

## **Social media, power and positionings in a Swedish middle-class activist demand**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to understand relations of power within a middle-class activist setting in southern Stockholm using online communication platforms in tandem with more traditional offline activist participation to organise and mobilise participation. The method for studying this setting is (n)ethnographic, conducting participant observations and interviews online as well as offline. Attending to the dialectic between shared values and participants identifications as activist enacted in processes of positioning, this paper seeks to discuss relations of power within the activist group. The activists are approached as a field in which core/periphery positions are negotiated through interactions between field specific values, habitus, participation -, mobilisation -, legitimacy - and networking capitals.

## *Extended abstract*

### **Introduction**

One day I got a message via Facebook suggesting I should sign an online petition against the plans to demolish the old community-run (but city-owned) bathhouse two blocks away from where I lived in southern Stockholm. Since I had enjoyed the bathhouse and their different activities, I signed the petition, joined the Facebook-group, started to follow their Twitter feeds, and added many of the participants as Facebook-friends. I soon come to realise that online visibility through practices of updating on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter would get me closer to the core of the activists. By echoing popular arguments through retweeting and through posting encouraging entries on the Facebook-group page, I was not only showing my sympathy for the participatory values of the activists, but I also reinforced these values and the core-positions of certain activists by commenting and retweeting their tweets. In this article the aim is to understand relations of power within this activist group by studying core/ periphery positions and positionings in relation to habitus, capitals and group values.

It is argued that activism is important for broadening political participation beyond established power elites (Bennett and Amoshaun, 2009). Contemporary representative democracies cannot include all political demands, since majority decision-making always favours one over another (Mouffe, 2005). Activism may thus be understood as a coalition of excluded demands that no longer are represented in the parliamentary political arena. At the same time, numerous studies have focused on how activists use the Internet to mobilise support and organise themselves and their demands (see Breindl, 2012, for an overview). Some argue that internet-based organisation facilitates more horizontal and equal distribution of power, and that politics and participation become more accessible because the internet is supposed to lower the threshold, even for groups previously excluded from the political arena (Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). While acknowledging that the landscape of power is changing in network societies, there is no reason to believe that increasing practices of social organisation in networks will cause a society devoid of power relations, an argument made already by Elias in 1939 (see also van Dijk, 2006; Bimber et al., 2008; Castells, 2009; Breindl and Gustafsson, 2011; Kozinets, 2011). The network metaphor emphasises a multiplication of connections and connectivity between people (van Dijk 2006, p. 24). And if

we adhere to a conception of power as processes that take place *between* people (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 258; Elias, 1970/1998, pp. 115-116; Foucault, 1979/1994, p. 324), it becomes important to investigate into changing power relations in a society in which relationships and connections between people are brought to the fore. By understanding network societies as consisting of relations, and understanding power as a type of relationships, I depart from an assumption that relations of power are still at play and vital in network societies. This article focus on relations of power *within* the activist demand in southern Stockholm. This focus is translated to the following research question: how did activists position themselves in relation to each other and the demand values?

To answer this question, this paper will undertake two analyses. First an analysis of the shared values of the activist demand in southern Stockholm has to be undertaken since it is in relation to these that participants positioned themselves and other participants. After this analysis, attention will be directed to theories of positioning and Bourdieu's analytical framework of habitus and capital in order to analyse how activists positioned themselves and others in relation to the demand values.

## **Method**

*Aspudden* together with *Midsommarkransen* are two suburbs in southern Stockholm populated by an educated and politically aware middle-class. They are among the oldest suburbs, situated close to the water front, with buildings dating back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and located just two subway stops away from the inner-city. Inhabitants in these suburbs started to rally already in 2007, first to renew their bathhouse in *Aspudden*, and later to save it from destruction. Together with traditional offline activist campaigns, online social media platforms were used to call for engagement, to spread information and to gather support for keeping the bathhouse. The bathhouse was demolished despite of heavy protests, campaigns and even an occupation. Most activities took place during the couple of months leading up to the overtaking and demolition of the bathhouse late November 2009.

The activists used a blog during the battle for the bathhouse, through which they disseminated information, mobilised participation and mocked municipal politicians. During October and November 2009, the activists also used a Twitter-feed, mostly to spread information on activities as well as a means to mobilise participation. For more lengthy comments, activists posted both on the blog as well as on a Facebook-group *Rädda Aspuddsbadet* (Save the

Aspudden bathhouse). As a resident in Aspudden, I participated in 19 bathhouse rallies and SÖFÖ meetings between 2009-2011, observations that are included in this study. With the purpose to reach an embedded cultural understanding (Kozinetz, 2011, p. 108) of the activist demand, I have also participated in discussions on their social media platforms. Five in-depth research interviews were also conducted with different activists during 2010 and 2011.

## Analysis

To understand power relations within an activist demand in a network society I will outline the contours of participation, mobilising, legitimacy and networking capital. Power within the southern Stockholm activist demand - understood in terms of holding a core position – seems to be connected with knowing how to network, to maintain intermediary ties and being in a position to mobilise these intermediary ties as well as other activists. This seems to be dependent on the habitus of the activists, their luggage of previously learned skills and their sense of knowing how to navigate this field of activism in a network society as well as the values in these suburbs. It seems that disciplined rituals (practices) of updating on social media platforms were pivotal among the activists in southern Stockholm. Such practices of updating were based on values of *reflexive connectivity* and *responsiveness*. I also conclude that the activists practices were also based on values of *location bound community* as well as being *active and involved*.

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