

## **Global Face with a National Body? Facebook Appropriation and Use in a National Context**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a study of Facebook in a national context, examining language use, friend networks, and content interaction and sharing. Based on a survey (n=739), six interviews with people living in Denmark, and ethnographic observation on site, the paper present findings which indicate that Danes (of Danish origin) on Facebook mostly interact in Danish with other Danes they know, focusing on their own life and local news, whereas Danes with a mixed background interact with people in several countries and in several, but still only with people close to them. A majority share international entertainment (such as YouTube videos), or sign up for international groups and activities on Facebook. A minority seem to be living in a “Danish capsule” with no or very little transnational interaction. Nothing in these findings indicate strong globalising effects by being on Facebook, but mundane global (sharing) activity needs to be examined further.

### **Keywords**

Facebook, nationality, identity, use, cosmopolitanism

### **Introduction**

When Facebook hit 1 billion users, founder Mark Zuckerberg in a Facebook post stated that “..hopefully together one day we will be able to connect the rest of the world too.”. This quote encapsulates the vision of Facebook as a globalising social product: it aims at connecting everybody across the world. As a widely used media platform, Facebook does indeed hold the promise of turning all of its users into citizens of the global village in that: “..media can play a crucial role in creating the conditions for cosmopolitan citizenship, through both the thematization of difference and the representation of empirical commonalities and universals” (Szersynski and Urry, 2006).

But in practice, are we really internationally oriented and cosmopolitan in our use of Facebook, or do we mostly stick to our own (country, language and national identity)? Surprisingly few researchers have looked at social network site use on a national level, and those who have done so, have mostly done the study from a diasporic, transnational or expatriate perspective (see for instance Hiller og Franz 2004, Giorgiu 2006, Imre 2009, Shklovski 2010, Myase 2011, Jansson 2011) or with a focus on potential differences in use based on ethnicity and race (see Hargittai 2007, Lewis et al 2008, Grasmuck et al 2009) or cross cultural use comparisons (Nemer & Das 2012, Cho & Park 2012). A notable exception, however, is Daniel Miller’s ethnographic study of the uses of Facebook in Trinidad (Miller 200), in which he argues that “There is no longer any such thing as Facebook. There are only the particular genres of use that have developed for different peoples and region” (Miller, 2011, p. x). This project supports this claim in that it looks at particular use patterns in the “region” of Denmark, taking its point of departure in media-oriented studies of Danish identity; and of mundane or banal cosmopolitanism. Thus, this study aims to contribute with new knowledge about national use and appropriation of Facebook, in a culturally and racially homogeneous Scandinavian country, which is often referred to as a “Facebook nation” (in Denmark, Facebook penetration is at least 52%, much more for younger ages). Specifically, the study examines language use practices and interaction around content, and it looks at network connections and examples of “global” engagement in order to understand how inward-looking or cosmopolitan, Danes and the Danish nation are on Facebook.

## Method and Data

The findings presented here are based on data from an explorative survey distributed via Facebook and Twitter in fall 2010 (n=739), and six individual qualitative interviews conducted in December 2012 and May 2013; supplemented by continuous observation of practices on the site. This data has been supplemented with official statistical data, when available.

## Findings

672 of the respondents in the 2010 survey were of Danish origin (both parents born in Denmark) henceforth referred to as “Danes”, the rest of varying ethnic background. Though not representative of the Danish population as such, answers are still useful, in that most people living in Denmark are still “Danes” by birth.

A majority of all respondents communicated with other Facebook users only in Danish (24% ) or mostly in Danish (52,5%). If they used another language, it was almost always English (552 out of 565 respondents), and less than 8% used other languages. The “Danes” (n=612) friends on Facebook mostly consisted of other Danes and people they had met when travelling (46%), 22% replied that their friends consisted of Danes, second generation immigrant and travel friends. 12% had Danes only in their network.

In terms of content, survey answers showed that disregarding ethnic origin, people mostly (median) interacted with their friends about what was going in their own life, by sharing local and international links to YouTube videos and similar entertainment. The “Danes” discussed Danish news rather than international news, whereas the other categories of respondents more often discussed international news. I also asked about respondent’s participation in cross-national events, providing several examples. 134 out of 701 had never engaged in cross-national activities. 356 had joined (fan) groups for American TV shows or celebrities, a similar number had forwarded a video from a friend in another country (339), joined groups for international brands or products (333). People had also joined activist groups (285), “Facebook events” such as the Doppelganger week (199), or offline event activity such as Earth Hour (252). Respondents additionally pointed to activities like “worldwide knit in public – WWWKIP”, “World Geek Day”, “Hug a Korean day”, Flash mobs, “live chat with Snoop Dogg” as examples of what they perceived as cross-national activities.

The 2012 - 2013 interviews with six people of both “Danish” and other ethnic origin based in Denmark showed that the three born Danes amongst them had a very small, if any at all, international network and almost exclusively used Facebook to communicate about personal matters and local/national news. The other three interviewees used Facebook primarily to keep in touch with both Danish friends, friends from stays in other countries, and family in their own or their parent’s home country. One used it very consciously to keep in touch with friends met on her travels, to have a place to stay when travelling again. Though these three often used Danish language, they switched to other languages in their Facebook communication when the audience in context required it. It also became evident that what these respondents themselves perceived as important differences in use was not primarily based on national-cultural differences, but rather generational differences.

So far this study indicates that many Danes use Facebook almost exclusively in a national context. However, on an individual level, people interact both as nationalists and banal cosmopolitans. They maintain close relations with friends and family in Denmark and in their (parent’s) home country; they perform national identity through the use of language, choice of friend ties and communicational content. But they also share a mundane cosmopolitan taste in humour, entertainment and “human interest” issues which are also transnational. Following Christensen, Jansson og Christensen (2011), this suggests that “being at home” with the media involves both enforcing geopolitical borders as well as participating in various fan, activist and taste cultures which cut across national divides.

### Further work

Occasionally global events take place which also reverberate in the Danish Facebook sphere. A recent example is the stepping down of the Catholic Pope (February 2013), resulting in a resurgence of a variety of pope memes on Facebook. One particular popular meme (based on shares) amongst Danes was the “Prince Henrik for Pope” meme, which showed the Danish Queen’s husband face insert in a Pope Image Macro. It is well-known gossip amongst Danes that Prince Henrik would like the title of “King”, but cannot have it. The Danified pope meme thus functioned both as a global news commentary meme as well as a Danish in-joke. In my coming research, I will look more closely into the spreading and appropriation of transnational memes amongst the Facebook Danes, further exploring how mundane globality is transformed in a national setting.

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