



TALKING BACK: BIKERS' MEDIATED SELF-REPRESENTATION UNN CONRADI ANDERSEN & ARNE H. KRUMSVIK

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In this article, we analyze the mediated self-representation of Norwegian bikers in contrast to how they are represented through mainstream-media. Based on analysis of MC coverage in local, regional, and national Norwegian newspapers and postings and comments on the Facebook page of PayBack Norway, we compare an online counterpublic with coverage in mainstream media. The overarching research question for the article is as follows: What is the strategic public discourse of bikers?



[Fig.1] PayBack Norway Facebook cover photo.

In 2015, Norway had a population of 5.2 million; there were 176,040 registered motorcycles (Statistics Norway), about 350 one-percenters (National Police Directorate), and 229 newspapers (Høst, 2016). Because of weather, the motorcycle season was about six months long (from May to October). In this context, we analyze how bikers represent a *counterpublic* where members of subordinated social groups circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities and needs (Fraser, 1992). Such publics often stand in a direct and conflicting position with respect to mainstream media (Habermas, 1989 [1961]; Fraser, 1992).

Counterpublics

Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere is indispensable for an understanding of how even today's mainstream media works. Habermas' (1989 [1961]) perspective has been important to gain a better grasp on the distinction between state apparatus and democratic unions. This division is of importance to understand citizens' potential to influence agenda setting and holding the state responsible.

Habermas' notion of a bourgeois public sphere is an arena conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state (Habermas, 1989 [1961]). The bourgeois public sphere increased in the late 18th century during industrialism when most men went out of their homes and took work. At the same time, coffeehouses and salons gathered men that discussed public matters. A public sphere came into existence separate from private household. This led to public opinions that the state had to take into consideration. For Habermas, democracy rests on a successful mediation between what he calls *weak public spheres*, or informal spaces where the public gathers around common topics, and *strong public spheres*, or legislative authority. In an idealized public sphere, the debate will be based on a rational and analytical discourse aimed at gaining consensus. Habermas still holds bourgeois public sphere as an ideal, and his theory is widely accepted and quoted.

A various range of scholars have criticized Habermas' idealization of *one* liberal public sphere, as he fails to examine other non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres (Ryan, 1990; Fraser, 1992), or, rather, it is exactly because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing *the* liberal public sphere (Fraser, 1992, p. 115).

Virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere of *men*, there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite woman publics, and working class publics. Not only was there always a plurality of publics from the start but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual. Virtually from the beginning, counterpublics contested the exclusionary norm of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech. The bourgeois public sphere deliberately sought to *block* broader participation. The public sphere was always constituted by conflict (Fraser, 1992, p. 116). In Norway, for example, domestic violence against women has until recently been considered to be a limited problem by the majority. Then feminist activists in the 1960s formed counterpublics arguing that violence against women is a structural problem in Norway's male-dominated society, and hence something that should be debated in a broader public sphere. After long and intense discursive arguments *outside* the mainstream-media, these counterpublics managed to make so-called 'private issues' into public matters.

Now, let us take a look at our time: Mass media is a crucial part of mediating between weak and strong publics between civil society and politicians. The media landscape consists of a myriad of overlapping publics and counterpublics, and where social media in particular opens up for new groups and positioned arguments, through for example frustration, rage and anger. We will soon return to this in our analysis, and in particular show how PayBack Norway is part of this new landscape. Still, there are several counterpublics that suffer from exclusionary norms from mainstream media. They do not speak the language that is required, their message does not fit with the logic of commercialism (Warner, 2002), or they lack gatekeeper-knowledge. Gatekeeper-knowledge is based on knowledge of how to both understand the media, and come through with a message. The gatekeeper role is provided by the editors and their staff, who decide what kinds of voices, cases and messages should pass through the different types of filters (White 1950). However, not all groups in society are familiar with how to get through to the gate-keepers. Though social media opens up for a myriad of voices and stories, most of them are not read and taken into consideration by the ones

with the power to define what is considered as important news. Communication through network-based media is potentially democratizing, but at the same time it reinstates hierarchy where the existing elite are able to strengthen their influence (Enjolras et al 2013: 188). Hence, having a voice within a Facebook group does *not* automatically mean that one is heard by those in power.

Unequal access to power and an uneven distribution of symbolic and material resources advantage dominant social groups and disadvantage subordinated groups in public discourse (Asen & Brouwer, 2001, p. 8). Some of these counterpublics are explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. One example is online activities, such as blogs, online news sites, and social media that voice anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic criticism. The views and perspectives expressed in these forums have until recently been generally ignored by the mainstream (Figenshou and Beyer 2014: 436). Now, there are different views about whether it is wise to open up for these anti-islamic “echo chamber cultures”, especially in Norway after the terror attack 22 July 2011.[1] Still, insofar as these counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, it *could* be understood that they help expand the discursive space (Fraser, 1992, p. 124).

We take this notion of counterpublics as a starting point when we examine the *mode of operation* of PayBack Norway, as it stands in a conflicting relationship with mainstream media and ask the following research question:

RQ1: *What are the differences in narratives from mainstream media and the biker community?*

Counter-culture and victim discourse

The picture of the countercultural motorcyclist was created during the 1950s through various low-budget films. These films hold a standard plot revolving around “the plight of an individualist biker who battles against a corrupt, unfeeling and conformist society” (Rubin, 1994, p. 362). The most famous movie is *The Wild One* (1954), in which Hell’s Angels are romanticized as violent and independent yet goodhearted bikers (Wood, 2003, p. 336). This view is also partly found in Hunter S. Thompson’s (1966) iconic book *Hell’s Angels*, though a darker side of the biker culture is revealed. This view of a goodhearted counterculture changed rapidly during the 1970s, taking its starting point with a Rolling Stones concert in 1969 where a black man was killed by a group belonging to the Hell’s Angels. Since then, a relatively huge number of articles, TV news programs, and documentaries have focused on criminality and the so-called one-percenters, creating a stereotype of all bikers as outlaw bikers (Maxwell, 1998).

In response, an organized riders’ rights movement has struggled for justice, dignity, and equal rights in the United States. Although Harley Davidson bikers have in particular been castigated by society with a stereotype and imagined to be noisy, rebellious, antisocial, criminal, and dangerous, the motorcyclists’ rights movement recognizes its own diversity—riding all types of bikes—as well as its similarities with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, women’s liberation, and advances by other oppressed minorities (Kieffner, 2009).

Like other groups, motorcyclists in America have been victims of oppression from many sources for over a century (Kieffner, 2009) from media stereotyping to police interrogation (Simi et al., 2008). But it is our expectation that bikers, like many other civil rights organizations, have *learned to use* this victim position to gain attention and rights. Holding a victim position seemed to become a strategic gain in the 20th century (Jensen, 1998; Stjernfelt, 2005). The victim position has become the most legitimate language for expressing discrimination and oppression, and all identity politics now derive their power from collective pain (Brown, 1995; Hellesund, 2008).

This leads to the following research hypothesis:

H1: *The counterpublic communication from bikers is expressed through a victim discourse.*

Research design and methodology

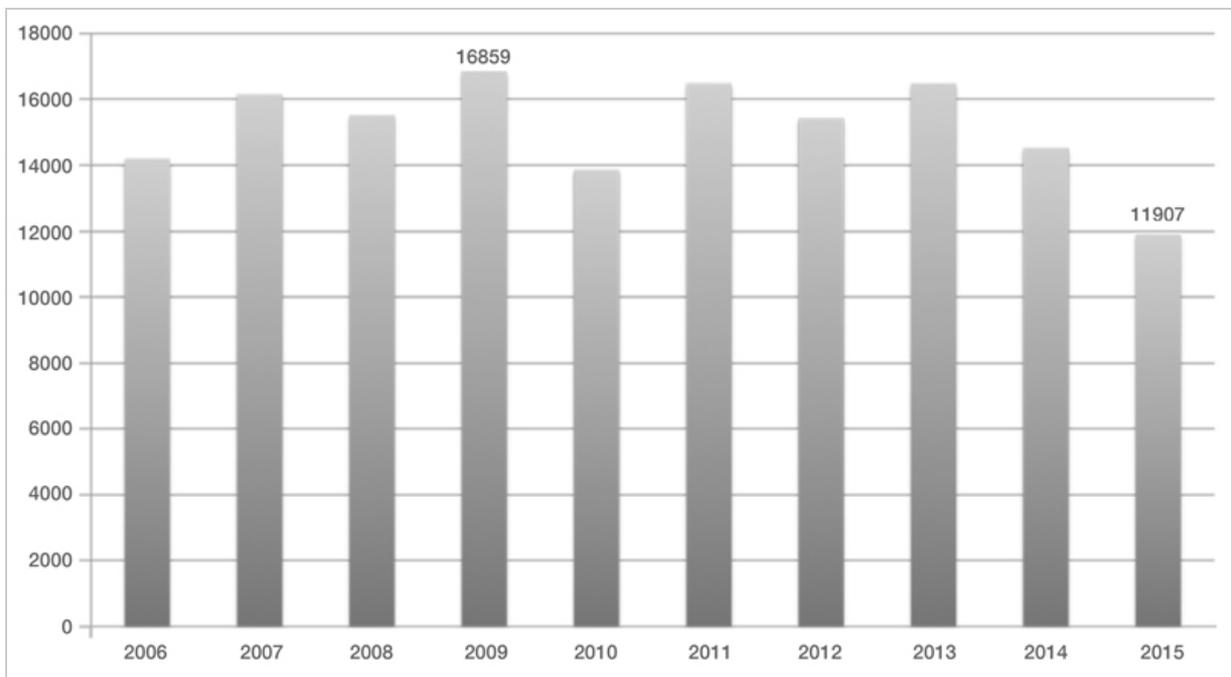
Two sources were used to analyze the mainstream media narratives of the motorcycle and the motorcyclist in Norway and the counter-voice of the biker community.

The news archive *A-tekst* contains printed material and online news articles from all the major daily, regional, and local newspapers, as well as magazines, journals, and periodicals. It is provided by Retriever as part of the most extensive digital news archive in Scandinavia.

The PayBack movement claims to be the official national organization for bikers' rights in Norway and Sweden, with both clubs and individuals as members, while having a looser network role in neighboring Denmark and Finland. It was established in Norway in late 2010, with a Facebook page as their main outlet for public communication on Norwegian affairs since 2011.

The data material consisted of newspaper items (print, N=817) and social media postings (Facebook, N=63) from 2015. The search string in *A-tekst* included general items capturing the total media coverage related to motorcycles and MC culture (e.g., *Motorcycle**, *MC Club*, *MC Gang*, *MC Criminal*) as well as specific club names (i.e., *Hell's Angels*, *Bandidos*, etc.).

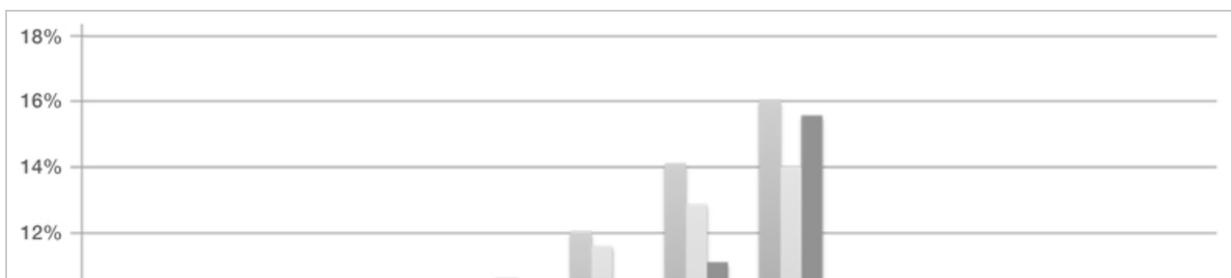
The search in all Norwegian sources resulted in 11,907 hits for 2015. This was the lowest observation over the 10-year period from 2006 to 2015, while 2009 was the highest with 16,859 hits (see Fig.2).

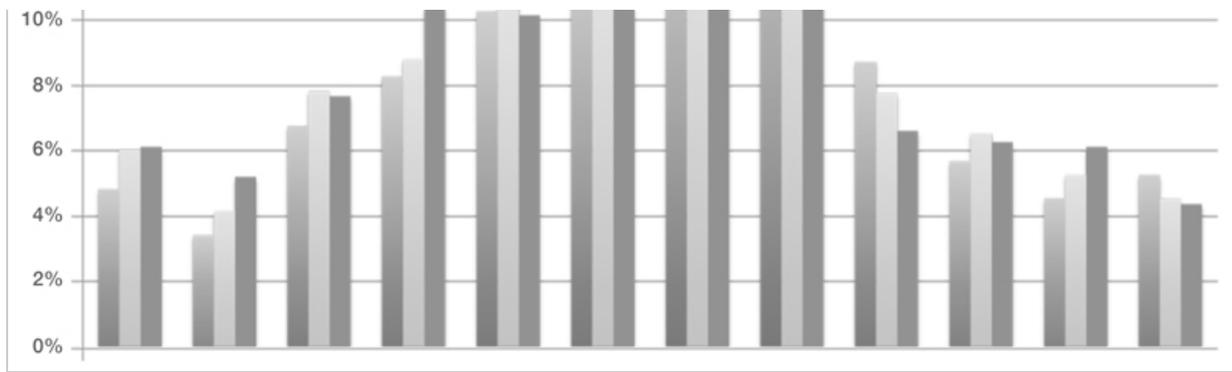


[Fig.2] Norwegian media coverage. All sources. 1996–2015.

Note: Search results from the Norwegian media database *A-tekst*. Search string: *Motorsykel** or *MC-klubb* or *Hell's Angels* or *Bandidos* or *Outlaws* or *Coffin Cheaters* or *MC-kriminel** or *MC and gjeng*.

To select a manageable sample for manual coding, the search was first limited to the print editions of national, regional, and local newspapers (N=3,704), and then the top 11 newspapers were selected, reducing the number of hits to 847. This sample included two national, four regional, and five local newspapers. In total, the search produced 817 articles in these newspapers, ranging from 62 in the local newspapers *Rana Blad* and *Smaalenenes Avis* to 123 in the national tabloid *VG*. All regions of the country were represented in the sample, and the monthly distribution of articles was similar to that of the wider searches (see Fig.3).





[Fig.3] Monthly media coverage 2015. All sources and newspapers; percent.

Note: All sources (N=11,907), newspapers (N=3,704), and a sample of 11 newspapers with the highest frequency of motorcycle-related articles (N=847). Search string: *Motorsykel** or *"MC-klubb"* or *"Hell's Angels"* or *Bandidos* or *Outlaws* or *"Coffin Cheaters"* or *"MC-kriminel*"* or *"MC and gjeng"*.

A thematic codebook was developed and used for manual coding of articles and postings.

Newspaper articles were examined in their entirety to categorize the content. Categories of newspapers (i.e., national, regional, or local) and newspaper sections (i.e., news, sports, culture, features, etc.) were generated deductively, while categories of narratives (i.e., criminal biker, criminal organization, human touch, benefit of society, etc.) were derived inductively through a pilot study.

Excel spreadsheets were used for manual coding. The sets of codes were exported to the IBM SPSS statistical package for quantitative analysis. Based on the results of this analysis, selected articles and postings were revisited for qualitative analysis. Hence, the data were analyzed in a two-step approach, drilling down from quantitative analysis to qualitative close readings of selected items, illustrating phenomena identified during the previous steps.

By using these methods, we obtained reliable and valid data. The study should generate theoretically generalizable insights, both in the Norwegian setting and in countries with similar media ecologies.

Findings

In May 2016, the Norwegian PayBack Facebook page had 4,655 likes (and a Swedish PayBack Facebook group had 8,310 members). According to the Facebook page, the aim of PayBack Norway is *"to improve the climate for biker culture by providing accurate information about this, its driving forces and mechanisms"* [translated]. On the official home page (in Swedish), the tasks of the organization are formulated as follows: *"to drive the overall legal affairs whose outcome is important for the majority of biker culture and cases where a legal ruling could set a precedent that could affect all clubs or club members"* [translated]. It is also stated that the PayBack initiative represents more than the 1% community, in Norway consisting of 10 different clubs with approximately 47 chapters and 350 members, according to a police report. In addition, there were 40 support clubs in 2013 (National Police Directorate, 2014).

The first posting on the Norwegian Facebook page in 2015 was a call to all biker clubs to join a celebration of their lawyers:

"For almost 4 years now, PayBack Norway has fought for the rights of the nation's MC and Biker Clubs. Just as long, attorney John Christian Elden and his partner, attorney Alexander Solhus have been standing by our side in the fight against discrimination from parts of the political Norway and parts of the government..." (10 Jan 2015, translated)

The lawyers were given vests with the PayBack logo patch on the back as a token of appreciation. According to a post on Facebook on 21 Jan 2015, about 100 bikers from 20–30 clubs were present at the ceremony. The high-profile Elden law firm was announced as their representation in a Facebook post on 12 April 2011. The most prominent public event organized by PayBack in Norway thus far was a rally outside the Norwegian Parliament attended by 300 bikers in September 2013.

Sixty-three postings were made in 2015, most of them signed by Atle Jørgensen, the contact person for PayBack Norway. He is also the editor of the *Scanbike Magazine* (published by a former Hell's Angels spokesperson), and he is a former captain with Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). Sixteen postings had links to newspaper stories (see Table 2). While the voice of bikers generally was not present in news stories analyzed, the meta comments published on Facebook give unique insight into the narratives of the biker community.

Analyzing the mainstream news, we found that 48% of the motorcycle-related newspaper stories were published in the news section, 14% in the feature section, and 11.8% in the sports section (Table 1). The main differences between categories of newspapers were the share of articles in the feature section. Recoding into binary variables, we found a significant positive correlation between feature and national newspapers ($r = .147, n = 817, p = .000$) and a significant negative correlation with local newspapers ($r = -.183, n = 817, p = .000$). This could be explained by resources in the newsroom. Larger newspapers have more editorial resources and tend to have a larger feature section in the weekend editions. However, a close reading of the feature articles revealed the motorcycle to play the role of a prop. Previous or former ownership, or the dream of owning one in the future, are used to build the character of the interview objects. The option to rent a bike on vacation in distant lands is also a recurring topic (see Table 2). More seldom is the motorcycle or the biker at the center of the story.

Table 1. Journalism category in newspaper coverage, 2015, percent.

| Section | National | Regional | Local | Total |
|--------------|----------|----------|-------|-------|
| News | 32.1 | 50.9 | 54.3 | 48.0 |
| Sports | 10.9 | 10.0 | 13.8 | 11.8 |
| Culture | 11.4 | 5.8 | 5.6 | 7.0 |
| Features | 23.4 | 16.5 | 6.5 | 14.0 |
| Op-ed | 3.3 | 7.6 | 4.4 | 5.3 |
| Other | 19.0 | 9.3 | 15.5 | 14.1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | 184 | 292 | 341 | 817 |

The dominating narrative in newspapers (21.9%) is related to traffic, including regulations, but—unfortunately—dominated by accidents, followed by the motorcycling sports athletes (9.1%). These stories are, however, outside the typical notion of biker culture. This is also the case for motorcycles used in war and terrorism (3.2%). While the PayBack Facebook page only published URLs to articles presenting MC clubs as criminal organizations (75%) or human touch stories about bikers (25%), the newspapers present a wider repertoire on representations of the biker community (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Narratives in newspaper coverage vs. PayBack Facebook page, 2015.

| Narratives | Newspapers total | Facebook page, news links |
|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Traffic, accidents | 21.9% | |
| Sports athlete | 9.1% | |
| Criminal biker | 7,8% | |
| Criminal organization | 5.4% | 75.0% |

| | | |
|--------------------|-------|-------|
| Human touch | 3.2% | 25.0% |
| War/terror | 3.2% | |
| Tourism | 2.9% | |
| Benefit to society | 1.3% | |
| Other | 45.2% | |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| N | 817 | 16 |

Note: Facebook page retrieved 11 May 2016.

Zooming in on the stories more typically relating to the biker community (Table 3), we find the criminal biker as the dominating narrative (44.1%), followed by MC clubs as criminal organizations (30.3%). The first category might also reinforce the latter, as newspapers tend to name the MC clubs that individuals are members of. While news media would be reluctant to mention other characteristics of criminals, such as country of origin or skin color, membership in MC clubs is quite likely to be highlighted. Viewing these two variables in isolation, there is no significant difference among the three categories of newspapers ($\chi^2(2, N = 108) = 1.173, p = .56$), but the local newspapers have a larger share of positive motorcycle-related stories (i.e., human touch, benefit to society). The national newspapers did not have any stories on MC clubs or individuals doing good for society.

Examples of these types of stories include those about bikers doing fundraising, such as Devil's Choice in Bergen doing a Charity Run and raising NOK 10,000 for children with heart disease (*Bergens Tidende*, 16 May 2015), Normand MC in Porsgrunn raising NOK 25,000 for children with special needs (*Telemarksavisa*, 17 Nov 2015), and Fatso MC in Eidsvoll raising NOK 106,133 for cancer research (*Romerikes Blad*, 29 Jan 2015) or bikers volunteering for a local community night patrol.

Table 3. Newspapers on the biker community, percent.

| Narratives | National | Regional | Local | Total |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|
| Criminal biker | 58.3 | 43.2 | 36.9 | 44.1 |
| Criminal organization | 30.6 | 38.6 | 24.6 | 30.3 |
| Human touch | 11.1 | 11.4 | 26.2 | 17.9 |
| Benefit to society | 0.0 | 6.8 | 12.3 | 7.6 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| N | 36 | 44 | 65 | 145 |

The narrative of criminal organizations dominates both the URLs posted on the PayBack Facebook page (Table 2) and the most shared postings (Table 4). The activists focus on this narrative to highlight the perceived discrimination from authorities and to add meta commentaries. The most high-profile case in 2015 was the police attempting to confiscate the Hell's Angels club house in Oslo because of unlawful activity, a

case won by the Elden law firm and celebrated at the PayBack page with comments such as “Justice prevails once again” (22 Jun 2015, translated).

“Reprehensible by the Military” was the meta comment to a feature story about the officer losing his security clearance because of fear of conflicting loyalties because of membership in an MC club for military personnel and thereby ending his military career (*Bergens Tidende*, 13 Jun 2015, translated).

In the same way as in the narrative of the military officer as a victim of the system, biker clubs are also victims. Strong language was used to characterize politicians and their community in southern Norway when a biker club was about to lose their property tax exemption for volunteer organizations because the club was not seen as a benefit to society (23 Jan 2015). A human touch story about bikers not being allowed to use skulls on gravestones was also framed as discrimination: “Shameful. Even the Church of Norway is helping to discriminate against the motorcycle community” (5 Nov 2015, translated).

Table 4. Top 10 shared postings on the PayBack Facebook page.

| Post | Type | Shares | Likes | Comments |
|--|-------|--------|-------|----------|
| Court ruling: Hell's Angels not a criminal organization | URL | 79 | 560 | 26 |
| Hell's Angels answering | URL | 50 | 255 | 12 |
| Support PayBack (fundraising) | Photo | 40 | 50 | 5 |
| Note from lawyer on expert witness statement supporting the PayBack position | Photo | 37 | 151 | 8 |
| Announcing poker run (fundraising) | Photo | 31 | 88 | 1 |
| Skulls not allowed on grave stones | URL | 30 | 94 | 30 |
| Note on biker human rights | Text | 29 | 76 | 9 |
| PayBack honoring their lawyers | Photo | 26 | 230 | 7 |
| | Photo | 25 | 57 | 3 |

| | | | | |
|---|-------|----|-----|----|
| Announcing Resistance Run (fundraising) | | | | |
| Congratulate HAMC Oslo on court ruling | Photo | 23 | 370 | 20 |

Note: Retrieved 11 May 2016. Sharing postings on Facebook is considered to represent a low threshold of engagement, however it might be higher than liking and commenting (Krumsvik, 2013; Larsson, 2015).

Based on quantitative content analysis of both newspaper coverage and postings on the Facebook page in 2014 and qualitative close readings of selected texts, we find contradicting discourses. In mainstream media, MC clubs and motorcycle culture are portrayed through discourses of criminal organizations and/or individual bikers as criminals. Hence, the 1% reputation becomes the dominant discourse of MC culture. Talking back through the postings on Facebook with reference to selected media coverage, MC activists develop alternative discourses of abuse from local governments and portray the humanity of bikers, i.e., the vulnerable individuals (Table 5).

Discussion

Let us now take a deeper look into what characterizes the different narratives in mainstream media and the biker community. Historically, the relationships between the bourgeois public sphere and various counterpublics have been conflictual (Fraser, 1992). In the 1960s, for example, this was the case with various forms of feminist counterpublics that tried to put “private matters,” such as domestic violence, on the agenda. Still, today, there are several counterpublics that suffer from exclusionary norms established by the mainstream media. Certain types of language, identities, and stories never reach the mainstream media. Does this hold true for the biker community PayBack Norway—are there certain types of stories and narratives that never break through? Our first research question is as follows:

RQ1: What are the differences in narratives from the mainstream media and the biker community?

One of our findings is that stories related to *criminal organizations* and *human touch* are used as a starting point for the main narratives of PayBack Norway (Table 2). The main narratives in the newspapers’ coverage of biker society (Table 3) are the narratives of criminal organizations as well as the criminal biker. In the local newspapers, the proportions of stories involving the *human touch* and *benefit to society* categories are 26.2 percent and 12.2 percent, respectively (Table 3). Nevertheless, these stories rarely reach the major national newspapers that are read and discussed by many Norwegians. The threshold for what is considered news will be lower in a local newspaper than at the national level. A local newspaper might post a donation from a local organization; a national newspaper will not. At the same time, the absence of *human touch* stories has consequences for the representation of the biker community on a national level.

Although these issues in the bigger picture may seem insignificant and “small,” they become relatively important in this context because they provide a more complete picture of the biker culture. Traditionally, the biker culture is a complex and rich counterculture: Bikers have developed their own behavior, styles, and rituals, such as their own funeral and mourning rituals (Shabanowitz, 2013) and a specific youth culture (Lagergren, 2007). When these narratives fall out of view and are only partially represented at a national level, the criminality narrative becomes even stronger. This *may* leave the impression that all bikers are criminal bikers. However, it is worth noting that the press is hesitant to judge the bikers as a group and to a large degree relates to them as individual persons (Table 3).

Let us look closer at one case in the sample that can illustrate this point:

The article was published in *Bergens Tidende*, a regional Norwegian newspaper with 174,000 daily readers and the fifth largest newspaper in Norway. The article "MC Hobby Crushed His Career in the Norwegian Armed Forces" (13 Jun 2015) discusses how an intelligence officer lost his security clearance because of his membership in an MC club. As a result, he also lost his "Cosmic Top Secret" clearance, which is the highest level that is given in the Norwegian Armed Forces, and his future career was stopped. The officer himself characterized the disavowal as a "character assassination."

Let us take a deeper look into what happened when this article was shared through PayBack Norway's Facebook site. It was shared 16 times, and even though it is not among the most shared articles in our sample, it is quite representative of the reaction amongst the bikers. At PayBack Norway, it garnered comments such as "Member in an MC club, so he is a criminal according to the state" (13 Jun 2015, translated) and "I am also a member of a club. Became a criminal after I turned 70" (13 Jun 2015, translated).

These comments are rather typical for such a post on PayBack Norway. It emphasizes the bikers' frustration (in an ironic tone) about the fact that they are conflated with criminals. What separates this article from the other articles we have looked at is that one of the members from the local club was interviewed in the same newspaper. The biker points to the fact that MC enthusiasts are often labeled as potential criminals: "If I put on my vest, I am suddenly a criminal". This is in fact a rare example in which a counter-discourse is articulated and given a space in mainstream media. We will soon categorize this counter-narrative as *vulnerable individuals* and show how it is closely linked to a victim narrative. First, let us take a deeper look at bikers represented as criminals.

Criminal bikers vs. vulnerable individuals?

We have now seen that stories involving *human touch* or *benefit to society* receive little or no coverage in the national media. As a result, the narrative of criminality is left as the dominant narrative. Let us now discuss more concretely *how* this narrative of criminality is played out in mainstream media versus how it is represented in the counterpublic PayBack Norway.

The most shared news story is from the national newspaper *Dagbladet*, a newspaper with 247,000 daily readers and the third largest newspaper in the country. The news article in *Dagbladet* is titled "Hell's Angels Keeps 'The Fortress'" (*Dagbladet*, 23 Jun 2015). The article states, "In January 2011, the police raided the Hell's Angels headquarters in Oslo also known as 'The Fortress'. There they found weapons and ammunition" (23 Jun 2015, translated). The rest of the article is about how the police wanted to confiscate the property belonging to the Hell's Angels (HA) and how the case has been brought to various courts. However, the article "Hell's Angels Keep 'The Fortress'" is angled toward how the city of Oslo lost the case in the end and the fact that HA was allowed to keep the clubhouse. They were still ordered to pay a fine of 100,000 Norwegian kroner for the illegal storage of weapons.

In the article, a law firm is interviewed, and this interview gives direction to what ended up being the headline when the story was shared on PayBack Norway. Attorney John Christian Elden is quoted as saying that "[the court] has stated that *the club is not a criminal club* (our emphasis), and let us now hope that the police witch-hunt against the bikers is over" (22 Jul 2015, translated).

The story was reposted on PayBack Norway under this headline: "Court Ruling: Hell's Angels is not a criminal organization." Here, the story is reframed based on the lawyer's statements and receives a more subjective twist than is the case for the newspaper article. It is not the court that says that Hell's Angels is not a criminal organization. It is their own lawyer. The court has on its end seen fit to impose a fine on HA for illegal weapons possession, which probably indicates that the organization still has something to do with criminal activity.

All 26 comments posted under the story (Table 4) are congratulatory, such as "Cheers" and "Congratulations!", but more detailed comments can also be found. Some of them are as follows: "To think that it took such a long time to figure that out, and think of all the tax money they have spent" (23 Jun 2015, translated); "Oh no. They don't give up so easily. Too much money, funds are at stake" (23 Jun 2015, translated); "Scary how untalented the Norwegian police are ... hope the police receive disciplinary action for poor police work" (23 Jun 2015, translated).

Note that most of these comments mention *they* or *them*. “They,” in this case, are not only the police but also the state and state officials as such. Many of the comments posted on PayBack Norway’s pages are precisely about how the police and the state actively oppose *the little man*, that is, *the little biker against the system*. This narrative is very close to a countercultural narrative *and* a victim narrative, and we will promptly return to this topic.

This has to do with a narrative where the bikers understand themselves as being criminalized and stereotyped, collectively. It is at no time mentioned that the Hell’s Angels were actually convicted under the Firearm Weapons Act. This is representative of all of the cases we have studied—the bikers do not address the factual circumstances surrounding criminal activities. This is probably a strategy to distance themselves from the most problematic aspects of MC-culture. By not addressing factual circumstances or going into details, the bikers construct an unspecified collective ‘us’ against the system, and create the impression that all bikers are not treated well.

Table 5 illustrates just how divergent the understandings of bikers are in the mainstream media and on the PayBack Norway Facebook page. In the mainstream media, the narratives are mainly *individual criminal bikers* or *criminal organizations*. On the PayBack Norway page, the narratives are primarily converted to vulnerable individuals on an individual level and to *biker culture under attack* on a collective level.

Table 5. Main narratives in the newspapers and on the PayBack Facebook page.

| | Individually | Collectively |
|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mainstream media | Criminals | Criminal organizations |
| PayBack on Facebook | Vulnerable individuals | Biker culture under attack |

Bikers as vulnerable individuals evokes the rhetoric that is used by other types of political resistance among marginalized groups. This type of “language of pain” is also close to a victim narrative, which leads us to our hypothesis related victim-discourse:

H1: The counterpublic communication from/of bikers is mainly expressed through a victim discourse.

We will start this part of the discussion by looking at some of the formulations by bikers at the PayBack Norway Facebook page. From previous research, we know that bikers have developed alternative norms of public speech, as they invent and circulate counter-narratives to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Warner, 2005). This is closely attached to their countercultural and subcultural character. Let us look more closely into whether these kinds of counter-narratives are also drawn on by Norwegian bikers.

The following comment is a reaction to the fact that the Devil’s Choice clubhouse in Farsund will no longer be exempt from taxation:

“The racists in Farsund do not let up. Here, the politicians and the police agree that their inhabitants are not worth as much as the rest. I never stop being surprised about the hatred that these people in power demonstrate toward a society that hasn’t done them any harm. Maybe they should reintroduce the Jewish paragraph in Farsund? But of course this time turn it toward the biker society (23 Jan 2015, translated).”

It is worth noting that the basis for this comment is the fact that the Devil’s Choice clubhouse in Farsund would no longer be exempt from taxation. The local council can award property tax exemptions if institutions or civic organizations are of benefit to society. In 2015, however, the local council decided that the Devil’s Choice clubhouse should pay taxation, as they ‘no longer [are] of benefit for the municipality’.

The bikers reacted to this situation by viewing themselves as vulnerable individuals who are part of a hierarchy: The bikers believed themselves to be more worthless than other organizations. In this specific case, a parallel is drawn between the bikers and the Jewish paragraph, which refers to the following

paragraph from the Constitution of Norway: From 1814 to 1851, a specific paragraph stated that “Jews are still excluded from the Kingdom”. The controversial paragraph was related to an intensification of the exclusion of Jews as a group from the country, and must be interpreted within a racist discourse; The Jews were excluded simply because of their race, and nothing else.[2] The bikers in Farsund, a small village in the south of Norway, view themselves as persons who are *not* wanted—they feel that they are outcasts of the valuable civil society. Similar to the Jewish paragraph, it is the state—the politicians and the police—that are out to get the bikers.

The comment refers to the bikers as not being considered worth as much as the rest. This type of language of pain is something the bikers have in common with several marginalized groups, which tend to employ a victim position to attract attention. In a Norwegian context, the gay movement has drawn on this type of language of pain to gain access rights (Hellesund, 2008; Andersen, 2014).

This article shows that also the bikers draw on this victim position.

Yet adopting a victim position may soon become a double-edged sword where rights and equality become opposites. One may gain access to reparations, compensation, and rights through the victim position, but equality will rarely be thrown in as well. The victim discourse tends to reproduce the hierarchical relations of power between the minority and majority (Brown, 1995, p. 58). This strategy is therefore counterproductive if equality is the goal of the identity struggle; this probably also pertains to the biker culture. The victim position becomes firmly locked into a subordinate position.

This self-subordination as victims is probably *not* intended by the bikers themselves. Rather, it is a result of how their frustration and anger comes through the media frame. The media debate on Facebook and other social platforms is not filtered through the mass media’s guidelines and codes. The threshold therefore opens up for more affect, feelings, rage, and anger, all of which very easily end up sounding like victim talk from an oppressed group.

The question that still remains is, could there be other kinds of strategies for Norwegian bikers? Strategies that could represent the biker-culture in another perhaps more positive way? An alternative strategy for the bikers *could* be to focus more on the specificity of their counterculture: friendship, bikers as extended family, outdoor life, various forms of rituals, and the bikers’ contribution to society. Paradoxically, it is not PayBack Norway themselves that primarily represents bikers in this way, but the edited *local* press. And even if these narratives seldom reach the mainstream media, that does not mean that these kinds of representations do not work and have no function—at a local level.

Now let us look at one last example before we sum up our findings. One of the most often shared articles on PayBack Norway is “Skulls Not Allowed on Gravestones” (Table 4). This concerns how bikers in the MC club Nevermind in Stord have been denied the use of skulls on gravestones. The skull is supposed to be a sign of independence. However, the church finds the skulls disrespectful and inappropriate, as they can “be offensive” to churchgoers. The reaction from the bikers is as follows: “This is a witch-hunt against all bikers” (5 Nov 2015, translated) and “Again, discrimination against the MC society!” (6 Nov 2015, translated).

Again, we see the *biker culture under attack* narrative, and again it is closely linked to an understanding that an attack on one biker is an attack on all bikers. These findings strengthen the hypothesis that the counterpublic communication from/of bikers is mainly expressed through a victim discourse (**H1**).

We also observe that the bikers seem to stand shoulder to shoulder regardless of the issue and in this way do not make any attempt to distinguish between different types of bikers and different types of MC clubs. In our material, they communicate as a collective, whilst the mainstream media to a larger degree focuses on the biker as an individual (Table 5). However, as the mainstream media does not hesitate to stigmatize individuals, an outcome is that they stigmatize the entire group.

Conclusion

We find a strategic counterpublic communication coming from the bikers in telling stories about small men against the system. The bikers express themselves mainly through a victim narrative, pointing to how they

are not treated well. There is a witch-hunt going on. This narrative, however, is complex, as it could contain marks of counterculture. Our conclusion is that, by talking back, the bikers are aiming at restoring the image of the 1950s, when the image of the countercultural motorcycle rider was created. The picture of "an individual biker who battles against a corrupt, unfeeling and conformist society" (Rubin, 1994) is the most striking representation of bikers talking back on PayBack Norway. However, they do not fully make use of the possibilities they have to represent the specificity of their counterculture, by foregrounding friendship, outdoor life, and the contributions bikers make to society.

Another finding is that these counter-narratives rarely reach the mainstream media. One of the main precepts of Habermas' notion of the bourgeois public sphere is its function as a reprimand against state power: It is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that may in principle be critical of the state (Habermas, 1989 [1961]). PayBack Norway functions precisely as a place where criticism of the state and police is articulated. Our analysis shows that these counter-narratives, as formulated by the bikers, rarely reach mainstream media: they take place in a limited parallel, counterpublic, which PayBack Norway is. In addition, narratives that could potentially cast a more complex light on the bikers, such as *human touch* or *benefit to society*, only circulate in local newspapers, and do not seem to reach the national mainstream media. Thus, the narrative of criminality remains dominant.

Still, the mainstream media primarily refers to the bikers as (criminal) individuals. However, as the media does not hesitate to stigmatize individuals, an outcome is that they stigmatize the entire group. In contrast, PayBack Norway consistently refers to itself as a collective. They seldom discuss the factual aspects of individual criminal cases. In this way, they might end up hurting themselves by appearing to be a more homogeneous group than they actually are.

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Notes

Newspapers in the sample (# of articles): VG (123), *Aftenposten* (87), *Romerikes Blad* (87), *Stavanger Aftenblad* (85), *Telemarksavisa* (82), *Rogalands Avis* (72), *Bergens Tidende* (65), *Adresseavisen* (62), *Dagbladet* (62), *Rana Blad* (61), *Smaalenenes Avis* (61).

[1] One view—called the pressure-cooker discourse—states that the mediated debate should be expanded further to include even previously unaccepted views on immigration, in order to expose them and “debate them to death” (Eide et al. 2013: 190). Another attitude, which is widespread amongst journalists, is that these anti-Islamic views could be harmful and insulting toward Muslims and create an even greater divide between different segments of the population.

[2] It is also worth noting that this took place in contrast to the intensified integration and freedom of Jews elsewhere in Europe at the same time.

Image Attributions

[Fig.1] PayBack Norge Facebook cover photo sourced [here](#).

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