

**PARTICIPATION THROUGH
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR:**

**CIRCULATION, CONSIDERATIONS, AND GENRES
IN THE LETTERS INSTITUTION**

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, Columbia University, New York

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen is a PhD student in Communications at Columbia University. He has published articles and book reviews in various social science journals, and co-edited the book *10x10*, out on Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

rkn2103@columbia.edu

(1)-646-326-9660

36 W 74th st, apt #4A
New York, NY, 10023

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ABSTRACT: This article analyze *who* participate in newspaper-mediated debate through letters to the editor, *how* they come to do it by passing muster under six editorial considerations, and *what* the three predominant genres (storytelling, criticism, appeal) of letters allow them to participate in. The starting point is a sedimented ideal of media that citizens can *use*—an ambition for media that are not only watchdogs, sources of information, or entertainers, but also enablers of participation in action and interaction. The contemporary incarnation of this ideal in newspapers is what is here identified as the ‘letters institution’. Its patterns of circulation and contribution, editorial considerations, and narrative genres constitute a fragmented contentious zone between politics, the media, and the private life of the limited number of citizens who get a chance to express themselves through the concrete operations of one of the institutions that gives the abstraction ‘the public debate’ whatever reality it has.

KEYWORDS: democracy, editorial considerations, editors, letters to the editor, media criticism, participation, politics, public, public debate, public sphere.

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I will argue that the letters pages, that kernel of largely unsolicited material published in most newspapers, are the product of a distinct institution—the letters institution. The forms of participation made possible by this institution are the motivating concerns here, and three are identified: storytelling, criticism, and appeal. I demonstrate how the institution that enables them operates on the basis of specific patterns of textual *circulation* (in the form of reading/circulation and writing/contribution), a set of editorial *considerations* (that differ in important ways from news journalism), and particular narrative *genres* that define the three forms of participation. Together, the three dimensions of circulation, considerations, and genres define the letters institution and differentiate it from the news institution it operates within. Combined, they constitute the participatory potential of the letters pages, a concrete instance of mediated public debate that is often referred to but that we know little about.

I identify the ‘letters institution’ as the aggregate of transorganizational and interpersonal formal and informal rules and regularities that define how letters operate in ways that are basically similar across different newspapers (cf. March & Olsen 1984 for an elaboration of the concept of institution). These persistent practices and patterns define letters to the editor as something *distinct* from the news—in the ways in which letters are produced, in how those involved understand them, and in how they present themselves to the readers. My use of the concept ‘institution’ here is in line with other appropriations of new institutionalism in media sociology (Cook 1998, Sparrow 1999), only here the referent is the more narrowly delimited terrain of letters, and not the wider expanse of the news. Though they are to a considerable degree oriented towards the dominant conventions and operations of the news industry, letters to the editor are different, and my analysis lends weight to the position that they cannot be understood simply on the basis of what we know about the logics of the news institution, newsroom culture, and professionalized journalism (see also Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). As one experienced editor told me in an interview: “If there is anything at a newspaper that

is autonomous of news journalism, it is the letters.” Indeed, the autonomy strikes one as going beyond operational peculiarities. Letters are fundamentally different from most newspaper output insofar as they are co-constituted through, and enable, peoples’ capacity to intervene and contribute—something of an anomaly in modern, predominantly one-way, mass media. In this sense, their participatory character foreshadows the newer and more interactive media that journalists and news organizations may have to get used to, and tell us something about how post-war twentieth-century news production is likely to move into the future. I will return to this point in the conclusion; however, let me stress that letters themselves are the main focus here, and merit attention in their own right. Despite technological changes and the growth of new media, the editors I have interviewed report that letters arrive at newspapers in increasing numbers; newspapers continue to publish them; and, importantly, even newspapers established long after the news began to move online have letters pages. The letters do not seem likely to leave us before the printed newspaper itself does. Letters to the editor remain important because they are among the few concrete phenomena that give the abstraction ‘the public debate’ whatever reality it has. They combine a classical form of mass publicity with the disagreement and occasional give-and-take of debate in ways that the typical blog or online discussion board still does not. They lend the symbolic status of printed newspapers to user-generated content.

Letters and their institutional underpinnings are analyzed here in the light of their participatory functions. The basis for this perspective is a historically sedimented ideal of media that citizens can *use*—an ambition for media that enables participation in action and interaction. Such an ideal of public participation through mediated debate is not reserved for the luminaries of political theory, but also found in the Hutchins Commission’s *A Free and Responsible Press* and many editorial and journalistic ethics codes around the world. Historical research has substantiated Tocqueville’s observation that nineteenth-century newspapers were not only for information,

entertainment, and keeping an eye on the government, but also allowed citizens to communicate with one another and even act together (2000: 633). In this form, letters themselves played a notable part in articulating and publicizing the aspirations of, for instance, the abolition movement in the United States (cf. Nord 1986). Indeed, what we today call *newspapers* were not only partisan, but also participatory platforms for debate, *before* they became professionalized and commercialized enterprises organized around the production and propagation of news, entertainment, and commercials (Schudson, 1978). Despite the changing orientation of journalism and news organizations and the attempt to differentiate more clearly between news and opinion, both popular and professional opinions continue to be printed by papers, and the participatory aspiration remains a ‘real ideal’ explicitly assumed and articulated by editors, publishers, and journalists on behalf of the organizations they work in, for instance when readers are invited to take part through captions like “join the debate!” and “send us a letter”. But how do these forms of participation work? We do not know.

So far, the limited literature on letters has predominantly detailed how letters do *not* work, relative to various normative baselines. One tradition, implicitly or explicitly drawing on notions of representative democracy, has repeatedly demonstrated that letters do *not* accurately reflect public opinion (Grey & Brown 1970, Sigelman & Walkosz 1992). Another, aligning itself with theorists of deliberative democracy, has used an idealized notion of the public sphere as a measure of the limitations of letters pages. Here, the work of Karin Wahl-Jorgensen stands out (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2007). On the basis of research in the Bay Area in California and elsewhere, she has written about the roles, rules, and reasoning of letters page editors. The present study goes further in two important respects. First, my analysis is not limited to the work of editors themselves, but also includes the two other defining elements of the letters institution, namely the circulation and patterns of participation characteristic of *who* individual newspapers assemble, including the flow

of actual letters printed and rejected, and the genres they employ. This research design allows for the first study also analyzing letters to the editor that were submitted to but rejected by the newspapers.¹ Secondly, the deliberative political-theoretical literature that frames Wahl-Jorgensen's discussions is here replaced by the 'real ideal' of *participation*. This is not simply a normative shift. It is also a move away from the dominant discussions of the *limitations* of letters (distortions, etc.), and towards a discussion of what they make *possible*, what would not be without them. Letters indisputably constitute forms of participation through reading and writing, even irrespective of people's intentions. The mere factuality of printed letters and the eyeballs on them testifies to that. But an unfolding of the double meaning of the word 'participation' is needed to understand their social significance; participation can be the fact of forming a part *of*, and/or the action of taking part *in* something. What is the ratio of one to the other? To understand how letters and other concrete mediations of 'public debate' work we must turn to the questions of *who* participates, *how* they come to participate, and *what* they participate in.

To understand how newspapers fulfill this self-assigned role in the provision of participatory public debate, I have chosen Denmark as a critical case for the participatory potential of letters. Danish newspapers are particularly generous in the space they provide for letters (on average about one and a half broadsheet pages). More generally, the country has a strong participatory tradition and, according to one analyst, "a quite lively democracy" (Andersen 2004). In so far as the concrete reality of letters can anywhere approximate the potentials often ascribed to abstract public debate, a small welfare democracy seems a good bet. Conversely, the limitations integral to and imposed upon the letters institution here will in all likelihood be more severe in most other countries.

Circulation, considerations, and genres, the three dimensions I argue are constitutive of the letters institution's participatory potential, are analyzed on the basis of both cross-organizational

¹ Farrell (1998) provides an interesting but very different kind of analysis of both printed and unprinted letters to the editors of *Ms. Magazine*.

data (to substantiate the claim that the letters institution works across different newspapers), and through a closer case study of the standard-setting morning broadsheet, *Politiken*. The cross-organizational data include nine long, semi-structured interviews with current and former editors of letters from seven different Danish newspapers, and documents and secondary material either made available by informants or found through archival studies and databases. The case study supplements these with several days spent informally with the letters editors at work at *Politiken*, and with content and textual analysis of 479 printed letters and 1049 rejected letters from October 2006.² The printed letters were read by the author, and a coding scheme devised. All 1528 printed and rejected letters were then read and coded by the author. On the basis of this data, the first part of the article analyzes patterns of circulation to deal with the question of *who* participates. The second part goes on to identify six editorial considerations that regulate *how* writers come to participate. The third part takes a closer look at the narrative genres that reveal *what* people try to participate in. The conclusion return to the broader questions raised in this introduction.

Circulation: Who participates through letters?

The key to the ‘who’ question is the apparently banal observation that *readers* are the main participants in the letters institution. Whereas news is a co-production between journalists and sources (Cook, 1998), letters must be seen as a co-production between journalists and letter-writers. The latter seem to be almost exclusively readers of the individual papers in question. Indeed, the Danish name for these letters is not ‘letters to the editor’, but ‘readers’ letters’, and interviews suggest that they are edited ‘in the shadow of the reader’. In contrast to the professionalization and one-way communication that characterize the rest of a newspaper—we print, you read—the letters pages constitute what one editor calls “the readers’ forum”. Letters are in this respect fundamentally

² An archiving mistake made at *Politiken* means that about a hundred rejected letters are missing from the data material.

different from the news institution, and even from the solicited opinion pieces and paid pundit columns that often surround them. All the different editors interviewed take upon themselves the responsibility to make it so. They do not represent this as a responsibility to some general public but, as one put it, to “the public that is ours”, the one defined by the circulation of one particular newspaper. It is a responsibility to the readers. *They* can get to participate here.

Who are they? In aggregate, paid newspapers reached fifty-six percent of the adult Danish population on a more or less daily basis in 2004. Young adults, retired people, the unemployed, and those with less than average income are substantially underrepresented. There are no significant gender differences. No data is available on the status of ethnic minorities. The aggregate figure is only a starting point for understanding how the institution works, however. Only twenty-one percent reads more than one newspaper regularly, so a defining part of the institution is its fragmented character. Each newspaper to a large extent hosts its own debate, defined by its circulation. While about three million people read newspapers, even a large-circulation daily like *Politiken* hosts only a fraction of this (about 460,000 people on weekdays when the study was completed in 2006).³ At the level of individual papers, the overall socio-demographic profile is broken down into even more distinct subgroups. *Politiken*'s readers are older, better-educated, and more wealthy than the population at large, and concentrated in the greater Copenhagen metropolitan area (Politiken Analyse, 2005). Again, there are no significant gender differences, and no data available on minorities. It is from these particular and newspaper-specific segments of the population that most of those who are even minimal participants (i.e., those who through reading are ‘parts of’ the letters institution) are drawn.

To stick to the case of *Politiken*, internal reader surveys reports that sixty-one percent of the readers read the letters pages three or more times a week (Politiken Analyse, 2006). I will count

³ All data in this section is from AKF 2004 and Index Danmark, provided by TNS Gallup.

these 276,000 people as the minimal participants (of) the particular reality of ‘public debate’ hosted by this one newspaper. Those assembled are predominantly middle class and above, and geographically concentrated in metropolitan areas. Whereas the readership is evenly balanced gender-wise, 75% of the letter-writers are men. Compared to a total share of the population of between 8% and 8.5%, names suggest only 4% of the letter writers are of non-Danish ethnic origin. The content analysis of printed and rejected letters demonstrates that the editing itself does not change these numbers. Table 1 summarizes some of the basic demographics of the population, the readers, and the letter writers.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

When seen from this perspective, as defined by actual patterns of circulation and letter-writing, the so-called ‘public sphere’ loses its integral character and looks more and more like a fragmented and only partly convergent network of circulating texts (a point made theoretically by Warner, 2002). The letters institution is fragmented, not integrated, and registering this is the premise for understanding *who* letters might facilitate participation for. No single paper hosts something approximating an ‘actual’ or ‘representative’ national and popular public, and there is nothing to make up the infrastructure of public debate but the slightly overlapping networks of circulation defined by individual papers and other networks of mediation. The logics of ‘balkanization’ that some worry about online clearly predate the internet.

The familiarity with *Politiken*’s coverage expressed in the letters to it supports the reasonable assumption that the vast majority of those who write, and thus who aspire to take up a more active participatory role *in* the letters institution, come from the readers of each particular paper. Most of the remaining letter writers are formal representatives of various institutions, in large

part responding to coverage or to previous letters. In the case of *Politiken*, content analysis combined with internal data suggests that the letter writers come to between fifteen and twenty thousand people a year, equivalent to six to seven percent of the number of regular weekly readers of letters. Between five and six thousand people have letters printed. This amounts to about two percent relative to the number of regular readers of letters in *Politiken*, or roughly one percent of all the paper's readers. If the results from *Politiken* can be generalized, this ratio of readers to writers identifies the approximate size of the population of people who go beyond the minimum of being a part of the letters institution by reading its output, and actually take part in it. A hundred-to-one ratio between readers and writers is a long way from C. Wright Mills' definition of a public as a body where "virtually as many people express opinions as receive them" (1956: 303). But this read/write public is a good deal closer to his ratio than, for instance, many mass meetings, and almost all broadcast media. The ratio is also maintained with a much wider reach than most participatory web sites.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 further elaborates the 'who' question by showing the percentages of 'ordinary citizens' and formal representatives who submit unsolicited letters and get them printed. Sixteen percent of the letters received come from formal representatives, ranging from members of cabinet and parliamentarians to spokespersons for everything from firms or small associations to large trade unions. These people speak with a formalized authority that sets them apart from someone speaking as an individual citizen. They represent a peculiar problem for editors. On the one hand, they insist that the letters pages belong to individual readers, not to spokesperson of this or that organization engaged in signaling to each other, or pursuing free publicity. On the other hand, the editors do

want formal representatives on the pages if their contributions represent a response to previous letters or criticism of the paper itself. The considerations discussed in the next part of the article deal with this delicate problem.

Not a single editor interviewed claimed that letters represent *'the public'*, let alone *'the public opinion'*. Editors are highly sensitive to the peculiarities of not only readers of the news, but also the writers of letters. For the editors, this is exactly what underlines the importance of an edited forum as opposed to a free for all. What is open in principle is explicitly recognized as being patrolled in practice. Every day, many potential contributors are rejected for pragmatic reasons on the basis of the consideration I analyze below.

Considerations: How do they come to participate?

Each newspaper under analysis here receives on average two to five times the amount of material they required to fill the finite space for letters that comes with the institution's continued dependence on print. Prominent newspapers in larger countries may have to handle ten, fifty, or sometimes many more for each letter they print. Editors have to sift through what is sometimes a trickle, usually a stream, and, depending on events, occasionally a flash flood of submissions, and select what to print. Practices of editing are the key to understanding *how* those who send letters can come to participate through the letters institution under these circumstances. Open-ended interview questions asking editors to describe what they wanted in a good letter, how they edited to create a good overall letters page, and the match between what they received and their aspirations brought to light six *'considerations'* that are shared across most of the newspapers analyzed here (I take the term from Gans (1979: 82-83), who define them as the unwritten rules of journalistic practice, *'reflexive routines'*). Most editors emphasize six: news value, textual quality, speed, individualized representation, fairness, and disagreement. A few only mention three or four of these, but there is

broad agreement on almost all, lending credence to the idea that the letters operate as a relatively homogenous institution across different news organizations, and to the proposition that the case study of *Politiken* (where two of the three current and former editors interviewed articulated all six considerations) can shed light on the wider institution. Table 3 organizes the responses. Below, I go through each in turn.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

(1) The first consideration is a specific take on the journalistic standard of *news value*. All of my informants emphasize that good letters have news value. Two aspects are involved here: novelty and originality.

Novelty is predominantly tied to the news agenda of any particular day. A good letter can refer to an unreported experience, but it is in practice predominantly recognized as having news value insofar as it relates to the flow of material in ‘the media’ in general and particularly the newspaper at hand. Their news value is thus of the second degree, derived from the news that has already been deemed to have (first degree) news value by journalists. Table 4 shows both the relative distribution of different references or lacks thereof in *Politiken*, and also how the printed letters differ from those rejected. The largest single group refers to the news, but thirty-three percent of the letters received refer to uncovered experiences. They make up most of what I will later categorize as ‘storytelling’. Among the letters received, those referring to news coverage and debate make up fifty-three percent. Compared to the printed letters, there is a fifteen-percentage-point shift away from letters without reference, which are often timeless or proactive pieces.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The content analysis substantiates the idea that such timeless or proactive pieces are handicapped from the outset—while thirteen percent of the letters sent to *Politiken* in October 2006 had no reference, they make up only four percent of those printed. From the point of view of the editor, the problem with a letter without a reference is clear. If it is timeless, it is never news, if it is proactive, the editor does not know yet whether it will be news.

The emphasis on originality is partly in line with news journalism, but also provides a letters-particular take on news value. It is in line in its emphasis on exclusivity, specificity to the newspaper in question. No editor will print something that also appears in another paper. Thus, the letters institution is not only fragmented, but also *fragmenting*. For systematic reasons integral to the institution, few debates are shared across different newspapers. But originality also plays out in a different way: where basic news journalism in virtue of the professional striving for objectivity tends to gravitate towards a shared, and thus in a sense ordinary and conventional, news agenda (cf. Hallin 1986), letters editors emphasize the importance of the surprising, extraordinary, and sometimes controversial, angle. One editor honestly admitted that he found “conventional points of view uninteresting”—and he thought his readers did too. Another adds that good letters “cannot be predictable”. It is worth bearing in mind here that, by definition, most people have conventional, and hence predictable, points of view. The letters institution is thus firmly positioned *against* the zone of consensus where people privileged as news sources—be they politicians, business people, or ‘people on the street’—have been granted the right to speak in platitudes, and *in* the domain of controversy.

(2) Secondly, editors consider the *textual quality* of the letters they receive.⁴ There are again two sides to this consideration. One is the style and the other the letter's format-consonance.

In terms of style, editors prefer letters that strike a balance between the personal and the professional. Every editor's dream is a letter brimming with passion and personal involvement. This is something many letters referring to personal experiences deliver. If the topic is appropriate, humor is appreciated as well. Abstract arguments do not play well with editors, something that handicaps general forms of criticism or appeal. As in many other forms of participation, a basically *private* and individual rhetoric is privileged over purely publicly oriented address. Public appeal has to be made *through* a personal statement to make it to the letters pages. On the professional side, the stylistic ideals of this consideration are largely taken from news journalism itself. The editors value brevity and clarity—"sticking to the point", as one puts it. And the point has to be concrete: "a debate about everything is uninteresting", another says. Many letters go unprinted or are edited quite drastically if they are deemed too general, or touch on several different issues and topics simultaneously.

When it comes to format-consonance, the consideration is tied in with the format provided. All newspapers have fixed formats for letters, usually two or at most three different lengths. These are encapsulated in the templates provided by the content management systems the editors use in their daily work. Participants are formatted by these slots, and as any one who has tried to make an argument in a hundred words will know from personal experience, this may not facilitate the development of a multi-faceted self-aware and nuanced intervention for those of us who would never have been able to write Abraham Lincoln's brief and powerful Gettysburg Address. The piles of rejected letters suggests that many writers think that provided guidelines on length are mere recommendations, but they are effectively more than that. The amount of work an editor has to

⁴ The word 'quality' is my informants'. As Bourdieu (1984) reminds us, taste, also when expressed in such professional, seemingly neutral, terms, is hardly innocent.

throw into cutting down a thousand-word letter to fit a four-hundred word format is considerable, and a task only reluctantly and rarely taken up.

(3) Letters operate at a high *speed*. This is the third consideration: to keep up with the news agenda and its incessant updating, with the daily deadline's pressure to produce something new every day.

Whenever letters continue to arrive on the same subject, often days after it has vanished from the news agenda, the question confronting the editors is always, as one put it to me, "how long shall we continue?" No one wants to risk boring their readers, and writers wanting to have their letters printed should avoid boring the editors. A contributor may think that her reaction to a recent news story, event or letter still fresh in her memory, coming just a few days later, is timely enough. But the editor who reads it will have read several hundred letters since then, and the news agenda will have moved on. Space is largely opened up on a first-come, first-served basis. Letters constitute participation not only as reaction, but as *instant* reaction. The letters institution is in sync with the news institution, perhaps less so with most people's everyday life.

The emphasis on speed is of particular importance to understand the relative lack of *interaction* on the letters pages (only twenty-three percent of the letters printed relate to previous letters, closer to ships-passing-in-the-night than to give-and-take ideals of deliberation). To be able to follow the rapid shifts of the news agenda, editors tend to adopt an almost mathematical doctrine: a reaction merits half the space of the letter it reacts to. Given the limited number of different format sizes available, this makes it exceedingly rare that any exchange is pursued for more than two or three letters: Editors actively seek to *promote* interaction—the proportion of letter reacting to previous letters is twenty-three percent amongst the printed, compared to eleven among those received. But the focus on speed keeps lengthy engagements rare. Only one percent of the printed letters from *Politiken* are third-generation interactions, that is, reactions to reactions to printed

letters. Whereas up to the late nineties, technological factors meant that several days would pass between a letter arriving and its being printed, today's digitized production process means that a letter is usually printed one or two days after its arrival, or not at all. This means that a long, three-linked chain of letters will stretch over no more than about a week. Only a few exceptional debates linger on for longer than that (in *Politiken*, only four in the month under scrutiny here).

(4) The fourth consideration is an almost metaphysical understanding of what letters are supposed to be, namely an *individualized representations* of points of view. Letters are largely off-limits for collective expression and action, as opposed to news coverage which often relies on collective identities like 'the government', 'the trade unions', or 'the Danish people'. In this regard, letters editors explicitly define their work *against* news journalism, where those authorized to speak on someone else's behalf are privileged as 'newsmakers'. One editor remarks that these organized points of view "have a tendency to become too predictable". The preference, expressed succinctly by one editor, is for "someone speaking on his own behalf". This consideration ensures that most participation through letters is *individual* participation, unlike the collective forms found in social movements, political parties, and the like. Insofar as they are allowed for, collective expressions largely come as reactions to letters (more on this below), or are textually constructed *within* the letter to pass under this consideration. Despite the increased percentage of formal representatives amongst the printed letters suggested by the content analysis (twenty-three percent), all editors insist that formal authority does *not* increase the chances of getting printed, and many proudly narrate how they have rejected letters from members of parliament and the government. They do have a point, as individualization gives the letters a different cast than news. In the seventies, Gans (1979: 145) reported that only about twenty percent of all sources in news journalism were represented as 'ordinary people'. A recent Danish study put the figure below ten percent

(Kontrabande & CFJE, 2006). The rest are formal representatives sanctified as ‘newsmakers’. In contrast, seventy-seven percent of printed letters from *Politiken* in October 2006 were printed with no affiliation or implicit references to newsmaker status (given their demographics, the writers are of course ‘ordinary people’ only in the sense that upper-middle-class professionals are ordinary). Editors do *not* see their writers as the proverbial ‘man on the street’, but insist that articulate readers must be given a chance to voice their concerns—and the letters pages represent that chance.

(5) The fifth consideration defines *fairness*, a term the editors often invoke in interviews to explain their decisions. It concerns the idea that there are ‘two sides to every story’ and a ‘right to reply’.

First, different letters dealing with the same or similar issues are routinely conceived of as marking out a continuum, on the basis of which they can be grouped. This allows one or at most a few letters to represent each ‘side’. One editor remarked that if he received four letters arguing for one position on an issue, and one letter arguing for an alternative position, he would print one of each. Despite its roots in folk wisdom, the insistence on exactly *two* sides to every question is remarkable in a country with a multiparty system and seven parties in parliament in 2006. Socialists and social liberals who would never form a government together are treated as one ‘side’. So are social conservatives and liberalists. The translation into ‘sides’ seems even more mysterious when one thinks beyond the *pro et contra* of electoral politics. Nevertheless, it is central to the operationalization of the fairness consideration, a practice that allow editors to reduce the sheer amount of letters without feeling that they unduly reduce the plurality of the debate, and simultaneously to format participants as partisans. They effectively privilege what one could call ‘plurality of participation’ over ‘representativeness of representation’, and indeed, the letters pages are in all likelihood not only more diverse than the mass of incoming letters, but also than the readers of individual newspapers.

The grouping into sides enables the editors to bring into play the second aspect of the fairness consideration. If a letter is printed attacking someone or something concrete by name, a right to reply is generally extended to an individual from ‘the other side’. This seems to be the case especially if those attacked are well within the sphere of consensus, establishment, and middle-class values. While letters editors try to avoid having too many formal representatives on the pages, this concern is left aside if organized groups are under direct attack or subject to criticism from the paper’s journalists. This consideration accounts for much of the increased presence formal representatives have in the printed letters relative to the received ones—in fact, thirty-eight percent of all letters by formal representatives come as reactions to previously printed letters, much more than the average twenty-three percent. This is in line with the general tendency to constitute participants as reactive, not proactive—like readers, authorities or other subjects under attack should have a chance to react, while the overall agenda is derived from ‘the media’.

(6) This leads to the final consideration, the insistence that the essence of good debate is *disagreement*. For contrast with news journalism, think of the common notion that one can send six news reporters to the same event, and they will each come away with the same story. In news journalism, the central consideration is objectivity and agreement with facts; on the letters pages it is subjectivity and disagreement over personalized ideas and principles. As one editor put it: “we are not concerned with truth ... [but] with debate”. This takes three forms, each corresponding to an equivalent peg that allows a letter to qualify under the news value consideration.

The first form is disagreement with the newspapers’ coverage of something. In line with the idea that the letters belong to the readers, and not the professional employees, criticism of the organization and its coverage is given priority. One editor calls it a counter-balance to the news, a chance to “speak back”. This form is at the heart of letters as (media) criticism. The second form is

disagreement with a previous letter writer. Again, the professionals background themselves here, and try to make the readers provoke each other. Finally, criticism can be of events external to the news coverage (whether covered or not) and the debate itself: often of policies, policy responses, or the lack thereof. Again, this is in line with the non-newsmaker focus on representation of individualized points of view. The readers and letter-writers that the editors say they want to privilege are those who have few other means of expressing such disagreements with any amount of publicity.

When they feel the inflow is not contentious enough, all editors rely on cohorts of paid or unpaid writers they know can always play the devil's advocate. All interviewed editors insists that such solicited contributions are few and far between on the pages dedicated to letters, and almost exclusively unpaid. They also claim that extracting disagreement is sometimes necessary precisely because the *actual* homogeneity of readers' views may not provide enough contention in itself. It is, as one editor says, "hard to get people of a different persuasion to send unsolicited letters to a newspaper they do not read". The disagreement has to be kept alive, also because it is presumed to keep the letters flowing, and the number of reactions elicited from readers (and external parties) is considered a measure of success. This is why most newspapers keep printing letters from a handful of habitual contrarians, who seem to have grasped the considerations at play here. Editors facilitate all three kinds of disagreement by privileging the most marked expressions on their conceived continuums—one says that she always asks herself "would anyone disagree?" before she decides whether to print a letter or not. It is exceedingly hard to make it to the letters pages with an expression of agreement with anyone, and consensus is never to be found on the letters pages—that would go against the editorial considerations.

Genres: What do they try to participate in?

Given the above profiles of the letter-writing participants (the *who*) and the editorial considerations their letters are subjected to (the *how*), this part of the article addresses the question of *what* the printed letters make their writers participants *in*? The question is addressed in two ways. First, I look at the *narrative construction* of the letters printed to determine how they semantically construct the relation between the letter as *part* and that which it tries to take part *in*. Secondly, I discuss how the *content* of the letters relates them to events, on the basis of the month when the content analysis was carried out. Neither approach allows any conclusion about what letters accomplish *outside* the letters institution, but they can identify their orientation.

Textually, the letters analyzed fall into three inductively identified genres of letters: storytelling, criticism, and appeal.

Storytelling covers letters that take part in the *news* as a supplement to existing coverage. Here, the letter writer expresses something in the conventions of the letters pages that could have been covered journalistically, but was not. These letters predominantly refer to personal experience. The distinctive semantic structure of such letters is storytelling, ‘I have witnessed/heard/read X, and here is what happened’. The reference can be personal experience, intermedial, or based on the newspaper’s own coverage of (or previous letters about) something.⁵ These letters are in many ways similar to what today find a less edited expression on blogs and the like.

Criticism names letters that also take part in the *news*, but as a critique of something already published. The object of criticism is usually the very newspaper the letter is sent to, but can also be a previous letter or coverage by other media. The critic adds a reflection on journalism that sometimes finds its equivalent in punditry and commentary, but has no guaranteed place in the daily coverage. Criticism is identified by a basic semantic structure along the lines of ‘you/your

⁵ As every letter coded had something to narrate, and none where grammatically incoherent, storytelling comes to double as a form of residual category too.

competitor stated X, while I in contrast, will make the case for Y'. They refer to news or letters. The historical precedent is the British tradition of 'Dear Sir' letters in the London *Times* and the like, whereby members of the elite audience were given an opportunity to take issue with their paper's dispositions.

Appeal letters strive to take part in an *issue*. In contrast to storytelling and criticism, where the very printing of the letters *makes* them parts, however small, of their semantic objective (the news), the printing of an appeal is no guarantee that it will actually be a part of anything other than the letters pages, something *beyond* the newspaper. The printing of appeal letters does ensure publicity, but not necessarily public participation. The appellant addresses the letter to collective identities, general issues, and public figures or authorities. The appeal includes advocacy of a course of action. Its semantic structure is 'X is the case. I (as a citizen/bearer of human rights/ecologist) think that we (as a society/human beings/people who care about the planet's future) should do Y for the following reason(s): Z'. The letters' reference can be any of the above mentioned, or absent. The ideal typical appeal letter tries to provoke the imaginative jump C. Wright Mills (1959: 8) identified as the one from personal troubles to public issues, and deliver a call to action that harks back to the tradition of political pamphleteering.

The three forms only identify differences, not a cardinal or normative order. Storytelling can have a powerful impact on public issues; criticism may be ineffective or unwarranted; and not all appeal is *J'Accuse*. The analytical point is simply that they represent different forms of participation. They share the traits identified above in terms of who and how people participate through them, but they have different orientations. Table 5 shows the quantitative distribution across these three forms of the letters to *Politiken* that I have coded.

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The general distribution is similar across printed and rejected letters—storytelling is by far the most common form, appeal the second most, and criticism the third. The differences between the printed and the rejected are, however, also notable. All else being equal, the editorial considerations seem to favor letters of criticism and appeal because they are most distinct from the rest of the paper. The rationale of the editors is that the professionals write better journalism, and that there is so much of it elsewhere in the paper, that the alternative forms should be privileged on the limited space available. In the case of *Politiken*, a hundred out of hundred and sixty letters categorized as appeal were printed, and eighty out of hundred and twenty criticism letters. Each has a publication rate of about two-to-three, much better than storytelling, where the rate is about one-to-four. The appeal and criticism letters that are rejected are generally those without reference, or those that downplay the individuality of the writer, are too long, too late, or not contentious enough. If these numbers are representative of other newspapers too, they suggest that the letters institution actually seems to *favor* appeals and criticism over storytelling.

Turning to the *substance* of what letters-writers participate in, the first observation is that letters are again akin to the news that Walter Lippmann (1922: 229) metaphorically described as a searchlight “that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness and into vision.” As Lippmann continued: “men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone.” The letters institution, a prominent part of the reality of public debate, produces a rushed and fragmented engagement with individual issues, while the vast majority of things, troubles, and issues never make it to the pages of printed letters. In the month’s worth of letters to *Politiken* included in the content analysis, only four issues were the subject of sustained debate in the letters. Two of these issues were largely internal to the universe of the newspaper itself, and database searches

demonstrate that neither of these generated any attention elsewhere. Two other issues did reach beyond the letters pages. One concerned decisions made as to the development of theaters in the greater Copenhagen area. This discussion continued throughout the month, and involved ten printed letters. It gave publicity to a set of decisions that were being made, but would not otherwise have been brought into the open. The other concerned a set of large demonstrations against the government's welfare policy. This proved to be the most traditionally political debate registered in the month under scrutiny here. Ninety-seven letters were submitted on this subject, and twelve were printed. It is notable that the proportion of letters rejected dealing with this issue was much higher than the general ratio—eight-to-one in contrast to three-to-one. As soon as what the editors perceived to be 'both sides' of the issue had had their say, they started privileging plurality of issues and expressions over a sustained engagement with this one issue.

What is perhaps most important to keep in mind is how many things never made it to the letters pages of *Politiken*. In addition to the numerous personal triumphs and tragedies that presumably played out in October 2006, the month under analysis coincided with the opening of parliament (and thus the Danish equivalent of the State of the Union address), an issue that attracted few letter writers, also among the rejected letters. It also overlapped with the presentation of the public budget by the Minister of Finance, another traditionally important political issue largely left untouched. Some letter writers touched upon the Danish part in the ongoing occupation of Iraq, but the editors considered the issue more or less exhausted. Nothing *new* was being said.

Importantly, the rejected letters analyzed are not a treasure trove of genuinely deliberative interventions screened out by shallow media gatekeepers. In general, they are much the same as what is printed, only longer, less well-written, and more predictable. Based on the analysis of printed and rejected letters from *Politiken*, the letters institution does not stand out as particularly exclusionary in terms of points of view. Indeed, it systematically generates a pluralism that fits with

the editorial considerations defining good debate. The second, third, or fourth letter on the same subject may express a current of opinion in the public constituted through a particular newspaper, but the editors quite consciously decide against such reiterations if they can only be printed at the expense of other points of view, or publicity for other issues.

Conclusion: Letters and Participation

All said, what forms of participation does the letters institution make possible? How does this concrete incarnation of the abstraction ‘public debate’ work? The patterns of *circulation* characteristic of the letters institution assemble both ordinary readers and formal representatives in largely distinct, newspaper-specific, read/write publics where, if the case of *Politiken* is anything to go by, about one percent of the readers are not only parts *of* the letters, but also parts *in* the institution. The *considerations* that regulate how these people come to take part draw the everyday functioning of the letters close to the rhythms and values of the news institution, but also carve out a place in newspapers where people are not reduced to passive readers, but can assume an identity as storyteller, critic, and appellant, depending on the individual writer’s chosen genre. Editing emphasizes news value, textual qualities, speed, and individualized representation in ways that ensures that the majority of letters remain individual, atomic expressions, predominantly reactive to the dominant news agenda. But it also breaks the conventions of news journalism with its emphasis on contention and its facilitation of people’s attempts to assume active roles as public persons, appearing side by side with authorized representatives in a shared and in principle equal space of representation. Here, the *genres* chosen by the letter writers can then define those who gain access as storytellers, critics, or appellants, and allow a few an occasion to engage publicly with a few public issues, before the agenda moves on, the debate is changed, and new debaters gather around new issues.

The close relationship between the news agenda and the letters and the fact that the letters remain clearly subordinate to the news (and advertisement) concerns that remain of primary importance for newspapers could suggest it is misleading to consider the letters institution distinct from the news institution. But though the two are deeply interlinked, and though the news institution is the dominant one, several of the defining aspects of letters discussed above set these apart from news—and characterize letters pages across numerous otherwise different newspapers. The participatory potential of user-generated content over professional content, the emphasis on disagreement, and the ways in which the letters institution systematically fragment into distinct debates what is integrated into one largely shared news agenda in the news continue to differentiate them. The letters institution as identified here is neither a totality nor a whole, in the integral sense suggested by words like ‘the public sphere’. Rather, it represents regular and routinized operations that maintain only partly overlapping and momentarily intersecting textual circulations defined by some shared editorial considerations and narrative genres. I have scrutinized only its mode of operation in the critical Danish case, where regional variations and the systematic differences between tabloids and broadsheets surprisingly turned out to be very small—my interviews suggest that the letters pages are structured similarly and produce similar outcomes across different Danish newspapers. Other countries and other ‘media systems’ (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) may have no letters institutions or may have different ones, perhaps characterized by greater heterogeneity in either patterns of circulation, in their considerations, or in genres of letters. Or they may be quite similar, as the *NY Times*’ self-presentation of their letters pages suggests (Feyer, 2003).

Despite these possible variations, some general remarks can be made about the differences between the letters institution and other infrastructures for public debate. Depending on their precise organization and social sedimentation, other institutions and media platforms constitute different forms of participation. Nowhere will we find a form of ‘ur-participation’ or originary public debate

that provides a gold standard akin to those articulated in abstract by theorists who can always hope that a purer debate is to be found elsewhere, in the past, or in the future. Public debate is always concrete, and we have to look at it as such. In such inquiries, one important trait brought up is the ratio of participants as parts *of* relative to parts *in*. Take broadcast media in their current technological incarnation. Television and radio arguably constitute the most powerful, widely accessible means of becoming a part *of* something, a power that their enormous everyday audiences and the pull of broadcast media events can testify to. Barring the creative re-appropriation and decoding of their content as well as phenomena like talk radio and call-in TV shows, however, the amount of participation *in* that they facilitate is minimal, and heavily patrolled. In their median forms, decentralized online forums for debate like blogging and bulletin boards probably represent the other end of the *in/of* ratio. Where broadcast media allow for very little participation *in* anything, and letters mainly facilitate vertical participation between individual readers and the institution analyzed here, dispersed participation online takes a more horizontal form, where those involved participate on each other's site. Ironically, relative to an online world populated mostly by a similar above-middle-class, white, and male demographic, the letters institution stands out less for who it excludes as for the people it pulls *in*. The formal representatives present on the letters pages are rarely parts either in debates on the internet. The inclusiveness and critical potential of the letters institution should not be overestimated, but it is worth keeping in mind that power has to be present if one is to speak truth to it. Or heckle or plead to it, for that matter. This harks back to the idea of media you can use—media that not only tells you about the world, but also helps you engage with it.

In this sense, the letters institution represent a distinct role newspapers have historically played and can still pursue today, on all platforms: namely, as facilitators of a little vertical political communication between citizens and representatives assembled on pages that are *distinct* in their

way of doing this. Few formal representatives debate publicly with people on blogs. Few citizens make it to public meetings to debate with representatives. But some representatives debate with some people, in front of many more, on the letters pages. This is something particular to the letters institution, and comes with its peculiarities of population, fragmentation, fickleness, and proclivity for expression. These very traits may be the ones that make such mediated meetings between citizens and representatives possible. This is why it is of considerable importance to what extent the formal and informal rules and regularities that define the patterns of circulation, the considerations, and the genres of the letters institution will migrate to non-print platforms as newspaper organizations appropriate blogging and other online formats. In the case of Denmark, it is interesting to note that while most newspapers quickly adopted free-for-all discussion boards as parts of their online sites in the mid- and late nineties, almost all of them have since removed them—according to my informants, because they were dissatisfied with the quality of the user-generated content. Today, most are experimenting with blogs that combine well-known writers with a modicum of editorially patrolled participation, often edited by the very same people who edit the letters pages. Analysis of how this plays out is a promising avenue for further research.

As they stand today, the letters and their daily dose of disagreement stand out against the apolitical and non-contentious trends writers like Eliasoph (1998) and Schudson (1998) have identified in contemporary culture. Letters are published through an institution that systematically gives the publicity of newspapers to reader-driven controversy over issues on the news agenda. Editors themselves interpret the values of the institution along the lines of a ‘democratic individualism’ (Ryfe 2005) where letters make it possible for readers to narrate their personal troubles as potential public issues, provided editors, fellow citizen-readers, and perhaps formal representatives drawn to the pages, will accept them as such. In this sense, the letters institution lends itself to claims to publicity, also for political purposes. The present analysis, however, shows

that its main orientation is towards participation in the media themselves—and mostly in the particular newspaper in question. Here, they sustain an ever-changing series of user-generated and editor-encouraged controversies, fed by the peculiar democratic authority that the citizen has, and that the professionalized journalist of today seems to have surrendered: the right to stand up, to express one self, and to disagree. Even if the news are often consensual, the letters are always contentious.

Thus, the letters institution exists somewhere between a private life devoid of politics, and a political life devoid of citizens. It constitutes a fragmented, sparsely and selectively populated, and contentious zone that gives a few readers a chance to participate in particular, individual, and mainly expressive ways in ‘the media’ and occasionally perhaps beyond that in ‘politics’—two of the main coordinating complexes of our human existence. If one is looking for more than that—for something collective, practice-oriented, and directly political akin to what the partisan press were parts of—one has to turn elsewhere. In terms of direct political action, the letters institution allows for very little, almost nothing. But insofar as one understands this, one can better appreciate the kind of contentious publicity it *does* allow for, use it, and choose other means for other ends.

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TABLE 1

	Population of Denmark	Politiken: Readers	Politiken: Printed	Politiken: Rejected	Politiken: Received
Male	49%	50%	77%	75%	75%
Female	51%	50%	23%	25%	25%
Ethnic Danes	92%	n.d.	94%	96%	95%
Minorities	8%	n.d.	6%	4%	5%
			N=492	N=1049	N=1541

Table 1: Data on the population is taken from the Ministry of Culture and the Danish Statistical Bureau. Data on Politiken's readers from Politiken Analyse (2005, 2006). No data available on the make-up of readers of letters. Data on letters printed, rejected, and total received from my content analysis of October 2006.

TABLE 2

	Printed	Rejected	Received
People	74%	87%	84%
Formal Representatives	26%	13%	16%
	N=492	N=1049	N=1541

Table 2: Data from content analysis (October 2006).

TABLE 3

	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5	Informant 6	Informant 7	Informant 8	Informant 9
1. News Value	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Textual Quality	X	X	X	X	X	X			
3. Speed	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4. Ind. Represent.	X	X	X	X	X	X			
5. Fairness	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
6. Disagreement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 3: Considerations inductively identified through interviews, interviews afterwards categorized after which considerations were articulated. Answers organized after considerations convergence. The right-hand responses articulating fewer considerations come primarily from papers receiving fewer letters.

TABLE 4

	Printed	Rejected	Received
No Reference	4%	19%	13%
Experience	30%	35%	33%
News	43%	41%	42%
Debate	23%	5%	11%
	N=492	N=1049	N=1541

Table 2: Data from content analysis (October 2006).

TABLE 5

	Printed	Rejected	Received
Storytelling	64%	88%	81%
Criticism	16%	6%	8%
Appeal	20%	6%	11%
	N=492	N=1049	N=1541

Table 2: Data from content analysis (October 2006).