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## Paper 46

### ***“Listen girl. Hitler is dead.”* – Reception of a female public intellectual on Finnish online discussion forums**

by

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## **“Listen girl. Hitler is dead.” – Reception of a female public intellectual on Finnish online discussion forums**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses a literary author's societal role as a public intellectual and examines the reception of literary authors as social action realised in online discussion forums as discursive practice. Online discussion forums are often conceived as democratic meeting places where the common public can participate in societal debates. While freedom of speech is defended on discussion forums, these are also sites where speakers are silenced, ridiculed or threatened by commentators protected by their anonymity. This paper discusses a case from April 2011 where the Finnish author Sofi Oksanen compared the art policies of the political party True Finns to those of Nazi Germany in an interview for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. After the news was published online by the two leading Finnish newspapers, discussion immediately broke out on the comment sections linked to the news. As a public intellectual Oksanen was able to raise discussion about a controversial political topic but got mostly negative feedback, writers disparaging her comments and denigrating her identity as a Finnish-Estonian woman. While examining what discursive strategies are used to support or criticise Oksanen's views, I will consider whose voices are heard on the discussion forums and raise the question of whether these forums are spaces for democratic discussion or, rather, playgrounds for anonymous commentators to express misogyny and racism.

**Keywords:** literary authors, public intellectuals, reception, discussion forums

## **“Listen girl. Hitler is dead.”<sup>1</sup> – Reception of a female public intellectual on Finnish online discussion forums**

### **Introduction: a literary author as a public intellectual in Finland**

Finland offers a curious context for public intellectuals – on the one hand, the country has a highly educated population that serves as an ideal audience for public intellectuals as people who are, supposedly, interested in democratic discussion. On the other hand, a great deal of the Finnish discussion on intellectualism has started, if not concluded, with the assumption that there are no public intellectuals in Finland (see Kauppi and Sulkunen 1992, Karkama and Koivisto 1997). Indeed, the whole term ‘public intellectual’ is not often used in Finland – apart from those who use it in a derogatory sense – and other terms, such as ‘a critic of society’ or ‘societal debater’ are used instead. While all kinds of experts are asked to comment on societal or cultural events related to their area of expertise in traditional media including newspapers and television and radio programmes, “universalists” that would share their opinions widely on various topics to draw the public’s attention to current concerns in society are rare.

In a few instances when public intellectuals have been discussed as a topic in Finnish media, it has become fairly obvious that the stereotypical public intellectual is an elderly man with an academic background and that female authors, or literary authors, or women in general are less likely to be considered public intellectuals (Eskola 1992; Rahkonen and Roos 1992; Lappalainen 1997; HS 2002). Against this background, the literary author and celebrity Sofi Oksanen is an exceptional character: in March 2012 she was voted as the third most influential woman in Finland in a poll conducted among leading figures in business, politics, culture and media (Martikainen 2012). Oksanen is a Finnish-Estonian author, playwright and columnist whose international fame is mainly based on her novel *Purge* (*Puhdistus*) that was awarded the Nordic Literature Award in 2010; the translation rights of the novel have been sold to 43 language areas. *Purge*, which deals with different forms of violence against women in

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<sup>1</sup> A comment posted by “Unknown” on the comment thread following a news text reporting Sofi Oksanen’s criticism of the Finnish nationalist party True Finns on the website of *Aamulehti*, 28th April 2012, 11:47 am (<http://www.aamulehti.fi/cs/Satellite/Kotimaa/1194676443214/artikkeli/il+sofi+oksanen+perus-suomalaiset+ovat+hitlerin+puolue.html>).

Estonia in the 1940s and 1950s as well as in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, won earlier the two major literary awards in Finland, the Finlandia Award in 2008 and the Runeberg Award in 2009, thus making it the first novel ever to win both of these awards. *Purge*, which was originally a play, has also been staged in Stockholm, Tallinn and New York and has recently been worked into a feature film as a Finnish-Estonian co-production. In her other works, Oksanen has dealt particularly with the lives and position of women in contemporary Estonia and Finland<sup>2</sup>. Apart from her literary works, Oksanen has edited a collection of articles on the history of Estonia during the Soviet regime together with Imbi Paju (Oksanen and Paju 2009), and commented more widely on various political, societal and cultural issues in her newspaper columns for *Sunnuntaisuomalainen* (2007), *Metro* (2008) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (2009-2010) and in a great number of interviews given in Finland and abroad.

By drawing on the Habermasian view of a public intellectual as someone who “is supposed to take normative stances and express them in novel perspectives ... and remains an observer from the sideline” (Heynders 2012), I would suggest that Oksanen is, in certain instances, performing the role of a public intellectual by actively taking clear standpoints in current societal debates in various media, instead of only presenting social commentary or critique in her artistic works. In her writings and comments, Oksanen has often focused on human rights issues, particularly regarding women and sexual minorities, but she has also discussed the history and political situation of Estonia, as well as freedom of expression and censorship in new media. Oksanen is a highly contested public figure, and some of her comments have caused havoc in the past. For instance, after discussing the issue of domestic violence in Finland in an interview for Danish television in 2009, Oksanen has received plenty of negative feedback, including death threats (Puhto 2011). For quite a few people, the problem is

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<sup>2</sup> Oksanen’s earlier works are *Stalinin lehmät* (2003) [Stalin’s cows], a semiautobiographical novel that deals with a Finnish-Estonian marriage, the status of women in Estonia and in Finland and eating disorders, and *Baby Jane* (2005), a novel reworking the plot of the Hollywood film *Baby Jane* and dealing with lesbian relationships and panic disorder. Oksanen’s latest projects include a music theatre production *Liian lyhyt hame* (2011) [Too short a skirt] and a new novel, *Kun kyyhkyset katosivat* (2012) [When the doves disappeared]. *Liian lyhyt hame* is a performance focusing on the issue of women’s rights and involving songs composed by Maija Kaunismaa and lyrics written by Oksanen. A compilation of a cd and a book including the lyrics for the songs were published in August 2011 and the theatre performance toured Finland during the autumn. *Kun kyyhkyset katosivat* is the third novel in Oksanen’s four-book series on the history of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Estonia that deals with the periods of Nazi occupation of Estonia in the 1940s and Soviet occupation of Estonia after the WWII.

not only in the content of what Oksanen says, but the fact that she represents identity categories that depart from the typical Finnish public intellectual – instead of an elderly, ethnically Finnish man she is a young Finnish-Estonian woman, and, moreover, a person who openly performs her subcultural identity as a Goth.

In this paper, I will focus on the reception of Oksanen in social media, that is, on news comment sections in the online versions of two leading Finnish newspapers *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti*. While the discussion in the comment sections does not offer any detailed, in-depth criticism of Oksanen's writings and public comments, it reveals, among other things, a great deal about the Finnish discourses about literary authors, intellectualism and public intellectuals, women intellectuals in particular. Even though the voices on online forums are not necessarily "real", or "authentic" like voices in literary texts, these voices can be analysed by applying the Bakhtinian (1981) concept of heteroglossia: the different voices in a text point towards various social discourses and identities circulating in society surrounding the analysed comment threads, although it may well also be the case that certain voices and discourses are generated on discussion forums from where they move to other online and offline contexts. While it is sensible to assume that many people online are voicing opinions that they also hold in their offline lives, it is also the case that several commentators may be pretending to be something that they are not, be it for political reasons or merely for amusement. In a political debate where there are, roughly, two sides, it is easy for anyone to pose as one of the opposite side and present outrageous, exaggerated opinions and thus create a negative image of the opponents. Technically it is also perfectly possible to use several usernames on the same forum and enter into a heated debate with oneself. However, all of these comments form a public text that is there for anyone to read and this is a text that is produced by random members of the general public, rather than professional journalists or critics. Whether the comments are representative of the general public in Finland is not the relevant question; this sort of online data will only offer answer to the question of how Oksanen is discussed on these particular newspaper sites. However, as will be seen in the discussion below, many of the comments in my data set are indicative of larger discourses circulating in Finnish society, evident in the intertextual use of metaphors, phrases and larger textual elements that are common outside these discussion forums. The main questions here are how the commentators react to Oksanen and what discursive and rhetorical

strategies do they use to locate Oksanen and themselves in the Finnish public sphere. We do not need to know *who* the commentators actually are to be able to analyse *how* they talk about certain groups in society in their comments and how they position themselves (be it their actual, virtual or fictional personas) in relation to these groups. This paper thus addresses a literary author's societal role as a public intellectual and examines the reception of literary authors as social action realised in online discussion forums as discursive practice.

Earlier research on discussion forums, newsgroups and bulletin boards has drawn various conclusions about political and societal discussions online. Some theorists and researchers emphasise the democratic potential of online discussion and participation (see, for instance, Grossman 1995), whereas others describe online participation in less optimistic terms, as does Beth Simone Noveck (2000, 19), according to whom "Instead of democracy's din, the Internet seems to be creating a hyper-speed cacophony of dissonant shouting voices", or acknowledge that online forums carry the potential of democratic discussion that does not, however, necessarily realise in practice (see Papacharissi 2004). At the same time when researchers and political theorists may have become more cynical about the democratic potential of online discussion, in the comment threads themselves the belief in this potential still flourishes: it is frequently repeated that online discussions allow "common" people to participate in societal debates and to speak the "truth" and that any attempts of moderating or regulating discussion are forms of censorship. Who these common people are and what is their role in online discussions, however, is not at all self-evident but depends on the context. While some researchers and theorists suggest that the fragmentation of online spaces and audiences has led to people participating in groups with like-minded people (see, for instance, Sunstein 2002) that are, in some cases, brewing grounds for different kinds of hate speech (see Saresma 2012; Castle & Chevalier 2011; Tateo 2008), other studies indicate that many users are actually enjoying and looking for diversity when engaging in political discussions online (Stromer-Galley 2003) – thus some people are interested in actually exchanging different opinions while others are not.

Currently there is less research on discussion forums or comment sections that are part of newspaper websites. In comparison to other types of discussion forums, newspaper comment sections have their own specific features, including the fact that

while discussion is usually moderated (newspapers are not willing to publish just anything on their websites), this happens alongside attending to the commercial interests of the newspaper: heated, controversial comment threads tend to draw in more visitors and more clicks thus making the site more attractive for advertisers. According to some research, constructive discussion is still possible; in their study of user comments on the websites of two U.S. regional newspapers, Manosevitch and Walker (2009) found that the majority of posts involve either analytic or social deliberation (as associated with democratic political discussion): the posts include factual information, are content-relevant and that commentators interact with each other. It is difficult to generalise on the basis of these findings, however. Existing comparative research points towards cultural differences between the users of forums on newspaper websites in different countries, yet there are also similarities, including the trend that regular commentators start to dominate discussions in time and while the discussions may thus become more interactive, they also become more ideologically polarised at the same time (see Robinson 2005). Regular users do not only dominate particular threads but, in certain sites, may dominate the discussion in all threads; in their study on user comments on websites of sixteen U.S. dailies, Blom et al (2011) found that 10% of the commentators are responsible for 47% of the posts and 60% of the users posted only once.<sup>3</sup> Blom et al. (2011) also found that although a number of people are posting informative and content relevant messages where they try to engage in political discussion in a constructive manner, 80% of the messages did not include any meaningful information and profanity and other character attacks were common. Also, it may be the case that interaction and actual discussion are not what users of newspaper comment sections are after: in her study on the user comments on the German website of *Spiegel Online*, Eilika Freund (2011) concludes that most comments are declarative and the users do not react to or interact with each other's comments. Similar features can be detected in my data set in terms of negative content and amount of interaction; however, my specific focus will be on the specific discursive and

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<sup>3</sup>The role of "dominators" has also been researched in political discussion forums not related to newspaper sites. In their study on political Usenet newsgroups Himelboim et al. (2009) found that a handful of key users are responsible for initiating threads and posting content from other sites and thus mediate the information flow on the forum in question. The role of these key users thus resembles the social role of influential opinion leaders (Himelboim et al. 2009, 786).

rhetorical means that participants use to formulate their responses to Oksanen's comments.

This paper discusses a case from April 2011 when Oksanen compared the art policies of the political party True Finns (now officially the Finns party)<sup>4</sup> to those of Nazi Germany in an interview for the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. After the news was published online by the two leading Finnish newspapers, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) and *Aamulehti* (AL), discussion immediately broke out on the comment sections linked to the news. To investigate Oksanen's online reception, I have conducted a discourse analysis of the discussion threads on the websites of the two newspapers, focusing on the discursive and rhetorical strategies of agreement and disagreement. While examining what discursive strategies are used to support or criticise Oksanen's views, I will consider whose voices are heard on the discussion forums and raise the question of whether these forums are spaces for democratic discussion or, rather, playgrounds for anonymous commentators to express misogyny and racism<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Even though the party is now officially known as The Finns in English, in this paper I will use their earlier name True Finns throughout, mainly for the sake of clarity.

<sup>5</sup> Metadiscourse about democracy and freedom of speech in relation to the contents and discursive strategies used on newspaper comment sections has also occurred in the online version of *Helsingin Sanomat* itself. See the column by Alhroth (2011), who works as a new media producer at *Helsingin Sanomat*.



### **‘Listen girl, Hitler is dead’ – Oksanen’s online reception**

Oksanen’s comments were published shortly after the parliamentary elections in Finland on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2011. The nationalist party, True Finns, got a lot of media attention before and after the elections since they were doing very well in the polls and ended up as the third-largest party in Finland, gaining 19.1 per cent of the vote (Official Statistics Finland 2011) – a major victory for them in the Finnish multiparty parliamentary system. According to their electoral programme (PS 2011a, p. 6; PS2011b), True Finns explicitly define themselves as a “populist” and “nationalist” party that is against “elitist, bureaucratic notion of democracy”. Major concerns for True Finns include the current immigration policies in Finland and the EU policies in general, and throughout their programme the importance of Finnishness and Finland’s independence is emphasised. Members and supporters of the party have been accused of racism and hate speech and have also faced official charges before and after the parliamentary elections<sup>6</sup>. Also their art policy – which Oksanen especially criticises in her interview – is based on nationalism. In the English summary of their electoral programme it is stated that “Finnishness is Finland’s gift to the world” and that “Cultural appropriations must be targeted to reinforcing the Finnish identity. Pseudo-artistic postmodernists can find their funding in the free market” (PS2011b). In the more detailed electoral programme in Finnish it is also specified who are the exemplary artists; the list includes Albert Edelfelt, Akseli Gallén-Kallela and Jean Sibelius, three canonical artists from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, known for their national-romantic works (PS2011a, p. 9-10). These notions about art attracted a lot of attention in the media and online forums already earlier in the spring and a number of people,

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<sup>6</sup> Of members of True Finns, James Hirvisaari and Freddy Van Wonterghem have been convicted for incitement of hatred against an ethnic group (YLE 2011, YLE 2012a), while Jussi Halla-aho has been convicted for defamation of religion (YLE 2009) and, later, after his appeals to higher courts, for ethnic agitation in the Supreme Court (Helsinki Times 2012a). More recent cases of hate speech and racism were when a True Finns member Tommi Rautio suggested on a public Facebook discussion that a Finnish man who killed a Moroccan man and wounded another in a shooting incident in a pizzeria in Oulu in February 2012 would deserve a medal for fighting a war against immigrants in Finland. As a consequence, Rautio became the first member who was officially expelled from the party (Helsinki Times 2012b). Another incident occurred in April 2012 when Hirvisaari’s aide, Helena Eronen, suggested in her blog post that immigrants and other minority groups, such as gays and lesbians, should be tagged with armbands. While Eronen defended herself by maintaining that her blog post was intended as a satire, her post caused a huge furore, also among True Finns who officially advised Hirvisaari to fire his aide (YLE 2012b). After refusing to do this, Hirvisaari was suspended from the Finns Party parliamentary group for five months (HS 2012).

including Oksanen, interpreted them as a suggestion that political parties should control what kind of art is produced in Finland.

The mini-debate examined here started in the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> April 2011 when *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS 2011a) and *Aamulehti* (AL 2011) published a piece of news on their websites, reporting Oksanen's comments about True Finns in the interview published in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* two days earlier, 26<sup>th</sup> of April (in the printed paper as well as online)<sup>7</sup>. *Helsingin Sanomat* refers to the websites of *La Repubblica* and the yellow press newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* as its sources, while *Aamulehti* only refers to the yellow press newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* that had published news about Oksanen's interview in its printed version in the same morning<sup>8</sup>. Later the same day and during the following days news about Oksanen's interview was also discussed on other online sites, including various discussion forums<sup>9</sup>, online newspaper columns<sup>10</sup> and blogs<sup>11</sup>. In the interview, Oksanen commented on the similarities between the art and culture policies of True Finns and Nazi Germany as well as other dictatorial states, compared True Finns to European ultra right-wing parties and expressed her concerns about the increase of racism in Finland. Considering that the title of the interview in the original Italian text was fairly mild – 'The invasion of the ultra right' – and in the interview, Oksanen discussed True Finns as a Finnish example of the nationalist right-

<sup>7</sup> *La Repubblica*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2011, 'L'invasione dell' ultra destra', <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2011/04/26/invasione-dell-ultradestra.097.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are part of the same media company Sanoma Oyj, while *Aamulehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are published by Alma Media – thus each online site refers to another newspaper of the same company. Since *Aamulehti* does not mention the original Italian source at all, it is likely that the brief online newstext was there not only to spread the news but also to advertise that day's printed version of *Ilta-Sanomat*.

<sup>9</sup> See the comment sections in *Ilta-Sanomat*

(<http://www.iltasanomat.fi/kotimaa/Sofi%20Oksanen%20vertasi%20perussuomalaisia%20natseihin%20/art-1288385364258.html#comments-anchor>) and *Keskisuomalainen* (<http://www.ksml.fi/yhteiso/keskustelu/posts/list/32468.htm>), as well as the discussion forums Suomi24 (<http://keskustelu.suomi24.fi/node/9833153#comment-0>), Hommaforum (<http://hommaforum.org/index.php/topic,48674.0.html>) and *vauva.fi* ([http://www.vauva.fi/keskustelut/alue/2/viestiketju/1383829/sofi\\_oksanen\\_pilkkaa\\_timo\\_soinia\\_italialaisen\\_lehd/sivu/1](http://www.vauva.fi/keskustelut/alue/2/viestiketju/1383829/sofi_oksanen_pilkkaa_timo_soinia_italialaisen_lehd/sivu/1)).

<sup>10</sup> Eeva Mannerkorpi, 'Sieg Heil, puhdasverinen suomalaisuus', 3 May 2011 (<http://www.kymensanomat.fi/Mielipide---Kolumnit/2011/05/03/Sieg+Heil.+puhdasverinen+suomalaisuus/2011311104991/68>),

<sup>11</sup> Kimmo, 'Kirjailija Sofi Oksanen arvostelee Perussuomalaisia', 28 April, 2011 (<http://aamulehdenblogit.ning.com/profiles/blogs/kirjailija-sofi-oksanen>), Mikael Kallavuo, 'Sofi Oksanen ja Hitler-Soini', 28 April, 2011 (<http://fifi.voima.fi/blogikirjoitus/2011/huhtikuu/sofi-oksanen-ja-hitler-soini>), Jyrki Lehtola, 'Hitler ja neekeri', 30 April 2011 (<http://blogit.iltalehti.fi/jyrki-lehtola/2011/04/30/hitler-ja-neekeri/>), Arko Salminen, 'Kirjailija Sofi Oksanen toimii raukkamaisesti', 1 May 2011 (<http://arkosalminen.wordpress.com/2011/05/01/sofi-oksanen-on-raukkamainen/>).

wing parties that have been gaining popularity throughout Europe, the two major Finnish newspapers turned this into provocative headlines, ‘Sofi Oksanen parallels True Finns (supporters) with Hitler’ in *Helsingin Sanomat* and ‘IL: Sofi Oksanen: True Finns are Hitler’s party’ in *Aamulehti*. Later the same day it was also reported by *Ilta-Sanomat* that Oksanen feels that the Italian journalist had partly interpreted her wrong – she had not been as pointed in her comments as the interview suggested – and also that the leader of True Finns, Timo Soini, disapproved of Oksanen’s comments and thought them unfounded. According to Soini, “She does not know me and I have never talked with her” and “it is insulting and inappropriate that democratically elected decision makers are criticised abroad by Finnish citizens” (IL 2011). As will be seen, Soini’s comments are echoed in the online discussion, as is the whole metadiscourse about who said what, where and when, including assessments of what one is allowed to say and who is allowed to say what in certain contexts.

*The context of the discussion: general tendencies*

Although there are some significant differences between the two comment threads, in terms of contents and style the two data sets show similar tendencies. The HS data set is substantially larger: there were 322 messages in the HS comment thread and 110 messages in the AL thread. The news comment sections of each newspaper are pre-moderated, which means that clearly offensive messages do not get through. Anyone can read and post messages anonymously without registering<sup>12</sup> – on the HS site one has to choose a nickname for posting while on the AL site a nickname is not necessary; thus all the comments in my AL data set have been posted by “Unknown”. This means that it is impossible to say how many people have been posting comments, which also concerns the HS site since it is possible to use several nicknames. The AL comment section has a simpler structure: comments do not have titles, comments cannot be recommended by readers and it is not possible to reply directly to a particular comment although it is, of course, possible to copy text from earlier comments and cite it in one’s own message. All the listed possibilities are available on the HS comment section, where the technical platform thus encourages discussion and reactions to earlier comments,

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<sup>12</sup> This still concerns the AL website but the policy on the HS website was changed in February 2012 after which only registered users have been allowed to post comments ([www.hs.fi/kommentit/](http://www.hs.fi/kommentit/)).

rather than merely offering the possibility to post one's own comment as a response to the news text. This seems to be reflected in the amount of interaction among commentators, because only 22% of the messages on the AL thread (24 out of 110) can be categorised as explicit replies to earlier comments, whereas on the HS thread the number of explicit replies is 55% (178 out of 322). Where comments are not addressed directly to other participants, they have a generic address, are addressed to Oksanen and the groups of people she is associated with, or to True Finns and their supporters. Some comments occur in both threads, either as slightly modified versions or as verbatim copies – they might be written by the same author or copied from one thread to another by someone else; in any case this shows that some people were following both discussion threads.

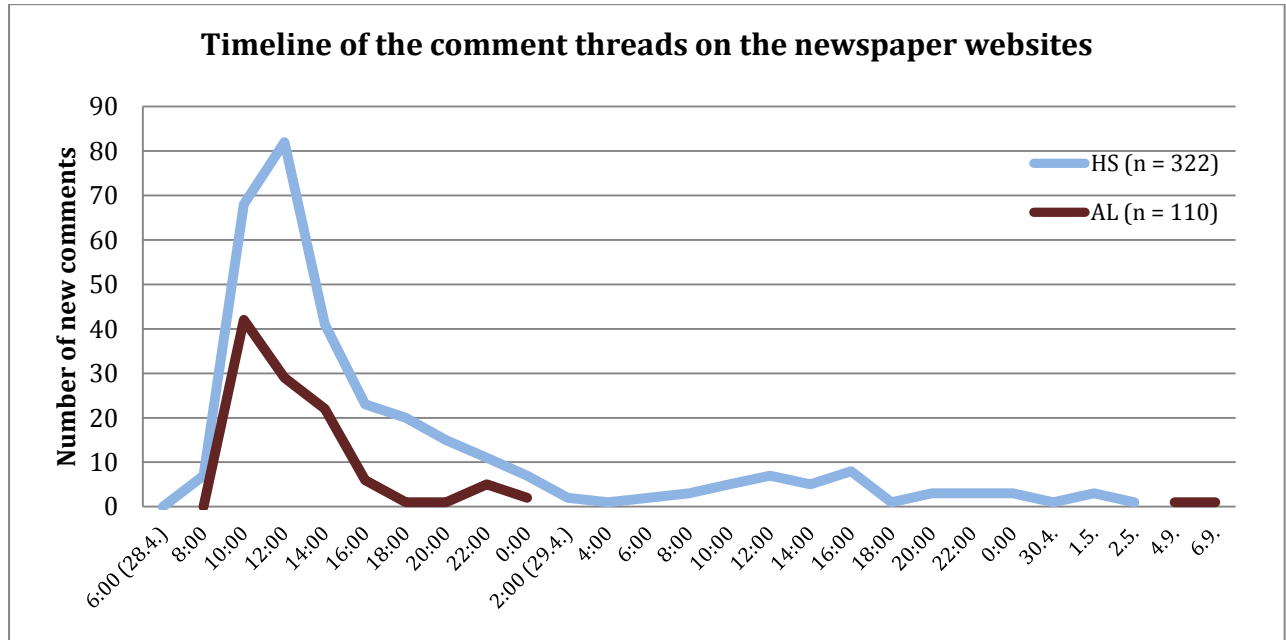
Stylistically, the comments on both sites vary between informal and formal language use, even inside a single comment. This is to be expected, since online communication in general tends to vary between formal and informal language use, particularly on sites where there are no strict stylistic guidelines and the texts are not edited – this, however, does not stop commentators themselves introducing normativity on the forums by making remarks about each other's incorrect language use and literacy skills. In each data set, the continuum reaches from simple, fairly rude comments to more sophisticated, polite messages, and from messages involving plenty of spelling errors to highly elaborated messages employing a formal, academic style.

A basic quantitative content analysis illustrates some general tendencies in the data set – this analysis is merely to characterise this particular data set and *not* considered a representative sample of Oksanen's general reception online<sup>13</sup>. On each website, the publishing time of each comment is indicated on the top of the message, and the first comments on each site show that the discussion started about 20 minutes after the news was posted online, thus readers started reacting almost immediately when one considers that the moderating process causes some time-lag in the threads. The discussion on the HS site lasted for five days, although the majority of the comments were posted during the first two days. On the AL site, the main discussion went on only for a day, although two comments were posted on the thread four months

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the following quantitative figures might be representative of the timeline of any comment thread as well as typical of the reception of *any* public figure. Since I have not conducted a large-scale comparative corpus analysis of comment sections, I cannot assess the representativeness of the data set in these regards.

later in September. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, which shows the number of new messages in relation to the time when they were posted, the discussion was most active during the first day and was finished fairly soon on each comment thread.



**Figure 1.** Timeline of the comment threads.

The comments to the news texts thus seem to be readers' first reactions to the news, and as examples from the data set will illustrate, these are often rather heated reactions even though the discussion threads also involve carefully constructed, analytical responses. On the HS site where recommending comments is possible<sup>14</sup>, the recommendation rate also shows that readers are mainly reacting to the messages at the beginning of the thread: the recommendation rate drops significantly after the first day. Moreover, only 12 comments are recommended more than 100 times and they are among the first 29 messages all posted during the first 97 minutes of the discussion. Since there is nothing extraordinary about these particular posts in terms of style or content, this seems to indicate that readers have only read or, at least, reacted to the

<sup>14</sup> This option is no longer available. HS website went through another structural update in September 2012, after which the recommendation button was removed and replaced with two novel two-point grading options: 1) I agree with the comment, yes/no and 2) the comment is well argued, yes/no. The commenters will now also receive stars if they have been positively graded by readers – how this will turn out in time remains to be seen; so far, during my daily visits to the comment sections, I have not encountered any commenters with stars. See instructions for comments, <http://www.hs.fi/kommentit/>.

messages at the beginning of the thread<sup>15</sup>. This is also indicated by the fact that each thread includes several messages repeating arguments that have occurred earlier and, in some cases, even repeating false information that has been corrected earlier in the thread<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, in some messages it is explicitly expressed that the writer has not read the previous comments<sup>17</sup>. Thus several participants are not engaging in any kind of discussion but merely posting their own opinions on the thread.

Based on the contents of the messages, I have divided the comments into three categories: 1) messages supporting Oksanen, 2) messages disagreeing with or criticising Oksanen and/or supporting True Finns, and 3) neutral or ambiguous messages. While some messages were difficult to categorise – not least because very little contextual information is available to decide, for instance, whether a comment has a neutral or a sarcastic tone<sup>18</sup> – in most cases it was fairly clear whether the commentator agreed or disagreed with Oksanen’s criticism of True Finns because this was explicitly expressed. While this categorisation says very little about the detailed content or style of any single message, it shows that, in general, reactions to Oksanen’s comments as well as to her persona were mainly negative – about two thirds of the comments on the HS thread and three quarters of the comments on the AL thread were negative, as seen in Figure 2.

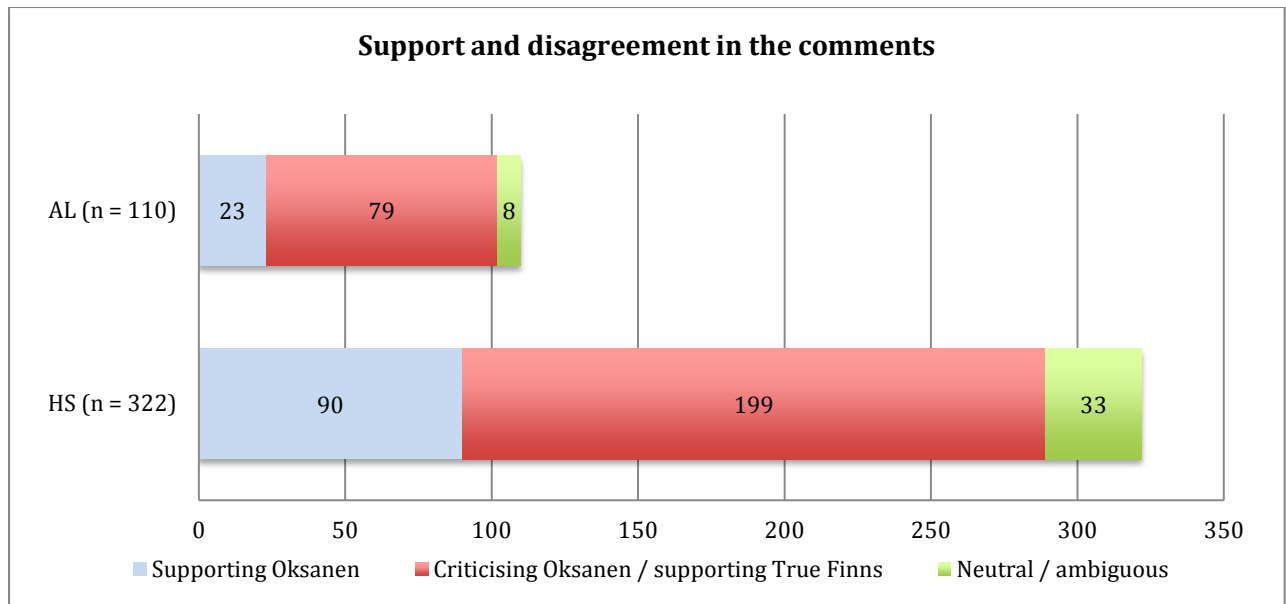
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<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that the recommendation rates have been manipulated – that is, the same person or persons are recommending certain messages several times because it is fairly easy to circumvent the limitation for recommending the same message more than once.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, repeating false information or arguments can be also done on purpose by those who are flaming or trolling, in which case the fact that someone tries to correct false arguments may only invite further trolling.

<sup>17</sup> From a point of view of a reader who has only limited time to spend on discussion forums, this makes sense, since reading the whole thread can take hours.

<sup>18</sup> Even in offline contexts it is notoriously difficult to decide what makes a straightforward insult or hate speech and what can be considered as irony, sarcasm or parody – all of which can, of course, be used to insult as well – since meanings are context-dependent (on political rhetorics and hate speech see, for instance, Butler 1997; Conley 2010).



**Figure 2.** Support and disagreement in the comments.

The recommendation rates on the HS site show a similar tendency: of the twelve most recommended messages, 9 are disagreeing with Oksanen and 3 supporting her. While the general agreement or disagreement does not necessarily reveal anything about how the people writing on the threads view Oksanen as an author or public intellectual – it could merely indicate how the *content* of her arguments has been received or, indeed, be the general negative response that *any* public figure tends to get on comment threads – a large number of comments explicitly evaluate Oksanen’s persona, intellect and expertise in relation to her status as a social commentator. It is worth noting that many of the messages do not discuss Oksanen’s main concern, the art policies, at all but either attack or defend her in general, or discuss other topics related to True Finns’ values and politics, including immigration, racism, (in)tolerance, Islam, poverty in Finland, the EU policies, democracy, freedom of expression, and the so-called “forced Swedish” in schools<sup>19</sup>. In the following, I will discuss some representative examples, starting with comments that disagree with Oksanen. I will focus on those messages that either

<sup>19</sup> The term “forced Swedish” refers to the fact that in the Finnish educational system it is mandatory to take courses in each of the two national languages in Finland: Finnish and Swedish. This is partly because The Language Act of the Finnish Constitution states that an individual citizen has the right to use his or her own language, Finnish or Swedish, before authorities (Ministry of Justice 2012). Many people oppose this, because Swedish is a minority language in Finland; in 2011, 90.04% of the population in Finland spoke Finnish as their first language, while 5.39% spoke Swedish (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2011, 5). The critics on the forums, as elsewhere, object to “forced Swedish” for various reasons, including pragmatic reasons (knowledge of Swedish is not really necessary in most areas in Finland and its utility in working life is debatable), personal reasons (bad experiences of or lack of motivation for studying Swedish in schools) and ideological reasons (Swedish as a national language is a sign of the colonial past).

explicitly or implicitly address Oksanen's status as an author who takes the role of a social commentator. I will argue that for many commentators the issue of voice – that is, who speaks and in what way – is more important than the contents of arguments.

### *Disagreement*

As regards the comments that disagree with Oksanen, there are four particularly typical strategies that are used to undermine the credibility of Oksanen's comments by focusing on the credibility of the author herself, rather than assessing the factual contents of her arguments.

First of all, there are plenty of comments in which it is suggested that Oksanen is not credible because she simply does not know enough about the issues that she is commenting on or that she is a poor debater due to her ignorance as well as her rhetorical skills. This happens, for instance, in the example from the AL thread that also features in the title of this paper.

Listen girl. Hitler is dead. (AL, comment 68, posted by Unknown)<sup>20</sup>

Oksanen is here addressed as a "girl", an inexperienced person who makes comparisons that are not valid and as someone who can be directly commanded (indicated by the use of imperative without any politeness markers). The clause "Hitler is dead" indicates that talking about Nazis and their politics in the present is no longer relevant and suggests that Oksanen is not aware of this fact or does not know the history. There are several other comments that also state that Oksanen should read more about history, about True Finns policies, or about things in general. Implicitly, all this shows that several commentators view Oksanen as someone who is not capable of social commentary due to her ignorance and lack of knowledge. Oksanen's lack of supporting evidence is also implied in the great number of messages that mention the so-called "Nazi card" or "Hitler card", referring to a strategy where someone compares his/her opponents to Nazis when he/she no longer has any valid arguments. The example below is the comment that was most highly recommended (464 recommendations) on the HS thread:

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<sup>20</sup> Kuule tyttö. Hitler on kuollut. (AL, comment 68, posted on 28.4.2011 11:47 by Unknown)



Really original to pull out the Hitler card already at the beginning of the discussion. One would have thought that Sofi Oksanen is able to come up with some other way to criticise *persut* [the nickname for True Finns]. So worn-out. //<sup>21</sup> Sofi is one of those folks who think that the people voted wrongly. So much for their tolerance then. (HS, comment 2, by basic finlanders)<sup>22</sup>

These messages suggest that not only has Oksanen got her facts wrong but that she is also an unskilful, uncreative or unoriginal debater. The tone used is often sarcastic, as in the opening sentence of the comment above. This particular comment – as several others like it – also positions Oksanen among “those folks” that are opposed to and do not tolerate “the people” who voted wrongly, that is, those who voted for True Finns. In later messages the group opposing to True Finns is fairly often referred to as “the elite”, as will be seen in some examples below. Oksanen’s debating skills are also questioned in comments where she is considered uncivilised because she is criticising others, as in this example from the AL thread where the writer refers to the Bible to suggest that Oksanen’s behaviour is unacceptable:

Hey Sofi. Even children say that what you blame others for, that’s what you are yourself. Jesus said that you hear the truth from the mouths of babes and sucklings. And the Bible says: “Do not judge, the things for which you judge someone else are things for which you are to blame”. // I’m not familiar with the True Finns’ ways of thinking, but I, too, do not think that every foreigner should be let into Finland. [...] (AL, comment 17 by Unknown)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The “//” notation signifies a paragraph break in the original.

<sup>22</sup> Tosi omaperäistä vetää esiin Hitler-kortti jo keskustelun alussa. Olisi luullut Sofi Oksasen keksivän jonkun muun tavan kritisoida *persuja*. Niin kulunut. // Sofikin lukeutuu siihen väkeen, jonka mielestä kansa äänesti väärin. Se siitä suvaitsevaisuudesta sitten. (HS, comment 2, posted on 28.4.2011 07:14 by basic finlanders.) The nickname for True Finns and their supporters, *persut* is an abbreviation of their Finnish name, Perussuomalaiset [“basic/common Finns” would be a literal translation; this can be seen in the writer’s nickname, “basic finlanders” that is in English in the original]. The nickname is used by supporters and opponents alike, although some consider it offensive since it resembles the Finnish colloquial, vulgar words *perse* and *persus*, meaning “arse” or “butt”.

<sup>23</sup> Hei Sofi. Jo lapset sanovat , että mistä toista syytät, sellainen olet itse. Jeesus sanoi, että lasten ja imeväisten suusta kuulette totuuden. Ja Raamattu sanoo: “ Älä tuomitse, mistä toista tuomitset, siihen olet itse syypää”. // En tunne perussuomalaisten ajatusmaailmaa, mutta en itsekään kannata jokaisen vierasmaalaisen Suomeen päästämistä. [...] (AL, comment 17, posted on 28.4.2011 09:10 by Unknown).

Here each of the biblical allusions is reformulated by the writer<sup>24</sup>, which is particularly obvious in the second allusion, presented as a direct quote, although the sentence inside the quotation marks is the writer's own composition with a grammatically ambiguous structure that makes the sentence also semantically ambiguous. It is clear that the writer is here reformulating the biblical allusions for his/her own purposes: to suggest that Oksanen is wrong in judging or criticising others. The writer continues to clarify his/her own position by suggesting that he/she is not a member or a core supporter of True Finns since their thinking is unfamiliar to him/her but that he/she is also critical about Finnish immigration policies – this is another recurring strategy that I will return to below.

A second popular strategy is to question whether Oksanen has any credibility to discuss the more specific issue of art policies because of her own professional interests. A number of comments argue that she does not understand what the art policy of True Finns is really about and is falsely interpreting it as an attack on freedom of expression. This suggestion is often combined with a claim that Oksanen is merely defending her own professional interests as an author.

Although persut do not want to throw money into marginal art, no one is forbidding it. This is only about putting first things first. Which is more important: To support the emancipation angst of an artist or to cut down the sizes of children's day-care groups? There is no money for everything. (HS, comment 14 by Emansipaatioahdistus)<sup>25</sup>

Ha, namely an awarded one [author]. Society's money has been given to one person because someone has defined her art worth it. Of course it hurts that this would be now restrained a bit. [...] (HS, comment 150 by jaana22)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These seem to be referring to the following verses in the Bible: "And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?" (Matthew 21:16, KJV) and "Judge not, that ye be not judged." (Matthew 7:1, KJV).

<sup>25</sup> Vaikka persut eivät halua suoltaa tukea marginaalitaiteelle, ei sitä kukaan ole kieltämässä. Kyse on vain asioiden tärkeysjärjestykseen laittamisesta. Kumpi on tärkeämpää: Tukea taiteilijan emansipaatioahdistusta [sic] vai pienentää päivätoryhmien [sic] kokoa? Rahaa ei riitä kaikkeen. (HS, comment 14, posted on 28.4.2011 8:28 by Emansipaatioahdistus).

<sup>26</sup> Heh, nimenomaan palkittu. Yhteiskunnan rahoja on annettu yhdelle ihmiselle siksi, että joku on hänen taiteensa sen arvoiseksi määrittelyt [sic]. Totta kai se vihlaisee, että nyt tätä vähän hillittäisiin. [...] (HS, comment 150, posted on 28.4.2011 11:56 by jaana22).

Well, Sofi's own scribbles are indeed degenerate art so therefore she has a reason to worry. (AL, comment 55 by Unknown)<sup>27</sup>

In the above examples Oksanen's misunderstanding or her own professional interests are directly pointed out. However, there are also messages where the value of postmodern or modern art and Oksanen's personal connections to them are criticised by using more indirect strategies – as in the following example where a comment is constructed in the form of a deliberately bad poem:

Is not art a "pleasure",  
exactly like  
a good red wine or beer.

No one supports, pays for,  
my pleasures,  
I finance them myself.

I don't want to support anyone's "pleasure"  
to produce or watch, a dry "Oksa" [branch]  
in a rusty bucket, for millions. (AL, comment 53 by Unknown)<sup>28</sup>

The example above can be read as a parody of modern (or postmodern) poetry; it is written in free verse but does not aim at expressing any metaphorical meanings, on the contrary, it is fairly explicit about its main argument. The writer compares art to other pleasures and presents the view that everyone should only pay for their own pleasures – thus implying that those who enjoy art should be the ones who pay for it. By composing a parodic poem, the commentator mocks artists and authors by appropriating their voice and addressing them in their own poetic language, as well as shows that anyone can produce works of art; a common reaction to postmodern or modern art from those who do not appreciate it. The word "Oksa" here has a double

<sup>27</sup> Noh, rappiotaidettahan ne Sofin pykäelmät ovat joten sikäli hän voikin olla huolissaan. (AL, comment 55, posted on 28.4.2011 10:31 by Unknown).

<sup>28</sup> Eikö taide ole "nautinto", // aivan samoin kuin// hyvä punaviini tai olut. /// Kukaan ei tue, maksa, // minun nautintojani, // itse kustannan. /// En halua tukea kenenkään "nautintoa" // tuottaa tai katsella, kuivaa "Oksaa" // ruosteisessa ämpärissä, miljoonilla. (AL, comment 53, posted on 28.4.2011 10:27 by Unknown).

meaning: it means a bough in Finnish but is obviously also a reference to Oksanen's name – the reference might suggest that Oksanen's own works are also pieces of art that the writer of the poem is not interested in, that is, pieces that include dry branches in rusty buckets.

Another strategy that undermines Oksanen's credibility by emphasising her professional interests involves putting forward the argument that Oksanen is only interested in making provocative comments – that are exaggerated or even false – because she is merely after publicity and uses her interview as a marketing strategy for her books. Again, this is frequently expressed through sarcasm.

Truly admirable that Oksanen is not at all fishing for publicity (and bigger grants), but is commenting quite sincerely. And what's best, by being a solid expert also on this matter... [...] (AL, comment 37 by Unknown)<sup>29</sup>

When one gives saucy degrading comments about one's home country abroad, media attention is secured! Then ambassadors do their job and fix the damage. Sofi is an independent writing entrepreneur who works at her own risk. She does know her marketing. (AL, comment 43 by Unknown)<sup>30</sup>

In each of these comments, it is indicated that Oksanen is merely after publicity and her comments have no real substance – the first comment, in particular, uses a sarcastic tone to ridicule Oksanen's expertise that covers various fields; what is implied, of course, is that she does not have the expertise to comment on general issues. Some messages also suggest that Oksanen is using her international fame in a wrong manner: Finnish authors should not criticise Finland in any way in foreign media – many commentators seem to view Finnish authors as representatives of their nation who should promote their country in positive terms:

[...] Instead of awards and other grants what she needs is a decent fine, a court summons on her paw for defamation of an ethnic group! She's talking complete

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<sup>29</sup> Todella ihailtavaa, että Oksanen ei millään muotoa yritä kalastella julkisuutta (ja kasvattaa apurahoja), vaan ihan vilpittömästi kommentoi. Ja mikä parasta, olemalla myös tämän asian vankka ekspertti... [...] (AL, comment 37 posted on 28.4.2011 9:53 by Unknown).

<sup>30</sup> Kun ulkomailla antaa räväköitä halventavia lausuntoja kotimaastaan, on mediahuomio taattu! Sitten suurlähettiläät tekevät töitään ja paikkailevat. Sofi on itsenäinen, omalla riskillään toimiva kirjoitusyrittäjä. Markkinointi on hanskassa. (AL, comment 43, posted on 28.4.2011 10:04 by Unknown).

RUBBISH about her home country abroad. I'M ASHAMED. [...] (HS, comment 98 by Buahaha)<sup>31</sup>

This is wanton abuse of foreign press by Sofi Oksanen, Finland should be helped to rise and self-confidence encouraged, then a Sofi like that gives wanton comments. this has been going on even before the rise of True Finns. (HS, comment 307 by millivon)<sup>32</sup>

It is worth pointing out that these kind of comments are not unique to Oksanen's case but reflect a more general, recurring debate about Finland's reputation abroad. In this debate two discourses are particularly typical: a nationalist discourse that claims that it is a civic duty of any Finn to give only positive accounts of one's country abroad and another discourse that maintains that Finland as a nation and Finnish people have a low self-esteem which leads to hysterical reactions towards any evaluative comments on Finland or the Finns. Traces of both of these discourses are evident in the above comments – while both mainly reflect the nationalist discourse, the latter also mentions “self-confidence” that, in this context, clearly refers to the general self-esteem among Finns as a nation.

A third strategy is to suggest that Oksanen's views are flawed because of her political interests. On the one hand, these comments are invoked by Oksanen herself because in the interview she reveals that she has voted for the Green League and suggests that Helsinki might be more liberal and less racist than the rest of Finland, on the basis of the election results that show that True Finns got relatively less support in Helsinki than elsewhere in Finland. On the other hand, this positioning is viewed as a sign that those who oppose the Greens do not have to listen to her at all – dialogue is not seen as necessary with anyone associated with the party that True Finns view as their main opponent. In many messages, however, the opponents of True Finns are not exactly the Green League but an imaginary group of green, liberal, left-wing cultural elite located in Helsinki – imaginary, or strategically constructed for the purposes of the argument because very few concrete representatives of this group are mentioned and in

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<sup>31</sup> [...] Palkintojen ja muiden apurahojen sijaan hänelle pitäisi läimäistä oikein kunnon sakko, haaste tassuun Suomen valtion ja kansanryhmän herjaamisesta! Jauhaa kotimaastaan täyttä POTASKAA maailmalla. HÄVETTÄÄ. [...] (HS, comment 98, posted on 28.4.2011 10:32 by Buahaha).

<sup>32</sup> Sofi Oksaselta ,mielivaltaista,ulkomaan lehdistön hyväksikäyttöä,Suomi pitäisi saada nousuun ja itsetunto kohdilleen,sitten tuommoinen Sofi jakelee mielivaltaisia lausuntoja.tätä on jatkunut jo ennen PerusSuomalaisten nousua. (HS, comment 307, posted on 29.4.2011 15:48 by millivon).

different comments the same group is accused of several contradictory issues, such as being too ecological/not really environmentalist, responsible for too lax/too strict legislation, promoting left-wing politics but supporting the right-wing government. Often various opinions are associated with this group by introducing fake citations or straw-man arguments that are presented as the “voice” of the elite. This liberal, green, left-wing elite is claimed to have a lot of power in Finland, which is rather curious in a context where the leading parties in the government have for over a decade been right-wing conservative parties. As regards Oksanen’s status as a social commentator or public intellectual, her political associations put her into a compromising position: she is a member of the cultural left-wing elite who do not know anything about “ordinary people’s” concerns and do not tolerate the common people even though they preach about tolerance.

The mocking of persut in “highbrow circles” is getting ridiculous. Yet no one seems to be interested in the creation of the EU support packages that might have substantial effects on the Finnish welfare state... (AL, comment 16 by Unknown)<sup>33</sup>

Here we see a “civilised, humane and very tolerant person” Dear Sofi, all of your comments about Finland and Finns only prove how tolerant people really are. Wouldn’t it be time for you to purge/remove yourself to somewhere else! (AL, comment 74 by Unknown)<sup>34</sup>

It sure seems to bug the supporters and politicians of the single-issue party that a great part of the Finnish people turned their backs to these pretend environmentalists who revel at taxpayers’ expense. They put Oksanen on the job, to denounce Finnish voters as Nazis and the leader of the party as Hitler. Last time this Oksanen was calling Finland’s men wife beaters. I believe that it was even in France that time. At least this issue was widely reported in the French press. Oksanen has taken herself the right to be the

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<sup>33</sup> Persujen mollaaminen “älykköpiireissä” saa jo naurettavia piirteitä. Ketään ei kuitenkaan taida kiinnostaa EU:n tukipakettien sorvaamiset, jonka vaikutukset Suomen hyvinvointivaltioon saattavat olla mittavat... (AL, comment 16, posted on 28.4.2011 9:08 by Unknown).

<sup>34</sup> Tässä näemme “sivistyneen, humanin ja erittäin suvaitsevaisen ihmisen” Hyvä Sofi, todistat näillä kaikilla kommentteillasi Suomesta ja Suomalaisista [sic], sen kuinka suvaitsevaisia ihmiset oikeasti on. Eiköhän olisi sinunkin aika puhdistaa itsesi jonnekin muualle! (AL, comment 74, posted on 28.4.2011 12:08 by Unknown).

conscience of Finland abroad and she also seems to have the birth-right to be the one who is correct...as the only person in Finland. [...] (HS, comment 49 by pepepuupää)<sup>35</sup>

[...] I don't support persut at all. But the elite greens and Sofis should know that Finland exists also outside Helsinki. Finland is the whole country and not only a home for some people who think of themselves as intellectuals and are soaking in their own juices. Kiasma [a museum of contemporary art in Helsinki] is not hallelujah to a great part of Finns. It is waste of money and like "the emperor has no clothes" phenomenon. [...] (HS, comment 65 by jäävi)<sup>36</sup>

Few professions provide one with a special competence for ideological exchange of views. Essentially, an author is thus as qualified as an engine driver. I suspect, however, that the views of an engine driver have been and still are more beneficial to the development of society than those of an author. // The history of ideologies shows, for example, that authors were much more susceptible to the temptations of communism than engine drivers. And still are, now almost as the only profession. (HS, comment 244 by Virastoveijari)<sup>37</sup>

[...] An intellectual quite simply has to lean towards the left like the so many potential French role models. (HS, comment 295 by Dr Dulcamara)<sup>38</sup>

Left-wing intellectuals, including Oksanen, are thus paying attention to the wrong issues, disturbed by the results of "democratic elections" (a phrase that is used

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<sup>35</sup> Kyllä näyttää yhden asian liikkeen kannattajia ja poliitikkoja korpeavan, kun melkoinen osa Suomen kansasta käänsi selkänsä näille veronmaksajien rahoilla rellestäjille, mukamas luonnonsuojelijoille. Pantiin Oksanen asialle, haukkumaan suomalaiset äänestäjät natseiksi ja puolueen puheenjohtaja Hitleriksi. Edellisen kerranhan tämä Oksanen nimitteli Suomen miehiä vaimonhakkaajiksi. Taisi olla peräti Ranskassa tuolloin. Ainakin Ranskan lehdissä asia uutisoitiin näyttävästi. Oksanen on ottanut itselleen oikeuden olla Suomen omatunto maailmalla ja hänellä on näköjään myös syntymälahjana saatu oikeassa olemisen oikeus...ainoana Suomessa. [...] (HS, comment 49, posted on 28.4.2011 09:27 by pepepuupää)

<sup>36</sup> [...] En kannata persuja ollenkaan. Mutta eliittivihreiden ja Sofien on hyvä tietää, että Suomea on kehä kolmen ulkopuolella. Suomi on koko maa eikä vain joidenkin intellektuaalina itseään pitävien omassa liemessä lilluvien koto. Ei Kiasma ole hallelujaa suurelle osalle suomalaisia. Se on rahan tuhlausta ja tyyliin "keisarilla ei ole vaatteita" ilmiö. [...] (HS, comment 65, posted on 28.4.2011 9:49, by jäävi).

<sup>37</sup> Harva ammatti antaa erityispätevyyden ideologiseen mielipiteenvaihtoon. Lähtökohtaisesti siis kirjailija on yhtä pätevä kuin veturinkuljettaja. Epäilen kuitenkin, että veturinkuljettajan näkemykset ovat olleet ja ovat yhä yhteiskunnan kiehityksen [sic] kannalta suotuisimmat kuin kirjailijan. // Ideologioiden historia osoittaa esimerkiksi, että kirjailijat olivat paljon alttiimpia kommunismin houkutuksille kuin veturinkuljettajat. Ja ovat yhä, nyt lähes ainoana ammattikuntana. (HS, comment 244, posted on 28.4.2011 18:19 by Virastoveijari).

<sup>38</sup> [...] Älykön on kertakaikkiaan kallistuttava vasemmalle kuten niin monet ranskalaiset mahdolliset esikuvat. (HS, comment 295, posted on 29.4.2011 11:07 by Dr Dulcamara).

throughout the threads), and do not understand ordinary people's views on art (or politics or life in general). What is more, the elite intellectuals are seen as *besserwissers* who claim to know it all even though they do not know more than any regular worker or taxpayer. By positioning Oksanen as a member of the cultural-political "elite" that rules the country and does not respect the opinions of "the people", the comments most clearly echo the discourse of other populist, nationalist right-wing parties in Europe<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, while pointing out Oksanen's political position, some commentators take great care to position themselves in particular ways that aim to highlight their neutrality – as in the fourth example above where the writer explicitly states that s/he does not support True Finns. Since this is a political discussion, it makes sense for a writer to position oneself as a disinterested participant in the debate, which functions as a way to frame the writer's own voice as an objective one. This positioning of oneself as a disinterested party is not necessarily truthful – anonymous commentators can, of course, pretend to be anything that they wish regardless of their actual voting behaviour – but still functions as a rhetorical strategy, an attempt to frame the writer's voice as objective. Thus these commentators aim at putting forward their "objective" criticism of Oksanen that is not supposedly affected by their own political interests, such as supporting True Finns. In the fourth example above, after the declaration of his/her lack of support for True Finns, the writer immediately shifts into using some of the key markers of the populist discourse that is used among the True Finns supporters, including the references to the oppositional groups of "elite greens" versus "a great part of Finns", which makes one suspect that the commentator is either actually supporting True Finns or merely posting an ironic comment.

Finally, several comments maintain that Oksanen is only showing her immaturity or expressing her personal traumas by criticising others, those traumas often associated with her artistry, ethnicity, appearance, and femininity and/or feminist views.

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<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting, however, that rhetorical construction where the elite and the people are presented as opposing groups has existed in Finland since the early days of independence and, what is more, was commonly circulated by Veikko Vennamo, the former chairman of The Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue*), a populist party that collapsed in 1995, after which a group of former MPs of the Rural Party founded True Finns.



[...] The success as an author has apparently gone to her head so much that in her delusion of grandeur she begins to behave as the expert in everything. Which is not at all forbidden for an artist, it's just a sign of immaturity. (HS, comment 317 by Maksumies)<sup>40</sup>

Miss Oksanen has become the new Expert in All Fields. // The post would, however, require consideration and familiarising with issues, and for these Miss Oksanen apparently has not had time. // Finland must be assessed from a Finnish starting point and not from an Estonian opportunistic one. (HS, comment 72 by MM2000)<sup>41</sup>

Here is a good example of how a person with a foreign background gnaws the roots of Finnishness and underestimates a Finnish voter. (AL, comment 12 by Unknown)<sup>42</sup>

What do the attention-seeking comments, strong make-up and sullen appearance mean? A very low self-esteem. Just like a teenage girl, who is painfully searching for herself. (AL, comment 86 by Unknown)<sup>43</sup>

A young girl wants to throw tantrums and has reached international fame, so now it's easy to yell. She has had such a hard and dreadful life. Men are swine, boohoo, ha. An embodiment of feminism. [...] (HS, comment 213 by konepakolainen)<sup>44</sup>

As in the very first examples, Oksanen's ignorance and immaturity are an issue, although here they are not due to her lack of knowledge but due to her persona: she is delusionary (as might be expected of an artist), an opportunistic foreigner (which is a misrepresentation of her ethnic and national identity), and a teenage girl throwing tantrums and seeking attention. The references to a teenage girl might be provoked by her very visible subcultural identity; the Gothic style, as well as other rock styles in

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<sup>40</sup> [...] Menestyminen kirjailijana on näköjään noussut Oksaselle hattuun siinä määrin, että hän alkaa suuruusharhaisesti esiintyä jo kaiken asiantuntijana. Eihän sekään toki ole taiteilijalta kiellettyä, kertoopahan vain kypsymättömyydestä. (HS, comment 317, posted on 29.4.2011 22:52 by Maksumies).

<sup>41</sup> Neiti Oksasesta on tullut uusi Kaikkien Alojen Asiantuntija. // Virka edellyttäisi kuitenkin harkintaa ja asioihin perehtymistä, ja näihin ei kaikesta päätellen neiti Oksasella ole ollut aikaa. // Suomea tulee arvioida suomalaisesta lähtökohdasta eikä virolaisesta opportunistisesta sellaisesta. (HS, comment 72, posted on 28.4.2011 9:56 by MM2000).

<sup>42</sup> Tässä on hyvä esimerkki siitä kuinka ulkomaalaistaustainen henkilö nakertaa suomalaisuuden juuria ja aliarvioi suomalaista äänestäjää. (AL, comment 12, posted on 28.4.2011 8:58 by Unknown).

<sup>43</sup> Mitä tarkoittavat huomionkipeät lausunnot, vahva meikki ja ynseä olemus? Erittäin heikkoa itsetuntoa. Ihan kuin teinityttö, joka kipeästi etsii itseään. (AL, comment 86, posted on 28.4. 13:21 by Unknown)

<sup>44</sup> Nuori tyttö haluaa kiukutella ja on päässyt kansainväliseen maineeseen, niin hyvähän se on huudella nyt. Hänellä on ollut elämä niin kovaa ja kamalaa. Miehet on sikoja, buhuu, heh. Feminismin ruumiillistuma. [...] (HS, comment 213, posted on 28.4.2011 15:27 by konepakolainen).

general are often deemed as attention-seeking teenage styles and thus someone dressing up supposedly like a teenager still at a later age might be considered “immature” in other ways as well. On the other hand, these references may also reflect opinions about any woman’s public behaviour in general, given that they rely on the stereotype about women’s excessive emotionality. As all of these aspects are associated with her embodied identity as a Finnish-Estonian female Goth, her comments and voice are framed by material aspects of identity that – apart from her subcultural appearance – she cannot change. This denigrating strategy is a very disturbing one, since the importance and value of a person’s voice are dependent on her ethnicity and gender, as well as her particular choice of clothing style. Ironically, while in some messages Oksanen’s personal experiences are denigrated as subjective, flawed views, the commentator’s own anecdotal evidence about artists, intellectuals, foreigners or teenage girls is provided as a truthful account about the everyday reality.

Thus, to sum up, in a number of cases, disagreement is not expressed by dissecting Oksanen’s arguments and by discussing the potential similarities between the art policies of True Finns and Nazis but by attacking Oksanen’s credibility as a social commentator. These messages suggest that Oksanen’s comments do not have to be taken seriously because she does not fulfil the requirements for an objective, disinterested commentator, or public intellectual, which happens by framing her voice with various identity positions that supposedly make her comments flawed, subjective or invaluable. Oksanen cannot fulfil the role of a disinterested public intellectual due to her ignorance, professional interests, political interests or her personal interests and traumas. Thus the emphasis here is not on what has actually been said but on whose voice is being heard and in which context.

### *Agreement and support*

As regards agreement, the messages supporting Oksanen employ three main strategies to respond to Oksanen’s own and her opponents’ views. First, many comments merely defend Oksanen against the personal attacks by offering facts about her background and achievements. In comparison with the comments disagreeing with Oksanen, those supporting her are more often clearly defensive and, particularly on the AL site, written as replies to earlier, disagreeing comments. Due to the fact that so many comments

attack Oksanen's ethnic identity, many supporting messages start by correcting false information about Oksanen's ethnicity, while others criticise the strategies used to denigrate Oksanen:

[citing and replying to comment 12 in AL, see above]

Here is a good example of ignorance and prejudice. Oksanen is a Finnish-speaking Finn, born in Finland, whose mother is Estonian by birth. Is this a good enough reason for persut to take away citizenship and freedom of expression? // Sofi is quite right. (AL, comment 38 by Unknown)<sup>45</sup>

[...] And what else could one expect for the counterarguments but these "No, you yourself are" one-liners by Persut. [...] (AL, comment 78 by Unknown)<sup>46</sup>

Is the elitism axe of persu-supporters already swinging? Or does this make one think, what one has put into motion? // Oksanen is one of those people who know and understand a lot. That is not elitism, but shows that a person has found out about things. Arrogance is another matter. Personally I don't see that Oksanen would have been arrogant here even if the interviewer had not misunderstood her. [...] (HS, comment 9 by Elekrep)<sup>47</sup>

As the reference to "the elitism axe" metaphor in the last example suggests, the counterarguments employed by the True Finns supporters are familiar to these commentators (and many readers) from earlier comment threads and debates on various discussion forums. The last commentator is attempting to point out that labelling all criticism as elitism prevents one from addressing the actual contents of the debate. Many readers who agree with Oksanen's views also point out that the ones

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<sup>45</sup> Tässä on hyvä esimerkki tietämättömyydestä ja ennakkoluuloisuudesta. Oksanen on Suomessa syntynyt suomenkielinen suomalainen, jonka äiti on virolaissyntyinen. Onko se persuille riittävä syy viedä kansalais- ja mielipideoikeus? // Ihan asiaa puhuu Sofi. (AL, comment 38, posted on 28.4.2011 9:53 by Unknown).

<sup>46</sup> Ja mitäpä muuta sitä voisi odottaa Persujen vasta-argumenteiksi kuin nämä "Ite oot" -läpät. [...] (AL, comment 78, posted on 28.4.2011 12:30 by Unknown).

<sup>47</sup> Alkaako persukannattajien elitismikirves heilua? Vai alkaako mietityttämään, että mitä tulikaan pistettyä liikkeelle? // Oksanen on ihmisiä jotka tietävät ja ymmärtävät paljon. Se ei ole elitismiä, vaan sitä, että on ottanut asioista selvää. Ylimielisyys on toinen juttu, itse en näe, että Oksanen olisi tässä ylimielinen vaikka haastattelija ei olisikaan ymmärtänyt väärin. [...] (HS, comment 9, posted on 28.4.2011 8:17 by Elekrep). This is the second most recommended supporting comment with 205 recommendations.

criticising the funding of arts and culture seem to know very little about how much state money is actually allocated into these.

The second main strategy used to support Oksanen is to agree with her arguments by engaging in a topical discussion on art and True Finns' policies. Oksanen's opponents are encouraged to look for the evidence themselves by comparing relevant documents presenting the policies of True Finns and Nazis:

Anyone who can read can compare the cultural programmes of ultra-persut and the Nazis in the 1930s herself/himself and make her/his own conclusions. Both can be found on the Internet. // There are so many similarities that it can't be a coincidence. [...] (AL, comment 75 by Unknown)<sup>48</sup>

What is implied is that anyone who actually will compare these documents, will most probably reach the same conclusions as Oksanen and the commentator here – “anyone who can read” not only refers to basic literacy skills but to a more comprehensive understanding of a person's critical thinking. As the writer refers to “anyone”, this might be viewed as an attempt to deconstruct the elite vs. the people discourse that has been circulated earlier in the thread – not only the elite but the great majority of Finns has reading skills and access to Internet, thus engaging in topical discussion about the True Finns' art policies should be easy. On the other hand, the comment may also imply that most of the True Finns supporters posting the previous comments cannot read critically or are not willing to do so (since they have not addressed the topic but merely attacked Oksanen's persona); this positions the writer as someone who is more educated than the True Finns supporters. Finally, not everyone engaging in topical discussion is completely supporting Oksanen; in some comments it is stated that Oksanen may have exaggerated a bit or a lot – the use of the “Nazi card” is not appreciated by all supporters of Oksanen – but that she is essentially on the right track.

Thirdly – and what is most interesting in regard to Oksanen's status as a public intellectual – some messages emphasise the importance of Oksanen's opinion as someone who, in comparison with the commentators on discussion forums, has a greater chance to be listened due to her special position in Finland.

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<sup>48</sup> Jokainen lukutaitoinen voi itse verrata ääripersujen ja 30-luvun natsien kulttuuriohjelmia ja tehdä itse johtopäätöksensä. Netistä löytyvät kyllä molemmat. // Yhtäläisyyksiä on niin paljon, että se ei voi olla sattumaa. [...] (AL, comment 75, posted on 28.4.2011 12:19 by Unknown).

Great that someone also tells the world what is the mission of persut and this information is not only dealt with in the “inside” change of opinions between persut and their opponents on discussion forums. It’s wonderful that such an esteemed person as Sofi Oksanen put this issue on the table! Thank you Sofi Oksanen! [...] (HS, comment 21 by kristallica)<sup>49</sup>

[...] Which leading figure of Finnish cultural life La Repubblica would listen to in the first place? [...] Sofi Oksanen is one of the best-known, if not the best known Finn in socially conscious circles. [...] (HS, comment 237 by Just-to-say)<sup>50</sup>

Sofi has not only criticised the authoritarian movements characterised as right-wing by our intelligentsia, but also, for instance, Stalinists and the Gulag Archipelago that they created. In this respect she is a positive exception from the mainstream of our intelligentsia. [...] (HS, comment 26 by Peräpohjalainen)<sup>51</sup>

As with the disagreeing comments, here the special identity position of Oksanen is emphasised, although here to show that her voice is more powerful and influential than that of an average commentator. Because of her critically acclaimed status as an author as well as her popularity, Oksanen is someone who is listened to, not only in Finland but also abroad. Instead of being seen as insults towards Finns and Finland, Oksanen’s comments abroad are here praised. Moreover, for the writer of the last comment, Oksanen seems to be someone who perfectly fills in the position of a disinterested social debater or public intellectual as she is criticising the extremes of both political ends in the left-right axis – as such a person, she is, according to the writer, exceptional in the Finnish context.

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<sup>49</sup> Hienoa, että maailmallekin kerrotaan, millä asialla persut ovat, eikä tuo asia jää pelkästään keskustelupalstojen “sisäiseen” sananvaihtoon persujen ja heitä vastustavien välillä. Mahtavaa että noinkin arvostettu henkilö kuin Sofi Oksanen otti asian esiin! Kiitos Sofi Oksanen! [...] (HS, comment 21, posted on 28.4.2011 8:32 by kristallica).

<sup>50</sup> Ketä suomalaista kulttuurielämän vaikuttajaa La Repubblica yleensä viitsii kuunnella? [...] Sofi Oksanen on tiedostavissa piireissä tällä hetkellä yksi tunnetuimmista suomalaisista, ellei tunnetiun. [...] (HS, comment 237, posted on 28.4.2011 17:41 by Just-to-say).

<sup>51</sup> Sofi ei ole suinkaan kritsoinut vain meikäläisen älymystön oikeistolaisiksi luonnehtimia autoritäärisiä liikkeitä, vaan myös esim. stalinisteja ja heidän luomaansa vankileirien saaristoa. Tuossa suhteessa hän erottuu myönteisesti älymystömme valtavirrasta. [...] (HS, comment 286, posted on 29.4.2011 9:09 by Peräpohjalainen).

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the whole discussion should not be regarded as a mere exchange of opposing views. Clearly, many commentators are not only expressing their opinions but aim at entertaining their readers by posting comments that involve wordplay, sarcasm and parody, which reflects the general emphasis on voice rather than topical content: the discourse in the comment threads is full of real and fictional identity positions and voices associated with those positions. This heteroglot textual composition created by a number of anonymous authors might be actually closer to literary fiction than we might first think – instead of “authentic” opinions by random citizens, many of the comments are skilfully crafted opinions of characters created for rhetorical purposes (such as “the common people”, “members of the elite”, “an educated person”). I am not suggesting that discussion forums are exactly like literary texts; instead, I am suggesting that these two genres do have some parallels in the ways in which discourses and voices (in the Bakhtinian sense) are constructed and circulated in texts. Also the fact that many readers seem to “switch the channel” after reading the first thirty comments or so might indicate that readers are not interested in in-depth discussion – it may well be that regular commentators include a group of trolls who comment on all the relevant news texts and check and applaud each other’s comments during the beginning of each “discussion”. That said, there is also plenty of topical discussion is going on among the trolling. It is, however, challenging to follow the moderate voices among all the shouting.

## **Conclusion**

Online discussion forums are often conceived as democratic meeting places where the common public can participate in societal debates. While freedom of speech is defended on discussion forums, these are also sites where speakers are silenced, ridiculed or threatened by commentators protected by their anonymity. Both of these aspects are highlighted by the data examined in this paper. By expressing her concerns about the election results and the policies of True Finns in the interview for *La Repubblica*, Oksanen was able to raise democratic, public discussion about broad topics such as racism, intolerance and freedom of expression in Finland – yet her reception on the examined discussion forums was mainly negative. Most of the comments disagree with

Oksanen and criticise her, often denigrating her personal identity as a Finnish-Estonian woman who has no right to criticise Finland or Finns, especially in foreign media – a few messages quite plainly suggested that she should move elsewhere. While these responses are partly related to the local Finnish context, they also fit into the general pattern of hate speech and abuse online where women and sexual and ethnic minorities are disproportionately targeted in comparison to white, heterosexual men (see Keats 2010, 31). In general, Oksanen was positioned as a representative of the Green liberal cultural “elite” in Helsinki consisting of idealists who do not have a realistic view of the life of the “common people” in the rest of Finland. Her position as a public intellectual was explicitly mocked in some messages, suggesting that Oksanen has announced herself as an omniscient “Expert in All Areas”, while she or any literary author does not have the competence to do this, and, if literary authors want to participate in societal debates, they should do it in their books. Even though the majority of the comments were clearly negative, there was also a lot of support for the author for participating in the discussion as someone who is more knowledgeable and influential than an average Finnish citizen or net commentator and whose criticism of True Finns was praised for “saying it like it is”, “speaking the truth” and pointing out potential societal problems when they are still small – thus functioning as “an early warning system”, the role that Habermas (2009, 55) associates with public intellectuals.

The debate died out fairly soon – although references to “Oksanen’s Nazi comment” still occasionally surface in online discussions. Since True Finns have been in the opposition, they have had little impact on state policies, including those concerning arts and culture. Ironically, in December 2011 the whole debate got a rather, should I say, “postmodern” closure, when the leader of True Finns, Timo Soini, claimed in a seminar that the whole section about art in the party’s electory programme was only a provocation, put in there tactically to irritate people who take things too seriously (HS 2011b). This shows quite illuminatingly how True Finns are indeed populist in the sense that they do employ exactly the same strategies that are used by “the people” on discussion forums<sup>52</sup>: provocation and making fun of the assumed opinions of the “elite”

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<sup>52</sup> To certain extent, this is unsurprising since it is clear to any regular reader of these comment sections – by a regular reader here I refer to someone like me who has been following these comment sections on an almost daily-basis for several years – that any news related to True Finns attract a lot of comments in a very short time and these tend to repeat elements of the same “people vs. elite” discourse that characterises the electory programme of True Finns. It is quite likely that part of the commentators are

or whoever it is that represents the Other of “the people” in any specific instance – in the case of Oksanen, it is the elite author. In the online discourse, rhetorical strategies such as sarcasm, irony, parody, wordplay, and metaphorical language are used to make argumentation rhetorically more effective. While some of the comments do give the impression of having been written in haste by someone who does not master spelling, grammar or logical argumentation, quite a few of them are skilfully crafted pieces of argumentative text. This raises intriguing questions: who are these commentators that are clearly knowledgeable about poetic uses of language but position themselves in opposition to the “elite” authors? A second question is: whose interests does this kind of discussion serve? Does this reflect democracy, freedom of speech and open public discussion about societal topics, initiated here by the comments of a literary author, or is it also about something else? More research into the behaviour and discourse of regular commentators would be in place but even based on the results of this paper and my own experience as a regular reader of these forums, it seems to me that it is a very specific group of people who are among the regular commentators on these sites – their political views, for instance, do not correspond to the general voting behaviour of Finns, or, in the case of Oksanen, her negative reception on these forums does not correspond to the fact that she is a best-selling author and also critically well received. It is thus quite curious that the sentiments expressed on comment threads on newspaper sites are often treated as the “public opinion” by newspapers themselves in their stories where selected quotes from online discussions are cited as examples of various viewpoints of the general audience. Moreover, often a heated online discussion is reported as a separate news item of its own, to describe the “public’s” reaction. What this “public” or “audience” is in any specific case, however, is not something that can be automatically assumed. While questions about who can be a public intellectual in Finland or whether an author can be a public intellectual are important, in the rapidly changing new media contexts the question of who are the audiences for public intellectuals and literary authors might be even more relevant.

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purposefully campaigning for True Finns online, while presenting themselves as members of the “general” public.



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