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Paid or semi-public media? The Norwegian film industry's strategies for social media

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Abstract

In this article, I explore how conglomerates and the independent film companies in Norway conceptualize their social media strategies before the release of their films in movie theatres. I analyse applications made to the Norwegian Film Institute's (NFI) support programme for promotional grants in 2015. The ability of individual companies to interpret and go beyond a framing of social media as semi-public platforms – where companies can gain visibility free of charge – is one indication of how strategic knowledge differs. Major distributors tend to perceive social media as a place to buy attention from a targeted audience. Thus, they are taking advantage of traffic data offered by surveillance technologies embedded in social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. This, I argue, is a distinct feature of strategic resources linked to power, networks and knowledge about audiences, which intensify power differentials between large, established corporations and small-scale independent players.

Keywords: social media, promotion, audience analysis, Nordic film industry, diversity, art and commerce

Introduction

The digital age is often understood as affording smaller, independent film companies greater access to their audiences via widely popular online and social media platforms (Jenkins et al. 2013: xiv, 294). In these 'semi-public' spaces (Enli and Skogerbø 2013: 759), companies can take advantage of the platform's network structure to reach potential audiences without having to pay for advertising, so-called 'organic reach' (Facebook Help Center 2018). However, these developments might be complicated by new business models for corporate social media looking to '[monetize] the social web' (Bolin 2011: 62). Drawing on emerging surveillance technologies embedded in their platforms, social media companies such as Facebook and YouTube are experimenting with ways of exploiting the vast amount of user data that they gather monitoring their members (Beck 2015; Bolin 2011: 62; Helmond 2015; Trottier 2012).

For instance, between 2014 and 2015 Facebook redesigned algorithms to favour native videos and reduce the effect of organic reach for official pages, thereby intensifying the platform's commercial potential (Beck 2015; Facebook Newsroom 2014; Wang and Yue 2015; Welch and Zhang 2014). Consequently, this increased incentives for companies to pay for Facebook's tools for targeted advertising as a means for reaching new audiences.

To analyse these claims, I investigate how different players in the Norwegian film industry related to social media in 2015. I explore film companies' communication strategies for new social media platforms and how they presented these strategies in successful applications for promotional grants from the Norwegian Film Institute (NFI) in 2015.¹ Twenty-three Norwegian films had ordinary movie theatre distribution that year, and their total share of the market amounted to 20.5 per cent – which, in a historical perspective, may be considered a relatively average year for Norwegian films (NFI 2016: 7). The list of films covers a broad range of genres and various types of production and distribution companies. With such a heterogeneous sample, we can address questions of power relations in the Norwegian film industry at a specific point in time: between large-scale, transnational and vertically-integrated media companies on the one hand, and small, independent film production companies on the other.

Moreover, it is a matter of cultural policy concern if we find systematic differences between companies' strategies for social media as this has implications for the publicly available and visible diversity of films in Norway. This article is guided by two overarching research questions: how do company size and level of available resources matter when designing a social media strategy? Further, to what extent are different film companies in Norway capable of articulating strategies for the tools provided by social media?

First, I address relevant Nordic media studies to provide context on both the study of power relations in the film industry and the study of campaigning on social media. Second, I outline theoretical frameworks and analytical concepts that are key to investigating strategic resources

for social media in the film industry. Here, I draw on cultural industries studies (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 2013) and sociological studies of social media, power and surveillance (Andrejevic 2007; Bolin 2011; Trottier 2012) to address how business models, media market concentration and the digital circulation of texts might be intertwined. In the methods section, I outline how and under which conditions I was granted access to the NFI archive. I then explore the interplay between film policy institutions, surveillance technologies and film companies, by paying particular attention to incentives for social media campaigns (NFI 2015). Further, I provide contextual information on the status of power relations in the Norwegian film industry, specifically how major distributors on the one hand and small independent film distribution companies on the other invest differently in art and commerce. Finally, I extend this analysis to the kinds of resources and knowledge about social media that are indicated in applications submitted by film companies to NFI (e.g. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter).

Literature review

Although several studies have addressed the convergence of television, journalism and/or politics with social media (e.g. Agger and Mortensen 2016, Enjolras et al. 2013; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Kalsnes 2016; Larsson and Moe 2014; Sundet 2018), there is a gap in the research literature on the hybrid of social media and Norwegian film industry. In addition, there is currently no published Nordic research addressing how the film industry utilizes social media.² However, studies on politics and social media in Nordic countries lend support to the thesis that social media usage in general often supports the normalization thesis, i.e. ‘the rich get richer’ (Larsson and Moe 2014: 1–3). This study explores whether we see a corresponding reproduction of power relations in the entertainment industries and whether the large, established players retain their dominance through the use of social media platforms.

Power relations in the Norwegian film industry follow, to an extent, the division of labour

between content production and film distribution in the industry more broadly. Several of the more financially successful Norwegian film production companies, almost all of which exclusively participate in commercially oriented productions, form alliances with large distributors. Smaller, independent distributors tend to work with documentaries and productions that receive funding on their artistic merits (see Table 1).³ The large-scale distributors, in turn, are embedded in transnational corporate structures, which might direct their priorities towards turning a profit (Givskov 2011; Moseng 2016: 50–51). Moreover, while we do find a considerable number of small-scale distributors – for instance with high stakes in the market for Norwegian documentaries – the divide between content production and distribution overall tends to also mirror the divide between small and large players in the Norwegian film industry (Eira 2016a, 2016b; Moseng 2016).

While there are several studies on film production companies, there are fewer in-depth studies on film distribution in a Nordic context (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2011; see Givskov 2011 for an account on the Danish distribution sector and its Nordic and transnational networks). According to prominent Norwegian film scholars, the production sector is fragmented and is comprised of relatively small companies (Eira 2016a, 2016b; Moseng 2016; see also the Ministry of Culture-commissioned report by Ryssevik 2014: 5–18). The large companies in the industry primarily work in distribution and are characterized by being vertically integrated in other transnational media markets, i.e. media conglomerates (Moseng 2016: 50–51; Solum 2016). Although Bondebjerg and Redvall argue that the distribution sector in Nordic countries is centralized, they also indicate that it faces challenges in coordinating and promoting a diversity of Scandinavian films (Bondebjerg and Redvall 2011: 10). In the following, I differentiate between small-scale and large-scale actors, building on production and distribution studies conducted by the aforementioned scholars (Table 1).

Power relations within the distribution sectors in the Nordic countries might limit the

broad circulation of different types of films, given that companies' resources for gaining audience attention differ. This diversity was originally politically desired, encouraged and fostered through different public funding regimes intended to facilitate a balance between art and commerce, and entertainment and public debate in Nordic film culture (see Enerhaug and Larsen 2013: 29). However, the polarization between art and commerce – in terms of movie theatre revenues – has continued for Norwegian films in the last five years, and 2015 was no exception.⁴ At a time when business models for film still rely on ticket sale revenues, DVD sales are dwindling and efficient models for licensing Norwegian films to streaming services are not yet fully developed,⁵ social media emerges as the lowest digital point of entry to promote films, sell tickets and gain visibility. Yet, independent companies working on smaller budgets are faced with new challenges associated with socio-technical developments within social media, which increasingly favour the distribution of paid over organic content (Beck 2015; Helmond 2015).

Theoretical framework

To what extent, then, have large- and small-scale actors in the Norwegian film industry taken advantage of surveillance technologies on social media platforms? Moreover, is 'real diversity' (i.e. content diversity) connected to power relations between independents and the large-scale companies in the film industries (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 168, 271ff)? By asking these questions, I address what 'kinds of texts that are produced' and *circulated* by the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2007: 39). In the context of this study, this translates to how market and company structures intersect with which types of films are made visible on social media. It examines producers'/distributors' strategies for buying and/or otherwise earning audience attention on new digital platforms.⁶ In accordance with Hesmondhalgh's approach, this study thus stresses the link between market concentration and the strategies for

circulation of different types of texts, i.e. how they together condition ‘public access to culture and creativity’ (2007: 174). In his account of the cultural industries he finds that dominant US companies (and other global media conglomerates) are thriving through a winner-takes-all logic. Although he sees ambivalent tendencies as to how this affects content diversity, he raises concern that it might have a negative impact (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 68, 271–73). I aim to investigate whether similar trends can be found in Norway, a small film nation, where the industry is heavily state-funded and therefore somewhat protected from the negative forces that Hesmondhalgh argues have driven the cultural industries in later years (i.e. commodification and the possible decline of ‘real diversity’ [2013: 68, 271–73]). In line with these perspectives, I investigate how power relations are reproduced, intensified or lessened by the film industry’s transition towards new social media platforms.

Access to people’s tastes and cultural preferences via digital traces and social media is in itself conditioned by asymmetrical power relations in emerging digital media sectors. This makes it necessary to look beyond the study of the cultural industries. Studies of social media, business models and surveillance in the digital age have emphasized how social media platforms in general, and Facebook specifically, in just a decade altered the media industries’ access to audience analyses (Andrejevic 2007; Bolin 2011; Bodle 2016; Trottier 2012: 58; 106). However, as Trottier (2012: 106) notes, this new access is linked to power, media structures and techniques for surveillance that are asymmetrically distributed, especially in terms of ownership of social media pages (e.g. Facebook), audience data and how to capitalize on them.

When companies in the film industry pay for sponsored content and/or ads on Facebook and YouTube, they pay for attention targeted on the basis of personalized information provided by new digital surveillance technologies. According to a recent industry report, digital surveillance technologies might both imply ‘improved services’ for providing relevant

and personalized information, but also ‘creepy behavior’ (Koljonen 2016: 19). In this respect, film companies ought to tread a fine line to avoid damaging their relations with audiences (Koljonen 2016: 19; see also Appelgren and Leckner 2016: 168–70). These technologies are already embedded as part of the infrastructure of corporate social media sites and are by media scholars viewed as producing a ‘traffic commodity’, derived from new techniques for measuring and selling information on audience behaviour (van Couvering 2008 in Bolin 2011: 56). They may be understood as elements of a new media business model, emerging from a convergence of service-based models (people pay for communication services) and audience-based models (the audience is sold to advertisers). In this model, audiences ‘pay’ for communication services by constantly revealing information about themselves as ‘digital consumers’ (Bolin 2011: 50–51, 65). It thus differs from traditional text-based models, where the transaction between consumer and producer consists of selling access to texts/films. In the context of this study, film producers and distributors still to a large degree base their business models on selling texts (i.e. films in theatres, NFI 2017a: 10). Simultaneously, however, they are challenged to adapt to new business models to be able to keep doing so and to evolve accordingly (Koljonen 2016).

This said, the tools provided by social media are not limited to traffic data, targeted ads and sponsored content (‘paid media’). The concept of ‘semi-public’ (Enli and Skogerbø 2013) indicates that social media can be utilized for the purpose of publicly spreading content (i.e. through ‘organic reach’ and shared content), and not solely be used as a tool for marketing. These objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but I differentiate between them for analytical purposes. This enables us to identify different conceptions of social media as either ‘paid’ or as ‘semi-public’, and how these interrelate. Moreover, as I will return to in the analysis, the terms ‘paid’, ‘owned’ and ‘earned media’ relate to these different interpretations of social media. They are industry concepts commonly used in the marketing discourse for

online promotion (see Boncheck 2014). The latter terms ('owned'/'earned') coincide with an understanding of social media as a 'semi-public' space, implying that content can be spread by media users via organic reach (i.e. not paid media).

Methods: Data access and industrial secrets

The Ministry of Culture granted me access to the 23 applications submitted to and approved by NFI in 2015 (i.e. all the Norwegian films in ordinary movie theatre distribution). This might seem as a short time span, resulting in a limited sample, but since algorithms change so rapidly it would be misleading to analyse a longer time period since the actual conditions for promoting films would be different. I look for patterns in these documents by comparing the strategies outlined therein. If we are to investigate how social media logics intersect with the work of other powerful media actors, these data make it possible to compare different-sized film companies, operating in the same field, at the same time and in the same territorial space. Such a sample thus affords a systematic investigation across genres and different agents, which is quite rare in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 272–73). It provides insight into how differently sized companies – embedded in both distribution and film production – aim to connect with their audiences through advertisement and social media campaigns. This study then complements research on the cultural industries in Britain and the United States, specifically studies that measure outcomes of promotion on social media without taking into account the strategic plans of the company (input), and those that only measure 'top hits' (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 272–73; Oh et al. 2017). Further, the sample allows us to look at promotion plans at an early stage, before the companies can alter their stories and rationalize in retrospect.

However, while the applications give us privileged knowledge about the proposed plans of different-sized companies, there are some limitations on how the data can be presented. To

gain access to data from the Ministry of Culture, for example, I am obligated to ensure that all film companies are anonymous. As demonstrated below, I may present aggregated data from the applications correlating it to companies' market positions (see Table 1) and since the companies' strategy documents are protected by business laws, sensitive data may not be revealed without their consent. Only anonymous citations approved by NFI or aggregated data describing more general tendencies are then open for analysis and discussion.

The research design in this article is part of a larger project based on mixed methods, including interviews and social media analysis. Hence, where relevant, I supplement findings with information found on companies' official social media sites or given in interviews with four social media workers – mainly to discuss or elaborate upon central findings from the document analysis. The workers were situated in either major or small-scale distribution companies. The overall research design is informed by Caldwell (2009), Bruun (2014) and Karppinen and Moe's (2012) methodological reflections on the analysis of texts and exclusive interviews in the media industries.

Aanalysis: Social media, visibility and surveillance technologies

The production of knowledge and strategic awareness about social media is a type of resource that involves socio-technical systems, professional networks and power relations. Powerful actors who are part of transnational networks often gain exclusive insight into new technical developments on social media platforms before competitors.⁷ For instance, the ability to take advantage of traffic data provided by new digital surveillance technologies might differ considerably.

Access to traffic data on digital consumers in 2015 largely depends on the size of the social media following film companies already acquired in the course of previous campaigns. One of the large-scale players has been estimated to have obtained more than 150 000

followers on their Facebook page during the last three years, mainly promoting genre films (action and family films) from United States and Norway (interview with a social media employee, 5 December 2016). Thus, they rank high above other Facebook pages for Norwegian films with theatrical release in 2015, which obtained between 800 and 62, 830 followers (data retrieved January–March 2016). Moreover, if these data are to be utilized, the target group has to match the new content being launched. Beyond this, access to traffic data on new audiences increasingly relies on the size of budgets allocated to acquiring it from social media companies (sponsored content, etc.). Relations – or the lack thereof – between social media companies, promotion agencies and film companies thus become important when it comes to taking advantage of surveillance technologies.

Nevertheless, these tools and resources appear less advanced when compared to the tools for capturing the digital consumer employed on streaming services (e.g. Netflix). There, consumption and contextual advertising happen on and through the same online catalogues. Producers and distributors of Norwegian films still, to a large degree, rely on business models for selling texts offline (e.g. in theatres, see NFI 2017a: 10). Thus, they are limited by the fact that they are promoting content online on platforms in which they have less control (Trottier 2012). Not surprisingly, the applications submitted to NFI in 2015 show that film companies in general display little direct knowledge of – and strategies for – digital surveillance techniques. This includes both large-scale and small-scale actors. Although the large-scale companies more systematically identify and construct profiles of their targeted audience, they do so mainly through traditional audience surveys, and not via traffic data. Rather, they use their surveys to identify target groups for online marketing campaigns, and not vice versa. The ability to take advantage of the tools provided by digital surveillance technologies thus tends to depend more on past film successes, a closer cooperation with web companies and available budgets for targeted advertising online.

In addition, whether Facebook is perceived by companies as a platform for ‘paid’ or ‘owned media’ reflects different perspectives on social media strategies (Boncheck 2014; Trottier 2012). The terms ‘paid’, ‘owned’ and ‘earned media’ are commonly used in marketing discourse for online promotion (see Boncheck 2014). ‘Owned media’ is understood as webpages that the company can control, whereas ‘earned’ is understood as press coverage and word-of-mouth (otherwise also categorized as ‘shared media’). However, the terms are ambiguous, especially when it comes to how social media marketing is interpreted (Boncheck 2014). Social media is ‘usually treated as both owned and earned’ media, thus not accounting for the fact that the social media platforms themselves ‘owns the access to data’ (Boncheck 2014, see also Trottier 2012).

In line with this, it is noteworthy that we find that the guidelines set by NFI contribute towards the interpretation of social media as ‘owned’ (‘Egne medier’) by listing it as such (together with the companies own blog etc):

- Owned media [Egne medier]: Strategies for your owned media platforms
(‘web/Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/own blog/other’)
- Paid media [Kjøpte medier]: What kind of media is given priority? What are your strategies for the channels you choose? (NFI 2015)

NFI thereby imply to applicants that film companies can publish content and gain the audience attention for free, through ‘their’ websites, including social media pages. However, companies do not ultimately control how the audiences are reached or monitored through the various tools provided by the social media platforms (Trottier 2012: 2, 118). Following Trottier (2012: 2, 118), one implication of for example Facebook’s unpredictable infrastructure for organizations or businesses is that when companies seek publicity for their products they ought to be viewed as renters rather than owners of their sites. In other words, they might increasingly have to pay to gain the audience’s attention, due to new changes in

Facebook's algorithms for visibility (Beck 2015). In contrast, NFI's guidelines re-produce a 'decision by default' (Sunstein 2013) understanding of Facebook and other social media platforms for distributing and sharing content for free. Facebook and YouTube – social media that also function as advertising platforms – go unmentioned as such in the guidelines and may become a blind spot for 'less informed' agents. How film companies of different sizes negotiate between these two contradictory understandings of social media may have implications for the reproduction of media power and campaign visibility. As the following analysis will show, more powerful players tend to dodge the default categorization set by NFI. This, I argue, is a distinct feature of strategic resources linked to power, networks and knowledge, which intensify power differentials between large, established corporations and small-scale independent players.

Film diversity and distribution in 2015

Large-scale and transnationally embedded distributors invested more in commercially viable genre films, than in documentaries and more experimental films in 2015 (i.e. films estimating that they will reach less than 100,000 admissions). This pattern is evident in Table 1, where films are categorized according to estimates for box office revenues. Large-scale distributors that are vertically integrated in the Norwegian film industry are also part of transnational conglomerates that have ties in other media industries (Givskov 2011; Moseng 2016; Solum 2016). As demonstrated below, they distribute five out of six the films aiming for more than 200, 000 admissions. In contrast, they distribute only four out of fourteen of the films estimating for less than 100, 000 admissions.⁸ Productions within the latter category are often films with alternative aesthetic qualities, or documentary films with more complex and varied topics than the box office hits.

Table 1: Large-scale vs. independent distributors estimated market share of Norwegian films in 2015.

Films¹ according to estimated box office revenues in application before launch. High or moderate?	Large-scale distributors (transnationally embedded)	Independent distributors, small scale
Applications for films estimating for more than 200, 000 admissions, i.e. commercially oriented films (N=6)	5	1
Applications for films estimating for between 200, 000 and 100, 000 admissions. A majority of genre films (N=3)	2	1
Applications for films estimating for less than 100, 000 admissions. A majority of documentaries and more experimental films (N=14)	4	10

^[1] All Norwegian films in ordinary movie theatre distribution in Norway 2015, N=23.

Estimates above 200, 000 are defined as commercial successes according to Norwegian cultural policy. Films above this also qualify for subsidies granted via NFI’s scheme for commercially oriented films (Enerhaug and Larsen 2013). They typically represent specific genre films that adopt Hollywood formats (comedy, action, family films and so forth). The mid-category of films (estimating between 100,000 and 200,000 admissions) also tends to adopt these formats. Consequently, having identified a relation between diversity of films, estimated market share and the size of distribution companies, I will proceed with addressing

the question of whether company size had any implications for the knowledge of how to utilize social media platforms to promote film releases.

Social media strategies by independent and large-scale distributors

Commercially oriented films – a majority of which are distributed by large-scale distributors – have a tendency to outline more commercially oriented social media strategies. Table 2 indicates a pattern of systematic differences, showing that commercially oriented films tend to have more extensive plans for social media. For example, one applicant articulates their strategy for their commercially oriented film in the following manner:

The social media campaign for [film title] will entail navigating a considerable number of partners and voices on the most important social media [...] In order to achieve this, we are currently working on an ambitious campaign/publishing plan that includes all actors and builds on three main elements: material that both introduces the film and invites the audience into the creative process (trailers, posters, soundtrack etc.), elements that play on nostalgia and the story of [film title], (concerts/concert recordings, interviews, drawings etc.), and elements from our partners (vinyl releases etc.). The overall campaign will engage both new and old fans, invite them into the universe and make [film title] into an ambitious and engaging project on social media as well. (Application, commercially oriented film in 2015)

This stands in contrast to films with lower estimates for admission. There, we typically find only the social media platforms mentioned in the NFI guidelines (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), and only a brief sentence or two describing the campaign.

Commercially oriented film companies to a larger degree ‘dodge’ the default understanding of social media promotion in 2015, as provided by NFI guidelines. As shown in Table 2, distributors of such films gave priority to Facebook as a ‘paid medium’, and thus demonstrated a higher capacity to form independent and more ‘informed’ social media

strategies. In contrast, only five out of fourteen of the less commercially oriented films view Facebook as a tool for spreading sponsored content.

Table 2: Films according to commercial ambitions and their strategies for social media in 2015.

Films¹ according to estimated box office revenues in application before film release (2015)	Facebook: Defined as paid media?	Extensive communication strategy on social media (organic and/or paid media)?	Facebook given priority?	Twitter given priority?
Applications for films estimating for more than 200, 000 admissions (N=6)	6/6	6/6	6/6	1/6
Applications for films estimating for between 200, 000 and 100, 000 admissions (N=3)	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3
Applications for films estimating for less than 100, 000 admissions (N=14)	5/14	7/14	12/14	10/14

Note: ^[1]All Norwegian films in ordinary movie theatre distribution 2015, N=23.

Furthermore, the large companies’ total budgets for online marketing, including Facebook, are often estimated to be relatively high. As one of the applicants writes:

Facebook is an effective and precise option for gaining coverage and the target groups’ attention for the film. It is easy to share videos with Facebook, which increase the potential of something going viral.

We are working together with Facebook in order to develop an integrated, optimal strategy for how to best utilize the platform for [film title] [...] Estimated budget online: 800 000 (Application, commercially oriented film in 2015)

It can then be argued that these companies combine market position, privileged knowledge and networks to make other choices than independent distributors and production companies. Such claims are supported by major distributors' closer cooperation with web 2.0 companies, such as YouTube and Facebook, as shown by the quote above and as reported in interviews with social media workers in large distribution companies (autumn 2016). A combination of advertisements and organic diffusion on Facebook was reported as having helped the campaign to spread and in turn having increased the companies' number of followers:

Interviewer: Speaking of paid advertisements instead of organic posts on Facebook, do they, in your view, help increase the number of followers on your official film page on Facebook? In other words, does sponsored content pay off?

Interviewee: Definitely. Yes, we can trace it back to the statistics on our official Facebook page, where we can measure how many likes we get through organic and paid reach [...] According to my experience, I believe, we see an increase in followers especially after posting sponsored content- or when a paid campaign has been particularly popular. Our official film page on Facebook often gains followers in periods when we run comprehensive paid campaigns for new, popular films (interview with social media employee, large-scale company, 5 December 2016).

It can be noted that large companies, with commercially oriented films, more thoroughly draft their budgets for social media and involve relevant outsourced staff when they outline their plans submitted to NFI. Typically, large distribution companies combine extensive communication strategies for both organic and paid posts on Facebook. This combination of organic and paid media increases the likelihood of a post to spread due to Facebook's new

algorithms from 2014 to 2015 (Beck 2015; Koljonen 2016: 19). Several of the companies within this category also give priority to paid advertisements on the social video-sharing site YouTube, a platform not mentioned in the NFI guidelines.

Most notable for their strategies is that they, to a large degree, dismiss Twitter as a relevant platform for film content diffusion. Only one out of six of the films within this category gives priority to Twitter in their campaigns. Earlier studies indicate that powerful players perceive Facebook as an effective medium for (political) marketing in the Norwegian context (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). These assessments are further supported by statistics. In 2014 only 21 per cent of the population had a Twitter account, whereas in the same period as many as 80 per cent of the population had a Facebook account, according to Ipsos MMI (2017). Marketing researchers have found evidence to suggest that Facebook engagement in 2014 was more important than Twitter for predicting how a film succeeds in box office rankings (Oh et al. 2017). Consequently, film companies that in 2015 gave priority to Twitter rather than Facebook for marketing purposes indicate that they might be ‘less informed’ on how to reach out to a broad audience. As the following analysis will show, this is indeed more frequently the case for independent companies.

Moreover, a different pattern emerges for independent companies that invest in documentaries and less commercially oriented fiction films. Only five out of fourteen in this category viewed Facebook as ‘paid media’, i.e. as a tool for buying targeted advertising. Thus, independent production and distribution companies seems to be more inclined to follow NFI's default categorization of social media as ‘owned media’. The dual strategies of the large media conglomerates on the one hand and the independent film company’s singular strategies on the other support the thesis that knowledge of running efficient social media strategies is reinforcing existing media structures rather than diminishing them.

Independent films and social media as a semi-public space

The independent companies in this study were more likely to view social media, including Facebook, as a *semi-public space*, rather than a platform for paid advertisements and sponsored content. They tend to project ideals in accordance with their creative ambitions into their marketing strategies, as showcased by their focus on Twitter and Facebook as a means for creating *discussion* and *debate* about their films.

As shown in Table 2, ten out of fourteen of the less commercially oriented films prioritized Twitter (those anticipating under 100,000 admissions). In a Norwegian context, this strategy might turn out to be flawed, as an innovative and successful independent film distributor-producer indicated in an interview the following year. It proves difficult to build a large fan following through Twitter since it ‘in recent years has lost some of its relevance on the cultural scene and is better designed for public debate on other issues’ (interview with social media employee, independent company, 29 August 2016).

Typically, then, these independent actors tend to reproduce a default understanding of social media as semi-public platforms, where content is shared through comments, likes and debates online (‘organic reach’). And, as discussed, this framing of social media is implicitly suggested to applicants using NFI's guidelines for seeking promotional grants (see p. 10, 11). In turn they produce strategies restricting advertising to traditional media and advertising platforms, trying to gain ‘buzz for free’ on social media. As one independent company writes in its application:

Paid media: We will give priority to the newspaper ‘Aftenposten’.⁹ We also consider including the four other big news outlets in Norway. Although we include paid campaigns in news outlets, we aim to limit those expenses. Instead we will give priority to selected prescreenings, press coverage, and rely on shares and buzz on social media. (Application for documentary film in 2015)

When taking all analysed applications into account, this is indeed illustrative of how independent companies tend to view social media.

Discussion

Why do independent companies to a lesser degree understand and view Facebook as a commodified space (i.e. a place for advertisements)? While commercially oriented film producers and distributors regularly take advantage of a wide range of opportunities for gaining attention, including taking advantage of social media's abilities to identify and reach target audiences through their corporate surveillance techniques, independents to a larger degree rely on Facebook and Twitter, in the hope of reaching their audiences via organically spread 'word-of-mouth' campaigning. I suggest that this supports 'decision by default' hypothesis (Sunstein 2013), in which less powerful agents are more inclined to follow publicly set default options. When actors follow the guidelines given by NFI – where, for example, Twitter is one of the suggested media alongside Facebook and Instagram – their actions indicate that they hold similar knowledge about social media as the public institutions themselves. As previously established, NFI's guidelines demonstrate that they interpret social media platforms as the film companies' 'owned' sites, and not as paid (and rented) media. More powerful distribution and production companies to a significantly larger degree 'dodged' this default in 2015. In their applications, they rethink and re-contextualize for instance Facebook as both a paid and organic medium from early on, when outlining their strategies for social media. This dual strategy gives them – as previously indicated - an advantage over the independents.

That said, there is an alternative explanation to the 'decision by default' thesis. Companies' different stances towards social media in 2015 – as a commodified space for targeted advertising versus semi-public space – might also reflect different ideals guiding

their work ethics. As Eira demonstrates, small but well-established production companies focus their energies on artistic and communal goals rather than extraordinary financial success. Financial goals are not irrelevant, but they come second to artistic ambitions (Eira 2016b: 11). One might argue that these values transfer to their strategies for social media. In this way, power relations between large and small companies might not be reproduced from above (via, for instance, interpretations of grant application guidelines and available resources discussed above) but could instead be a result of different perspectives on what film success means. Nonetheless, the less commercial strategy might be at a disadvantage if the aim is to reach a larger audience or create more buzz around the film.

In summary, companies producing and distributing less commercially oriented films exhibited overall 'less informed knowledge' on efficient uses of social media as means to promote a film to its targeted audience. Irrespective of whether the strategies of the small-scale companies are best understood as unreflexively following a default, set by NFIs guidelines or other values and criteria for success, this might have important implications for a film's presence and visibility on popular social media platforms in 2015. Hence, by analysing strategies for social media promotion, I have shown that the applications from a broad range of films reveal systematic differences between large and small companies in the Norwegian film industry. Accordingly, the material lends support to the normalization thesis: that power relations in cultural industries are reproduced by unequally distributed resources and strategic knowledge about social media. Since the large-scale companies are shown here to have closer cooperation with, and more in-depth knowledge of social media, this might lead to a wider circulation of certain types of texts over others. This media structure might then direct, shape and contribute to limit the 'public access to culture and creativity' (Hesmondhalgh 2007: 174).

I have here foregrounded how strategies by the Norwegian film industry are outlined and

articulated in an early stage of the strategic process, and specifically how different companies set out to create buzz about their films in social media. Further research is needed to evaluate how strategies were implemented. The sample in this article is limited to the year of 2015, and more work is needed to test and refine central findings, not least in relation to the situation in other countries and contexts. Consequently, further research ought to take different media systems into account, as well as new socio-technical developments.

Conclusion

Examining applications to the NFI revealed three patterns that stood out regarding strategic knowledge on social media for the Norwegian films launched in 2015. First, film distribution companies embedded in transnational corporate structures were far more likely to perceive Facebook and other social media platforms as ‘paid media’ and to invest in commercially oriented films. In several cases they established direct communication with social media companies when developing strategies. However, rather than capturing the digital consumer through traffic data online, large-scale players tended to use audience surveys to identify target groups for social media campaigns. Thus, the ability to take advantage of the tools provided by digital surveillance technologies depended on past film successes, a closer cooperation with web companies and available budgets for targeted advertising online. Second, these same companies submitted applications to NFI that had far more extensive and advanced social media strategies than those submitted by independent companies. The major players included budgets for social media in their applications and to a larger degree had already hired dedicated staff (often outsourced). Finally, independent companies developed promotion campaigns that framed both Twitter and Facebook as tools for obtaining publicity for ‘free’ to a far greater extent (i.e. as a semi-public platform). They were more likely to be distributors of documentary and experimental fiction films and tended to follow NFI's

guidelines on how to promote films in a more literal fashion. Thus, the larger companies tended to show more agency by initiating independent strategies for the tools provided by social media.

The new currency in the digital media world is the vast amount of user data that social media companies have collected on audiences and that can be sold to advertisers (Bodle 2016; Trottier 2012). Sociological perspectives within surveillance studies suggest that prominent platforms such as Facebook should be framed as ‘rented’ rather than ‘owned’ media for organizations and businesses. This stems from their lack of control over how content is shared with audiences and the tools for monitoring them (Trottier 2012: 118). As shown here, larger companies tend to both cooperate more closely with and adopt socio-technical innovations on for example Facebook faster than independent companies.

This Norwegian case study thus counters the idea that lowered barriers of entry in the digital age necessarily lead to more obtainable visibility for smaller players. Consequently, it can be seen as lending support to the wider thesis of normalization, namely that within the domain of new social media, power relations in the film industry reproduce themselves. Paradoxically, then, were this development to continue, the visible variety of Norwegian films might decrease.

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Notes

¹ The Norwegian Film Institute is a public institution operating under the authority of the Ministry of Culture. NFI is the government's executive body for the film sector and its advisor on film policy issues (NFI 2017c).

² According to Nordicom's database for Scandinavian research, research on "social media and the film industry" is rather scarce (Search: social* media* film* industry*, 30 January 2018).

³ In addition, several production companies are currently establishing themselves as independent distributors.

⁴ Ticket sales are reported in NFI's annual reports 2008–16 (2016), see Lismoen for a critic's account of why commercially oriented family films are thriving and arthouse films are struggling (2017: 02–107, 156–58, 178–79).

⁵ See revenue streams documented by NFI (2017a:10).

⁶ The visibility of films on the most frequently used Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) and Television Video On Demand (TVOD) platforms are not taken into account in this study. Although NFI has produced reports on the topic (NFI 2017a, 2017b), more research is needed on what types of content are made visible and available on streaming services. NFI report that Norwegian content visible on SVOD is rather scarce and that revenues from movie theatres are still essential (NFI 2017a 10).

⁷ Such as the improved reach for native videos in Facebook's news feed in 2014–15 (Beck 2015).

⁸ Even though some of the small-scale production companies with less commercially ambitious films manage to work with large and vertically integrated film distributors, this does not necessarily reflect an advantage. Indeed, former research points to a neutral or even a negative outcome for independent production companies who work with major distributors (Siminton 2009: 413).

⁹ *Aftenposten* is one of the largest newspapers in Norway, both in print and digital arenas, with an extensive coverage of the cultural scene.