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## Conflict and Affect Among Conservative Christians on Facebook

Mona Abdel-Fadil

### Abstract

Drawing on the ethnographic study of the Norwegian Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, this article focuses on the emotive performance of conflict. The author delves into the multitude of ways in which emotion appears to drive the conflict(s) in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. This Facebook group, by virtue of dealing with religion and identity issues contains typical trigger themes, which may lead audiences to emotively enact conflict. Still, these modes of enactment of conflict cannot be understood as a characteristic of religious strife alone. Drawing on Papacharissi's concept of 'affective publics' this article compares the modes of conflict performance, the most salient frames, trigger themes, and emotive cues in this Facebook group to findings from other studies about mediatized conflict. The analysis demonstrates that mediatized conflicts appear to be emotively performed in very similar, at times even identical ways, across a variety of themes and contexts. Participatory media audiences' tendency to remediate conflicts in ways that draw on an abundance of emotional cues appears to be integral to the enactment of mediatized conflicts. It is argued that we ought to speak not only of affective publics but also of the politics of affect.

### Keywords

Mediatized conflict, media and religion, affect, affective publics, performing conflict, Facebook, political engagement, social media users, media audiences, emotive politics, online ethnography, media anthropology

## 1 Introduction

The Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, was established at a politically charged moment in November 2013,<sup>1</sup> in response to an impassioned debate on the visibility of religion on NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). In this sense, the Facebook group can be defined as a ‘special interest’ group that primarily (but not exclusively) attracts people who believe in the importance of preserving Christianity (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*).<sup>2</sup> The conflict and subsequent protest group was sparked by a cross-pendant worn by, Siv Kristin Sællmann, a news anchor while reading the news on TV and subsequently raced across multiple media platforms. The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council swiftly ruled that wearing the cross in the newsroom was a breach of policy. The tininess of the cross – a mere 14 mm - is emphasized by many debaters in the pro-cross camp, and a number of the images that are used to illustrate the case in main stream media, feature the journalist holding up the cross - thus accentuating how small the cross pendant is compared to her (by comparison) enormous hands and/ or face. Still, according to NRK’s regulations, it is the symbolism and affiliation to Christianity, which is a breach of policy for news anchors and hence size is irrelevant.

*Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* swiftly received vast support, reaching over 120 000 likes during its first few weeks of existence. The initiator and administrator of the Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, also launched a letter-campaign, inviting and encouraging everybody in the Facebook group to send their letters of complaint to The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council, in the hope that the council would overturn their verdict. This outcome never materialized, much to the frustration of the majority of those involved in discussions in the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook group.

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- 1 ‘Politically charged moments’ used by Miller et al, “(2015: 145), shares many communalities with the term ‘mediatized moment’, as used in Sumaila (2015: 111), and the concept “critical moments” as employed by Terje Colbjørnsen (*forthcoming*), though originally Boltanski & Thévenot’s concept (1999).
  - 2 Kushin and Kitchener (2009) appear to be arguing that Facebook facilitates for a more productive and civil type of conversation, I do not subscribe to this view. In my opinion, social network sites such as Facebook, do not in themselves encourage civil conduct or productive arguments, any more than they encourage confrontational or battling styles of interaction. It is important to examine what types of audiences that get pulled into the various online discussions or discussion groups. For instance, Enli (2007: 53-9) demonstrates that a high percentage of the participatory audience who interacted with a popularized political TV debate program, had xenophobic and right wing leanings. This appears to be true of a number of the participants in the Facebook group under study here, too. However, this is in stark contrast to the Facebook group studied by Kushin and Kitchener, which is a group for those who are opposed to torture as an interrogation tool, and by implication will attract a certain segment of society – that a group like *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, may arguably draw fewer of. Against this backdrop, it seems of utmost importance to not only discuss the type of theme, but also discuss the ideological sympathies represented amongst the debate participants before making claims about Facebook inherently inducing a more civilized or uncivilized debate.

NRK's decision to disallow the news anchor Siv Kristin Sællmann from wearing the cross on TV did however receive an unprecedented number of complaints from viewers. Reportedly, the cross controversy alone received twice as many complaints as the total number of complaints the previous year (185).<sup>3</sup> The head of the committee reports that he received hate mail for NRK's decision on the cross. He adds that blaming Muslims appears to be the main concern of those who penned the hate mail (Jakobsen 2013). On similar note, the secretary of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council, tells NRK that he attributes most of the complaints to the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page. He elaborates that he does not think that this level of engagement is only about the cross on the news, and suggests that conservative Christians are disenchanted by how NRK and other TV channels broadcast too much sex and too many swearwords (Eie 2013). Indeed, the last time audience complaints poured in, was when the TV series 'Threesome' (Trekant) was broadcast, and mobilized protest from similar conservative for its blunt, no strings attached, and experimental attitude to sexual relations. As the analysis will elucidate, the NRK cross-conflict may not be as intrinsically tied to conservative views on sexuality and coarse language, as the secretary of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council proposes. Nonetheless, the secretary hits the nail on the head in the assumption – that the level of engagement in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that this must be about *far more* than the cross on NRK news.

The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council ruling was a blow to the majority of those actively debating on the Facebook page in question. Yet, while, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* initially was created to protest the prohibition of the cross for NRK-news anchors, many of the discussions and audience interactions transpired into heated religio-political debates with strong elements of anti-Muslim, xenophobic, anti-secular and anti-atheist sentiments. Even from the very start, the cross-case functions as a springboard to numerous other religio-political debates within the Facebook group. In this sense, the scope of the group's discussions supersedes the original protest campaign by far.<sup>4</sup> As such the Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* in question is a locus of opposing interests and struggles over

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3 as of December 15<sup>th</sup> 2013.

4 Some anthropologists are slightly dismissive of the value of studying one interface, special interest groups, or fleeting politically charged moments – as they do not deem them as representative of the complex every day social media practices of 'most people'. While these are valid inferences, I believe that studying a special interest group at a particularly charged political moment, may yield additional insights that nuance our understanding of social media users' engagement with religio-political topics and elucidate other aspects such as group dynamics. As I have argued elsewhere, rather than 'the spiral of silence', such milieus may represent a spiral of speaking out – and contestation. In fact, engaging with other users, and their performance of the conflict through contestation is one of the key aspects of the performative agency of each individual debater (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). People may be drawn to conflict performance for a variety of reasons, to support the cause or to critique the cause in a spectrum of ways linked to a series of ideological or religious positions. My study of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that rather than shun conflict, a number of users face conflict head on.

meaning - in my view - far beyond protests against too much sex and swearing on TV. Indeed, the fact that *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* is still the locus of livid debates about religion in public space, demonstrates that the discussions are indeed not solely about allowing the cross on the news, but that much deeper values are at stake.

At first glance, it may appear as if all those active in this particular debate environment participate because they have a clear religious, ideological, or political agenda. It can certainly be argued that many of the comments posted in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, speak to particular stances on religion and identity politics. There is, however, a danger of over-emphasising the ideological *intent* of the individual debaters. Hence, it is important to take into consideration that many participants may be performing the conflict for other, more mundane reasons such as: letting off steam, boredom, or the need for entertainment (Skogerbø & Winswold 2008:48, Michailidou & Trenz 2015). Elsewhere, I analyse the different types of participants in the Facebook group and their various roles and positions (Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming). Here, I focus on and analyse the various emotive elements of the most salient, overarching narrative which dominates the Facebook page, and to which all participants in this online milieu must relate to.<sup>5</sup> Mediatized debates may attract various constellations of actors, and *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is not exception, here I focus on the most ‘typical’ participants, the most salient frames and their emotive offshoots.

The omnipresence of emotion in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is palpable and deserves analysis. Cottle (2006) refers to the need for research that explores: ‘what makes certain conflicts high in meaning and affect?’ On a similar note, Beckett & Deuze (2016) argue that there is a need for more research and analysis of what Papacharissi (2015) labels ‘affective publics’ and a need for more studies that examine the question: ‘What motivates attention and agency related to media?’ This article is my modest attempt at trying to contribute to filling this knowledge gap. Here, I delve into the multitude of ways in which emotion appears to drive the conflict(s) in and evaluations of opponents in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*.

I situate my study within the broad category of ‘media anthropology’. My methodology and research approach to the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* group is ethnographic and founded on online fieldwork. I also draw extensively on studies about mediatized conflict (Hjarvard et al. 2015, Averbek-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou

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5 Elsewhere (Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming) I focus more on competing narratives, and how participants relate to the master narrative – either by condoning – or contesting it.

2015).<sup>6</sup> Tricia Wang coins the term ‘thick data’, an adaptation of Geertz’ iconic notion of ‘thick descriptions’, which I consider a good match to my own approach. In her own words:

Thick Data is data brought to light using qualitative, ethnographic research methods that uncover people’s emotions, stories, and models of their world (Wang 2013).

I am particularly interested in how people’s emotions, stories and models of the world shape the way they engage with mediatized conflict. In terms of method, I observed (and logged) interactions, repetitive communication patterns, positions, and roles, in the group, during the first weeks of peak activity from November 4<sup>th</sup> of 2013 until December 13<sup>th</sup> of 2013.<sup>7</sup> I conceptualize my research as a (time-delayed) online ethnographic fieldwork of the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook group. In a sense, my observations can be considered a form of non-participant observation, because I observe discussions that have already taken place, and I am not a member of the group I am studying.<sup>8</sup> The quotes in this article are reconstructions of arguments (and not direct quotes) from the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page. The reconstructions represent common positions among debaters, and illustrate repetitive patterns of communication and modes of enacting the conflict. I use NetCapture (a Google Chrome extension) to archive the Facebook discussions for coding purposes in the qualitative analysis software program Nvivo.<sup>9</sup> The Facebook group is open, and I do not need to log on to my Facebook account to observe the interactions that go on in the group.<sup>10</sup> It is evident that I do not influence the

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6 My focus on mediatized conflict may prompt other scholars to place my research within what Rasmussen (2016) calls a ‘Contestation- and conflict-oriented’ approach to social media.

7 This period covers the weeks with the highest levels of activity and discussions and during this time frame all postings are related to the NRK-Cross case. Discussions on the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page are still going strong, including a wide range of issues that pertain to the cross and Christianity in Norway, and at times, the world at large. The Facebook group is still active at the time of writing, September 2016, though the number of likes has decreased to 117 240, suggesting that roughly 3000 people unliked the group since I started collecting data in the spring of 2015.

8 During the process of data collection I quickly discovered the benefit of not being logged onto Facebook while collecting the data, in the sense that my name and profile picture would then not feature a zillion times in the material for coding.

9 Each individual post with the debate and comments it sparks is saved as PDF. NetCapture PDFs a Facebook discussion with all the comments, but entails a meticulous eye for detail on the part of the researcher in terms of including all the comments, and replies to replies on a post that may have elicited a very high level of activity. Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of NetCaptures ways of ‘capturing’ the data entails giving the application highly intrusive access to near all the information on your Facebook profile and the profiles of everybody on your friend list. I chose the option that did not grant such access, but it may possibly be more tedious in terms of usage.

10 I treat the Facebook group discussions as interactional transcripts and consequently conceptualize them as my field notes. It is these field notes that I code. In addition, I keep a field diary, which includes a log of technical and methodological queries and challenges, adjustments of the substantive codes and preliminary analysis and reflections. I code the data within four main codes; themes, roles, styles and arguments. The codes function as a springboard to further analysis. I write in ethnographic present.

online milieu but instead observe what has already happened.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, this approach allows for a deeper study of group dynamics and analysis of the emotive performance of conflict - in a particular environment at the very peak of the conflict.

Several of the contributions to the anthology *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts* (Eskjær et al. 2015) provide a detailed analysis of bottom-up emotional engagement with mediatized conflicts or what Papacharissi (2015) terms ‘affective publics’. In this article, I survey the common characteristics of audience engagement across the mediatized conflict cases and analyse my empirical data from *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* in relation to the findings from these other studies about mediatized conflict. The article is structured as follows, in the first two sections I briefly summarize relevant scholarly work on mediatized conflict, and affect. In the main body of the article I analyse the main narratives within *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* in relation to the findings of other studies on affect in mediatized conflicts (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). I employ the findings as section headings, for example ‘Shaming and Blaming’. The clear separation of the findings into separate headings, are analytical constructs to ease the analysis. Often the mechanisms and characteristics described in the various headings in actuality intersect. Before delving into the data, I sketch out some basic observations about both mediatized conflict and affect.

## 1.1 On Mediatized Conflicts

‘Conflict’ can take a variety of forms, ranging from verbal disagreements to war. In his seminal study ‘Mediatized Conflict’, Simon Cottle (2006) argues that at the very core, ‘conflicts’ invariably reflect ‘a struggle over interests and outlooks’. As will be demonstrated, this basic definition is in fact a very good match for the case at hand. Integral to the notion of conflict is dispute. ‘Making a drama of a crisis has always been part of mass media’ argue Beckett & Deuze (2016: 4). Against this backdrop one can argue that ‘the drama of conflict’ simply spilled over to social media. On a general level, conflicts can be latent or manifest, but tend to include disputes, contentions, and struggles over meaning. Moreover, conflicts may range from single-issue campaigns to complex multi-layered disputes (Cottle 2006). I will argue that some mediatized conflicts fluctuate in-

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11 This applies to the time-frame of study. It is important to note the research is not covert and the moderator of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* announced my research in the group, and linked to my university profile page. Discussions that took place immediately after this announcement may possibly be influenced by the knowledge that a researcher was analyzing interactions, but these interactions are not included in my time-frame. The announcement of my study did elicit some response amongst the group members, mostly in the form of confirmation of the importance of studying this group, a long the lines of this possibly affecting the cause in positive way.

between these two. Digital media change the preconditions of public communication through use-generated content and participants actively framing debates and conflict (Averbeck-Lietz et al. 2015). Of particular relevance to the current text, is that conflicts may range from the ‘objectively real’ to the ‘subjectively perceived’, and that conflicts are invariably both ‘pursued’ and ‘purposefully enacted’ (Cottle 2006).

The idea of both pursuing and enacting conflict is central to theoretical frameworks of many other scholars who work on mediatized conflict, myself included. In his elaborations, Cottle discusses how media perform and enact conflict, and draws attention to both how media ‘do’ conflict, but also how audiences engage with conflict. In this article, I shift focus slightly away from media performance per se, and focus instead on how social media users perform and enact conflict. In this sense, I place my study within what can be considered the bottom up dynamics of mediatized conflicts. I build on Cottle (2006) and Hjarvard et al.’s (2015) discussions of mediatized conflict in order to focus on the ways in which media audiences may ‘add a series of dynamics to conflicts, namely, amplification, framing and performative agency, and co-structuring’, as formulated by Hjarvard et al. (2015:6) According to Hjarvard et al., there are four possible outcomes of mediatized conflicts: 1) reduce or resolve conflicts, 2) generate new conflicts, 3) transform existing conflicts, and 4) intensify or prolong conflicts (ibid.:11). This article focuses in particular on the amplification of conflict. Drawing on Hjarvard et al.’s (2015) framework and several of the contributions to the edited volume *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts*, this article seeks to contribute to deepening our knowledge with regards to how social media users enact and perform conflict in ways that intensify, transform, , or multiply the conflict(s) (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015)<sup>12</sup>.

Conflicts are generally ‘high in meaning’ and ‘high in affect’ for those involved, and some conflicts burn briefly whilst others rage on for years or even generations (Cottle 2006). Why do some conflicts become infused with moral charge?, asks Cottle. In a European context, ‘trigger themes’ (Hagen 2015: 116-118) such as ‘immigration’ ‘religion’, and ‘climate’ are more likely to induce spiralling arguments and the escalation of conflicts, and to draw the interest of particular types of audiences (Ibid, Enli 2007 54-7, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou et al 2015) . In addition, I would argue that trigger themes paired with topics that pertain to personal belief systems and identity politics may be particularly well-suited to draw out emotive responses, a point to which I will return. Conflicts may be ‘visualised’, ‘dramatized’, ‘narrativised’, ‘mythologised’, in particular ways that may lead to the amplification of conflict (Cottle 2006). Several scholars discuss the multiple ways in which media may ‘perform conflict’ in modes that are high in affect (Hjarvard

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12 This study is a subproject of the Scandinavian study Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments (CoMRel) <http://www.hf.uio.no/imk/english/research/projects/comrel/>.

et al. 2015, Averbek-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015).

Typically, posts on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* are news-stories posted by the administrator twinned with his personal introduction. The comments from participants in the Facebook group deal with the news-story and/or introduction to a varying degree. User-engagement often entails a display of emotion. Intriguingly, in this online milieu, stances rarely stand entirely uncontested. Hence, this Facebook page can be viewed as a mediatized religious environment where identity politics and religious disputes are played out openly. As shall be demonstrated, the performance of the conflict entails both constructions and contestations of religious realities and religiously grounded positions, and formations, negotiations, and reconfigurations of religious and non-religious identities (both individual and national). In this article, I substantiate and illustrate the multiple ways in which the conflict is driven by emotion.

Hjarvard et al. maintain that mediatized conflicts involve particular dynamics such as amplification and co-structuring, which are extensions of performative functions of agency, lending a dramaturgy to a conflict. If applied to the case of social media, users enact and perform the conflict in multiple ways in order to attract attention. Performative agency<sup>13</sup> then may include the ways in which actors frame the conflict, the repetitive patterns of communication through which they communicate, such as trigger themes and emotional cues.<sup>14</sup> I am particularly interested in the group dynamics that may come into play amongst social media actors during a mediatized conflict. How social media users engage with one another, put forward - and evaluate each other's statements, is in my view part and parcel of users' performative agency and power to shape the conflict itself.

It can be argued that those who participate in - or perform mediatized conflicts over time are motivated by something in particular be it a political leaning or an activated set of emotions (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015, Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). They not only represent a type of 'performative involvement' in the mediatized conflict, but in fact play a 'constitutive role' in the conflict itself (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015). Stamina and persistence may be considered a crucial part of conflict performance in online milieus. Participating in the debates over an extended timeframe, incessantly arguing a particular point of departure, or unremittingly pushing a specific frame or remediation of conflict are both key to enacting conflict and ensuring that a perspective gains attention (Abdel-

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13 I employ the concepts 'performing conflict' 'dramaturgy', 'enactment of conflict' and 'performative agency' based on my reading of Hjarvard et al. (2015), Sumiala (2015) and Chouliaraki, (2015).

14 I borrow the term 'emotional cues' from Figenschou et al (2015: 131). My understanding and use of the term 'emotional cues' also draws on the concept 'emotionally charged phrases' as employed by Michailidou & Trenz (2015).

Fadil, forthc.). As will be demonstrated, emotional framing is a significant factor, with regards to creating audience engagement.

## 1.2 On Affect

Emotion drives people's increasingly intimate relationships with technology, fuels engagement with news and information (...) It inspires connection. As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. (Beckett & Deuze:2).

Emotional engagement<sup>15</sup> with news or politically charged moments is commonplace. Rather than assume that this is an entirely novel trait attributable to social media, it is important to acknowledge that news has always tugged at emotional strings, but that today there a wider range of 'emotional styles' and audiences are explicitly encouraged to engage (Beckett & Deuze 2016: 3). Indeed, it has been documented that stories with emotional cues tend to both gain audience attention and prolong audience engagement (Beckett & Deuze:3, Figenschou et al. 2015).

'We know from politics that people respond to emotion not ideas or facts—inspiring the rise of the so-called "fact-free" politics' maintain Beckett & Deuze (2016: 3). A similar point is fetchingly formulated by Clay Shirky, who states: 'As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think' (ibid.: 4). Aside from the catchy packaging of the argument - is Shirky's dismal picture accurate – and - do emotions and thoughts necessarily need to contradict one another? (Pfister 2015). These are very important queries, however I do not think that these questions can be sufficiently answered with a simple yes or no, mainly because it depends on the composition of the publics.<sup>16</sup> Papacharissi's (2014) concept of 'affective publics' is a term that fittingly, covers the affective ways in which social media audiences engage with news and mediatized conflict. Indeed as Beckett & Deuze (2016: 3) argue:

One key motive for consuming and certainly for sharing news in the social media space is personal. The consumer is acting in an emotionally charged way in connection with their community or wider networks.

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15 Papacharissi (2015: 20-5) operates with a clear distinction between affect on the one hand and feelings/emotions on the other. Affect is held to be an energy or a mood, which may be subconscious, while feelings and emotions are theorized as being identified. I do not operate with a similar distinction. I use all three terms interchangeably, to describe both phenomena.

16 Audiences can constitute a variety of publics depending on the cause or topic, and a variety of background factors. See also footnote 2.

Papacharissi (2015:131) argues a similar point, arguing that narratives fuelled by personal affect, may be particularly well suited to counter politically dominant narratives:

These affectively charged micro-narratives typically produce disruptions or interruptions of the political narratives, inviting others to tune in and feel their way into their own place in politics.

Engaging in online debates about a mediatized conflict in a Facebook group like *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* certainly fits the bill, in that 1) most of the initial posts by the group administrator are links to news, 2) the emotionally-charged responses from engaged audiences – ubiquitous, and 3) the dominant narratives in the online milieu can be considered in opposition to dominant political and mainstream media frames. In the next section I turn to how these characteristics manifest themselves in practice, as affective performances of conflict. I focus on both the specifics of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, and the clear parallels across mediatized conflicts about entirely different themes.

On a general level, the discussion will provide layered insights on how mediatized conflicts about religion and media are instigated and performed in particular social contexts, by social media users. The goal is to shed light on the role of participatory audiences in framing and amplifying mediatized conflicts about religion, especially on the ways in which conflicts are intensified through what I call the politics of affect.

## 2 Affective Performance(s) of Conflict

### 2.1 Giving the ‘Voiceless’ a Voice: Claiming to Be the Silent Majority

*Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, carries the characteristics of many other types of online environments. By virtue of its thematic (and initial protest-) focus, it appeals to particular interest groups, such as, those I have categorized as ‘conservative Christians’ and ‘nationalists’, which some times are overlapping categories.<sup>17</sup> Conservative Christians and nationalists, are characterized by being the most voluminous in terms of unique Facebook

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<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* also attracts debaters who do not share the group’s main point of departure, which makes for a very lively and at times livid debate climate, the intricacies of which I discussed in more detail in Abdel-Fadil, forthc. Broadly speaking those who are the most active on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* and the enactment of the conflict(s) can be divided into five clusters and ‘types’ of participants: Conservative Christians, Nationalists, Mediators, Fortified Secularists, and Ardent atheists.

profiles/individuals<sup>18</sup> and the number of comments in this group. Hence their enactment of the conflict can be said to dominate the page, and hence conservative Christians and nationalists play an active role in shaping the conflict(s) and the outcomes, and are the focus of the current article.<sup>19</sup> On a whole, conservative Christians main concern is the preservation of Christianity in Norway (and at times the world). They rally for more visibility of Christianity in public space, and often equate the nation with themselves. Their language tends to be more prone to a transcendental vocabulary, includes prayers, and is void of profanities. Conservative Christians, often express that they feel marginalized in Norwegian society, due their conservative religious views. Conservative Christians zealously focus on preserving Christianity in their performance of the conflict. As for the nationalists, they tend to be more liberal with the use of swearwords, and more into the preservation of ‘Norway’ than Christianity. Nationalists, often express xenophobic views with or without explicit Christian leanings. These individuals extensively focus on the preservation of ‘Norwegian heritage’ In their own rendition, conservative Christians and nationalists seem themselves as representing the majority of Norwegians, and that Norway is a ‘Christian nation’ founded on ‘Christian cultural heritage’.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that these claims do stand uncontested, and as I have demonstrated elsewhere, atheists and secularists ferociously battle against this reading of their nation and national identity (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). However, an elaboration of these stances is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the worldview the typical participants in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is that they speak *for* the Christian nation. This starting point is significant in terms of affect, and shapes much of their emotive engagement with the mediatized conflict.

How then, do conservative Christians and nationalists (on a whole) perceive and frame the original NRK-cross conflict? All the data referred to in this article reflects main tendencies in the data, and in no way claims to be the only view purported by those I categorize as conservative Christians or nationalists. Part and parcel of their overarching conflict narrative, is that the pro-cross complaints were in the hundreds, while the against the cross complaints are reported to be a mere handful. This is referred to in an attempt to add credentials to their claim that they represent the majority view on the issue. Such descriptions of the state of affairs give rise to arguments of the type: ‘we are the real people’s voice’ and ‘Norwegian PBS is forced to allow a small minority dictate it’. Similar findings are found in Michaeliou & Trenz’s (2015) study about EU and

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18 There is of course a hypothetical possibility that some users have created more than one Facebook profile and are commenting under several names. I have not scrutinized this further.

19 For a more detailed description of the various types and an elaboration on their performance of the conflict(s) in relation to one another, see (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

20 This is not entirely straightforward. For there is an intriguing paradox whereby conservative Christians and nationalists seem themselves as both in majority and marginalized or silenced.

environmentalism where some of the debaters self-identify as the ‘silent majority’ or what I have called ‘the will of the people’, elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

Even if some individual journalists within NRK may sympathize with the idea of a news anchor being able to wear a cross, this is not the official stance. Rather, NRK maintain that their dress code policy was clear on this matter long before the journalist Siv Kristin Sællmann chose to adorn herself with the cross pendant when reading NRK’s local news in what is popularly termed ‘the Bible-belt’ region of Norway. In fact, NRK’s policy prohibits news anchors from wearing any garments or symbols, which may signify any religious or political due to a commitment to ‘neutrality’ in that particular role. In this reading, the complaints from viewers displeased with the cross on Norwegian TV-screens and PBS –news may have sparked NRK to enforce their policy – but they did not instigate the ban itself.

In contrast, within the ‘silent majority’ remediation of the conflict the ban is perceived as a direct result of NRK’s cowardice when faced with (at most) a handful of complaints from viewers outraged by a Christian cross being exhibited on PBS- news. Proponents of this view consider themselves the real representatives of the majority of Norwegians and thus claim to have ‘the Norwegian people’ on their side when they demand that NRK news anchors be allowed to wear the cross when on NRK.

In the remediation of the cross-ban conflict in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* it is often portrayed as NRK targeting either Siv Kristin Sællman (the personal angle) or Christians (the religious persecution angle). Both of these remediations tell the story of undue maltreatment, and hence are well-suited to stir up emotions amongst audiences with similar leanings. Furthermore, part and parcel of this framing is that the pre-existence of NRK’s rules and clothing policies is overlooked. Instead, the story is portrayed as if Sællmann (or Christians) are unfairly treated by a totally random, ad hoc regulation that came into being when Siv Kristin Sællmann wore her cross pendant in the NRK newsroom. Much as NRK’s regulations for attire and neutrality are ignored, the fact that they not only exist but also apply to people of other religions or political affiliations is often similarly brushed over. Frequent references to arguments of the type ‘if she /we can’t wear the cross then they shouldn’t be allowed to wear the hijab’ evidence this disconnect, and the disregard for the policy that NRK’s verdict is founded upon. In arguments of these types who is who gets a bit blurry. The journalist ‘Siv Kristin Sællmann’ becomes interchangeable with ‘we’, and hence who is allowed or disallowed from wearing a cross (and when

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21 For instance in my analysis of (top-down) media frames in Post-Mubarak Egypt demonstrates how opposite political fractions claim to represent ‘the will of the people’, which in turn appears to be interlinked with an attempt to dictate the political process in a particular direction (<https://newmeast.wordpress.com/2013/08/03/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-egypts-propaganda-war/>).

and where) becomes equally fuzzy. Together, these aspects lay the foreground for the conversation to transpire into one about the visibility of religion, and who's religion it is OK to show in public.

With this as a backdrop, the question of the size of Siv Kristin Sællmann's cross becomes very important to the debaters, the argument is: Its mere 14mm ought to be a sight to be tolerated. Also here the contrastation to the hijab serves to highlight that the cross is so tiny while the hijab is protruding. Particularly when the debate transcends its original boundaries and the conflict rages on as if the cross is forbidden in the Norwegian public sphere in general, the conflict transforms into one about the general visibility of religion, and which religion it is ok to display in public, or has the privilege of being 'the right religion'. The conceptualisation of a minority trying to dictate the majority is an emotional trigger theme, that pushes forward narratives about right and wrong – and upholding justice.

## 2.2 Separating 'Right' from 'Wrong': Moral and Normative Claims

When conservative Christians and nationalists demand that the cross be allowed to flash on the TV screen during news bulletins, they are in fact making a normative claim. Put simply, in their worldview it is immoral to forbid news anchors from adorning a cross. In this light, the prohibition of the cross is seen as a great injustice to 'Norwegians' – often equated with 'Christians'. Indeed, as other scholars have pointed out, normative claims and public negotiations of meaning and controversy are an integral part of the dynamics of mediatized conflicts (Sumiala 2015). Remediating and reframing conflict is thus a significant part of conflict performance and social media users' engagement with mediatized conflict (Cottle 2006, Eskjær, et al. 2015, Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

Reframing and restructuring conflicts by positing alternative frames, is part and parcel of contesting and remediating conflict as interpreted and mediated by both mainstream media and co-debaters. In this sense, there is an element of public opinion making, in the performance of mediatized (Cottle 2006, Eskjær, et al. 2015). Put simply remediations contribute to shaping audience perceptions. The discussions between debaters in social media tend to reveal conflicting moral problems, and different senses and parameters of or for morality (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). On the one hand social media users engage in what can be defined as both an ideological and a moral battle, when performing conflict. At the same time, debaters also compete for attention, and ultimately there are winners and losers in all performances of conflict (Cottle 2016, Hjarvard et al, 2015, Michaeliou & Trenz 2015). According to this perspective, the most salient frames gain the most attention and dominate the debate, and are thus indicative of who wins and loses ground in the performance of conflict. In the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, there is a somewhat skewed

starting point since the most salient frames and the narratives that branch out from them stem from the two groups of participants with the most obvious presence in the Facebook group. These frames draw on a particular type of emotive framing, as I will discuss further, in subsequent sections.

Remediations of conflict often entail restructuring the conflict in a manner that puts forward moral and normative claims. Figenschou et al. (2015) argue that audiences may experience a clash between news coverage and their own ‘common sensical popular morality’ and react to news frames on the basis of a ‘intuitive ethics’. For instance, in contentious public debates about immigration, debaters expressing pro-immigration stances often argue on the basis of what they consider the moral obligation of a society to treat immigrants and refugees with decency.<sup>22</sup> By redressing the moral claims of a story, engaged audiences are able to gain attention and following for their remediation of the conflict. For instance, in the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, conservative Christians and nationalists redress the morals by reframing the core of the conflict in the following emotionally charged and normative manner: it is a moral disgrace to ban the display of Christian symbols in a Christian nation. Neither of these claims go uncontested among other types of participants (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). Among likeminded participants however, the normative and emotive frame is both compelling and grounds to ‘rise and revolt’ against opponents. By remediating the conflict, and emphasizing shared ideas of morality and moral justice, conservative Christians and nationalists are able to draw attention to the moral claim (and amplification of the conflict) that it is wrong to target and discriminate Christians in such an adversary way. By appealing to core identity issues and the moral justice of protecting Christians against undue discrimination, NRK ultimately represents a breach of justice. The perceived remedy is that NRK follow their (true) moral obligation to protect Christian values and preserve the national religion rather than forcefully and unjustly dictate the politics of a tiny minority. Injustice alone, is a powerful mobiliser of affect, but when it is coupled with such emotionally charged identity politics it gains even more potency. In effect, such normative remediations are packed with trigger themes and emotional cues, designed to tug at the very core fabrics of emotion that constitute a sense of self, and mobilize people into affect.

Central to the most salient framing of the cross-conflict is NRK’s skewed moral compass that defames Christians. The only way to correct these ills is to pressure NRK to restore the correct moral order of things, by calling them out. Justice is served when Christianity is awarded special treatment over other religions. NRK ought to grant Christians the right to wear the cross when reading the news because Norway is a Christian nation, and jewellery that signifies affiliation to Christianity is a ‘natural’ expression of identify. Prohibition on the other hand is unjust and

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22 In cases of for instance deportation of immigrants, case which are both dramatic and emotively potent, audiences protest. Their sense of justice is drawn from their intuitive ethics, since they see it as simply wrong to throw out a person or family who thrives in this country, due to bureaucratic details (Figenschou et al. 2015).

outrageous. In effect, the demand to wear the cross expands from NRK newsrooms to all areas of public sphere. In this sense the frame transitions into a call for the freedom to wear the cross wherever and whenever in a more literal sense, as if the cross was prohibited from all public space in Norway.<sup>23</sup>

An expansion of whom the cross is forbidden for is observable in one of the main frames of the conflict in this Facebook group. While the cross is initially understood as being prohibited for NRK news anchors, the understanding gradually expands to include all employees in NRK, after which all employees in the public sector are considered to be bound by a cross-ban, and then finally, the prohibition is envisioned as applying to all Norwegians. In the imaginations of the most active in the online discussions on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, the conceptualizations of the ‘cross-ban’, are thus ever expansive. Hence, the prohibition of the cross, is exceedingly understood as a national ban in this online milieu. This is an example of the aforementioned spiralling argumentation style, sparked by a trigger theme, which in turn induces emotive responses. In Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*, I demonstrate how this very spectacular understanding of the cross-ban is both a core characteristic of the debate while simultaneously also a highly contentious trait of performing the conflict for many of the debaters. Here it serves as an example of how the most salient frames of conflict are both high in effect and symbolic value because they relate to identity politics.

It is against this background, that many debaters call for increasing the visibility of the cross in public space in Norway. This call for the cross in public space is not to be confused with the right to display all religions in public. For the conservative Christians and nationalists, the moral order entails a hierarchy that Christianity ranks higher than other faiths (or non-religion), and ultimately links Christianity to territorial claims of the type: Norway is Christian, not Muslim.<sup>24</sup> Fear of Muslims or atheists gaining territory or dictating regulations about the public display of religion in Norway, is tangible.

Some conflicts and frames are better suited to draw out audiences’ sense of justice and moral obligations. Trigger themes are inherent to this type of conflict. The totality of these aspects lays the foreground for emotional involvement in conflict performance. Emotional engagement in the enactment of the conflict may in turn lead to a sense of a media slant.

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23 As discussed in detail in (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*) this is a fairly common point of departure in the debates in the Facebook group in question.

24 While the superiority of Christianity is wildly and ferociously contested by other types of participants, Only a fraction of those rallying for the cross in this Facebook group do so with a ‘pro-all-religions- in public attitude’ (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*).

### 2.3 Restoring ‘Balance’ to a Perceived Media Slant

Rebellion against mainstream media representations of the NRK-cross case is perhaps not surprisingly at the core of many of the lively discussions in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. This actually appears to be a fairly common trait with regards to audience engagement with mediatized conflicts, in the sense that debaters may experience a news slant that contradicts their ‘sense of justice’ (Figenschou et al. 2015). In their discussion of immigration debates in Norway, Figenschou et al. (2015) demonstrate how many of the debaters appear to believe in the ‘significance of news’, and in the importance of ‘speaking truth to power’ by critiquing news frames. This leads to stories with emotional cues, and the emotional involvement of the debate participants, which in turn, fuels stories of causal effects or blame, a point I shall return to. When dealing with topic of media bias, Cottle (2006) contrasts research findings of actual media slants to common sensical ideas about propaganda, media bias, distortions, in everyday experiences. Put briefly, people tend to have an exaggerated sense of media bias. Even if it is a very common perception the idea of media slant or propaganda doesn’t hold, according to Cottle (2006).<sup>25</sup> Several studies of bottom up mediatized conflict, demonstrate that perceptions of media bias are commonplace (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). In fact, it may even be seen as one of the most common traits across conflicts. It appears to be the driving force for numerous social actors who may enter the debate and perform the conflict on the basis of the need to balance out the slant, tell the truth, and remediate the conflict from the ‘right angle’. Costructuring the conflict from another vantage point as an attempt to counteract perceived media bias is certainly evident across several mediatized conflicts.

In the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, the main claim about media bias revolves around NRK being leftist and secularist in its media reporting. The most vocal proponents of an alleged media slant, consider NRK a media outlet for socialist propaganda. They lament that NRK’s lack of neutrality earns them the name ARK rather NRK. AKP is reference to the Labour Party in Norway, which is abbreviated AP. The current Labour party is charged with fuelling PBS with a politicized leftist agenda. This in turn evolves into a critique of the PBS license which all Norwegian households with at TV-set are obliged to pay: the argument being that one should not have to pay to listen to AKP spewing out communist propaganda. A call for boycotting NRK is linked both to the idea of communism and the presumed anti-religious stance of the media outlet.

The link to party politics and politicians is not insignificant. The case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* shows how particular political parties are blamed for the curtailment of religious expression in public spaces. In short, leftists and socialists are seen as ruining Norway with both their naïve immigration politics and their ban of religiosity from public

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25 Arguably media slant may hold better in some corners of the world.

spaces. To top things off these same political parties are seen as also dictating Norwegian media, and manipulating the news to suite their ideological agenda(s). An interlinked emotive response is the condemnation of NRK expressed as ‘To hell with NRK’ or the like. Many debaters tune in stating that they too, do not want to economically support biased, media slant, unfair representation and hence call for a boycott of NRK and the compulsory payment of a TV license per household.

Others call for the dismantling of NRK as a PBS or selling it off altogether: ‘Do they even know they are in Norway?’ ask a number of debaters– an emotive rhetorical question which connotes NRK selling out Norway. In this emotionally charged manner, allowing the cross to be worn by NRK news anchors, is framed as a question of protecting the nation. Part and parcel of this remediation is that socialists and atheists and Muslims are to blame for the nation dissolving. Common arguments include: ‘How can they pose as a Public Service when they do not stand up for - or protect - our Norwegian values? How can they expect us to pay for that crap?’ These types of arguments are often linked to the conviction that NRK only represents a very marginal segment of society - whilst those arguing against NRK or ARK represent the mainstream view in Norway or the ‘silent majority’. Reiterating many of the same points in the very media outlet he seeks to critique Hoelseth, a local politician from the Progress Party, argues that NRK/ARK is ‘Fox News for Socialists’ and that weakening NRK’s grip on the mediascape will lead to more democracy (Hoelseth 2015).

It is important to acknowledge that perceptions of media slant can be seen to represent: ‘a disconnect’ between mainstream media and its audiences, which ‘grows as the industry suffers from a loss in public trust and confidence’ (Witschge & Nygren, 2009: 41 in Beckett & Deuze 2016: 2). This lack of trust in itself may ride on a series of emotions ranging from frustration, fear, to anger leading to the wielding of increasingly emotionally charged frames of mediatized conflict(s). Indeed, similar emotionally charged accusations of media slants and political dictatorship are for instance found in the modes in which publics engage with debates about the EU environment debate, which suggests yet another cross-topic communality of engaged audiences (Michailidou & Trenz 2015). Claims that a minority is dictating a majority, are made in several mediatized conflicts and seem to inspire dictatorship metaphors.

## 2.4 Of ‘Dictatorship’ and ‘Tumors’: Evaluation and Devaluation of Co-Debaters

Audiences often compete for attention. In fact, one of the main characteristics of social media audience’s online engagement with conflict is that it often plays out in the form of competition of perspectives and audience attention. Part and parcel of competing is evaluating other performances of conflict. Audiences then, not only evaluate mainstream media coverage of the conflicts they are engaged in – they also scrutinize and evaluate each and those they hold responsible for the current

state of affairs. Averbek-Lietz (2015) outline the ways in which media audiences interact with one another, and the ways in which they evaluate each others' statements. More specifically Averbek-Lietz (2015) argue that debaters withhold or extend respect in their social evaluation of one another, and thus frequently pass social judgment of others in their interactions. They often do so by either praising arguments as good, or devaluating arguments as bad. These types of evaluations are often extended into evaluations of co-debaters. As I have illustrated elsewhere, in its more extreme iterations take the form of coarse personal insults. The general gist of such insults is to classify opponents as imbeciles (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*).

Affective publics are moved by emotions. Evaluating one another in an emotive fashion, sparks interest and may lead certain frames to gain more attention than others. Michaeliou & Trenz (2015), demonstrate how evaluating others and their user comments, is a key characteristic of the contentious environmental debates in Europe. In the bottom up enactments of the conflict, winners and loser of the debates emerge. Who wins or loses a debate is tied to the overall strategies and the modes of conflict performance (*ibid.*).

Defaming opponents makes for a livid debate, and certainly serves to draw audience attention. Metaphors of disease or political demise are not uncommon. Debaters may be tempted to depict the authority behind an unpopular decision as inflicting 'cancer' or a 'tumour', or classify their opponents as 'North-Korean dictators' or 'EU-dictatorship' or the like (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015). It is interesting to note that similar tactics and emotionally charged descriptions of opponents, are employed by audiences across various mediatized conflicts, on rather dissimilar topics. Discussions about the EU financial crisis, and the NRK Cross-Case are framed in intriguingly similar ways.

In both cases, audiences lament that they have no autonomy or freedoms and provide emotionally charged comparisons to being governed by dictatorships or living in North Korea. In both cases, the governing authorities, (perceived or real) such as specific European governments or the EU parliament in the first case, and the Norwegian government or the Norwegian Council of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council are accused of imposing their authorities in autocratic ways and are depicted in similar ways as representing either terminal disease or a dictatorship. The former implies death and the latter implies suffocation or no room for manoeuvre. Certainly such imagery is tailored to evoke emotive responses. References to being quelled from speech or action, and the looming risk of mortality, serve to ignite the debate in a way that invites more affect to the performance of conflict. Such depictions are well suited, to stir up anger, sadness, or other emotive reactions and hence pushes social media audiences to perform conflict in more emotive ways. The us vs. them divide and mechanisms of othering and blaming are evident in all the bottom up mediatized cases examined, and comes in varieties (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*, Michaeliou & Trenz 2015, Averbek-Lietz et. al 2015), and are appear to be defining characteristics of performing conflict.

Metaphors with a certain flair for drama, are both salient and effective attention grabbers. In *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, one recurrent emotionally charged argument is the somewhat melodramatic argument: what if I tattoo a cross on my arm, what will they do then – chop off my arm? Such dramatic images thrive in (online) debates because they are founded upon trigger themes, which connect to audiences' self-perceptions and identities. This may explain why I come across several instances of the tattoo and chop the arm off argument. In addition, quite a few debaters proclaim (in a far less dramatic fashion) that they plan to tattoo a cross on their body in response to the alleged cross-ban. This comes in addition to all those who announce that they will either brush the dust off their old cross-pendant or purchase one for immediate wear. Within this worldview, such declarations serve to emotionally validate the necessity of exhibiting affiliation to Christianity in public space, at a time when such displays of religiosity are considered problematic or against the law. In this way the conflict is framed as fighting for the right to *be* Christian. Against this backdrop, visibly marking oneself with a cross, is not only an act of defiance, it is also an act of everyday heroism of saving Christianity from its demise.

Affective publics not only play the part of the hero, they also tend to point out the villains.

## 2.5 Shaming and Blaming Tactics

Cultivating an 'Us vs. Them Divide' is, perhaps not unsurprisingly, integral to the enactment of mediatized conflicts. Othering, shaming and blaming, go hand in hand and are core characteristics of the ways in which engaged audiences perform conflict (Abdel-Fadil, forthc., Michaeliou & Trenz 2015, Cottle 2016, Averbek-Lietz et. al 2015). In previous sections, I outlined how emotionally charged evaluations and descriptions of opponents as 'dictators', 'tumours' or 'imbeciles' are commonplace in mediatized conflict dealing with rather different topics. For instance, in *Yes to wearing the cross wherever and whenever* leftist politicians are often described as spineless and resented for being oh-so-politically correct, in their lack of sufficient defence of Norway and Christianity. Still, the main frames involve many different 'others'. Put differently, there is a lot of blame to go around. The main targets are socialist politicians, Muslims, immigrants, atheists, and secularists. For instance, the prohibition of the cross from NRK news is often presented as a cowardly act on behalf of NRK, and as caving into the momentous pressure from a few immigrants, Muslims, leftists, secularists or atheists – who insist on banning the cross – and indeed all Christian symbols from the public sphere in Norway. The blaming comes in different variations. For instance Muslims, immigrants, leftist politicians, secularist and atheists - are accused of De-Christening Norway bit by bit. In this reading these villains are the puppeteers and NRK the puppet. The 'political correctness' of various others is seen as key to the demise of Christianity in Norway, and

is often expressed in protectionist ways of protecting Norway from immigrants or Muslims especially. One of the elaborate spin offs of the main frame, is that socialist politicians are clearly to blame, and are dictating NRK with their secularist agenda, and allowing immigrants and Muslims to be used as pawns in the de-Christianizing of Norway. Another spin of the blaming and shaming tactic is the following: leftist politicians/NRK are so politically correct and naïve, that they end up ‘gifting’ Norway to immigrants/Muslims. In this reiteration, Christianity is sacrificed at the expense of political correctness. A common denominator is that the ultimate goal of all others, is to de-Christianize the nation.

Shaming and blaming are arguably emotive acts, they are projections of negative emotions. Indeed the majority of emotions expressed by audiences when engaging in mediatized debates may be negative. For instance, Michaeliou & Trenz (2015) illustrate how the emotionally charged phrases in the EU environment policy debates, take the shape of negative emotive commentary, and hence the debaters often remediate the conflict in ways that amplify or multiply the conflict(s).<sup>26</sup>

Intriguingly, part and parcel of the blaming game in this online milieu is that those purporting the main frame of blaming Muslims or immigrants are blamed by other debaters for derailing the debate and maliciously scapegoating people who have nothing to do with NRK-cross conflict and using this debate as a springboard to spread xenophobic spew (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*). Still, the main culprits are Muslims, immigrants, atheists, secularists and leftists. Sumaila (2015) discusses how the Us vs. Them divide often takes the form of ‘the ideal victim’ vs. ‘the absolute other’. In my reading, Christians are projected as the ideal victims who endure the most suffering, in the overarching master narrative in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. While, Muslims are depicted as the absolute other, with negative commentary, in ways unparalleled to other groups blamed. Some frames are simply more polarizing than others, and represent what Michaeliou & Trenz (2015) call ‘septic frames’. The most septic frames appear to be reserved for othering Muslims, and will be discussed and contextualized in the next section.

## 2.6 Emotional Cues and ‘Enraged Fans’

The ubiquity of affect marks audience engagement with mediatized conflict. For instance, a defining characteristic of the EU environment debates, as characterized by Michaeliou & Trenz, is the way the conflict is remediated in a fashion that incorporates stories with emotional cues, and negatively emotionally charged phrases. In the case at hand, the very name of the group, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, can be understood as an emotionally charged

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26 In (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*), I discuss the role of participants in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* whose main mission is to mediate between participants and defuse the conflict.

name. While it may not have been intended as a literal description of the Christians' plight in Norway, it does however seem to gradually take on a literal meaning as the enactment of the conflict progresses. It can be argued that for many of the participants in the Facebook group, the name of the group, over time, symbolizes the emotionally charged postulate that the cross is forbidden in all public spaces in Norway. Thus the name of the Facebook group can in itself spark emotive responses amongst some debaters and simultaneously instil the perception that Christians in Norway need to fight for their individual right to bear the cross in public. As an observer, one may feel overwhelmed by what appears to be the dominant mode of performing the conflict. The sheer number of posts that argue that: Muslims and immigrants are to blame for the cross-ban, or claim that there is no freedom of speech or freedom of religion in Norway, or claim that there is a general cross-ban in Norway is somewhat daunting. Certainly, the conflict is frequently enacted through amplification, transformation, and generating new conflicts. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary characteristics and amplifications of the conflict on this Facebook page is what can be described as an expansive understanding of for whom the cross is perceived as forbidden for.

The fervent performance of conflict rides on emotions. Media audiences exchange moral claims, discuss rights and wrongs and uncertainties, thereby mobilizing emotions (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). Choulikarki (2015), working on mediatized death in the Arab world, demonstrates how the mobilization of emotions is interlinked to 'affective attunement'. Thus, even if remediations tend to ride on the emotions of the person(s) remediating, they may also serve to mobilize and fine-tune the emotions of their audiences (Choulikarki 2015). In the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, as has been illustrated throughout this article, many of the frames tug at the strings of emotive perceptions of self, religious and national identity. Yet another example is the claim that the cross will be erased from all public and places and symbols, planting the suspicion that the cross will ultimately have to be erased from the Norwegian flag, rendering it entirely unrecognizable as a national symbol. The invitation to visualise the Norwegian flag without a cross – is highly powerful because it may give associations to being erased or wiped out as both a nation and a religion. In addition, by removing the blue and white cross in the centre of the Norwegian flag, one is left with an entirely red flag – a very suitable symbol for those arguing that Norway is a socialist dictatorship. The latter is a frame with less emotive appeal among the debaters in this online context, than the former. One of the emotions that drives these types of frames is rage.

Social media users who immerse themselves in rage and who frequently unleash embellished, emotionally charged phrases, and septic frames, are classified as 'enraged fans' by Michaeliou & Trenz (2015). The most septic frames in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* are reserved for blaming Muslims, and put forward by 'enraged fans'. Part and parcel of enraged fandom is cultivating an 'us vs. them divide' only in more extreme renditions. Enraged fans take

emotional cues up a notch. In the case of blaming Muslims, outrage at Muslims' (perceived) inherent wish to take over Norway and Europe and eradicate Christianity is expressed in a manner reminiscent of Eurabia theories (Bangstad 2014). These blaming tactics differ from other forms of othering, in that the enraged fans, embellish in antagonistic descriptions of Muslims classifying them as murderers, rapists, criminals, thieves, or cockroaches. Debaters who embellish in their 'absolute othering' of Muslims in this manner, transition from being emotionally engaged to being utterly outraged can be said to constitute 'enraged fans'. In my interpretation, 'enraged fans' are a priori angry, in the sense that they bring their rage to the mediatized conflict. That is, enraged fans are already angry before they enter this particular space in order to enact the conflict. When further immersed in other debaters' negatively charged phrases and septic frames, their anger swells, and the transition to enraged fan ensues.

The septic frames of the enraged fans do not go entirely unsanctioned: they are ferociously contested by debaters with other convictions (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). In addition, the administrator of the group has blocked a number of the enraged fans and deleted some of their comments due to unsuitable content.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, septic frames and enraged fans are present in the empirical material I analyse. Some enraged fans lament that they are being censored and that they plan to leave the Facebook group because they cannot exercise their freedom of speech in this online forum.

While enraged fans amplify their rage and invite others to join in and ride a wave of anger, there are other emotions that audiences may seek to fine-tune when participating in mediatized conflicts about religion.

## 2.7 Affective Publics and Fine-Tuning Emotion(s )

Anger is an emotion that appears to motivate and shape much of audiences' performance of conflict. Yet as argued by Beckett & Deuze (2016:4) media audiences tend to yearn for the full range of emotions (e.g., love and desire, wonder and surprise, fun, anger and fear, disgust). Remediating conflict(s) mobilizes and in Choulikarki's terminology 'fine-tunes' emotions in both audiences and other debaters, and may activate a spectrum of emotions such as: outrage, compassion, contempt, vengeance (Choulikarki 2015). In other words, a range of emotions may connect with - and engage audiences. Against this backdrop, it is important not to overlook that anger may not be the only emotion that is being nourished and encouraged to flourish in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever*

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27 In the administrator's own rendition, he says he does not have the capacity to moderate the group, but that he has blocked or deleted 10-15 users from the Facebook page due to extremist views. He says his aim is to allow for a vibrant debate but draws the line at vulgar language and hateful comments. The number of 'members' or 'likes' fluctuates, as some leave the group, and new members join (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

*and wherever I choose*. Sentiments of compassion and love for fellow humans regardless of religious or political affiliations shape a few of the counter narratives in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, but an elaboration of this is beyond the scope of this article. Still, it is interesting to note that some frames of conflict appear to be driven by feelings of boredom and the need for distraction, gratification and entertainment (Abdel-Fadil, forthc., Skogerbø & Winsvold 2008).

Rage and outrage are certainly well represented in the main frame(s) of the NRK cross-conflict as put forward in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* as evidenced in this article. The main targets of anger are: Leftists, Muslims, immigrants, atheists, secularists as previously demonstrated. Nonetheless, other types of participants also express rage. For instance, atheists unleash much rage, by scapegoating religious people who are often likened to imbeciles (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). It is also interesting to note that rage is as at times expressed as part of an exasperated evaluation of other debaters who are perceived circulating unfounded remediations of the conflict. Accusing other debaters of being unhinged or racist may at times be part and parcel of their fury (ibid.).

Still the analysis of mediatized conflicts has to take into consideration that some times emotions are muddled. For instance, the main frame(s) that are discussed in this article appear to be driven by anger or at times even outrage, but may actually ride on a more complex set of emotions. One emotion does not necessarily rule out another. Affective reactions can draw on a series of either complementary or contradictory emotions simultaneously. It appears equally likely that some of the remediations are fuelled with sadness and fear in addition to anger. Both sadness and fear may pose as anger, but more importantly all three emotions may coexist and intermingle and together drive a narrative or worldview. For instance, the nostalgic longing for a Norway (real or perceived) that once was, can be understood as an expression of sadness for what was lost. At the same time it can be interpreted as an expression of the fear of irrevocable damage to the nation or the extinction of Christianity all together. Both sadness and fear can fuel anger or all three emotions may inhabit a narrative side by side. By incorporating emotive cues and trigger themes of this sort into the remediations of the conflict, emotive reactions among fellow debaters are likely to ensue.

Enraged fans take the emotional rollercoaster to its extremity, by immersing themselves in variations of outrage, contempt and vengeance. The dedication to vengeance is particular to enraged fans. By fine-tuning emotive narratives, participants are able to draw the attention of audiences and the push the emotional buttons of co-debaters, sparking affective responses.

### 3 Concluding Reflections

*Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is a special interest Facebook group and online milieu, which shares a number of characteristics with other bottom up performances of mediatized conflicts. If we are to sum up some of the findings, across cases then we find that mediatized conflicts tend to entail: a struggle for audience attention, ideological confrontations, remediation of conflict, the evaluation of other debaters' user comments, passing both social and moral judgment. Moreover, typically mediatized conflicts entail moralizing the conflict and mobilizing emotions that centre around trigger themes, which in turn may lead to shaming & blaming participants with opposing views. Ultimately we find that the multiple ways in which social media users perform conflict leads to winners and losers of the debate(s). Dominant affective narratives in a given digital setting may run counter to dominant political narratives.

Debaters remediate conflicts in ways that draw on an abundance of emotional cues and efficiently grab the attention of co-debaters and other audiences. Calling upon particular sets of emotions (over other types of feelings) may be crucial to the enactment of both the conflicts that play out in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, but also mediatized conflicts in general. In this sense we can talk not only of affective publics but also of politics of affect.

Still, certain emotions may simply be better suited to amplify conflicts and thrust audiences into emotive states, creating affective publics. *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that anger may be such a driving emotion, but not exclusively so. This Facebook group, by virtue of dealing with religion and identity issues contains typical trigger themes, which may lead audiences to emotively enact conflict. Still, these modes of enactment of conflict cannot be understood as a characteristic of religious strife alone. It is evident that the same mechanisms are in play when social media users engage with other topics or non-religious themes and entirely secular topics. Affective publics appear to perform conflict in particular ways if the same emotional push buttons are pushed. It seems then, that affect, rather than religious conviction may be the driving force behind the dramaturgy and amplifications of bottom up mediatized conflicts.

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**Biography**

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