HIP HOP AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: POLITICAL COMMITMENT AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES ON THE NORWEGIAN HIP HOP SCENE

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Abstract

In terms of its booming popularity and public outreach, lyrical thematisations of society and adherence to politicised tradition, hip hop as a form of expressive culture may in significant yet largely unexplored ways enter the framework of democratic politics as laid down in Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. Based on in-depth interviews with key actors on the Norwegian hip hop-scene, this article explores and discusses political commitment, the degree to which Norwegian rappers can be seen to draw public attention to subaltern experience, the communicative strategies typical of the scene, and how these strategies might be relevant to public discourse. Furthermore, by highlighting recent examples of the mainstream media's reception of hip hop music, this article shows how songs, lyrics and performances specific to the hip hop genre have entered public discourse, and further argues that hip hop music should be seen as an integral part of democratic public sphere processes.

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Introduction

How does one conceptualise and understand the role of musical practice and reception in deliberative democracy? In models of democracy that champion rational and argumentative communication between citizens as the core of legitimate political discourse, the role of music has come to be seen as a particularly elusive case among the arts. One reason is the generally non-referential nature of musical communication, another is what is regarded as music's appeal to the heart and the body rather than the mind, and yet another is what came to be seen as the ideologically mainstreaming and mind-numbing effects of (popular) music – most sharply formulated by early critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno (1963/1991) and, later, political economists such as Jacques Attali (1985). Yet there is a strong and general acknowledgement among audiences, critics and scholars alike that music forms part of public life, and in significant and potentially progressive ways may enter into processes of political and social transformation.

In recent years a number of scholars have forcefully argued that public sphere theory is a fruitful framework in which to make sense of the role of expressive culture in democratic politics (Van Zoonen 2000; Goodin 2003; McGuigan 2005), therein music (Love 2006; Street 2007, 2012; Gripsrud 2009). Yet given the focus on communicative rationality and deliberation, there is scholarly acknowledgement (Dahlgren 1995; Bohman 1998; Karppinen et al. 2008) that the public sphere framework needs to be developed further in order to gain a better understanding of how expressive culture could be seen as forming a part of democratic public discourse. By investigating firstly the level of political motivation among established Norwegian hip hoppers and how inclined they are to contribute to public discourse, and secondly their communicative practices and strategies, this article provides empirical evidence of how hip hop, by means of its genre-specific characteristics and practises, may enter public discourse. By employing established theoretical models of the public sphere, this article further argues that hip hop music in significant ways must be considered relevant to deliberative democracy.

Hip Hop as Political Public Discourse

There are several distinct reasons why hip hop makes up a particularly pertinent case for the study of music in the public sphere. Firstly, it has in the past ten years transformed from a relatively marginal subcultural phenomenon into the most popular genre among young people in Norway as measured in sales figures (*Ballade* 2012), radio airtime (Gramo 2011) and festival/concert attendance. Accordingly, hip hop-performances, hip hop songs and the activities of hip hop artists have become frequent fixtures in Norwegian mainstream media and the object of wide public interest and occasionally (critical) debate. One recent example of the latter is *Lars Vaular's* chart hit "Kem skjøt Siv Jensen" ("Who shot Siv Jensen"), which lyrically depicts a fictive scenario where the leader of the Norwegian Progress Party is assassinated. The lyrics of this song became the object of discussion and critique in a number of national television, radio and print media outlets, fostering wide public discussion not only about the quality of the song, but also about other issues such as freedom of speech (see Appendix 2). Another recent example is *Karpe Diem*, a group, which through public musical performances played a key role as national

spokespersons for multicultural coexistence in the aftermath of the 22 July massacre. They subsequently had a major chart hit with a song that lyrically portrayed sex with a well-known parliamentary politician, which consequently sparked wide public debate about a range of issues including freedom of speech, attitudes to women and the ethics of the political left in Norway (see Appendix 3).

Secondly, the centrality of *rapping* within the hip hop genre makes it perhaps the most linguistically centred genre in popular music, allowing for direct commentary and critique. This is the simple aesthetic reason why hip hop music, lyrics and performances may in significant ways enter public political discourse.

Thirdly, although certainly not unequivocally or without contradiction, hip hop has historically been politically relevant in terms of explicitly and publicly voicing political and social critique (Rose 1994; Neal 1999). In the Norwegian context research into musical taste in political communities (reference removed for review purposes) shows that hip hop stands out as being perhaps the most politicised musical genre within Norwegian popular music. This is both in terms of the political meaning invested in it by members of the political community, and in terms of the role hip hop plays as a means of political expression among the active members of the ideological left. Fourthly, hip hop has historically functioned as an important means of public representation for socio-demographic groups which are otherwise underrepresented (Pough 2004; Quotrep Jensen 2008).

Public Sphere Theory and Music: The Need for a More Inclusive Theory

Public sphere theory as formulated by Jürgen Habermas, first in *Structural Transformation* (1971) then revised in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), promises a theoretical framework in which the role of music in democracy can be understood. In Craig Calhoun's (1992, 41) words, it "offers one of the richest, best developed conceptualisations available of the social nature and foundations of public life." In Habermas' conceptualisation of discursive democracy the public sphere is of vital importance since this is the social space where private people come together as a public and where public opinion by means of deliberation is formed, a process which, along with voting, forms the basis of legitimate political decision-making.

The multilevel, bottom-up, top-down laundering system later proposed by Habermas (2006) provides a model that is more sensitive to expressive culture and where expressive culture can also be meaningfully located in the anatomy of democracy. Although upholding a steady focus on the importance of traditional political journalism, a distrust of market-driven entertainment and turning at least one blind eye to the democratic role of expressive culture, Habermas here presents a model of the public sphere which also acknowledges that political communication may "take on different forms in different arenas" (Ibid, 415), and "need not fit the pattern of fully fledged deliberation" (Ibid). He locates the public sphere in the periphery of the political system as opposed to the institutionalised discourses at the centre, where it may "facilitate deliberative legitimation processes by 'laundering' flows of political communication through a division of labour with other parts of the system" (Ibid). He further contends that the public sphere is "… rooted in networks of wild flows of messages – news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, and shows and movies with an informative, polemical, educational,

or entertaining content" (Ibid). Commenting on Habermas' 2006 model, Gripsrud (2009, 210) argues that:

> *It is (…) striking how Habermas manages to say so much about the public sphere without ever directly commenting on the role of television documentaries, lifestyle magazines, popular music, movies, soap operas, sit-coms, novels, musicals and stand-up comedy […] Still, I think Habermas here contributes to a framework for a clarification of the roles of music and other arts – whether 'serious' or 'popular' – in deliberative democracy.*

Locating music in the "wild" part of the public sphere, Gripsrud further argues that music must be considered an important means of expressing ideas or experiences, which are filtered into and "laundered" in the "serious" part of the public sphere before actual political decisions are made.

A number of scholars have similar to Gripsrud, called for a more inclusive theory in terms of which communicative *modes, sites* and *topics* that should be considered part of the framework. One line of criticism has emphasised the need for communicative forms other than verbalised, rational discourse to be included as part of democratic communication. Arguing that the practice of deliberation is culturally and socially specific and excludes people who do not possess the ability to partake, Sheila Benhabib (1996, 6) states that Habermas "cuts political processes too cleanly away from cultural forms of communication." Similarly, maintaining that (popular) art does in significant ways become integrated in public sphere processes, Jim McGuigan (2005) suggests that public and personal politics may also be articulated through what he terms "affective," "aesthetic" and "emotional" modes of communication. This article will take Habermas's conception of the public sphere as a starting point, but employ both critical and supplementary concepts from democratic theory in order to elucidate how music in general, and hip hop specifically, may perform a democratic role.

Iris M. Young and Supplementary Modes of Communication

In line with the call for a more inclusive notion of democratic communication, political theorist Iris Marion Young (1996) suggests three communicative modes, supplementary to rational argument, which may contribute to political discussion. Although Young initially focused on speech, these modes can, as argued in this article, also fruitfully be employed to illuminate the ways in which the practice of hip hop music may contribute to public discourse. The first mode Young calls *greeting,* by which she means a "moment of communication" that has no specific content, but which is important in terms of establishing the communicative situation itself. This mode closely resembles Roman Jacobson's (1960) *phatic,* and essentially social, communicative function which captures the workings of communicative acts that open up for discussion; by so to speak saying "Hello, we are here and we can talk – if you like." The second mode is *rhetoric* which refers to the styles and forms of communication which ensure both the capturing and holding of an audience's attention, but also the effectiveness in addressing issues and putting forward arguments. She argues that "Humour, wordplay, images and figures of speech embody and colour arguments, making the discussion pull on thought through

desire"(Ibid, 130). The third mode is *storytelling* or narrative which supplements argument by its capacity to exhibit a subjective experience to other subjects and thus foster understanding of another's values, culture and priorities. The importance of storytelling in deliberative democracy is also emphasised by political theorist Robert Goodin (2003) who argues that (mass mediated) narratives are necessary engines for the "empathetic imagining" among citizens and a prerequisite for a functioning deliberative democracy.

Hip Hop and Public Sphere Theory

The public sphere perspective is latently present, yet not explicated, in early writings on hip hop, such as Tricia Rose's seminal *Black Noise* (1994). She writes that:

> *Rap's cultural politics lie in its lyrical expression, its articulation of communal knowledge, and in the context for its public reception. (…) The politics of rap music involve contestation over public space, the meanings, interpretation, and value of the lyrics and music, and the investment of cultural capital* (Rose 1994, 124).

Similarly, later writers like Kitwana (2002) contend that it is through hip hop that the African American experience is drawn to the public's attention and critically illuminated.

Although far from confined to hip hop culture, the concept of a "Black Public Sphere" (The Black Public Sphere Collective 1995; Neal 1999; Hanson 2008) much inspired by Fraser's (1992) concept of subaltern public spheres, involves the reformulation and expansion of Habermas' original concept in order to accommodate the vernacular practices, forms of expression and institutions specific to the African American community. This literature highlights both how hip hop culture constitutes (micro) counter public spheres where collective African American experiences and values can be contested and negotiated – upholding "the hood" to be an important communicative space (Neal, 2003) – and also how hip hop music plays a key role in bringing African American experiences and concerns into the eye of the wider public.

Echoing the infamous declaration by Chuck D of *Public Enemy* that *Public Enemy* functioned as the "black man's CNN," Pough (2004, 27) writes that "The fact is, some of the most humanizing and accurate accounts of life in impoverished ghettos come from rap songs and not the network news." Pough further contends that the hip hop-specific communicative practice of directing and managing public attention by means of disruptive spectacle, boasting and overstatement is key to understanding the way hip hop may play a progressive role in the wider public sphere. Pough's emphasis on the attention commanding aspect of hip hop practice is consistent with Young's call for *greeting* to be included in the framework of public sphere theory.

The struggles and aspirations of the largely underprivileged and voiceless African American community and the role of hip hop music therein do not map so easily on to the more homogenous economic and cultural conditions in Norway. However, hip hop does function as a privileged means of expression for the immigrant youth population (Vestel 2004; Knudsen 2008; Sandberg 2008) who otherwise have little or no access to the public sphere, and also for young adults in the general population who either come from relatively underprivileged socioeconomic conditions or identify with them and hence adopt the perspectives of the marginalised.

Method

Rather than treating hip hop as a public cultural representation of any single demographic or socioeconomically based collectivity or as one homogenous musical subculture, this study regards hip hop as a *scene*, defined as "the systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that link text, industry and audience" (Neal 1980, 19). It focuses on the creative and interpreting actors of the scene, namely rappers and critics: the former because they are suitable to bring out information concerning the aesthetic-communicative practices and political commitment typical of hip hop musicians; and the latter because critics, in their capacity of monitoring and interpreting musical and ideological-political developments on the scene, provide an overview and historical context. Given the multitude of smaller and local sub-scenes and sub-cultures within Norwegian hip hop today and how these are interwoven with other musical scenes and subcultures, the intent of this study – rather than to arrive at generalising conclusions about the scene as a whole – is to explore cases which will illuminate how the motivations and practices of some of the key actors on the scene might be relevant to public discourse.

The main criterion for the selection of informants was a high level of significance on the national hip hop scene, either in terms of being important in the evolution of the genre in Norway or being at the forefront of the scene today (see appendix for list of informants). Criteria for the selection of rappers included commercial success, subcultural legitimacy and centrality on the scene. In order to obtain balanced data, rappers representing different and competing aesthetical discourses and different degrees of political involvement were selected. Critics were selected on the basis of their longevity and centrality on the scene. Rappers were recruited through their management, critics or by direct contact.

The interview guide included a set of questions focusing on different aspects of hip hop practice. In the interviews the informants' role as either rapper or critic determined how much emphasis was placed on the different kinds of questions. The questions focused on five main issues: (1) the degree to which the hip hop scene is committed to remaining politically and socially relevant, (2) communicative strategies and practises, (3) the hip hop scene as a counter public sphere, (4) mediation between the hip hop scene and the wider public sphere, (5) informants' self-understanding and experience as actors in the public sphere.

Political Commitment

Whereas explicitly political hip hop in the U.S. reached its peak around 1989-1992 with highly popular yet politically agitating and conscious artists such as *Public Enemy* and *N.W.A*, the explicitly political hip hop in Norway, heavily inspired by their American predecessors, peaked during the first years of the following decade with groups such as the Marxist-rooted *Gatas Parlament* and *Samvirkelaget.* Both the American and the Norwegian groups were explicitly political in terms of musically and lyrically expressing direct social and political critique and lending themselves to radical political and social agendas.

Contrary to popular claims of the depoliticisation of hip hop and its full scale demise into misogyny and glorification of violence and excessive consumption, the interviews suggest that the Norwegian scene at large is characterised by an enduring commitment to staying relevant to the social and political reality of

present day society. However, this commitment is markedly different in nature and, indeed, generally opposed to that of the earlier days. Vågard Unstad's (rapper in *A-laget)* statement exemplifies the general sentiment against earlier, explicitly political hip hop:

> All political rappers in Norway can go fuck themselves, they can't rap, they can't make music and they are all communists. And honestly: who the fuck is a communist in 2012?!

Leaving aside the fact that the tone of address at the hip hop-scene hardly resembles that of the literary salons of the bourgeois public sphere, this statement is illustrative of prevalent sentiments on the scene in two significant ways.

Firstly, it is illustrative of a general dismissal and desertion of what is considered to be overly didactic and politically agenda driven hip hop. With the exception of *Gatas Parlament*, who themselves remain the main proponents of the explicitly political, and today relatively marginal, tradition within Norwegian hip hop, all of the informants express dislike of what they consider to have been the "preachy," "pushy" and overly simplifying style of the past. Rapper Lars Vaular describes the scene at large as "allergic" to any affiliation with this style. Further testifying to the demise of explicitly political hip hop, critic Martin Bjørnersen comments that;

> Most of today's rappers want to distance themselves from what is being considered 'political rap' because they don't want to identify themselves with the stern AKP (ML)[1]-like thing it was in the past.

Secondly, Unstad's statement paradoxically illustrates that whereas the explicitly political style of the past has largely been abandoned and is out of vogue, the scene still largely, albeit through different and less explicit modes, remains politically engaged. Unstad is, after all, rather crassly and overtly opinionated about communism and communists – which in itself must be regarded as political engagement. All the informants, artists, critics and producers alike contend that hip hop artists, although not rooted in specific ideological or political programs or agendas, have largely remained committed to critically thematising political and social conditions. Also, several of the informants maintain that the scene is characterised by a shared hostility towards Norway's right wing populist party, The Progressive Party. Critic and journalist Øyvind Holen comments that;

> There has always been some kind of politics running through Norwegian hip hop – one has always been in opposition and taken some kind of political responsibility. There haven't been many rappers who have exclusively been into partying and bullshit. (…) Today you see many political songs but very few all-and-all political bands.

Both rappers, Vaular and Borgersrud, and the critic Holen locate the typical hip hop performer as being on the left in the Norwegian ideological-political landscape.

Representing the Hood?

The extent to which Norwegian rappers can claim to authentically represent socially marginalised experience has been a much-disputed issue since the establishment of the scene and a regular fixture in the critical reception of hip hop. This is also a question of vital importance to hip hop – authenticity, in which afro- and

ghetto-centric discourses are dominant (Dyndahl 2008). Danielsen (2008) comments that there is an inherent tension within Norwegian hip hop between middle class living in Scandinavian welfare states and a musical form tightly connected to the underprivileged conditions of black men from American urban ghettos, and further argues that the thematisation of similar destitute conditions in the Norwegian context remains problematic.

According to several of the informants questions about authenticity, "what counts as 'real' hip hop," has been the single most disputed issue within the scene throughout the years. These disputes over "realness" have mostly included questions regarding identity and aesthetics, for example whether rappers rap in English, Norwegian or dialect, and adherence to aesthetic orthodoxy – style of rapping, the use of singing in the chorus, which beats are used, etc. – but also the question of how closely rappers should conform to afro- and ghetto-centric notions of hip hop authenticity. Moreover, the informants appear divided as to whether Norwegian hip hop can be seen to authentically represent socially marginalised experience or not. Critic and producer Martin Bjørnersen contends that the self-understanding on the scene as representing the underprivileged is "false" and that the scene is dominated by ethnically Norwegian actors.

> Hip hop isn't an outsider culture today, but keeps itself with an image of itself as one – this is of course a false self-image.(…) One has always wanted hip hop to represent immigrants, but the reality is, at least in Oslo, that hip hop is pretty segregated. Particularly the political hip hop scene – it isn't exactly multicultural.

Others again contend that they, in capacity of themselves being outsiders, whether a posture or not, inevitably end up promoting outsider-perspectives. Rapper Aslak Borgersrud, for example, describes the typical hip hopper as follows: "One comes from the bottom or the margins, one is a petty criminal, one is a tough guy, an outcast and a thug." Yet another take on this problematic, represented by rapper Lars Vaular, emphasises the speaking on behalf of others:

> I'm very preoccupied by telling the stories about those who struggle and those who haven't gotten what they deserve. As such, I have a classical hip hop perspective on things – teaming up with the outsiders and telling the stories of those who aren't allowed to do so themselves.

What remains typical of the informants' perspectives at large is an identification, real or contrived, with outsider positions in Norway. Whereas hip hop in the US is tightly connected with race, class and urban locality, the reoccurring notion of "the outsider" among hip hop artists in Norway is more vague and may draw on a social and stylistic sensibility rather than an actual socio-demographic affiliation. However, this identification can be seen to allow for and, to some degree, commit rappers to lyrically or performatively expressing and exhibiting the perspectives of outsiders. This is not to say that hip hop by necessity publicly brings forward subaltern or marginalised experiences; rather, that it lies within the genre's discursive make-up to do so.

Giving evidence of this identification with outsiders, Knudsen (2008) draws on ethnographic studies of amateur hip hop production in Norway to show that hip hop artists identify as "underground" – an identity position constructed in opposition to "mainstream" and the majority-society. Similarly, Perry (2004, 39-42) claims that hip hop is an art form *attendant but not reducible* to substantial socio-political

ramifications and issues, and further argues that although hip hop may entail a celebration of the status quo, it also manifests a radical commitment to otherness.

Subjective Realism and Storytelling

Confirming the general antipathy towards the politically explicit tradition within Norwegian hip hop, many of the informants report that most lyrics are centred around a set of "classical" hip hop themes such as partying, sexual conquests, love, drugs, the police, and also boasting about the supremacy of their particular style, neighbourhood or town. The lyrical thematisation of these subjects are often rooted in the rappers' daily life experience and often carried out in a descriptive manner. This heavy reliance on personal subjective experience, as both a lyrical source as well as the source of authenticity, is one of hip hop's defining characteristics and a constituent part of hip hop discourse (Perry 2004, 38).

Furthermore, many of the informants emphasise how the lyrical tradition in hip hop has a direct approach to subject matter; for example, Lars Vaular describes hip hop as allowing for a more "straight to the matter" approach than other musical genres. Similarly, rapper El Axel describes his lyrical approach as "hardcore reality rap" which, according to him, means to lyrically picture his personal life as truthfully and realistically as possible, an approach which is consistent with the ideal of "radical honesty" (Perry 2004, 6) within the hip hop tradition.

However, critic Øyvind Holen comments that whereas most lyrics are primarily of a thematically mundane nature, the genre, by matter of stylistic convention, often implies a lyrical scope that extends beyond the private lives of the rappers.

> There is such an amount of lyrical content in hip hop that you will inevitably end up saying something about the society around you. There aren't any rappers who make vague lyrics about poetry and love. It's very much about describing one's life. Hip hop songs are not party programs, but are very often problem oriented and very often towards everyday problems. And everyday problems are in a sense highly political.

Whereas there has been a number of hip hop songs in recent years (including songs made by some of the informants) with an explicit focus on larger structural problems such as poverty, inequality and the rise of right wing populism, most of the informants contend that the political value of hip hop primarily lies in its expressive capacity to bring to an audience their own and other people's everyday experiences, hence *implicitly* thematising, actualising and sometimes problematising social and political questions. Rapper Vågard Unstad comments that;

> I'd think, for instance, that if you rap about drugs and portray it in a good way but at the same time depict the dark sides, you will communicate much better than, for instance, artists who make a 'legalise drugs'-song or songs that are explicitly supportive of a more liberal drug policy. Do you get my point? At once it gets banal, it loses its effect, but when it's related to real human experience and problematised, then it can become politically significant.

Unstad's comment exemplifies both a common communicative practice as well as a common conception of the political that recognises subjective everyday experience as an important source for politically and socially relevant musical-lyrical expression.

Furthermore, many of the informants highlight storytelling, either based on their own experiences or other people's, as a key lyrical mode in hip hop. Thus, Norwegian rappers adhere to the lyrical traditions of hip hop as moulded in the U.S., where storytelling is perhaps the predominant lyrical mode (Alim 2004). Echoing Goodin's emphasis on the democratic importance of "emphatic imaginings," Unstad comments:

> By telling stories, or as in rap, telling about your own life – how you experience things – you can make people think. Through that process of thought people might become engaged in the lives of other people in the society. In this way one becomes political in the classical sense of politics.

Rooting the storytelling tradition of hip hop in African American oral tradition Smitherman (1997) further emphasise the rhetorical aspects of storytelling as a means of both explanation and persuasion – aspects that may also enable hip hop as an alternative form of public discourse.

Hip Hop Greetings and the Rhetoric of Hyperbole

The informants highlight the importance of gaining public visibility through performative style, lyrics and musical traits, and the importance of declaring "here we are" and this is "*who* we are". Rapper Aslak Borgersrud comments that;

> I think it is important to Norwegian rappers to position themselves in society. Their ethos, or point of view, is very important to communicate – who you are, where you come from and from which background.

However, in Iris Marion Young's conceptualisation of *greeting* she emphasises politeness and virtuousness as a way of motivating discussion between two parties. Hip hop "greetings" are, in contrast, rather crass and, by stylistic convention, directly opposed to politeness. Rhetorically, hip hop music may establish communicative situations in a disruptive rather than virtuous manner by employing a *rhetoric of hyperbole* where provocation, profanity and exaggeration are used for emphasis. Another related feature typical of the ways in which rappers (publically) present themselves lyrically or through performance is self-aggrandisement, or in Smitherman's (1997) terms, "hip hop braggadocio."

Marxist hip hop group *Gatas Parlament* has a number of times in the past entered the news (including the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera) as a result of its songs, performances and stunts. Aslak Borgersud, rapper in *Gatas Parlament*, contends that in some of these cases they strategically used provocation and exaggeration in order to draw attention to particular issues and to open up for further discourse.

> I think we have placed issues on the political agenda that otherwise would not have been there. And we have been a voice that has made way for other voices. By being the craziest guys, saying the most outrageous stuff, we have opened up a space for other people where they can talk about other stuff.

Similarly, *Karpe Diem (*of which both rappers are from immigrant backgrounds) included in their number one chart hit "Toyotaen til Magdi" a much discussed line about receiving oral sex from a parliamentary politician from the Progress Party, and thus employed the tactics of shock and profanity to ensure attention. Crucially, both the rappers themselves and other members of the publicly underrepresented

immigrant community in Norway consequently became engaged in public debate about the song's lyrical style and content as well as other issues related to immigrants' conditions in Norway. In this case the lyrical use of sexually explicit rhetoric typical of hip hop can be seen as an important contributing factor in establishing public discourse between social groups with an otherwise democratically problematic communication deficit.

Also *Lars Vaulars* "Kem skjøt Siv Jensen" ("Who shot Siv Jensen?") is an example of the clever use of exaggeration and provocation as a means of drawing attention to the song's message. In the song that was partially intended as a critique of tabloid media logics, Vaular styled the title of the song as a tabloid newspaper headline, anticipating that it would attract considerable media attention due to its explicit nature.

> I wanted to use the title of the song as a means of showing how people only read headlines and make choices on the basis of headlines. The song was a social experiment; I used populist logic here, also because it sells. (...) The title made the song live its own life in the papers, in social media and in the heads of people.

The media commotion that followed included, among other things, airtime on NRK Television's main news programme, the full lyrics printed in two national newspapers and public accusations by FrP-Politicians that the song was encouraging political violence.

The Music as Rhetorical Underscore

The primary focus of this article is on hip hop as a lyrical practice; however, the *musical qualities* specific to hip hop are also key to understanding how hip hop addresses the public as well as how it demarcates itself from other lyrical forms, such as poetry or novels, and musical forms, such as folk or jazz. These include the beat, samples, programming and the tonal, timbral and rhythmical qualities of the lyrical delivery itself, which must be seen as constituent parts of hip hop's rhetorical appeal and ability to command attention. Rose (1994, 2) defines hip hop music as "(…) a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music." Further emphasising the importance of the beat, musicologist Danielsen (2009, 204) points out that "Even though rap is communication- or message-orientated in the sense that lyrical content and shape is central, the rhythmic fundament that is being rapped over is of utmost importance to the song as a whole."

In addition to setting the mood of a song, the beat is an important rhetorical device for both directing attention to the lyrical content of a song and, importantly, maintaining this attention. Walser (1995, 204) points out that rappers' engagement with the beat "produces dialectic tensions" where rhythm supports textual argument. Therefore the lyrical delivery and effectiveness of rhetoric in hip hop are both fully reliant on the *flow:* the relationship between the beats and rhymes in time (Ibid. 204; Alim 2004, 550).

The practice of sampling is one of the aesthetic characteristics of hip hop that also contributes to its rhetorical appeal. This can, for instance, be seen when Lars Vaular includes a sampled gunshot to both rhythmically and rhetorically underscore

the chorus in "Who shot Siv Jensen." Danielsen (2008) ascribes great importance to sampling in hip hop, claiming that it often functions as a *reality effect*, anchoring the lyrical message in a geographical and socio-political location. The frequent use of beat samples and melodic or lyrical themes from funk, jazz or past hip hop songs further anchors the lyrical message in a musical discourse which, historically, has opposed dominant power structures.

The Democratic Value of Hip Hop

It should be stressed that the rappers' rhyming stories, reflections and messages, as well as the rappers' own socio-political locations, would probably gain very little publicity at all were it not for the musical form in which the lyrics are delivered. It is, for example, most doubtful that they would have any comparable public outreach had they been expressed through poetry or literature. At this constitutive stage of public discourse, mediated hip hop songs and performances phatically and by means of genre-specific hyperbolic rhetoric and disruption may function as a an important vehicle for establishing communicative situations and the possibility of public discourse between parties that may not otherwise have interacted.

Moreover, hip hop can be seen to perform an important democratic function since it gives shape to private, subcultural and sometimes marginal experiences and brings these into the public sphere. Thus, hip hop music and performances function as vehicles for the mediation between the private and public sphere. In the public sphere, at the periphery of the political system and as shown in the various examples of media reaction to hip hop, the stories, provocations and reflections brought to the fore by hip hop are scrutinised, discussed and validated or invalidated – a process which may facilitate the formation of (considered) public opinion. Hence, these values, practices and perspectives brought to the public's attention by the music and performances potentially become integral parts of the multilevel, bottom-up top-down, *laundering system* described by Habermas (2006). In line with Habermas' emphasis on the bottom-up top-down process, rappers from marginal or subcultural positions respond to political and social conditions – the focus of government and administrative bodies – and throw their interpretations of these conditions back into the public sphere, where these ideally are laundered and filtered further towards the centre.

The level of authenticity ascribed to rappers is therefore of vital importance in this process. The degree to which the rapper is seen to master musical traditions, deliver the message in a convincing way, and through personal biography appear truthful is crucial in terms of the leverage a song or a performance gains in public discourse. A similar point is also made by Habermas (1981, 15) who argues that a main function of aesthetic/expressive discourse is to support validity claims with authenticity or truthfulness.

By becoming part of public discourse, hip hop can be seen to enter what Weigård and Eriksen (1999, 253) term "the political circuit of power" ("Det politiske maktkretsløpet") where public opinion formed in the public sphere, the formation of will in political parties, trade unions etc and the decisions made by "strong publics" are all responsive to each other. Although it is very rarely possible to pinpoint the concrete impact of a particular musical performance or song, or to track its trajectory from the periphery to the centre of a political system, the example of Lars Vaular's hit

"Who shot Siv Jensen?" provides some evidence of a certain responsiveness to mass mediated music among members of the political elite. The debates following the release of the song particularly focused on whether or not it is acceptable for artists to joke about killing politicians. The party leader, Siv Jensen, herself responded to this by declaring in an interview that Vaular's lyrics were within the boundaries of what should be accepted in a liberal democracy.

Conclusion

This study shows that hip hop performers share motivations which are prerequisite for progressive contributions to public discourse in two significant ways. Firstly, evidence is given that among Norwegian hip hop artists there remains a commitment and inclination to be politically relevant by means of thematising and problematising every day, private experiences, and bringing these into the public eye. Although today's hip hop artists largely do not identify with the explicitly political traditions of the past, there is also an inclination to lyrically thematise social and political conditions. Secondly, the study shows that hip hop artists today remain committed to publicly exhibit marginalised or subaltern experience, either through their own personal biographies or in terms of their identification with and adoption of outsiders' perspectives.

The interviews and examples of media coverage referred to further demonstrate that Norwegian hip hop artists, by means of genre-specific lyrical practices such as provocation, profanity and exaggeration, and what can generally be termed a rhetoric of hyperbole, command public attention, thus publicly highlighting experiences that may otherwise would be given coverage. Hence, hip hop music, may under certain circumstances, stimulate public discourse by means of disruption rather than virtuousness and establish communicative situations that potentially allow for further public discourse. Moreover, the widespread use of storytelling as a lyrical form in hip hop, often from an outsider's perspective, may also serve a democratic function as it facilitates what Goodin terms "emphatic imaginings" among citizens, which in turn may strengthen the quality of public deliberations.

I would here further argue that hip hop may enter public sphere processes in four significant ways. Firstly, it phatically establishes communicative situations, thus having an initiating function for public discourse. Secondly, it mediates between the private and the public sphere. Thirdly, in doing so, it provides what Dahlgren (1995) terms "symbolic raw material" for public deliberation, where songs and performances themselves become the object of public debate and generate further debate about political and social issues related to the songs' lyrical content, the style and context of performance, the performers' background, or any combination of these elements. Fourthly, in terms of their expressive capacity to address politically and socially relevant issues, hip hop songs and performances may also under certain circumstances function as contributions to ongoing public debates in their own right.

In the anatomy of democracy as modelled by Habermas (2006) hip hop songs and performances are part of the communicative processes in the public sphere that are located on the periphery of the political system. This model further makes probable how the narratives, perspectives and reflections brought forward by hip hop music are laundered and filtered from the periphery further towards the

decision making institutions at the centre of the political system. Henceforth this article argues that hip hop-music, although in a peripheral role, should be considered part of this system.

However, in order to explore in more depth how hip hop music enters public discourse and forms part of the public sphere further empirical studies are needed. One pertinent route for further research is to carry out closer analysis of hip hop songs with regard to what kind of stories, perspectives and reflections they communicate, how these are communicated, and how the songs may or may not bring forward arguments. Another pertinent route for further research would be to conduct systematic analysis of the public debates generated by or related to hip hop music, with regard to where these debates take place, who participates, which issues are raised and last, but not least, how the rhyme and rhythm based stories and reflections of hip hop songs are taken up in debates.

Note:

1. Revolutionary Marxist – Leninist political party in Norway, prolific in the 1970's.

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Appendix 1
List of Informants

Martin Bjørnersen: rapper, critic and DJ. Writes regular columns and reviews about hip hop music for *Morgenbladet, Klassekampen* and a range of other other printed or online publications.

Aslak Borgersrud: rapper in *Gatas Parlament*.

Øyvind Holen: journalist, critic and author. Has for the past few decades regularly written columns and reviews about hip hop for a range of national print and online publications (Including *Dagens Næringsliv* and *Ballade*). He is also the author of two books about Norwegian hip hop.

Gunnar Greve Pettersen: former rapper in *Spetakkel,* now manager for various hip hop artists including *Lars Vaular*, *Tommy T* and *Vinni*. He is also currently one of the judges for the Norwegian Pop Idol television show.

Axel «el Axel» Purcell: rapper in *Equicez*, who won the Norwegian Grammy Awards (2003) and recently released the album "Hardcore/Encore" (2012).

Lars Vaular: rapper. Won Norwegian Grammy Awards in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Vågard Unstad: rapper in *A-Laget*, columnist and public debater.

Appendix 2
Selected Examples of Critical Media Coverage of Lars Vaular's "Kem Skøt Siv Jensen"

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