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Viral Politics. Political Mobilisation and Participation in Social Media

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VIRAL POLITICS.
Political Mobilisation and Participation in Social Media.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Lex Orwell – a story about political mobilisation in social media

Stockholm, 18 June, 2008. Outside the Swedish Parliament, thousands of people had gathered to protest against what they considered to be a serious infringement to their basic rights of personal integrity. The night before, an MP of the Centre Party burst into tears as he tried to explain his reasons for accepting the government proposal in spite of his promises to his voters not to. The media went wild as domestic politics suddenly was having a narrative quality worthy of front page coverage. All over the country, citizens were discussing the alleged march towards the surveillance society. At the end of the day, after a lengthy debate, with party leaders and ministers lurking around in the plenary chamber, the Riksdag finally approved the bill. It was not strange that the government, based on a parliamentary majority, got the bill approved. The question is why there was so much fuzz about it, and why the campaign against the proposal did not calm down after the final decision was taken.

In early June, there was almost no public debate about the bill in question – a proposed law that will allow continuous filtering of all international tele-communications and Internet traffic leaving or entering Sweden, pejoratively named the Lex Orwell[1]. The debate and the vote were scheduled just before the parliamentary summer recess and the Midsummer weekend, during the European Football Championship, on a day when Sweden played Russia. The odds for anyone caring were high.

However, a small number of almost fanatic debaters, many of them connected to the Pirate Party[2], had been following the legislative process of the bill closely from the start in the Defence department of the old cabinet[3]. By using various social media as platforms for their campaign against the proposal – blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and various internet for a, they managed to draw the interest of other people, who in their turn also made use of social media platforms. Hundreds,

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[1] Swedish government proposal 2006/07:63 – "En anpassad försvarsunderrättelseverksamhet".

[2] Piratpartiet - a small Swedish political party without seats in the Parliament whose political programme is mainly concerned with the reform of intellectual property rights laws and the abolishment of the EU data retention directive (www.piratpartiet.se).

[3] Cf. Ds 2005:30 – "En anpassad försvarsunderrättelseverksamhet" and SOU 2003:30 – Försvarets radioanstalt – en översyn.

and then thousands of citizens started to shape an informal network. The campaign had gone viral. Suddenly the most used Swedish blog portal – knuff.se – was clogged with blog posts about the Lex Orwell, effectively jamming normally popular themes like fashion and gossip. In the end, the presence in social media was so marked that regular news media began to take notice. At first the reports were about the phenomenon of the "blog quake", as it was called, but it did not take long before the law proposal was a news story in itself.

After the first wave of online frustration, the protesters took to traditional ways of protesting: MPs started to receive unprecedented amounts of e-mail from their constituents – on 30 June, the MPs of the Swedish Parliament had received about half a million e-mails[4] - and demonstrations were organised throughout the country. Citizens who had never even thought about contacting "their" MP, and even less about participating in a demonstration, took to the streets.

At the time of writing (August 2008), there are no signs of the debate concerning the law proposal calming down. A large demonstration is planned to coincide with the opening of the Riksdag session on 16 September, marketed above all through social media[5].

To recapitulate: a political issue barely covered in traditional mass media was in a few weeks translated into one of the most salient political protest movements in Sweden in years, mobilising people of all ages and party alignments. This was done with the aid of social media. The mobilisation as such would not have been impossible without the aid of social media, but the force and the velocity of the campaign, the rapid spread of information and the chain of recruitments across social networks would have been difficult to achieve and would probably have taken on other forms in an earlier technological setting.

1.2. The Problem

The reason I have been telling you this short story is that the Lex Orwell campaign in Sweden serves as a useful illustration to what I mean when I am talking about political mobilisation in social media. There are of course other stories about rapid, online-driven mobilisation like this. The problem is that they are anecdotic, like the

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[4] http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/1.1215252/en-halv-miljon-protestmejl accessed on 2008-08-20.
[5] Cf. http://www.new.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=1267972&id=609308335#/event.php?eid=22219871359 accessed on 2008-08-19.

story above is an anecdote: interesting, but atheoretical. With my dissertation project I aim to provide for a more systematic inquiry of the field.

My research interest lies more specifically in what these forms of mobilisation and participation look like, and whether they are any different from earlier conceptions of mobilisation and participation. What does the use of social media do for the level of political participation? Who participates?

RQ: What effect does the use of social media have on the form and level of political participation?

An ongoing discussion in democracy research is concerned with the question of whether the level of citizen political participation in the industrialised or post-industrial countries is sinking or not. The academic debate might be partitioned into two lines of argumentation. The line championed by, among others, Robert Putnam (2000), maintains that political participation is decreasing as the level of social capital in society wanes with increasing individualisation and political apathy. Another line, represented by, among others, Russell J. Dalton (2008; see also O'Neill 2007), argues contrarily that the forms of participation are merely changing and are taking on new forms, as post-materialist values (Inglehart 1977, esp. pp. 262-321) become more salient. Instead of enrolling in political parties and other formal organisations, citizens are now to a greater extent canalising their engagement through various types of protest, such as boycotts and buycotts (cf. Micheletti 2003), civil disobedience, internet activism and through the means of informal networks. These tendencies arguably run parallel to the global nature of several contemporary political issues, as well as the circumscribed autonomy of the nation state and increasing complexity of governance relationships (Stoker 1998).

Another debate concerns the effects of the ever more dispersed and advanced use of digital communications technologies – e-mail, web pages, mobile phones, social media – on political mobilisation and participation. Within political science, this discussion tends to be focused either on the causal effects of such technologies on the level and type of social capital, which is thought to spur participation, or on the effects of social or "new" media use on political knowledge and attitudes, also thought to spur participation (Cantijoch et al 2008).

The discussion about social media and social capital is also linked to assumptions of the increased importance of social networks in late modern society (cf. inter alia Castells 1996). In this case it is also possible to distinguish between different strains of thought present in the debate. On the one hand it is argued that the dominant effect is a decrease in social capital; on the other hand it is argued that new communications technologies in combination with a waxing network society are in fact contributing to an increase in social capital. A third position maintains that the internet and other arenas of digital communication function as a useful compliment to traditional types of social capital. (Wellman et al 2001)

Concerning the effect of social media on political knowledge, the discussion also divides into an optimistic and a pessimistic strain. Some researchers have found causal effects of social media on political knowledge and participation in empirical investigations, explaining the effect with the "surprise effect" of unexpected political social media content, offsetting the effect of already politically interested people actively searching for political information on the internet (Cantijoch et al 2008: 6; Sweetser & Kaid 2008). Empirical evidence has, however, also been provided for the hypothesis that social media in combination with other types of media, producing an overall wider media choice for consumers, have resulted in a larger knowledge gap between politically interested and disinterested citizens (Prior 2005).

In the light of these academic discussions and the existing body of research, I will try to investigate the effect of social media on political mobilisation and political participation by empirical study of social media users and non-users and their (alleged) political behaviour in online as well as offline settings. I will also try to evaluate the effect of social networks on successful recruitment as an explaining mechanism for the hypothesised causal effect of social media on political participation.

This task will be completed by a series of minor, well defined studies using different cases, populations and settings and different research methods, asking slightly different (sub)questions. From these minor studies, four or five essays/articles will be written, reporting the results, and providing the base for a doctoral compilation thesis.

1.3. Why Study Political Mobilisation in Social Media?

There is no lack of research done in the field of internet and politics. eGovernment, eDemocracy, political discourse and deliberation in online discussion forums, effects of internet access on voting behaviour, the use of internet in electoral campaigns and social movements' and activists' use of internet tools etc. have proliferated since the mid-1990s (cf. Chadwick 2006). There have also been an abundance of studies trying to studying the effect of the internet on political participation (cf. Davis 1999, Bimber 1999, Anduiza et al 2007, Cantijoch et al 2008), claiming positive, negative or no effects of internet use on participation levels. However, studies on the relationship between *social media* and political participation are scarce. The reason for why I find it interesting to single out social media is that social media have several aspects that differentiate them from other, static/hierarchical types of internet media. Social media are participative on another level and have a strong connection to people's offline social networks to a greater extent, highlighting the recruitment factor rather than the media consumption factor in participation, and also studying this recruitment-through-network factor outside of institutions, which has often been the case in previous studies (i.e. Verba et al 1995).

  It is also the fact that research concerning online activism tend to focus on either formal political organisations and their members or "social movements", while I intend to study individuals regardless of organisation affiliation. And whereas research on the impact of social media on various aspects of social life have begun to flourish, they have mostly studied single platforms and services (boyd & Ellison 2007), I intend to study the phenomenon not focusing on any particular forum or website, as this would make the research I undertake unnecessary limited to these specific settings and with all likelihood make the results less relevant in coming years as specific services are in a state of constant flux (Sundström 2008). I have not been able to find any research singling out social media and studying its effect on political mobilisation and participation.

1.4. Why Compilation Thesis?

I have chosen to plan my dissertation project with the aim of writing a compilation thesis. This is mainly due to the fact that I intend to follow slightly different leads within the general field and work with different, rather well defined projects in the

framework of the larger project. At this point, I believe that a compilation thesis is a better way of presenting my research than a monography that would be characterised by chapters following different paths of methodology and focus. Of course, should it be apparent in the end that my material is so consistent that it deserves a full-blown book project, I intend to reserve the option of changing my mind on that point.

1.3. Outline of the Rest of This Paper

After this short introduction, a brief sketch of the theoretical framework for the dissertation project is provided, adding some of my own ideas for how a model explaining the mechanisms of political mobilisation might be outlined (2 & 3). In parts 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 I provide my thoughts on how this phenomenon might be studied empirically, finishing off with a brief conclusion where I provide a preliminary time table and recapitulation of how the thesis will be built up.

2. Political Participation

Political participation is defined by Brady (1999: 737) as "action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcome." The concept is further specified by ruling out political attitudes and political learning and knowledge, instead restricting the term for active participation where the goal is influencing decisions made by government bodies and/or the selection of government officials (see also Verba et al 1995: 38).

   The strict definition of politics as something that is limited to government decisions and actions is often questioned in favour of a more open definition. Using a broader conceptualisation, actions directed towards private bodies or public opinions might also be seen as political participation (Conge 1988: 344f). At this point, I tend to lean towards the latter definition: given that a significant number of political issues are no longer unambiguously under state control, it is logical the targets of political action are diversifying. Apart from targeting the traditional political institutions, people today direct their claims-making directly towards, inter alia, international governmental institutions, international agencies, and private businesses (Norris 2002; Micheletti 2003).

   Another problem concerning the conceptual limits of political participation concerns the action itself, and whether it is truly a way of influencing a political

outcome or something else. For an example: joining a Facebook group devoted to supporting the democratic movement in Burma would clearly be an action, but, depending on the participant's behaviour and personal motives for joining the group, mainly be a way of manifesting an attitude rather than actively influencing officials. It might be argued that a large number of supporters for a group in itself might be taken as an implicit request for political action, but would it be enough for us to characterize it as an action rather than just an expressed attitude? On the other hand, protesting, signing petitions and writing to elected officials are usually treated as acts of political participation, but is not that also just a way of expressing attitudes? There is simply no academic consensus on what constitutes an act of political participation (cf. Anduiza et al 2007: 3).

For the more exact operationalisations, one problem is that new forms for political participation have risen in later years that have not been covered by earlier studies. In the Swedish Citizen Study of 1997, for instance, several questions about political participation were asked using traditional indicators like signing petitions, demonstrating and so on. I have elsewhere shown (Gustafsson 2008a) that with the aid of ICTs, new forms of participation have been made possible, although not covered by the questions and variables in the citizen study. Would it be a conceptual point to classify political participation in acts that are only possible online and those that can only be carried out offline (Anduiza et al: 2-4)? Would it be any point to assign different forms of participation different values in determining the level of participation, i.e. time used or money spent (Brady 1999: 762, Verba et al 1995: 13)?

There are also other problems of measurement associated with the study of political participation. Lacking memory and overreporting due to social desirability bias (Brady 1999: 740ff) are common problems when asking people of their behaviour, although there are ways of improving answers by making the questions more extensive.

My first great task in this endeavour will therefore be to develop a meaningful measurement of political participation. I expect, however, this measurement to undergo changes as I dive into the empirical material – especially the focus group discussions proposed in section 4 of this paper.

3. Social Networks, Social Media and Viral Politics

3.1. Social Networks and Social Capital

Previous research has established a strong connection between social capital and political participation, in particular, the link between "weak ties" and political participation. As Mark S. Granovetter (1973: 1374) put it: "[P]eople rarely *act* on mass-media information unless it is also transmitted through personal ties; otherwise one has no particular reason to think that an advertised product or an organization should be taken seriously." The relationship has been found in empirical studies, for instance in Teorell (2003), where the main finding, using data acquired through a large 1997 survey in Sweden, was that the more weak ties an individual has, the more likely it is that that individual commits acts of political participation. Teorell's measure of weak ties was based on the number of associations that the individual was a member of. It would be interesting to see if this could also be found when measuring people's networks outside of organisational settings.

One classical problem with the idea of the importance of being asked is that people who are being asked and say yes might be people who are asked because they have said yes in the past (Verba et al 1995: 377). One way of distinguishing the effect of social media an digitally managed social networks on political participation through recruitment would perhaps be to distinguish between whether people have been politically active in formal political organisations or in other forms prior to their social media use.

3.2. Social Media

"Social media", "post-broadcast media", "new media" "Web 2.0" and other concepts have been used for describing recent developments in information technology and mediation (Beer & Burrows 2007). In this paper, I choose the term "social media", which emphasises the social, interpersonal aspect of the phenomenon. In the following, I will describe some of the most prominent features of social media.

Whereas the media structure of the 19th and 20th centuries, characterised by the sharp boundary between consumers and producers of media content and the professionalisation of journalism; the one sender, many receivers framework; the hierarchical organisation of media providers; the high infrastructural costs of producing and transmitting media; and the organisation of media in national

contexts, the media structure of the early 21st century can be characterised by a blurring of the boundaries between producers and consumers ("prosumers"); the many senders, many receivers framework; the lowering of costs of production and new tools resulting in the rise of amateur and citizen journalism and autonomous, alternative and personal media providers, opening up for wider choice and better opportunities for minorities, subcultures, dissidents and other marginal groups to develop their own public spheres, set in a global context. (Silverstone 2007:90)

Social media play an important part in this new structure. Well-known examples of social media are *blogs*[6] or weblogs: "a web page with minimal to no external editing, providing on-line commentary, periodically updated and presented in reverse chronological order, with hyperlinks to other online sources" (Drezner & Farrel 2008: 1); *social network sites*[7]: "web-based services that (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison 2007); and *wikis*[8] "website[s] designed to allow individuals to collaborate electronically in an easy way for authoring, [enabling] users to add, remove, edit and link other pages or resources and change contents, generally without the need for registration" (Albors et al 2008: 196f). Other well-known examples of social media are the video-sharing site YouTube and the photo-sharing site Flickr.

Broadcast media do not, however, loose their importance and give way to a fundamentally new media paradigm. The monopolistic tendencies of media concentration and cultural homogenisation become more and more articulated. A defining characteristic of the media structure is *convergence* (Jenkins 2004). The content in social media is often taken straight from mainstream media. As an example, YouTube, the enormously popular video sharing site, started out as a channel for purely user-generated content. Ever since the beginning, users have uploaded copyrighted content, such as outtakes from TV programmes, music videos, motion pictures etc, sometimes showing them in their original form, at other times mixing or sampling content to create new content. (Webb 2007). The reverse is also true: mainstream media try in various ways to reach out to their

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[6] For listings of popular blogs, consult Technorati.com (in the US and globally) and knuff.se (in Sweden).
[7] Some examples: Facebook, MySpace, Lunarstorm, Xanga, Orkut.
[8] The most famous, of course, being Wikipedia.org.

audience by inviting readers, viewers and listeners to comment, share, upload own media content or rework existing content (Jenkins 2006).

There are differing views on what this might mean for democracy, political knowledge, and political participation. The Democratic Participant concept of liberal media maintains that "small-scale, interactive, and participative media forms are better than large-scale, professionalized media". A common critique against this notion is that "small-scale media are less able to check the abuses of government and corporate power, whether at home or abroad." (Hachten and Scotton 2007:23) This critique fails to understand the aggregate power of decentralised media and the workings of crowdsourcing[9] and collaboration. It also fails to understand the intricate relationship between social media and traditional media. Media power in comes from two directions: "one comes through media concentration, where any message gains authority simply by being broadcast on network television; the other comes through collective intelligence, where a message gains visibility only if it is deemed relevant to a loose network of diverse publics" (Jenkins 2004: 35).

3.3. Viral Politics: a hypothetical model for mobilisation in social media

To take a hypothetical example: someone sends you a funny video clip of a politician making a fool of her- or himself on television (mainstream media content edited and published in a social media environment, see the discussion above on media convergence). You "favourite" it on your personal YouTube page, post it on your blog with a comment, tag it (assigns a label to it in order to find it easily later) and store it on your del.ici.ous folksonomy page, forward the blog post to your Facebook profile, pass it along to your friends etc. Your friends will in their turn assess whether they think that the clip is worthy of passing on, forwarding it or not. Someone might edit the original footage, adding music, snippets of other clips, texts, thereby creating a "mash up", a new piece of media, which in its turn might be passed around. Different tools allow the interactive audience to discuss and see how other people have interpreted and rated the media content. There are special services available that collect the forms of media content that are most circulated at the time. In the end, the sharing of the media

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[9] A form of openly coordinated online collaboration, "that harnesses the creative solutions of a distributed network of individuals through what amounts to an open call for proposals" (Brabham 2008: 76).

content might in itself be a story worthy of mentioning in mainstream media, thereby creating a feedback loop between the different forms of media. In effect, your social network provides a *media filter* for you, passing on media content that are found to be especially interesting, shown below in figure 1:
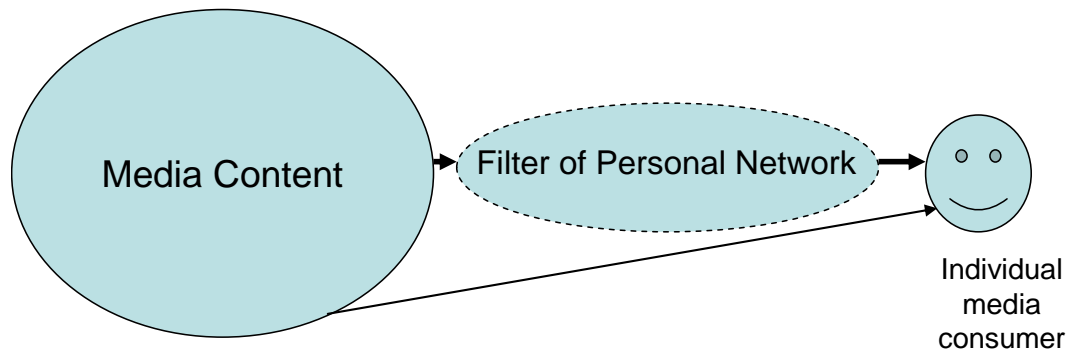
Figure 1: The network as media filter

What I have described here, is the art of viral sharing, with a metaphor drawn from how viruses use hosts (like humans) for self-replication and fast spread across a social network. Perhaps most applied to the logic of new marketing techniques ("viral marketing"), it is also a concept most useful to describe how post-organisational political mobilisation might occur through activist mediation.

Henry Jenkins (2006:206f) defines the core of viral sharing as "getting the right idea into the right heads at the right time." The features needed for any media content to be truly viral are evocative images and consistency with existing world views in the minds of the audience. In the field of political and social activism, I call this phenomenon *viral politics*.

The importance of the personal dissemination of media content and calls for action is nothing new. The qualitative difference with social network sites and social media is, however, the efficiency with which information can be spread. I will mention three major differences.

1) Organising weak ties in social network sites allows for an individual to in a cost-efficient way stay connected to brief acquaintances also when moving to another geographical area, thereby creating "maintained social capital" (Ellison et al 2007). This offsets the deterioration of social capital in society as a product of increased mobility (ibid). Online relationships are provisional (Silverstone 2007: 117), but offline relationships in an online setting are not.

2) Another qualitative difference is the size of networks. The *Small World Pattern* explains the expression "It's a small world" exclaimed by "newly introduced individuals upon finding that they have common acquaintances" (Granovetter 1973: 1368). Small World networks are composed *both* of small groups of people dense ties *and* of larger groups with weaker ties. Important for networks to grow extremely large is the existence of individuals with a wildly disproportionate amount of connections, being able to connect a large number of smaller dense groups with one another: "In fact, social networks are not held together by the bulk of people with hundreds of connections but by the few people with tens of thousands." New communication technology can enhance the stability of these networks, making it easier to connect to other social networks through the *Connectors*. In an increasingly interconnected world, this might take global communication closer to the famous six degrees of separation. (Watts and Strogatz 1998 cit. in Shirky 2008: 213ff)

3) Finally, the sheer velocity of viral sharing implies that millions of people can be reached through word of mouth in a matter of days. Whereas meeting in person, phone chains, or other older methods of spreading rumours or information took days and months to pass on media content to a larger group of people, social media reduces this time to a matter of minutes. Spreading a message through your personal network through social media will, by the logics of maintained social capital and the small world pattern, through viral sharing reach a global crowd at short notice (provided that the message *is* attractive enough to be virally shared).

In spreading media content to their personal network, individuals manifest their commitment to their existing beliefs and move closer to political action. They also invest their personal status as an acquaintance in forwarding a message through their social network. By finally reaching into mainstream media, the content will reach people who already does not share that commitment. This might be called "networked individualism" (Wellman cit. in Chadwick 2006:27). Through the electronic organising of social networks the "personal" information flow increases and the threshold for political participation is lowered. Viral politics does in this way reflect more general tendencies in contemporary *participatory culture* especially observed in younger generations (Jenkins 2006). Quoting O'Neill (2007:11), "increasing education levels, political sophistication, and participation

norms among younger generations help to explain their increased willingness to adopt direct-action techniques".

It also makes post-organisational activism more viable. A fourth difference from earlier forms of political mobilisation is that the repertoire of action and modes of engagement have grown. Think of the classical way of engaging politically. You join an organisation. Through the organisation you gain knowledge of your pet causes but also about things you are not interested in. Maybe you are forced to accept an ideological package with a ready set of views. You enter the organisation at a low level and instead of weighing in on major decisions, you are required to participate in time-consuming trivial administrative work, giving up free nights. You do not have the flexibility to engage in your pet causes with the exact amount of time that you are willing to spare.

Post-organisational flexible engagement becomes easier when coordination and information is possible outside formal organisations. This lowers the entry barriers for political participation, offsetting the sinking membership levels of formal organisations, in the same way as social network sites offset loss of social capital as a result of increased mobility.

4. Part A: Political participation in social media (Articles 1 and 2)

4.1. Political participation in social media: Sweden and abroad

In this part of the project, I intend to explore how social media users react to political content in social media and to recruitments, and what kinds of invitations they accept. What kinds of recruitment attempts are there? In what ways, if any, do they participate politically? What is the connection between online and offline behaviour? What are the attitudes concerning political content in social media? What does the users' political engagement "outside" of the social media context mean for their attitudes and behaviour? The method for data gathering will be mainly focus groups discussions, perhaps accompanied by a few single depth interviews.

The point of this part is to get a rich understanding of how people actually use social media and how they behave on- and offline and not to produce generalisable claims. The results from the focus group discussions will be used to adjust, if necessary, the measurements for social media use and political participation used later on in subsequent parts of the project.

In May 2008, I carried out a pilot study for this part of the project (Gustafsson & Wahlström 2008). This study had two purposes. One was to test virtual focus groups as a research method while the other purpose was to get an early "on-the-ground"-feel of the field. Two focus groups with six participants in each group were formed, comprised by Swedish Facebook users. One group consisted of people engaged in formal political organisations; the other group of people not engaged in formal political organisations. The discussions were carried out during one week, using Facebook itself as the platform. There were no major differences between the answers from the politically active participants and the non-active participants concerning the attitudes to political mobilisation in Facebook, except for the fact that several politically active participants reported that they had incorporated Facebook among other forms of communication in their formal political engagement. Participants in both groups viewed their own participation in political groups and other forms of campaigns on Facebook as a form of public or semi-public identity maintenance. They claimed that few, but remarkable, campaigns manage to spill over into off-line action.

Although the results were interesting as such, the pilot study suffered from some flaws. The groups were too small and the time frame too short, turning the sessions into serial answers from the participants to the moderator's questions rather than dynamic discourse. The participants were also rather homogenous in age and education. All of the participants were also chosen on the basis that they were Facebook users, rendering the discussion unnecessarily platform-centric.

For this part of the project, I am planning to work with a set of focus groups providing larger variance as to what concerns the demographics and use of social media. of the participants. Facebook will not be used as the platform of the discussions. I will also conduct both virtual and physical focus groups in order to try to distinguish whether the form of discussions itself has an impact on the results.

In a first step, the study of the Swedish Facebook users will be expanded, incorporating groups comprising people of different ages and levels of education (known factors influencing political participation) and with different user patterns (i.e. what types of social media that they use). The reasons for studying Swedish social media users are of course convenience as to what concerns language and geographical proximity (for the physical focus groups), although Sweden might be seen as an avant-garde nation concerning trends such as individualisation,

globalisation, post-industrialism and information-driven economy, making it a theoretically interesting case (Bjereld & Demker 2006).

This first step of part A will form the basis for article 1, that will report how Swedish social media users go about with political participation.

In the next step, I plan to expand the study further by incorporating focus groups composed by people from other countries. One methodological difficulty I have regarding this is whether I am going to have groups composed by participants from the same country, or if I am going to avoid this. Maybe it would be just as interesting mixing people regardless of nationality in the same way as I could mix people of different ages and levels of education in the groups, avoiding the trap of methodological nationalism (Beck 2007). If I use virtual focus groups, there would not be any practical reasons other than language limitations, to do this. However, I am aware of the tradition in social science using countries as defining attributes and for comparative reasons, there might be a point in distinguishing between different nationalities. The language limitations will also restrict my choice of participants to Scandinavian, English, and German speaking people. This second step of part B will provide the basis for article 2.

4.2. A short note on using virtual focus groups

Focus groups have been used within the social sciences since the 1920s and attained its most well known introduction through Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in the 1950s (Merton et al 1990). The method has been mostly used in commercial market research for the purpose of studying consumer behaviour and attitudes. Within the social sciences, the method has gained more attention in the last few decades (Morgan 2001:142). In political science it seems to be very rarely used.

Focus groups are useful when the purpose is not to generalise, but to study the motives, experiences and thought processes of individuals not obtainable through extensive methods like surveys or other data management, to explore a new field; to generate hypotheses; and to develop interview guides (Rezabek 2000; Stewart & Williams 2005:398; Stewart et al 2007: 41ff).

When researching online populations, like in this case, using virtual focus groups could be a time- and cost-effective way of gathering data. Physical focus groups are often made up by people who live in the same geographic area in order to avoid

travel expenses. In virtual focus groups, geographical location is of less importance. Another advantage is the flexibility attained by asynchronous communication: time location is also of less importance, which allows for participants to plan their interaction according to their daily schedules. And while virtual focus groups is not useful for all research fields, due to lacking computer/internet availability or technological knowledge, in this case, where the participants are part of an internet population, is seems reasonable (cf. Stewart et al 2005:402). Finally, a great advantage of using textually based focus groups, as in this case, is that the transcription process is made substantially easier (Murray 1997: 534).

   Some negative aspects of using virtual focus groups in the asynchronous-textual form as opposed to traditional focus groups are that some of the richness of physical discourse disappears, such as phatic communication (expressions like 'ok', 'mhmm', and the like), and body language. The asynchronous factor might also have effects on group dynamics. This makes it more difficult for the moderator to interpret nuances in answers, such as irony or sarcasm and silences from participants. However, it must be added that this kind of asynchronous textual communication is extremely common, which might minimise the risk for misunderstandings on behalf of the researcher and the participants.

   The discussions will then be analysed using, for example, methods used for text analysis.

5. Part B. Political participation in on- and offline campaigns.

5.1. Social networks and political participation

In this part, I move from focusing on social media users trying to determine how political participation varies to focusing on people who *do* participate. Here the variance is instead on use of social media. As the sharing of information and recruitment is essential for political participation, I am interested in knowing whether the social networks of social media users and nonusers differ in size and density. The hunch would be that social media users are capable of maintaining larger social networks, and have therefore access to larger amounts of information and more recruitment attempts from peers. That would in turn mean that politically active social media users are expected to be more informed on political matters and more prone to participate.

In order to test this empirically, I will study the social networks of individuals engaged in a political campaign. Does a person who does not use social media have a larger or smaller social network "within" the campaign than a person who does use social media? Although the results can not be generalised to a larger population, they will still give indications of whether the hunch is right or wrong.

Taken that people can have very large social networks – perhaps especially people who are active in a political campaign – the number of individuals that I choose to study must be limited. For comparative reasons, I will also restrict myself to studying individuals active in one single political campaign. For convenience, this might be a local or national campaign of some sort, preferably fairly well limited in scope and time. The individuals participating in the study will simply be asked to name their contacts in the political campaign and whether they think that they know each other or not.

Another way of studying this might be to try to study at least a part of the social network engaged in a political campaign and map out the relations between the individuals in the network, making it possible to distinguish density and whether social media users are more or less interconnected than nonusers. This would most probably involve more individuals and a larger set of data and also be more time consuming, but would also probably produce interesting results.

Among the numerous difficulties associated with this choice of method is of course the problem with what a relation is and how strong it is; and indeed what a "social network" is (Scott 2000: 54).

This part will provide the basis for article 3.

5.2. A short note on social network analysis

Social network analysis (SNA) has been mostly used in sociology and social anthropology although a prominent study using a form of social network analysis was written by a political scientist, Robert Dahl (1961). Although sometimes used in research based on network theories, it is not a theory in itself. It is preoccupied with relational data – i.e. the connections between individuals – and not attribute data – i.e. properties attributed to individuals and this makes network analysis distinct from variable analysis (Scott 2000: 3). What social network analysis deals with is how individuals are connected to each other.

SNA can be used studying ego-centric networks, the connections of a single individual, or "global" networks, networks that are defined as being political, economic, etc. The relations between the individuals in the network can be qualified in various dimensions. Strong and weak ties can be identified (Granovetter 1973), the density of the network can be evaluated, the reciprocity, durability, intensity and reachability (how easy node in a relationship can reach the other node) of a relation can be estimated (Scott 2000: 30ff).

Data gathering can be conducted in various ways, using surveys, interviews, texts, participant observation or other methods. Random sampling is not possible using SNA, as a subset of a population in most cases will not be connected to each other and generalisation is difficult. There are different sampling techniques, as a total network in most cases is impossible to study. One of these approaches is starting out with an initial sample of people from the network, and then using snowballing (asking individuals of their contacts). The snowballing is then stopped when names start to reappear for the second or third time. (ibid: 65) Another way of sampling is to choose individuals holding certain positions in the network.

The data is computed into a data matrix, listing cases (individuals) and their connections to each other. This matrix can then be used to produce sociograms, showing the individuals' relations to each other in the network, making it possible to distinguish "stars" (individuals with many connections) and cliques (individuals who are more closely connected). The computing is executed in special SNA computer programmes and statistical software packages, such as SPSS.

6. Part C. Online people vs. offline people: Political recruitment and Social Networks.

In this part, the variance will be both on social media use and political participation. I will try to evaluate whether a causal effect of social media use on levels of political participation can be found using large-N survey material and variable analysis. The biggest challenge performing this part will be finding appropriate data sources. Unless I find financial support for conducting a large-scale survey, I will be restricted to existing data sources and rely on these to construct measures for social media use and political participation.

Constructing good measures for social media use and political participation demands that the right questions are asked in the survey. Ideally, such a survey

would contain a large battery of questions concerning various types of media consumption and internet use as well as a large set of questions concerning various forms of political participation. The data sets I have had the opportunity to peruse so far have been disappointing in on or more of these aspects. One of the most thorough Swedish studies on political participation, the Citizen Study of 1997, had a large number of questions concerning various forms of political participation,. However, as this study was undertaken more than a decade before the breakthrough of social media in Sweden it is impossible to use. I have elsewhere shown (Gustafsson 2008a) that it also lacked several indicators of political participation, many of them associated with online activism. The SOM studies[10] are of course interesting. Some of the SOM studies have had information on some types of social media use – the 2006 SOM study contained some questions about internet use and blog reading, among others, but not much concerning political participation.

One option would of course be to try to sneak in some social media/political participation related questions in future SOM studies or other existing annual surveys, but I am not sure how viable this is.

Going abroad, the US based PEW Internet and American Life Project[11] regularly conducts large-scale surveys of the American population concerning, among other things, internet use and politics. Here the problem is more that the questions are usually tightly connected to the US election cycles and more concerned with electoral campaigns than other types of politics or forms of political participation unrelated to elections.

One interesting survey, that I recently found out about, was conducted in Spain in 2007 in the context of the project "Internet and political participation in Spain"[12] . This data set, based on a 4 000 people random sample, contains information about both political participation and internet and other media use, but at a first glance, it seems to lack more nuanced questions on social media use. Blogs and online forums are mentioned, but not for example social network sites. However, this is the most useful study I have found as of yet.

This part will provide the basis for article 4.

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[10] Codebooks available at http://www.ssd.se
[11] http:///www.pewinternet.org
[12] http://www.polnetuab.net

7. [Part D.] Theoretical developments

A fourth part of the project is developing theoretical concepts for analysing this field. This will either form the backbone of the comprehensive summary of the compilation thesis, or generate article 5. The ambition is to construct an empirically informed description of the phenomena I have named "viral politics" and account for the plausible mechanisms that are in play in the recruitment of citizens in political campaigns and other acts of political participation. Some of the first attempts can be found in an early manuscript (Gustafsson 2008b) and in part 3 above, and I will not go any further into it here.

8. How does it all fit together?

Taken together, these three (four) studies cover different dimensions of the research problem, as shown in the figure below:
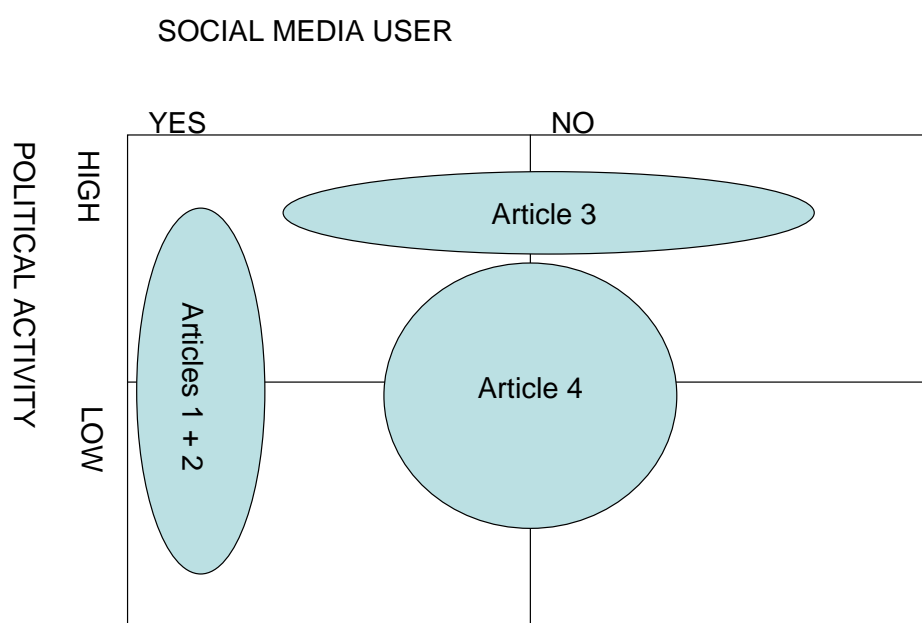
SOCIAL MEDIA USER

Figure 2: Articles and dimensions of the research problem

9. Conclusion

9.1. Anticipating results; research contribution

Of course it is difficult to predict what kind of answers that will be provided by this dissertation project. I believe that a fair estimation is, taking into account that this would be one of the first doctoral projects devoted to the field – as far as I know – that it will provide new knowledge on the mechanisms of social networks and political mobilisation in an online setting. This might add to our understanding of the effects of social media on social life and society, as well as to the debate on sinking or rising levels of political participation in Western society and on the network factor behind recruitment to political participation.

9.2. Policy relevance

What are policy makers to do with such information? One effect, if the empirical results are convincing (and palatable) for political parties, is that campaign strategists might try using the results for designing electoral and other campaigns: producing viral politics. This would of course also apply to governments and public agencies, as it will do to social movements and other organisations. Although I have written about the increasing importance of political mobilisation without organisations, I do believe (at least at this early point in the project) that political organisations play an important part in mobilisation and recruitment also in a viral politics model, although not exactly in the way that they have done before. A deepened understanding of how viral politics and rapid political mobilisation functions might also give policy makers a better knowledge base for how to respond to such political activities.

9.3. Time table

This time table is, of course, very preliminary. I hope nevertheless that it might give some idea of how I intend to go about with the project in the coming years.

Spring 2009: Further literature studies and planning of Part A1: focus groups in Sweden.

Fall 2009: Carrying out of Part A1; planning of Part A2: focus group "in" other countries.

Spring 2010: Reporting Part A1 (writing article 1), carrying out Part A2.

Fall 2010: Reporting Part A2 (writing article 2), planning Part B: social network analysis of online campaigns.

Spring 2011: Carrying out Part B, planning Part C: large-N study of Political Participation and Social Media use..

Fall 2011: Reporting Part B (writing article 3), carrying out Part C.

Spring 2012: Reporting Part C (writing article 4), writing article 5, completion of thesis.

Late Spring/Early Fall 2012: Defence of thesis.

9.4. Preliminary outline of the thesis

The outline of the thesis, with the working title "Viral Politics[13]", follows quite directly from how I have described the project above.:

1. Viral Politics: Introductory essay presenting the theoretical framework of the thesis (Article 5)

2. Article 1 : Social media and political participation in Sweden.

3. Article 2: Social media and political participation: a cross-country comparison.

4: Article 3: A social network analysis of recruitment in online campaigns.

5. Article 4: The link between social media use and political participation: a large-N study.

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[13] An utterly preliminary working title: I am not alone in using the phrase, and I expect it even to be worn out during the next few years.

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