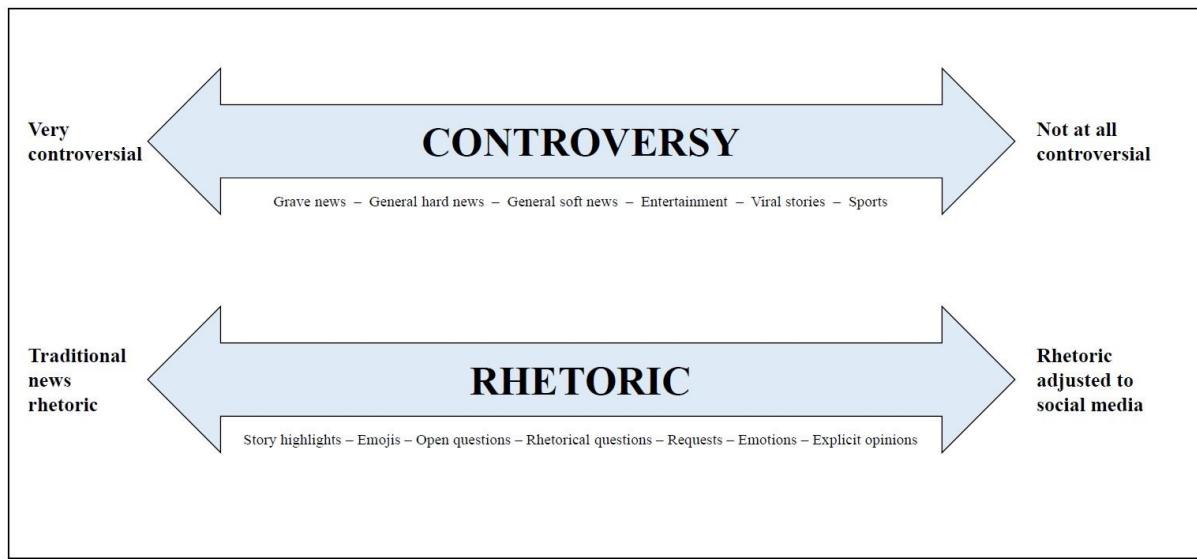


Figure 1. The connection between the degree of controversy and the choice of promo rhetoric on Facebook.

Now, does it matter if the traditional paradigm of “objective” news reporting cracks up on Facebook? There are indeed good arguments for maintaining a strict division between news and views, not least in the light of recent attacks on the alleged political agendas of the “mainstream media”. However, one could also argue that news can never be objective anyway, and that the Facebook updates are simply making explicit the arguments that are already implicit in the full story. Following this line, the interpretative rhetoric on Facebook could be seen as a means to enhance journalistic transparency. I will not conclude in this debate, but I believe the answer will depend on where the newsrooms draw their lines on the continuums in Figure 1. Scholars therefore need to monitor the development of journalistic text norms in social media carefully.

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