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## **Mainstreaming the Alternative: The Changing Media Practices of Protest Movements**

**Tina Askanius, Nils Gustafsson**

### **Abstract**

*The article argues that contemporary protest movements are facing a convergence of what has traditionally been coined as mainstream and alternative media. Traditionally, the broad term 'alternative media' has been employed to embrace a wide range of oppositional media channels that can be considered to carry on the tradition of the early radical and party press: micro-media operating at the grassroots level, discontinuous, non-professional, persecuted or illegal. Today, heavily commercialised media and online communities such as Facebook, YouTube and MySpace constitute a common part of the repertoire of communication channels for activists engaged in alterative politics and protest movements. Are these new media channels a necessary means in order to reach beyond the circles of the likeminded? Or, do the use of these media point towards a mainstreaming process of political cultures of resistance to the establishment, eroding their very raison d'être? Combining a theoretical discussion of the inherent paradoxes in the celebration of new media technology as a source of democratisation and empowerment of civic cultures with an empirical focus aimed at exploring the changing repertoire of communicative tools used by social movement actors, this paper analyses two cases of online media practices in contemporary Scandinavian protest movements: 1) A series of civil disobedience actions and mobilisations of mass demonstrations before and after the eviction and destruction of the Youth House (Ungdomshuset) in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2007-2008; 2) The popular demonstrations in connection with the European Social Forum in Malmö, Sweden in September 2008.*

### **1. Changing activist media practice?**

When looking at the official Facebook page for the 2008 European Social Forum in Malmö, Sweden, the message of "building a more sustainable, democratic and accountable society" is juxtaposed alongside advertisement banners for, among other things, magicians and blue jeans (see Fig. 3 below). Although the political content is clearly separated from the ad banners, the graphics serve as a reminder that social movements are moving parts of their communication into commercialised spaces that are owned and controlled by private corporations, such as the social networking giant Facebook. Departing from the puzzle of the co-existence of subversive politics and commodified, private communication, we wish to create a discussion of what this might entail for contemporary protest movements and their media-oriented practices.

During the past few years, social media of various shapes and forms have boomed. The world has seen occasions of rapid mobilisation facilitated by the use of ICTs being capable of bringing thousands of people to the streets in short time (cf. Molnár 2010; Goldstein & Rotich 2008; Goldstein 2007; among others). One would expect that social media should be a vital tool for protest movements, creating new vistas for

transnational as well as local campaigns, effectively connecting thousands of dispersed activists around the world. In this article, the term "social media" denotes social network sites and other services, both commercial and non-commercial, used for personal communication building on digital technology sometimes grouped under the term "Web 2.0" (boyd & Ellison 2007; Beer & Burrows 2007). A strong trend in contemporary Internet culture is, however, that millions of people are settling on a few commercial, free services, such as the Google empire, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, etc. (Hindman 2008). A winner-takes-all model creates economies of scale but also potential threats to non-commercial or subversive elements of society. When studying local protest cultures in Scandinavia, we found that activists in the circles of the radical Left were not reluctant to place their entire communicative infrastructure in the hands of corporate media despite a mounting concern amongst media activists that protest movements navigating today's media face the constant threat of being co-opted into the cyber-market.

In order to better grasp these tendencies, we take a closer look at two recent protest events in Scandinavia; the Youth House riots in Copenhagen 2007-2008 and the popular demonstrations connected to the European Social Forum in Malmö in 2008. Our cases give us variation in the type of protest as well as a common ground for comparison. Sweden and Denmark have a lot in common, both countries being prime examples of social democratic welfare states with a high level of organisational life as well as pioneering countries concerning trends such as individualisation, globalisation, post-industrialism and information-driven economies (Bjereld & Demker, 2006). They are also pioneering nations in the online world: broadband access is omnipresent and penetration rates of social media are high (Smith, 2008). Therefore, we would expect that protest movements in both countries to be heavy users of social media and good cases for exploring online practices. In terms of the differences between the two cases, the Youth House might be seen as more openly confrontational with respect to the state, actively proposing illegal methods of protest, whereas the organisers of the European Social Forum worked closely with the city authorities, even receiving financial support and explicitly condemning illegal activity during the forum. As to the degree of violence of the actions, the autonomous movement behind the Youth House riots were on the more radical end of the spectrum and often on thin ice with regard to Danish regulation of civil disobedience. This difference is important, for comparative purposes, as to the question of whether members of the Youth House movement (who we see as more radicalised than ESF participants) were more wary of using commercial media platforms.

In our contribution to the ongoing debate on social movement media practices, we demonstrate how the activists affiliated with both the Youth House movement and ESF 2008 used corporate social media as part of their communicative toolbox. We also disentangle the way in which these platforms were appropriated and shaped by the activists to meet their needs for effective mobilisation. On this backdrop, we pose the following research questions:

- 1) How are corporate social media used by political activists in the mobilisation for the two distinct protest events?

2) How can these media practices be understood in terms of an alternative/mainstream media dichotomy and problematised from the vantage point of data security, ownership and the political legitimacy of the political actors involved?

In the following section, we briefly sketch out the contours of two dominant camps in contemporary theory on the role of media technology in democratic development. This is followed by a brief note on methodology, after which we give an account of our empirical findings. The paper is concluded by a short discussion on the paradoxes of alternative politics being mediated through corporate mainstream media and suggestions for the direction of future research in this area.

## **2. Digital media and political mobilisation**

Accounts of the interplay between media technology and political activism is, to put it crudely, split between two conflicting narratives on the potentials of digital media in democratic development. New media technology is thus either celebrated as a vehicle for social change by expanding political discourse beyond the here and now into transnational political communities as well as closing the moral distance between world citizens (Chouliaraki, 2006; Fenton, 2006; Drache 2008) - or, alternatively, such technology is condemned for undermining the authenticity of discourse and interaction by failing to fulfil the ideal of co-presence in offline political action often coupled with the viewpoint that the internet fosters an ultimately neoliberal system of commodification requiring persuasion and impression management in order to be seen and heard in the cacophonous jungle of the world wide web. (Putnam, 2000; Dahlberg, 2005, 2007). These two conflicting narratives seem to beg the question of whether technological development leads to a degradation of political participation or an enrichment of democratic development.

Rather than dismissing either of these two viewpoints, we depart from the general assumption that, in order to understand the interplay between the opportunities and constraint these technologies entail, we need to start from the vantage point of social movements--what people actually do with media (Couldry, 2004) and how technologies are integrated into people's everyday lives and political engagements (Dahlgren, 2008). Although at first glance sites such as YouTube or MySpace might not be categorised as political per se it is precisely in these seemingly popular, non-political spaces that people start to form publics and take baby steps into engaging politically. In this line of argument, even issues that tend to reside on the fringes of what would traditionally be characterized as political or as expressions of participating in democracy shouldn't be neglected analytically. Popular culture or issues of a seemingly private character can become a springboard for political concerns and impinge on people's sensibilities for social engagement (Dahlgren, 2008; Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007; Barkardjieva, 2009; Graham, 2007).

In adapting this perspective, we take into account not only media texts as an outcome of these practices but, similarly, draw upon activists' own reflections on their use of corporate mainstream media as a platform from which to examine the contentious politics of a specific event.

Both case studies are locally situated, place-bound to a specific regional context, but each have, in their own distinct ways, a global reach in the sense that their causes

stretch beyond the locality of the events, raising issues that provoke engagement and strike chords amongst people in transnational communities. Hence, although the dispute between left-wing activists and Copenhagen city council over the legal right to the so-called Youth House might seem to be a purely local one, the struggle to keep the building became a symbolic event in a greater political process of mainstreaming traditional autonomous enclaves in the city (such as Christiania). It was also an attempting to de-radicalise political subcultures in general, as well as an illustration of the lack of non-state, non-corporate, non-religious free spaces for young people all over Europe today. Therefore, the lengthy struggle over Ungdomshuset became the centre of attention and a defining issue for young activists across borders, joining them in a transnational community of common interest and in a cause reaching beyond the Danish context and the specific case itself. By contrast, the ESF is a transnational event, which unfolded and was articulated in a local, Swedish setting.

The concept of alternative media is a much disputed one – as is the dichotomy of alternative versus mainstream media. The use and creation of media by political activists fall under various headings such as alternative media, citizens' media, community media, tactical media, independent media, counter-information media, participatory media, Third Sector media, social movement media, etc. The term has no fixed meaning. It has been attached to a heterogeneous set of media practices developed by a very diverse range of groups and organisations and is used as a broad term for a disparate body of practices (Harcup, 2005). Research in this area consists of two somewhat overlapping types of research: studies on the use of ICTs for mobilisation and coordination purposes and second, studies on the creation of independent media in an effort to challenge the hegemony of mainstream media (McCurdy, 2009). Definitions stressing the non-commercial character of alternative media underscore that while the message-based news format of mainstream media is designed to draw consumers to advertising and subscription services, the range of alternative anti-market and anti-authority news sources are free and participatory (Drache, 2008: 91). Other definitions highlight social change by stressing the fact that alternative media should, in some way, advocate change in society (Atton, 2002:15). When referring to and using the term 'alternative media', we integrate these different positions and conceptualise alternative media as a non-profit, democratic space where people communicate, organise and debate for politically progressive ends.

### **3. A note on methodology**

Social media is still an under-researched phenomenon that needs to be both studied and conceptualised as tools for and sites of politics. There are indicators that empirical as well as theoretical contributions are in the pipeline (See e.g. boyd & Ellison 2007; Turnšek & Jankowski, 2008; Gustafsson, 2010). From a methodological perspective, the so-called Web 2.0 constitutes a moving target, constantly changing its interface in a continuous flow of 'newcomers' being added to the list of social networking and file-sharing sites. The problems scholars face when exploring this field are numerous: the sheer mass of digital content available on the Internet, finding and cataloguing comprehensive collections through the use of key words, and search engine biases, pose major challenges (Turnšek & Jankowski 2008: 13ff).

Our analytical ambition is not to plunge into a thick description or close textual analysis of the texts produced by the activists in these platforms. Rather, what we offer is an analysis integrating both text and lived experiences of these practices informed by the concept of mediation in order to account for the various ways in which media - its content, producers, users, technologies, cultures and rituals – as an ongoing and reflexive process, is actualised through activists' media-oriented practices around mobilising and coordinating (Couldry, 2004; McCurdy, 2009).

In doing so, the analysis draws upon a wide range of empirical material. First, the empirical foundation consists of a number of media texts: YouTube videos uploaded by activists prior to and in the aftermath of the Social Forum and the Youth House eviction as well as user profiles and debates spurred online in the comments linked to each video. Specifically, in the case of the ESF, the largest ESF 2008 Facebook group and MySpace page are also included in the scope of the material. In the case of the Youth House, in addition to YouTube videos and profiles, our data consist of the largest Facebook group connected to the movement, "Ungdomshuset blir", as well as the major MySpace profile for Youth House News, 69newsph. The end result is a motley sample of multimodal texts all stemming from an online realm.

Secondly, this study draws on secondary data of previous studies conducted on our two cases; these include ESF participant surveys and reports (Wennerhag et al. forthcoming; Björk, 2008) as well as quantitative and qualitative data of the digital media use by the Youth House activists (Andersen & Larsen, 2008). The empirical insights provided by these studies are brought into play and weaved into our analytical framework. In addition, the empirical framework leans on a series of debate articles produced by alternative media practitioners dealing with their first-hand experiences with trying to gain visibility, support and legitimacy in today's media environment.

#### **4. The paradoxes of online protest**

In the analytical vein of inquiry we propose, the Youth House riots and ESF 2008 are approached from a media-centric perspective by looking at some of the web-based activities of key stake holders within the two movements, such as the organising committee of the ESF, as well as central organisations and individual activists affiliated with the two movements. Following a fairly straightforward outline of how different digital media were put to use and assigned a given role within the movements, we question how placing the communicative infrastructure on corporate platforms could possibly affect the radical, often anti-capitalist discourses of the movements' messages and, by extension, the political legitimacy or credibility of the actors producing these discourses. In order to discuss the growing tendency within the activist milieu to resort to websites controlled by corporate media when organising and debating direct actions in a more general perspective, we begin with two specific examples in two Scandinavian contexts. In the subsequent section, we broaden the discussion of a problem that applies to different areas and contexts.

##### **4.1 The fight for the Youth House in Copenhagen 2007-2008**

The Youth House (Ungdomshuset) was a building handed over to the Copenhagen squatters' movement in 1982 by the city authorities. For the next two decades, it was a centre for leftist youth culture in Denmark. In 2000 the political climate in

Denmark started to change and the building at Jagtvej 69 was sold to a Christian organisation - Faderhuset (The Father House) - that had the explicit intent of demolishing the house. On 1 March 2007, the squatters were evicted by the national police task force and the building was razed.

An outbreak of violent street fights followed the eviction. Thousands of protesters took to the streets, building barricades, setting cars on fire, and throwing cobblestones at the police. Demanding a new building from the authorities, a network of activists spent the next year organising happenings, small support events, minor squats and a series of largely peaceful demonstrations, one of which attracted over 10,000 people (Karpantschov & Mikkelsen, 2008). In April 2008, the city authorities started negotiating with the movement, which led to a new Youth House being prepared and handed over to the movement. The new house was inaugurated on July 1st 2008.

The Youth House movement network consisted of a core of dedicated activists (having regular meetings, the so-called "Monday meetings"), with groups of more loosely attached activists participating in actions less frequently and/or meeting up at major events. The actions were characterised by a mobile and largely unpredictable nature, mirroring new policing tactics focusing on fast, concentrated efforts (Karpantschov & Mikkelsen, 2008). Digital media was a crucial component in mobilising this movement which quickly exceeded the city borders and grew over time to represent a much broader cause than the support for the Youth House alone. It evolved into a more general struggle for free spaces in the city and a symbol of the struggle against the neoliberal politics and the 'normalization campaign' led by the Danish government.

In a recent study of the use of and meaning attributed to digital media by the Youth House movement, Andersen & Larsen (2008) identify two key types of media use linked to what activists articulate as planned and spontaneous actions. Websites, social networking sites (various MySpace and Facebook profiles) and most importantly Gmail accounts such as Blokru@gmail.com constitute the main digital platforms used to coordinate and mobilise the numerous planned protest events, whereas activists would rely mainly on mobile phones and chain text messages when it came to spontaneous actions.

Activists tended to conceive of the three official websites; ungdomshuset.nu, blokr.nu and jagtvej69.dk as external rather than internal media - a window where the "outside world" could get an idea of what the movement was up to - and not so much as a practical tool used by the activists themselves who considered the information there as redundant and the websites as somewhere you would go to confirm the information you already had (ibid: 9).

Absolutely vital to the activists, on the other hand, were chain text messages on mobile phones. A spontaneous collective action was, contrary to the planned actions, characterised by the fact that activists would use this single means of communication as a way of spreading information quickly and widely. The messages were always articulated in a impersonal manner and never contained any information which could be potentially harmful to the receivers. It is important to stress that the chain text messages served to coordinate – not to plan. The actual long-term planning of an event would take place during (physical) meetings where everyone would take out the batteries from their phones before the meetings to avoid being traced by police. Equally relevant to questions of data security and the activists' perceptions of the

risks associated with the use of mainstream media, the same study showed that media use dropped radically during a planned protest, even at the actual time that people were on the streets. This obviously has to do with the fact that people had turned from the computer screen to take to the streets but more interestingly this reflects how activists, when engaging in planned events, leave their cell phones at home to avoid being arrested on the basis of the data on the phone (Andersen & Larsen, 2008: 7).

These facts tell us that Youth House activists were, indeed, self-reflexive and cautious when it came to issues of security, state surveillance and the constant threat that their means of communication could potentially be used against them by authorities.

In addition to the two types of usage discerned by Anderson and Larsen (2008) we found that a third kind of media use can be identified in terms of employing social media for building and sustaining support for the cause in a more long-term perspective. The YouTube videos on the eviction of the Youth House in 2007 that seek to reinforce the fighting spirit of the protester fall into this category. Although providing images of an event fixed in time, the different ways of portraying the eviction and the following riots in Copenhagen seem to have the function of reinforcing the fighting spirit of the protesters and create sympathy for the movement amongst a broader public. This would be of special importance since the strategy of the movement in the wake of the eviction was to claim a new building as soon as possible by tactics such as taking over new buildings and protesting in the streets. These videos construe an ongoing narrative where the "spirit of the Youth House "will live on long after it's destruction" as one YouTube user puts it. In this sense, activists seem to be using YouTube not only to promote their cause but also as an audio-visual archive of their offline activities. In doing so it become a place of memory where activists can return to in order to view documentation of their own participation or that of others in previous direct action events. In a recent study of two London-based social movement organisations and their management of visibility in popular social networking and file sharing sites, the author demonstrates how photos from offline events can help sustain commitment to the group, as visual self-representations enable emotional engagement in relation to a cause and foster commitment to the act of participation (Uldam, 2010: 312).

The "standard" pro-Youth House video on YouTube is a mix of still photography or moving images depicting clashes between police and protesters, set to forceful club music. At times text slides are used to back up arguments for why the resistance against the police should be violent. The images focus on the one hand on the bravery and strength of the protesters themselves, on the other hand on the brutality of the police - thereby providing a classic example of war propaganda, where the violent acts of the one side is pictured as heroic, whereas the enemy is condemned as a brute. The comments sections of the clips are, as often the case on YouTube, extremely polarised. Supporters of the movement post cheerful comments encouraging activists to keep up the struggle, whereas dissenters use crude language condemning the acts, creating a debate which for the greater part of the cases transcends into pure 'flaming' or hate speech. The users who upload the videos often have names that reveal their commitment, such as "danishpoliceviolence" or "ungerenblir" (the Youth House stays).



## Ungeren Blir!

EgoDiversio 36 videoklipp  Prenumerera



Fig 1. Opening image from the video 'Ungeren Blir': The text reads "Some things are worth fighting for. The Youth House '69' We will never surrender."

However, the myriad voices on YouTube are not in unison as these videos paying homage to the movement are juxtaposed on the very same platform with videos condemning the activists and their cause. The video 'Nej til Ungdomshuset' (No Youth House), draws upon the same kind of imagery as the videos supporting the event. The music used is from a German Neo-Nazi hard rock group vowing to fight for the Fatherland against intruders, and it is difficult to know whether the intent of the sender is to picture the movement as fascist in a pejorative way or if the sender is him- or herself a fascist. This kind of dissonance where seemingly conflictual material appears side by side and is specifically characteristic of YouTube demonstrating the multifaceted nature of such sites, a polyphony of mainstream, alternative, hegemonic and potentially subversive clips (Christensen, 2008: 156).

The Facebook group 'Ungdomshuset blir', was launched a few days after the eviction in March 2007 and contains links to the web site and the MySpace site. In March 2009 it had about 2,300 members (this is still the case at the time of this writing [October 2010]). It contains photos, links, information about events, and discussions about the Youth House. On the wall of the group, a slow but steady stream of posts has continued in ongoing conversation over the years. The posts can be divided into three groups: supporters of the movement giving calls for actions; opponents of the movement criticising it in various ways; and students looking for information about the movement or persons to contact for schoolwork. Over the two years the group has existed, it has only generated about 120 posts. This is an indication that the wall, as is the case of most Facebook groups, does not in reality have the function of a discussion board and that discussions among the activist within the network are still mostly taking place outside of the realm of corporate social media. When dissenting views are posted, however, supporters of the movement are quick with rebuttal, and the conversation quickly gets harsh, despite the supposedly mitigating factor of

Facebook users displaying their real names. The Facebook group would probably best be seen as a way for individuals to be able to publicly give their support to the movement (Gustafsson, 2010).

The MySpace site, 69newsCPH, is no longer active, but served as an information hub during the time immediately following the eviction. Compared to the serene built-in graphics of Facebook, the MySpace site shows more vivid imagery. Most of the content consists of a series of short newscasts, using YouTube streaming video clips to provide a news source coming from within the movement, rather than relying entirely on external media. This might be seen as a hybrid of alternative and commercial media, as the content is alternative (peer produced), but the platform (MySpace) is commercial. On the site, the friends of 69newsCPH are also displayed. In contrast to Facebook, most MySpace user profiles are anonymous or represent organisations. In the case of 69newsCPH, this network of friends provides links to other alternative networks, movements, musicians and artists. Although the number of friends are fewer compared to the Facebook group (about 1,400 in March 2009), the conversation seems livelier, containing links and information to other events as well as shout outs for the movements. Interestingly, there seem to be no negative comments in the guestbook. The fact that the MySpace site is not active might have something to do with the fact that MySpace in general over the past few years has seen sinking levels of membership.

In addition, Myspace and Facebook profiles seem to have yet another function in the way they are used - much resembling that of a flyer. Only with the advantage over regular paper flyers that digital flyers comes with a personal endorsement – a recommendation from someone within the activist's own network.



Fig 2. MySpace account using a poster promoting the protest event 'Blok action' in 2008 in the profile picture.

One example is uploading a poster as your personal profile picture to promote an upcoming protest event or happening. This creates a way of effectively spreading the word in personal networks seeing how one's profile picture is shown in the profiles of others every time someone leaves a comment (Andersen & Larsen, 2008).

Particularly noteworthy of the use of the Gmail account bloknu@gmail.com (bloc now) is the way in which the activists successfully shape technology and bend the hegemonic technological structures and rationalities to work in their favour. Youth House activists reported that E-mailing was absolutely pivotal to them when it came to mobilising - but not so much as a means to send information from one person to

another but rather in terms of a gmail accounts ability to work as a many-to-many form of communication (Andersen & Larsen, 2008). In this manner, all users within the network had access to the account and thereby were able to answer any incoming mail and communicative with everyone within the network in an ongoing asynchronous dialogue. By using the draft application to collaboratively make flyers, press releases etc, they transformed what is intended as a personal email account into a collective online working tool attesting to what Feenberg (1991) terms as the interpretive flexibility of technological artefacts present in the perpetual struggle over technological processes and producer-user relationships. Whether this kind of media practice can be called subversive is open to argument. But it is reflective of the creativity and adaptive appropriation with which the activists respond to the technological structures, constraints and rationalities they face when trying to navigate in the technological terrain and balance issues of visibility and dissent. In other words, they attempt to make use of the potentials provided by the online realm for publicity purposes, and at the same time use these spaces to debate, negotiate and coordinate dissent.

#### **4.2 Online protest cultures 2.0 – the case of the European Social Forum 2008**

The European Social Forum, the annexed little sister of the 'World Social Forum', is often phrased as a counter-piece to the World Economic Forum held each year in Davos. The social forums of the progressive Left serve to counter the agenda of these forums with one more in keeping with notions of justice, equality and democracy. These annual global, macro-regional and national events function as an arena where organizations, affinity groups and networks - radicals and reformists - meet in a "real life" exchange of knowledge, experience and ideas to coordinate shared strategies and campaigns for another, more just world order. In this sense, the forum is both a physical manifestation of a larger social movement often referred to by scholars as "the global justice movement" as well as a symbolic event, which marks a political process of a worldwide popular struggle for social and political change.

In 2008, the event took place in the labour movement stronghold Malmö, in the southern part of Sweden. According to the organizers, the 2008 ESF attracted in total 12,544 participants who indulged in political and cultural activities all over the city from the 17th to the 21st of September. The official ESF demonstration was estimated to have attracted some 15,000 participants (Wennerhag et al., forthcoming).

The issue of inter-textuality is one the first things that jump out when digging into the sphere of social media use by ESF participants. When watching a clip on YouTube you can repost the movie on your personal Facebook profile or MySpace domain, thereby personalizing or customizing your profile by sampling material from the different file-sharing sites. In this manner, all three social network sites are explicitly linked up to one another. The ESF2008 Facebook group, for example, links to a MySpace profile (<http://www.myspace.com/esf2008>) dedicated to the artists performing live in Malmö during the forum as illustrated below.

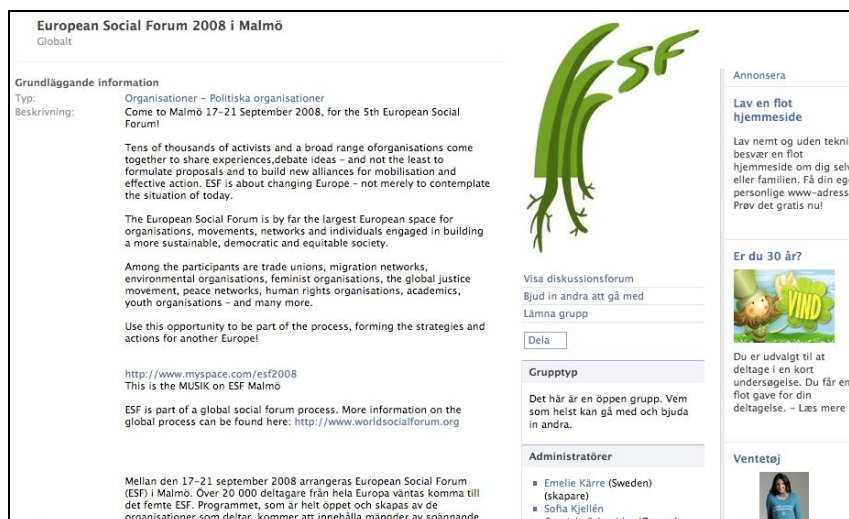


Fig 3. The official ESF2008 Facebook group

As illustrated in the screen shot above the ESF Facebook profile is, as in all platforms examined here, visually dominated by the advertisement banner figuring in the right hand side. To be sure, this could be seen to entail problems when trying to understand what distinguishes activists' politically embedded media use from other forms of public engagement in web-based media, a relationship often articulated in terms of an alternative versus mainstream dichotomy. In this regard, this somewhat trivial observation is emblematic of the kind of murkiness surrounding the web 2.0 platforms called into question here. Activists are constantly negotiating community and commerce in a mash up of both user-generated amateur productions motivated by a desire for self-expression or community and professional media content driven by market motivations (Burgess & Green, 2009).

The official organising committee has made a few attempts to mobilise via YouTube by uploading videos with a plea to come to Malmö and concrete directions for how to get engaged in the forum process. Judging by the relatively low popularity of these mobilisation videos, having generated few hits and little posting response, it would seem that the video repository primarily serves as a spaces where participant have posted videos and comments in the aftermath of the forum to document their participation and give reports on their account of what took place in Malmö.

Unlike the mobilisation videos a group of videos which have however, stirred some degree of political debate is the "street account," a group of videos consisting mainly of unedited street-level footage taken using mobile phone camera of the actions on the night of the demonstration and the coinciding Reclaim the Streets party which lead to clashes between demonstrators and police and caused material damage estimated at around 26.5 million kronor (Westerberg, 2008). The vloggers all present their version of what happened and who were to blame for the conflicts and in particular the issue of violence and civil disobedience is continuously raised and fiercely debated in the postings around these videos. This quarrel represents a conflict that could be understood in terms of an internal dispute between reformist and radicals within the movement who assess the issue of civil disobedience and the use of violence as a political tool to create change from conflicting perspectives. But perhaps more incisively, the hostile nature of the debate could be seen as a

consequence of these 'texts' leaving the 'gated communities' or enclaves of likeminded on alternative media platforms. People posting comments tend to be very hostile - not only of the forum but of the Left in general and use the images of disturbances in the city to vent their antipathy towards the antifascist movement and the radical Left in Sweden. This kind of hate speech – often referred to as flaming when occurring in an online context – obviously has an effect on the ongoing debate, to some extent emptying it of its political value which instead turns into a mere act of mud-slinging - at least if approached from a non-agonistic, consensus-oriented conception of democracy inherent in the visions and stated goals of the social forum process. If indeed, the intent on the part of the ESF organising committee was to reach a broad audience or to incite public debate on issues at the heart of the forum process, both attempts seem to have failed.

## **5. Going Facebook - political forum or viral ad heaven?**

*"(...) it's like holding all your political meetings at McDonalds and ensuring that the police come and film you while you do so" (Yossarian, Indymedia activist, Nov. 2008. See appendix 3)*

What is hinted at and critiqued in the above by this specific media activist working as a programmer on the global Indymedia platform is the recent turn in the nature of online political activism as activists increasingly turn to corporately owned sites when uploading and sharing their media productions and organising their political activities. Instead of advertising their political events on for example Indymedia, they put up a MySpace group. Videos go on YouTube and photos on Flickr. Email accounts are registered on Gmail or Hotmail rather than activist-run email services such as riseup.net or aktivix.org. The explosion of radical political content on the Web is according to this critical voice within the activist circles quite simply not happening in the context of radical media anymore. He bemoans the fact that media activists are uncritically putting the entire communications infrastructure of the radical left in the hands of "the enemy", indifferent or unaware of the implications this has to issues of security, data ownership, censorship of content, data mining etc. And, he continues, these events have to be seen in the light of history. The process of radical press and free media structures bowing under the pressure of the market is evident in several occasions in the past, such as in the context of the print-based radical press of the labour movement in late 19th and 20th century that fell prey to a monopolisation and mainstreaming process ultimately leading to its destruction. This activist's self-reflexive critique continues:

*"(...) most people's experiences of the internet now happen inside the online equivalent of gated communities owned by the world's largest media corporations. Obviously we are organizationally outside these gated communities. I say "outside" because I suspect many Indymedia people do actually use corporate platforms like Facebook while regarding it as a sort of dirty secret. The question of how we interact with these heavily-defended enclaves on the internet is a crucial one, because they are where the majority of the world's online population live and work. If we want to change society, we need to deal with this, or we're no longer a group of radical media producers with advanced technical platforms (which we were in*

2000-2003), we're the equivalent of a Geocities page - lost, lonely, and slightly crazy-looking".

Hence, at a more subtle level, what is described here is ultimately the felt or lived experience of neo-liberalism seen through the eyes of a media activist. Neo-liberalism understood as a particular mode of socioeconomic organization based around the primacy of the market – a process that is translatable into every single aspect of contemporary life. In the context of online political communication, this refers to, for example, lack of community, a collective 'we' and the way in which the social is being transposed into the individual and society into the market (See e.g. Couldry, 2008).

The dubious dimensions of "going Facebook" in the broad sense of the term touched upon in the above seems to be registered and reflected upon by some activists. However, the popularity and impact of these sites promising unseen potentials when it comes to reaching a broader audience seem to offset these issues as illustrated in this small closing remark and aber dabei in a group e-mail on the launching of Attac's Facebook group.

*"P.S.: Of course there is a lot of valid criticism against Facebook. I think most Attacies are aware of it. Nevertheless, more and more people and progressive organisations use it as it has a huge potential for mobilization" (Sven Giegold, 'globattac' e-list, January 2008).*

The arguments in favour of widening the possible contact points of their online presence are not hard to see. Besides the potentials for reaching large audiences by means of social networking in popular sites not hidden away in obscure corners of Cyberspace, the platforms offered by established media corporations are often user friendly and demand less technical skills than do alternative sites. So what is the problem apart from the somewhat obvious problems of data ownership and similar issues raised in the above? The argument brought forward here is that this change in media practice amongst activist entails a certain transformation of the format or 'genre' of media practice traditionally linked to political activism. It might even, to a certain extent, be seen to dilute the term in the sense that the credibility of the political message, the content itself is called into question by the contradictory context in which it occurs. When an ad for a quick money loan by SMS is right next to a debate stream on the causes and consequences of the global financial crisis on Attac's Facebook group, the inherent paradoxes in current media practice seem evident.

Regardless of how pivotal one might deem this seeming paradox, there is a need to raise the question of whether the indiscriminate use of these sites by political activists could be seen as an expression of a blurring of boundaries of the non-commercial space activists use, their developing of technical platforms and the line of argument representing global civil society as a democratic realm counterposed to a realm of self seeking, profit and power (Clifford, 2005:194). If considered from an historical perspective, alternative media platforms, such as Indymedia, were started - as a form of media direct action - by people worried about the negative social effects of broadcast forms of corporate media (see Appendix 5). The fact that a site such as Indymedia has been not only been overtaken on the inside by the very same corporate media they initially set out to circumvent, but that activists also now tend to rely on their 'services' is not only a paradox but can be a slippery slope towards eroding their reasons for coming to life, ultimately questioning the legitimacy of their political programme.

The question remains whether the activists become not only subject to but *part of* the very same neoliberal logic they try to subvert. In what way or to what extent does the political economy of these circuits condition the politically imbued media texts circulating here? To take the argument even further, these questions raise issues of a more philosophical nature, such as a possible critique of the existence of an 'outside'. As Heath & Potter (2006) argue, "today one of the most essential issues is the question of how active opposition, rebellion and articulation of alternatives is possible when all aspects of our everyday lives are implicated in the food chain of the pervasive consumer culture that reproduces and strengthens the existing power relations. Everything it would seem, protest included, can be turned into a commodity and used as an empty emblem of political correctness or radical chicness" (pp. ??).

In a brief return to the conflicting narratives accounted for in the theoretical section, social networking has often, in the techno-optimistic accounts, been inextricably linked to the dynamics and political practices of new social movements and seen to be emblematic of democratic and empowering practice. However, networking logics should not be romanticised. There is nothing inherently democratic in networked technologies and network logics have spread widely to other 'non-alternative' spheres. Media technologies have been popularised and the network logic is no longer to the same extent something characteristic of social movements only. This problem is articulated in the following way by a software developer in the Indymedia London network at their 2010 Software Summit in Whitechapel:

*"Around 2005 the web changed - in a big way. It caught up with the stuff we had been doing from 1999 to 2005-2006. And now there are you know (...) Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. All these sites are fundamentally doing the exact same things activists were doing six years previously but they are doing it in a way that is on a scale and in a speed and a with a user base that is huge compared to anything that we ever did. We now need to react to that!"* (for a link to the audio file of this keynote speech see Appendix 5)

From this vantage point, one might argue that what we are witnessing is not an activist community "selling out" to capital but rather an expression of corporate media having succeeded in commodifying the technical forms and participatory philosophy behind the user-generated media systems "invented" decades ago by media activists seeking to counter the broadcast media of the time. Consequently activists should not abandon a lost territory but find new ways to reclaim what was once theirs.

## **6. Closing remarks**

As more online interaction is drawn to a small number of corporate spaces - including that of protest movements - a number of questions need to be raised. What are the dangers of public discussions and networks being controlled by corporate enterprises? What interests do owners and managers have in gathering information on potentially subversive issues and individuals? And how do commercial platforms change the nature of alternative media practices within a social movement context?

Further research will have to widen the scope to other forms of movements and other regions of the world, as well as include activists themselves more openly in the discussion. How do protesters perceive the paradoxes of alternative media practice

going mainstream? What are the views and strategies of corporate social media? What constraints in terms of service do they feel are necessary?

To be sure, the alternative media texts now circulating in popular online spaces are emblematic of a reorganisation of political space, but the question is whether this should be understood as a mainstreaming process of media practices or even go so far as to speak of a commodification of protest culture? Should the problem alternatively be understood as an outcome of increasing individualisation in society that produces individualised forms of activism? Some of the questions raised here have been left somewhat open and few answers are carved into stone. Our contribution shows some evidence of the ways corporate social media are used by activists and provides examples of the kind of internal struggles this media practice induces among activists working with programming and media production. More importantly, our study shows that, although an inevitable part of the communication repertoire for activists today, social media are not vital mobilising tools in terms of having the actual effect of getting people to take to the streets. Rather, they seem to serve primarily internal purposes of sustaining commitment and keeping abreast of peers within the network. For strictly mobilising purposes, e-mail lists, chain SMS messaging on mobile phones, and actual physical meetings prove far more efficient and secure.

Our argument is not a moralising critique or a finger-wagging at 'co-opted' activists selling out to capital or "the system". Rather, we issue a call for caution. In the attempt to leave the echo chambers and in the process of reaching beyond the circles of the likeminded, much is at stake. On one hand, important and long-ignored issues raised by progressive activists are in some regards leaving the enclaves. On the other hand, when faced with this increasingly corporate-led and mainstreamed political culture online, we need to raise questions of how the communicative spaces of radical web-based activism is changing its dynamics of political practice and urge caution as to the potential pitfalls and dangers this development may pose to the "free" spaces of radical voices in society.

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