Virtual Mobilisation? Linking On-line and Off-line Political Participation among Swedish Facebook Users: Courtesy and Irritation

Gustafsson, Nils; Wahlström, Mattias

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Nils Gustafsson
Department of Political Science
Lund University
P. O. Box 52
SE-221 00 LUND
Sweden
Nils.Gustafsson@svet.lu.se

Mattias Wahlström
Department of Sociology
University of Gothenburg
Mattias.Wahlstrom@sociology.gu.se

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1. Summary

Political mobilisation in social media on the internet is an under-researched field. This paper is a pilot study where Swedish Facebook users are interviewed in virtual, textual, asynchronous focus groups using Facebook itself as the platform. The object of the paper is twofold. Firstly, our intention is to explore the attitudes that users of social media have concerning political campaigns and recruitment within the interface. Secondly, we are interested assessing the utility of virtual focus group interviews as a method for social movement research. Various forms of online focus groups are increasingly used in qualitative social science. However, the method is arguably in need of further development and in several disciplinary areas it still is a method almost unheard of.

We used two virtual focus groups, each containing six participants, comprised of Swedish Facebook users. One of the groups consisted of individuals who are active or have recently been active members of formal political organisations, while the other group consisted of individuals not having a formal political engagement. The discussions were carried out in Swedish language during the period 12 May – 18 May,

2008, with a few days' extension for those participants who wanted to amend their answers. These focus group interviews make up our first round of data gathering in an ongoing research project, and will be followed by additional data collection and analysis in order to further develop and validate the findings presented in this paper.

Our preliminary results show that there are 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 have incorporated Facebook among other forms of communication in their formal political engagement. Most participants in both groups view their own participation in political groups and other forms of campaigns on Facebook as a form of public or semi-public identity maintenance. They claim that few, but remarkable, campaigns manage to spill over into off-line action.

This paper begins with a short theoretical introduction to the research field, followed by an overview and definitions of social media, virtual social networks, and Facebook. After a short review of previous research and a description of the methodology used, the results are presented.

2. New forms for political participation, political mobilisation and recruitment

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 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). 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, Wahlström and Peterson 2006).

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 on the causal effects of such technologies on the level and type of social capital, which is thought to spur participation. In general, the discussion 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).

From another perspective, the developments of information technology and the concomitant rise of the network structure in social organisation have affected the modes in which people around the world take collective political action (Melucci 1996, Castells 1997). On the one hand, information-technological advances have facilitated a rise in territorial as well as extra-territorial communitarian identity politics; on the other hand increasing individualisation and reflexivity appear to have resulted in a growth of "individualized collective action" and politics based on "serial identities" rather than unitary collective identity constructions (Micheletti 2003, cf. Young 1994). However, it is debatable what the relative importance is (and will be in the future) of individualised and less committed forms of political activism in relation to traditional ways to organise contentious politics (della Porta and Diani 2006). This indicates a need for further empirical study.

In order to explore the empirical grounds for these supposedly new forms of social capital and political participation, it seems reasonable to start with studying

engagement, mobilisation and recruitment on the individual level. If scholars in the field of social capital and political participation work with conceptual tools that do not fully capture recent phenomena, extensive studies in survey form risk to miss out on vital information in that the predefined answers are not covering important issues. Teorell (2000; 2003) found that one important reason for individuals to participate are invitations and pressure from their social network. Social network sites make it possible for individuals to collect and organise their personal contacts, intimate family and friendship relations as well as casual acquaintances, in the framework of a single platform. The easiness with which messages and information might be spread between people and across interconnected social networks are giving rise to political discussions and information on political campaigns as well as discourse on other subjects that interest people, being a part of their everyday lives. Studying how mobilisation and political participation function in these surroundings is a vital part of understanding the links between social networks, social capital, and political participation. In the course of these scientific endeavours, special attention should be brought to the links between on-line and off-line behaviour.

3. What is the *Facebook*?

3.1. Social Network Sites

Social network sites are an important part of the various shapes of social media with user generated content that sometimes are referred to as Web 2.0 (cf. Beer and Burrows 2007). They are "web-based services that allow individuals to (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 and Ellison 2007) By using social network sites, off-line connections are possible to maintain and uphold in an on-line environment.

The base of social network sites are the personal profile pages that allow users to present themselves by posting information about personal interests, age, location, workplace and multi media material. Usually the profiles also contain bulletin boards or guestbooks where visitors can leave comments or messages. Visitor accessibility is dependent on user privacy settings and default settings of the service.

The first social network site, SixDegrees.com (not in operation), was launched in 1997 and was quickly followed by services like LinkedIn, Friendster, LunarStorm, and others.

3.2 Facebook

Facebook is one of the largest social networks in the world. According to the company, it had in early 2008 over 60 million active members. In Sweden alone, there were over a million members in November 2007 (Facebook 2008a; Metro 2007). The service was originally only open to U.S. college students, but has in degrees been opened up to other groups and is now available to anyone.

The demographics of Facebook are not representative for the entire population. In a widely read essay, the American sociologist danah boyd could show a clearly visible class divide in social network site adoption in the United States: white, middle class, college students joined Facebook, while ethnic minorities and working class youth chose MySpace (boyd 2007).

The features of the service are much alike other social network sites, including profile pages, guestbooks, et cetera. A special feature of Facebook is the numerous 'applications', additional services, that each user can add (and recommend his/her 'friends' to add). These might be everything reaching from various kinds of games, surveys and social graphs to basic functions like 'groups' and 'causes'. A 'group' is a tool for collecting a group of users around a common interest. The group name is in general visible on members' profile pages and contribute to the creation of the (semi-) public identity of the user. Some users might be a member of a very large amount of such groups, and the function of the groups shift from being the Facebook home of formal organisations to being more or less internal jokes. One Facebook group that gained a lot of traditional media attention in the autumn of 2007 was a group called "Support the Monks' Protest in Burma" supporting the Burmese democracy and human rights movement. In a few weeks it managed to recruit about 500 000 members and still retains about 400 000 members. A local current phenomenon in Sweden are the various Facebook groups devoted to organising protests against the law on digital surveillance passed by the Swedish parliament in June 2008. Another application is 'causes', that is similar to 'groups', but differs in that it also allows donations to charities (predefined by Facebook).

3.3 Previous research on social network sites

Research on social network sites is a fast growing field. This short review will only give a shallow introduction to the scholarship currently being undertaken. Most studies focus on identity manifestations, self-marketing, integrity issues and the form of communication as such. Almost all of them are authored by American scholars and, especially in the case of Facebook, use empirical material from college students at a single university. We have not been able to find any study exclusively devoted to political behaviour or attitudes.

Lampe et al (2006) find that Facebook users tend to use the network primarily for upholding relationships with people they have met off-line. Acquisti and Gross (2006) explore attitudes and behaviour concerning privacy issues on Facebook and show that users often share intimate information despite the fact reporting caution. Kumar et al (2006) construct a theoretical model for the development of social network sites based on data from Yahoo! 360 and Flickr. According to the model, a period of fast growth in the number of users is followed by a slow decline, later turning into slow but steady growth. A typology of Facebook users in a corporate environment (IBM) is developed by DiMicco and Millen (2007). 'College users' retain content rich profiles with private information, whereas other employees are more cautious, instead focusing on networking in their professional roles. Liu (2007) studies taste performances in MySpace profiles and argues that displaying personal interests might have satirical and ironic motifs and reflect aesthetic values as well as factual interests. Golder et al (2007) measure Facebook messaging and claim that the number of sent messages is a useful proxy for the intensity in a relationship. The fascinating concept of 'maintained social capital' is introduced in Ellison et al (2007). This form of social capital is created when highly mobile individuals (such as college students) find it easier to uphold long distance relationship through Facebook use.

The methods used in the above-mentioned oeuvres are generally extensive (surveys and data mining) and make use of the ease with which large amounts of data can be retrieved from the internet, although danah boyd (2008) also uses in-depth interviews in her research on the identity shaping of young people in social networks.

4. 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 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).

Some occasionally claimed disadvantages related to focus groups are that the results are non-generalisable in a narrow statistical sense, that group dynamics might affect respondents and the difficulties of obtaining clear results from free flowing discussions (ibid: 43). However, when compared, the results of focus group interviews have turned out to be remarkably similar to those of surveys, with the most notable difference that focus groups in several aspects gave access to more nuanced data (Morgan 1996). Furthermore, the results of focus group research can be generalisable by providing 'negative cases' to existing theories (e.g., Flyvbjerg 2001), and in most areas of the social sciences it is no longer controversial to claim that valid theories can be generated by systematic qualitative analysis (e.g., Miles and Huberman 1994, Strauss and Corbin 1998). Finally, if the interaction between the participants itself becomes an object of study, the group dynamics are not so much a liability as an important data source.[1]

One of the earliest examples of the use of *virtual* focus groups as a research method can be found in Murray (1997), who studied a group of geographically dispersed health care professionals. Some of the advantages with virtual focus groups is lower costs. Traditional 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

[1] It should be stressed that the findings presented in the present report are only based on a pilot study. Thus our current data is not sufficiently "rich" to provide basis for anything more than some quite tentative conclusions.

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 (cf. Mann and Stewart 2000). 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.

A basic dimension of conducting focus groups is the level of structure in the discussions. On one extreme of the continuum, discussions are very structured, with a large number of specific questions, where an active moderator steers the participants into giving adequate answers to the questions within a fixed time frame. On the other side of the continuum is a less structured discussion characterised by fewer, more general questions with flexible time allocation and a moderate amount of moderation. In this study, a semi-structured discussion form is strived for.

5. Using Facebook as a platform for research

In this study, Facebook is used as a platform. A major advantage in using Facebook is that since the participants are Facebook users, there is no need for any introduction to how the tool works. As the subject is Facebook use as well, it becomes easy for the participants to connect to the discussion. It is also time- and cost efficient since there is no need for building your own platform or hire a professional enterprise.

The disadvantages are, among others, that there is no possibility for the researcher to have full control over the features of the tool. As we shall see, this made recruitment difficult. A 1000 character limit for posts forced some verbose participants to divide their answers into several posts. There are also ethical aspects of using commercial platforms not originally designed for research. The by far largest problem is that Facebook claims non-exclusive ownership to all material posted on the site (Facebook

2008b), which at least in theory means that the company might make use of the focus group material without asking for permission from the participants or the researcher. The participants were fully aware of these complications.

For our pilot-study, we decided to create two focus groups, each containing six individuals. The number was in part based on earlier focus group studies; 6-8 persons is a common group size in traditional focus groups (Murray 1997: 545). The number was, however, also based on the short time frame used for recruitment. As Stewart & Williams (2005: 401f) remark, moderating larger groups of people are easier in an on-line environment than in a physical setting, and so it would have been possible, and probably also desirable, for the groups to have as many as 10-12 participants each.

When the objective is to create data for a qualitative analysis, strategic sampling is clearly preferable to random sampling. In practice, the practical recruitment strategies to some extent needed to rely on existing networks and snowballing. The original strategy in this case was to find potential participants by browsing Facebook profiles, but limitations on to what extent it is possible to contact non friends made this impossible. A colleague at the Department of Political Science in Lund aided in providing access to *her* personal network, thereby solving the problem, but sadly limiting the total number of potential participants. The participants were sent an invitation letter and were then invited to the groups.

Since political participation would be the core subject of the discussions, group 1 was made up of politically active people, that could be supposed to participate "before" Facebook, and group 2 was made up of politically inactive people. This would allow for variation on the existing level of political participation off-line. Non-systematic heterogeneity was allowed in all other aspects. Another demand was that the participants were not allowed to know each other, as this might have an effect on tacit knowledge not being outspoken (Morgan 2001: 153). Nevertheless, the groups turned out to be homogeneous in other respects. The participants are born between 1967 and 1984. Almost everyone have a college education, they all live in Sweden and have Swedish as their first language.

Group 1 (politically active) contains four men and two women. All of them are, or have recently (according to themselves), been active in political organisations, such as political parties and feminist and environmental organisations, often overlapping. Three of them might best be described as left leaning and the other three as right leaning. Group 2 (politically inactive) contains three men and three women. They are

not, and have never been (according to themselves) active in a political organisation. Some of them have an interest in political discussions, a few have outspoken aversions towards discussing politics.

The group discussions were moderated by the first author, who followed the interview guide provided in the appendix. In the groups application, there is an opportunity of using a 'secret' version. This means that only the participants and the moderator was able to view the group, and the group name was not visible on the participants' profile page. It was also made clear to the participants that all material posted in the groups would be erased after the study had ended.

6. Descriptive analysis

The discussions in group one (politically active) generated 22 posts comprising 2175 words. Group two (politically inactive) generated 19 posts comprising 1974 words. The material was organised around thematic categories, and the results are summarised below under each category.

6.1 Groups are indulgences

Independent of each other, the participants in both focus groups bring up the view that membership in political Facebook groups function as a secular form of "letters of indulgence" that excuse the user from further engagement and not fulfilling any purpose beyond that. This does not prevent the participants from actually joining various Facebook groups, although they maintain that this is just a statement.

> *To me, most Facebook causes seem utterly pointless as political/opinion forming tools. My impression is that they function more like markers for a group or an attitude that the user wants to identify with. Quite simply they become statements that you pose with on your Facebook page. It's really the same function as the summary of facts on the user profile, although they give a more active and engaged impression.*

> *When I first got a Facebook page, I joined a few causes and gave a penny or two, but after a while it felt like a very shallow and disoriented thing to do. Like digital letters of indulgence. Receivers, and the group itself, appeared to be very vague.* (Participant, group 1)[2]

[2] All text samples are translated from the Swedish by the authors.

> *I don't join causes/groups very often because it often tends to become a bit simple minded and one-tracked. When I do, it is more of a statement that says something about me as a person and enriches my profile on Facebook. I present my views through groups/causes. Not to actually fight or follow up anything/any cause.* (Participant, group 2)

This is well in the line of the findings of scholarship on profile pages as self-marketing (cf. Liu 2007 and DiMicco & Millen 2007). Through the list of groups displayed on a profile page, it is possible to create an image of that person, or more correct, how that person wants to be seen. There are however some risks with this way of openly showing your engagement. Even if it is possible to show your profile page against uninvited guests, anyone can visit an open group and see a list of the members, as mentioned by a politically active participant in group 1:

> *I avoid groups where there are obvious risks for getting into different registers, though. The last time I avoided an invitation of that kind was to "The Popular Movement against the Swedish Resistance Movement."*[3] *As a leftist journalist, I have had some problems with such groups.* (Participant, group 1)

6.2 Joining out of courtesy

If goodwill and the wish to express your views is one motive for joining political Facebook groups, another one is courtesy. As Teorell (2000; 2003) shows, 'nudges' through social networks is one important reason for individuals to engage. This also seems to be important in Facebook groups. Several participants in group 1 (politically active) mention this as an important motive for joining.

> *As to what concerns invitations to various political groups here on Facebook I don't really have any private policy. The sender is just as important for me – whether I think that the friend that sent the invitation will become happy if I join – as the factual content.* (Participant, group 1)

> *My engagement in groups is perhaps depending a bit on who sent the invitation. As to my buddies that I've gotten through politics, I don't have any problems whatsoever to totally ignore the invitations – it lies in the nature of friendship*

[3] The Swedish Resistance Movement is a militant Nazi organization that was founded in the mid-1990s. (cf. http://www.expo.se/research_smr.html, 2008-07-03)

that we most often have differing views, and that we can stand for it. As to my more "apolitical" circle of friends, I'm probably more inclined to join out of courtesy. And finally, we have the category of women that I might be interested in dating – there I'm probably more inclined to join in order to show them that I'm a "nice guy." (Participant, group 1)

6.3 Facebook fatigue

Facebook and other social network sites make it very easy to share information with a lot of your friends at the same time. Many applications cannot be used without inviting at least some of your friends to the application, and several participants in both groups express frustration over the vast bulk of incoming invitations. It is difficult to discriminate between choices, and some users described having started out taking all invitations seriously, but then having proceeded to ignoring most of the invitations. Another reason is aesthetic: displaying a lot of groups and other applications clogs your profile page, rendering it illegible. Some of the participants criticise other the tendency of other users to join to many groups. Information overflow has become a problem also in the cases when you know the senders.

A lot of people might not check out their profile too often, so they don't see that it's crammed. Kill your darlings doesn't seem to exist. A lot of people probably think that you don't want to prioritise. "Stop the street violence or support the Engla family[4]? I can't choose between that. It'll have to be both." (Participant, group 1)

I get annoyed instantly [upon receiving an invitation]. Me, myself, I'm in a group dedicated to abolishing demands on inviting others in order to use an application (it's a self-contradiction, I know). All mass invitations are a nuisance. In spite of that, I'm a member of a few such groups and causes, which probably reflects the stance of most Facebookers: annoyed participation. (Participant, group 2)

The "annoyed participation" referred to in the second quote is an approach to Facebook causes that is shared by a significant portion of the focus group participants. A reasonable conjecture is that it to some extent is related to an inherent ambivalence of the situation. On the one hand people appear to have a general desire

[4] Engla was a Swedish child murder victim who received a large amount of media attention in 2008.

to be courteous to friends and to confirm their personal identities, as well as their public image, by subscribing to all causes that represent the values that one identifies with. On the other hand, situational norms of self-presentation (cf. Goffman 1959) require that the Facebook profile is not overloaded with information, and that the information presented reflects an individualised approach to the standardised format of the application.

6.4 Good and bad groups

Despite the overweighing approach to political Facebook groups as politically pointless identity markers, some participants express a notion of groups that might fulfil a function beyond this. Among the politically active participants in group 1, some use groups linked to formal organisations that they are "off-line members" of. There are also political Facebook campaigns that are perceived as successful, by participants in both groups. The "Red T-shirt for Burma" campaign was a call for wearing a red T-shirt on 28 September 2007, thereby endorsing the Burmese democracy movement.

> *As far as more general political groups are concerned, I'm a member of a few that quite a lot of people might express strong views about (for example, the Centre Party, Timbro, liberalism and capitalism etc)*[5] *Above all because I get invitations to events that I often attend (instead of joining a mailing list at the organizer), but also because there are some political discussions and tips on interesting articles and the like.* (Participant, group 1)

> *I would like to add that there are certain types of groups/petitions that I believe might be effective. Those that call for some very specific, clearly visible, action. For example "red T-shirt for Burma" on a specific day. The reason for a thing like that to be successful is that it will more easily be picked up by traditional media. It might be a way to let the demonstration come to the participants instead of the other way around, a way of overcoming the laziness in other words. On top of that, the aforementioned shirt action spurred a discussion in real life, outside Facebook.* (Participant, group 2)

An interesting theme, which is in need of further exploration, is that socio-cultural factors may affect people's evaluations of causes. In some contexts, adherence to a

[5] The Centre Party is a Swedish centre-right political party. Timbro is a Swedish right-leaning think-tank.

cause considered to be too "mainstream," involves a risk of having an adverse effect on one's presentation of self, as illustrated by the following quote:

> *I don't believe that I have received invitations in connection with the Engla murder. People that i associate with probably consider it a bit too thick to use protest against child murder as a social marker. It is a little too obvious.*

6.6 Red T-shirt for Burma: successfully linking on-line and off-line participation

The "Red T-shirt for Burma" campaign was mentioned above as an example of a successful political campaign (in the sense that it "spilled over" off-line, not in the sense that it actually brought about democratic change in Myanmar). That also became evident that when the participants were asked whether they had done anything "in real life" as a result of Facebook influence. Several participants in both groups state that they had worn a red shirt in order to demonstrate their support of the Burmese democracy movement.

> *The red t-shirt-monk protest thing. And other life choices in general, I guess. For example not supporting industries and companies that do things you don't like…(although in that case it's not a result of what you saw on Facebook but rather things you thought before, but was too tired to bother joining a group)*
> (Participant, group 2)

One participant mentions that she had contacted the Stockholm Public Transport (SL) as a result of influence from a Facebook group, but she maintains that this was a reaction on exactly how pointless she felt that the protest group was.

> *I let myself be carried away by the cause "Stop SL's homophobic ads" when the organisation Save the Marriage got spots in the underground. On second thought I felt that that was just a statement and not really what I was after, so I contacted SL directly and told them that I didn't agree with the judgements of their ad sales agency concerning this ad and for example the film poster of 'Ken Park'. So straight out of the cause and getting in touch with SL directly.*[6]
> (Participant, group 2)

[6] In October 2007, the Stockholm Public Transport Company sold advertising space to the Swedish Evangelical Alliance 'defending marriage' against calls for same-sex marriage legislation, which caused criticism. In June 2003, the company took down posters for the motion picture Ken Park after complaints about the explicit nudity.

6.7 Scepticism towards use of Facebook causes as a political method

One of the questions that was asked encouraged the participants to themselves propose a campaign strategy. The question was posted at the end of the discussion; not everyone answered it. Nevertheless, participants in both groups who answered the question express scepticism towards at all using Facebook as a platform for a political campaign. The answers also emphasise clarity of the purpose, and giving the campaign an on-line – off-line dimension.

> *I don't think I would ever get the idea of working a campaign on Facebook, it is such an incredibly narrow medium. But if I did, I would try to be as clear as possible with what I would want to do and so on. I would use the group for creating a petition (that you wouldn't be able to leave). I would "reward" the participants with interesting articles etc. but not demand anything further from them.* (Participant, group 2)

> *…if you worked a campaign on Facebook you would spam as many as you could, you know, to get maximum attention, reward people who recruited others etc. It would be incredibly important to follow up with a RL-event at some point, to get a confirmation of the support.* (Participant, group 2)

What is evident from the discussions is the clear distinction that the participants make between activities located in Facebook and their consequences for "real life." The political value of a Facebook cause is assessed in terms of its ability to mobilise synchronised collective protests, to provoke individual political action outside the internet, or to attract media attention. The respondents in the focus groups do not regard building identity-based virtual networks as a political activity in its own right. This is not as self-evident as it may appear, given the alleged importance of "identity-politics" in contemporary society.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Tentative remarks on the discussion

In spite of the difficulties related to the study, we would like to argue that the result of the discussions give rise to a few interesting questions that might be developed in further research. It is clear that at the same time as several participants express ambivalent attitudes towards political mobilisation, recruitment and participation on

Facebook, they also state that they have canalised their political participation through joining groups and in some cases also taking participation off-line.

The groups do not differ significantly in the discussions. Participants in the politically active group express, perhaps unsurprisingly, a stronger inclination to use Facebook groups for organising their membership in formal political organisations. Otherwise, the consensus of scepticism is striking across the groups.

The attitudes presented here might be used for the purpose of studying exactly what types of campaigns that have the ability to become successful. The attitudes towards recruitment and information overflow would be suitable for inclusion in surveys on political mobilisation and further focus group studies. Whereas the choice *not* to participate in a political cause through Facebook appears in many cases to be a more active one than the choice to participate, it does not seem to be sufficient for an individual to get invitations from acquaintances and friends in order to engage. The sheer amount of invitations has an annoying effect. The element of courtesy participation should also be studied further.

Another point that deserves attention is in what way politically active individuals use social network sites organising their engagement in formal political organisations. What effects does that have on organisational life? Does the smorgasbord of events and activities presented to politically active people through applications in social network sites (e.g., Facebook) in some ways individualise the character of participation even in more collectivised forms of collective action?

7.2 Improving virtual focus groups

Facebook as a platform for virtual focus groups has many disadvantages. The fact that Facebook is a commercial operator creates considerable obstacles for research . The difficulty of determining and upholding participant security and confidentiality is also a problem, not least in regard of the fact that Facebook claims non-exclusive ownership to all material published on the site. The advantages of using an existing platform for participant convenience remain, but they hardly outbalance the disadvantages.

From other, more general aspects, the strategy proved to be most useful. Neither we nor the participants were committed to time or space synchrony. Most of the problems originated from the limited time frame used for planning and carrying out the study.

With more time for recruiting participants, enlarging the groups, and extending the time frame of the discussions would most likely lead to better and richer material.

Although it is difficult to say due to the apparently very limitiedgroup dynamics, some things that actually came up during the discussions might not have come up in in-depth interviews with single respondents, and carrying out a large number of interviews would inevitably have taken more time. Conversely, an intensive qualitative method proved to be useful by providing information that most likely would not have become accessible by means of predefined answers in a survey. The courtesy participation element, for instance, came as a surprise.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE[7]

Q1: If you have a profile on Facebook, you soon discover that you get a lot of invitations to groups, causes, events, testing various applications etc. I'm interested in what you think about using these kinds of tools for spreading political messages or urge people to some form of action. With political messages I'm not only referring to party politics, but also to requests like "Stop the street violence," "Boycot the Olympics" and such. Do you encounter a lot of that kind of messages on Facebook? What do you think about it?

Q2: Why do you believe that people join political Facebook groups? Is it about doing something or just manifesting support? How are such groups being used? What groups become popular, and why?

Q3: Has it ever ocurred that you have done something "in real life" as a result of something you saw or heard on Facebook, for example that you participated in a demonstration or stopped buying a certain brand?

Q4: If you would work a political campaign on Facebook or any other internet medium, how would you go about it? What strategies are most successful?

[7] Translated from the Swedish original. the questions were not posed in the exact wording.

SCREENSHOTS


facebook
Profile
Friends
Inbox
home account privacy logout
Search
Applications edit
Photos
Groups
Events
Video
Latest PHD Comics
more
Unsustainable (2008-2050)
Unsustainable is a journalist's page and documentary on big changes which will shape our near future.
More Ads | Advertise
Facebook och politiskt deltagande #2
Global
Information edit
Group Info
Type: Internet & Technology - Cyberculture
Description: Hej och välkommen! Detta är en virtuell fokusgrupp som diskuterar politiskt och socialt engagemang på Facebook och andra sociala medier. Det kan röra sig om hur du ser på påverkansförsök via Facebook, om uppmaningar att gå med i vissa grupper eller stödja vissa causes, och vilken nytta du tror att det kan ha. Hur gör du själv?
Du är inbjuden eftersom jag tror att du skulle ge ett värdefullt bidrag. Gruppen är verksam under perioden 12-18 maj 2008. Denna grupp är hemlig och syns således inte på din profil, och den kommer att raderas efter diskussionens slut. [OBS: Fram till att diskussionen börjar kommer gruppen att vara öppen - detta eftersom det inte går att bjuda in folk på samma sätt till gruppen annars. From måndag är den hemlig och det ni säger/skriver kommer således inte tt vara synligt för alla.]
Från och med måndag 12 maj kommer jag att ställa en inledande fråga till gruppen. Under veckan kommer jag sedan att ställa följdfrågor. Du är fri att planera ditt deltagande i diskussionen precis som du vill - du behöver inte avsätta någon särskild tid för det. Din medverkan kommer förmodligen att ta ca en timme, utspritt under veckan.
Som tack för din medverkan kommer du att få en mindre belöning efter diskussionens slut (läs biobiljett).
Message All Members
Edit Group
Edit Members
Edit Group Officers
Invite People to Join
Create Related Event
Leave Group
Share
Officers edit
Nils Gustafsson
Moderator [remove]
Related Groups


Members
edit
This group has 7 members.
See All
Henrik
Annika
Caroline
Nils
Mattias
Mattias
The Wall
Displaying 10 of 14 wall posts
Write Something | See All
Mattias
vrote
at 8:57am yesterday
Sedan är det nog viktigt med avlatsbrevfaktorn, att man kan ta ställning för något fint utan att behöva göra något och därmed kan "bocka av" kravet på engagemang i den frågan. Det är nog det som många inser efter ett tag, och det är då massavhoppen kommer. Vem vet, kanske kan den eftertanken sporra till verkligt engagemang istället, och då har ju gruppen fyllt en funktion.
Report - Delete
Mattias
wrote
at 8:55am yesterday
Varför går folk med i grupper? Det finns helt klart olika typer av Facebook-användare: vissa försöker glatt