‘Volunteering is like any other business’
Civic participation and social media

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Published in:
New Media & Society

DOI:
10.1177/1461444817731920

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Kaun, A., & Uldam, J. (2018). ‘Volunteering is like any other business’: Civic participation and social media . *New Media & Society*, *20*(6), 2186-2207. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731920

Accepted Author Version, for citation:

Kaun A, Uldam J (2017) "Volunteering is like any other business" - Civic participation and social media *New Media and Society* doi: 10.1177/1461444817731920

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"Volunteering is like any other business" - Civic participation and social media

Abstract

The increased influx of refugees in 2015 has led to challenges in transition and destination countries such as Germany, Sweden and Denmark. Volunteer-led initiatives providing urgent relief played a crucial role in meeting the needs of arriving refugees. The work of the volunteers in central stations and transition shelters was mainly organised with the help of Facebook, both in terms of inward and outward communication. This article examines the role of social media for civic participation drawing on Swedish volunteer initiatives that emerged in the context of the migration crisis in 2015 as a case study. Theoretically the article provides an analytical framework including power relations, technological affordances, practices, and discourses that helps to shed light on the interrelation between social media and civic participation.

Introduction

The increased influx of refugees in 2015 has led to different challenges in transition and destination countries such as Germany, Sweden and Denmark. In different ways, governments took measures to restrict the entry of refugees. At the same time, the situation saw a reinvigoration of civic participation and volunteering. Indeed, in most of the countries, urgent relief was organised by volunteers and activists rather than state institutions as a report presented to the Swedish government confirmed (SOU 2017: 12). In Germany and Sweden, the handling of the influx of refugees would have been impossible without the help of volunteers. In Sweden, already before the migration crisis every second Swede was volunteering for different organizations and in diverse contexts, but 2015 brought this effort of civic engagement to new heights, as numerous Swedish citizens volunteered to assist migrants entering Sweden (Gustafson, 2015). For example, *Volontärbyrån* – a matching

service for volunteers and beneficiaries – multiplied the number of registered volunteers by nine. When the Swedish Red Cross announced that it was looking for volunteers in the summer of 2015, 10,500 expressed an interest and 5,500 applied for specific volunteer assignments throughout the country (Gustafson, 2015). Furthermore, *volunteer* was announced as the Annual Swede by the Swedish magazine *Fokus* (similar to *Time* magazines person of the year) (Adolfsson, 11 December 2015). Against this backdrop, this article investigates the role of social media for organizing volunteer work in Sweden in the context of the migration crisis in 2015. It explores major volunteer initiatives that were started in 2015 with the help of social media. Volunteering is here considered as an empirical entry point to re-evaluate the interrelations between civic engagement and social media, and to discuss the implications of commercial social media platforms for organizing volunteer activities over time. We argue for the importance of an analytical approach that pays attention to the technological, structural, discursive and practice-oriented dimensions of civic engagement and social media. We shed light on these dimensions by combining in-depth interviews with central organizers of volunteer initiatives and an analysis of their Facebook pages and groups.

Background: The migration crisis in Sweden

In 2015, the UNHCR reported that approximately 60 million people are refugees worldwide (Forsberg, 2015). In total 163.000 refugees were registered as asylum seekers in 2015 in Sweden. People applying for asylum in Sweden reached its peak in November 2015 with almost 40.000 applicants. After Sweden reinstated temporary passport controls at the Danish border in November 2015, these numbers dropped significantly as indicated in figure 1. In November 2016, only around 400 people applied for asylum in Sweden.

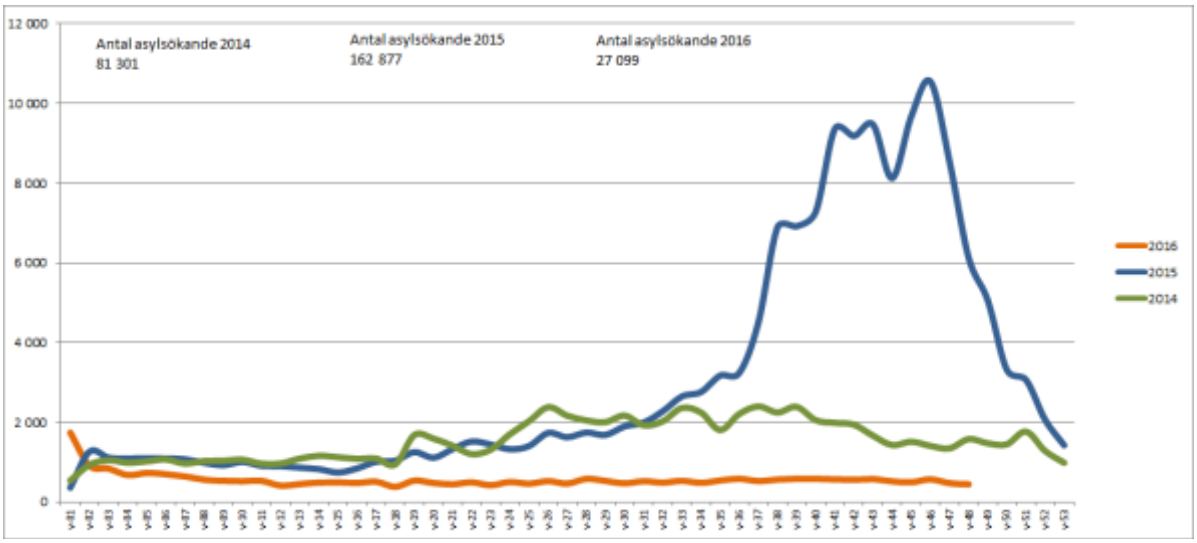

Figure 1: Source: Migrationsverket http://www.migrationsverket.se/Om-Migrationsverket/Statistik.html

These numbers are however not telling the stories of long journeys involving risky boat trips, long marches across different countries and the uncertainty of reaching the destination. They also do not speak of the experience of finally reaching the destination and the first hours and days spent in the new country. At the same time, numbers are only indicative of how many refugees reached Sweden in 2015, since many never registered and considered Sweden as a transit country on their way to Finland or Norway. The status as a transit country contributed to the importance of volunteer initiatives meeting the urgent needs of arriving refugees, since state institutions argued that they can only support people officially registering and applying for asylum in Sweden. Strategic transportation hubs such as the central train stations in Malmö and Stockholm became the physical sites of urgent relief primarily provided by volunteers, while the help was predominantly organized through Facebook groups and pages. Even state officials and municipalities often referred arriving migrants to central Facebook groups and pages for urgent help (SOU 2017: 12). The groups explored in this article share that they had their starting point on Facebook that was used as on organizational infrastructure to coordinate the volunteering efforts. In the following, we review discussions of how civic engagement might be changing in the context of social media to continue with presenting a four-dimensional model for analysing civic engagement and social media.

Civic engagement and social media

Volunteering is part of the larger discussion on civic engagement and participation, where

> '[e]ngagement refers to subjective states, that is, a mobilized, focused attention on some object. It is in a sense a prerequisite for participation: To 'participate' in politics, presuppose some degree of engagement. For engagement to become embodied in participation and thereby give rise to civic agency there must be some connection to practical, do-able activities, where citizens can feel empowered' (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 80).

According to Dahlgren's definition of civic life, volunteering is a form of civic participation in contrast to political participation that refers to voting, political knowledge and organization, campaign activities among others. Besides religious participation and connections at the workplace, civic engagement and participation form the cornerstones of civic life and

contribute to fabric and infrastructure of social life in a society.

The distinction between civic and political participation is however not as clear cut. Putnam (2001), for example, shows that volunteering often intersects with political interest. He argues that people who volunteer are less cynical about political leaders and show a positive engagement with politics than those who do not volunteer.

Social media have been vested with hopes that they can help reinvigorate political participation by providing new possibilities for bottom-up, self-organizing participation such as direct democracy and for bypassing mass media gatekeepers and taking action to hold governments and corporations to account (Castells, 2012; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). In this vein, these platforms have been considered essential in organising both migrants and volunteers in the context of the current crisis of migration. Gillespie et al. (2016) for example reviewed the role of different applications for information dissemination among refugees on their way to Europe. They conclude that the access to information via digital media including social media is essential as the digital infrastructures are helping refugees to navigate their physical surroundings (M. Gillespie et al., 2016). In contrast, we are focusing on the role of social media for the volunteers in one of the major destination and transit countries.

The advent and increasing popularisation of social media has been noted as an important vehicle for political participation and volunteering. Celebratory accounts of the Arab Spring uprisings, the Occupy and Indignados movements often focus on technological affordances of social media such as instantaneous, dialogical communication that bypasses traditional mass-media filters (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012). Here, the capacity of social media for facilitating mobilisation, organisation and visibility has been highlighted. These accounts often focus on technological affordances of social media such as instantaneous, dialogical communication that bypasses traditional mass-media filters (DeLuca et al., 2012). While these affordances are important to the emancipatory potential of social media, they are merely one part of a much bigger picture. We need to look beyond affordances and also consider user practices, discourse and media power. When we do so, we can move beyond the celebratory and simplistic focus on technological affordances and better understand both the possibilities for and limits to political participation in social media.

An analytics of civic participation and (social) media

To develop a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges that social media can offer political participation – including the nitty-gritty of everyday organizing, struggles to mobilise for systemic change that only a few pay attention to, let alone engage with, and corporate and government impediments to visibility among wider publics – we need to look beyond affordances. Therefore, we suggest an analytics of political participation in social media that also pays attention to other key issues that condition political participation. Our aim is to avoid techno-determinism and media-centric focal points. More specifically, the approach we suggest considers the context of political participation in social media, paying attention to (i) power relations, (ii) affordances, (iii) practices and (iv) discourses. In doing so, we draw on Couldry's (2012) model of a socially oriented media theory that conceptualises media in the context of other social institutions shaping our sense of reality and question media's overemphasized role for constructing social reality. Like Couldry's model, the analytics of social media that we suggest could potentially be applicable to analysing political participation beyond social media, since it is non-media centric. However, our focus is on political participation and social media. In outlining his model, Couldry (2012) proposes a pyramid with four apexes that each represents a focal point in media research:

> We can turn the pyramid four ways up, with the type of research we want to prioritize at the top, while others form the pyramid base. No way of turning the pyramid is 'right', or 'better', since the apexes name different priorities for research: media *texts*; the *political economy* of media production, distribution and reception; the *technical properties* of each medium; and the *social uses* to which media technologies and media contents are put. (p. 6, emphasis in original).

Our four-dimensional analytics is alse informed by the cultural circuit suggested by du Gay et al. (1997) to analyse cultural artefacts, including representation, identity, regulation, production, and consumption. However, our approach departs from du Gay et al.'s circuit of culture and its distinctions such as the one between consumption and production, which is difficult in the current, participatory media ecology (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013). Similarly, we find it necessary to speak more explicitly about power relations and not recude issues of power to regulation. At the same time, we agree with du Gay et al. that a distinction between different categories is merely theoretical. The distinction serves an analytical purpose. Here, it is important to note that they are simultaneously significant and overlap. Therefore, we stress the significance of considering multiple categories or dimensions, even if only one or two are

in focus.

In illustrating our suggestion for an approach to studying civic participation in social media on the basis of the four dimensions, we find the following graphic useful, because its circular connectors illustrate the continuous interrelations between all four dimensions.

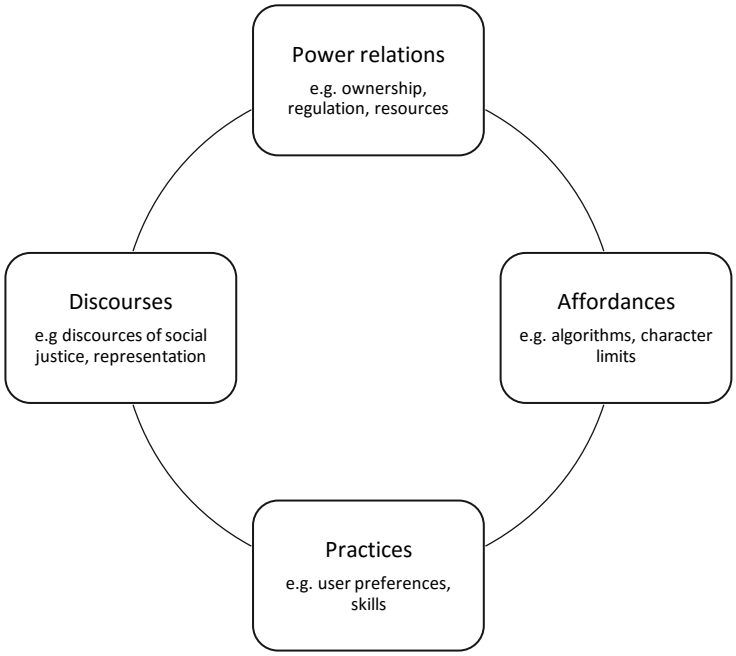

Figure 2: An analytical model of civic engagement and social media

Paying equal attention to all four focal points is often not feasible. Nonetheless, it is important to consider their role, even if just one apex is in focus. We find this approach to studying media highly useful, because it acknowledges the interrelations between the four aspects of the role of the media while also allowing for pragmatic choices regarding delimitations. We therefore adopt this approach while fine-tuning it for studying civic participation in social media. In the following, we outline each of the four dimensions and discuss their interrelated roles in conditioning political participation in social media.

Power relations

While social media can potentially help civil society actors access and circulate information in unprecedented ways, these technologies are embedded in unequal power relations that privilege government and corporate elites (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013). Social media platforms are characterised by increasing ownership concentration, with multinational media corporations such as Google and Facebook dominating the majority of

social media platforms (Dahlberg, 2014; Fuchs, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). Particularly government policies and regulation as well as platforms' Terms of Service are important in this respect. Recent examples of Facebook deleting left-wing political group pages show that the platform is all but neutral (T. Gillespie, 2010). Instead social media platforms' Terms of Service (ToS) play a key role in conditioning possibilities for political participation. This is propelled by the commercial logics that underpin popular social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube (and the relegation of non-profit alternative media platforms such as IndyMedia to the margins of the Internet) (Hestres, 2013; Papacharissi & Fernback, 2005; Author, 2014). Youmans and York (2012) show how the policies and user agreements of commercial social media platforms inhibit some forms of political participation by preventing anonymity and prohibiting certain content, resulting, for example, in Facebook banning the page ''We Are All Khaled Said'' which was used to mobilise protesters during the Egyptian uprising. Author (2016) has also addressed the influence of policies and user agreements of commercial social media platforms on political participation, showing how the blog hosting site Wordpress.com referred to their policy of no anonymity and removed a website that criticised the oil company BP following a request from the company. The commercial logic of popular social media platforms means that companies such as Facebook must cater for broad segments of users and advertisers (Youmans & York, 2012). This often entails ToS that impede anonymity and privileges copyright over subvertising, in some cases enabling corporations to censor antagonistic political participation (Author, 2014; Youmans & York, 2012). In addition to revenues from advertising, commercial social media have developed business models based on the collection of data that is re-analysed and sold to third parties (Andrejevic, 2013). Access to the data gathered as well as tools for analysis is limited to the major commercial players contributing another layer of unequal power relations (Dahlberg, 2014). These interests and conditions of unequal power relations further spur asymmetrical visibilities because the specifics of their collection and price are not made transparent. This obscures exactly what is being observed, on what basis and logics, enabling governments and corporations to monitor citizens' activities without being seen themselves and instilling uncertainty in those being watched (Brighenti, 2010). In this way, social media augment visibility asymmetries by rendering them less transparent and accountable (Brighenti, 2010). To the extent that civic users are aware of these asymmetries of visibility, they risk impeding participation in radical politics by instilling self-censorship (Author, forthcoming 2017).

Affordances.

While we argue for the importance of looking beyond affordances, we also want to stress the importance of paying attention to affordances and their implications for political participation in social media. The notion of affordances is often used to refer to 'action possibilities' (Gibson, 1979) provided by an object or technological infrastructure. Following this definition of affordances, media technologies in general and social media in particular are constructed following a certain set of ideas (Author 2014). For example, as a commercial platform, Facebook follows a business model that is largely based on dispossession of creative expressions in the form of data (Andrejevic, 2013; Elmer, 2003) and the near impossibility of organic reach (Collister, 2015). Organic reach refers to the possibility of a post appearing in users' newsfeed without paying for it. However, as Facebook's business model relies on revenue from users (companies, NGOs, politicians, artists) paying to reach their constituencies and stakeholders, significant organic reach is almost unattainable. This business model is embodied in technological affordances, namely the algorithm that determines the visibility of posts and tweets in social media platforms impede organic reach so as to motivate users to pay for boosted reach (Dahlberg, 2014). Further, social media algorithms grant visibility to posts on the basis of interaction. For example, our posts are most likely to be featured in the newsfeeds of those of our Facebook friends with whom we frequently interact (whether via likes, comments, posts, messenger, etc). One of the consequences is that organisations and social actors with resources – either capital to pay for reach or people with skills to circumvent the algorithm – are privileged in struggles for visibility in Facebook. This illustrates the interplay between affordances (the algorithm), power relations (the business model), and practices/social media literacy (skills). Another consequence is that a lot of the information that we receive via social media platforms presents one aspect of an issue, bits of information or factoids, connecting likeminded users rather than challenging our presumptions or offering new perspectives. This illustrates the interplay between affordances and practices. This interplay is further illustrated by the transient features of many social media platforms, which facilitate the instant agency of point-and-click activism, which offers easy, non-committal modes of civic participation (Fenton, 2008). Consequently, citizens' engagement with an issue may end after a single click of a mouse as is often the case when joining a Facebook group or signing an online petition (Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

Practices

The notion of media practices refers to what we do with media (Couldry, 2004). What we do

when we use media is not necessarily what we were intended to do. Just think of text messaging (SMS) which was intended as an emergency communication tool and not the popular everyday communication channel that it is today. Paying attention to media practices is also important in relation to political participation. Couldry (2012) develops the notion of media practices as an "open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media" (Couldry, 2004, p. 117). He argues that media practices are concerned with specific regularities in actions relating to media and regularities of context and resources that enable media-related actions. He details further that media practices are concerned with the need for coordination, interaction, community, trust and freedom. In that sense, focusing on media practices provides a fruitful link to questions of political participation, particularly in extra-parliamentarian contexts, because it opens up for considering the ways in which social media enable practices of political participation that do not necessarily cohere with formal participation such as voting. While social media thus provide new platforms for expressing and acting out various forms of political participation, they have also been shown to privilege formal (reformist and institutional) modes of political participation over informal (radical and anti-systemic) modes (Author, 2013; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010) and individual over collective participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Fenton & Barassi, 2011). For example, increasing surveillance from government and business has led many activists to avoid social media for uses that relate to organising, and even sometimes mobilising for, protests (Gerbaudo, 2012; Author, 2016). Activists with insight into online surveillance risks and possibilities for circumvent surveillance - i.e. – a high degree of media literacy (Livingstone, 2008) – instead use alternative social media platforms such as Crabgrass or RiseUp, or use social media platforms in alternative ways (Author, 2013). While face-to-face meetings remain crucial in organising protests, this highlights the interplay between media practices, literacy and power relations.

With social media information flows have become more complex changing from a privileged position of broadcast media and mainstream press towards networked digital media as Lotan et al. (2011) argue. Investigating the news flows during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprising on Twitter, they find that news are increasingly co-constructed by bloggers, activists and journalists. These and similar findings from other studies point towards changing power relations in the media landscape that need to be taken into consideration when studying political participation in social media.

Discourses

Discourse itself signifies a certain part of social practice incorporating a particular perspective and interpretation of social reality. The particular discursive practice and the specific fields of action are dialectically interrelated. Discourse can, hence, be understood as a complex set of simultaneous interrelated linguistic acts that take place within and across fields of social action (Author 2016). As discourses condition our understandings of the world, they also condition our possibilities to act in that world. In that sense, discourses have performative power to condition political participation and political identities. However, for our discourses to be given a kind of reality that they would not have otherwise, they need to be seen and heard by others in the space of appearance (Arendt, 1958). The rival discourses of hospitality and hostility that characterise debates and coverage of migrants entering Europe condition the possibilities and predispositions of publics in responding to the situation and taking responsibility (Chouliaraki, 2016). Social media can potentially help civic actors access the space of appearance. We therefore need to pay attention to the discourses and counter-discourses that circulate in social media – and the ways in which they are facilitated and constrained by social media affordances, power relations and practices. One of the key democratic potentialities of social media platforms relates to their capacity for circulating counter-discourses to wider publics (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2013). It is not only the affordances, power relations and practices that condition possibilities for gaining visibility for discourses that are important, but also the discourses as such for which social and political actors struggle to gain visibility and support (Chouliaraki, 2000). For example, competing discourses try to establish different causes, identify different villains and different solutions to the Euro crisis. As a wide range of actors, including capitalists, anti-capitalists, social democrats, and nationalists, struggle to promote their discourse on Europe, social media have become a key arena for these struggles. Other discursive struggles and representations include climate change (Author, 2013; Author, 2016), corporate responsibility (Vestergaard, 2015) and movements of the dispossessed (Author 2015). Specifically in relation to the influx of migrants in Europe, counter-discourses of hospitality attempt to challenge dominant discourses of fear, financial constraint and nationalism (Dahlgren, 2016).

Power relations, practices, affordances and discourse form the basis of our suggestion for an analytics of political participation in social media. As we have indicated in relation to the four dimensions, they each play a key role for possibilities of political participation. Therefore, studies focusing on any of the four dimensions are important. At the same time, we want to stress the significance of considering all four dimensions and their interrelations, even when

highlighting on one of them. It is precisely the interplay between the four dimensions that allows us to understand the conditions of possibility behind questions such as: Who participates? Who listens? It allows us to better understand phenomena such as virality and spreadability, the interplay with the mainstream press and between online/offline dynamics.

Methods and Material

For this case study, we have combined an analysis of the Facebook pages and groups with in-depth interviews with central organizers of key volunteer initiatives in Sweden. The choice of initiatives was based on an analysis of mainstream newspapers and we included those organizations that featured prominently in the reporting. The Facebook pages and groups were monitored over the course of three months during in terms of the main activities of members and moderators as well as the structure of the conversations featured. We also conducted an automated, quantitative analysis of the engagements with posts on the Facebook pages for which – in contrast to groups – analytical tools are available. The practices within the groups were related to the more general structure of Facebook, for example concerning difference between Facebook pages and groups. During the interviews, we discussed the findings from the page analysis with the organizers. We interviewed the person who set up the Facebook presence and mainly maintained it throughout the most intense working period. The interview material was then transcribed and we conducted a theme-based analysis following the categories of our four-dimensional model. The interviews were conducted throughout late summer and autumn 2016 and addressed the development of the groups since their inception in 2015. As the number of newly arriving migrants has decreased dramatically, the groups had to reconsider their status and in some cases change their mission. This is also reflected in their social media practices.

Al Tadamon	• Facebook group • Approx. 4,000 members • Served Stockholm's largest shelters distributing cloths and other necessities

Vi som tar emot flyktingar på Stockholms central/ We who welcome refugees at Stockholm's central station 	• Facebook group • Approx. 17,000 members • Coordinated urgent help at Stockholm's central station (September 2015)
Refugees Welcome Stockholm 	• Facebook page • Approx. 11,000 likes • Official organization with physical center in Stockholm (Rosa stationen)
Vi gör vad vi kan/ We do what we can 	• Facebook page • Approx. 20,000 likes • collected donations to be distributed in Greece (initially mainly Lesvos) • still raising funds, and ship non-food items (NFI) such as medical supplies to Greece, Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria

Table 1: Overview initiatives considered

Facebook pages and groups coordinating urgent relief

Al Tadamon

The group Al Tadamon – solidarity in Arabic – was set up in May 2015 with the aim to provide urgent help for one of the biggest shelters in Sweden situated in a Southern suburb of Stockholm. The group mainly coordinated the collection and distribution of cloths and necessities for the people living in the shelter. In autumn 2015, the group secured a large room that served as storage and distribution centre. The Facebook group was mainly used to coordinate the collection of specific products that were needed, to collect financial donations and to invite volunteers to sort and distribution sessions at the shelter. The group collaborated with the Swedish Migration Agency and partly took responsibility for supplying newly arrived asylum seekers with necessities, which normally falls within the responsibility of the agency. The group still exists, but its clothes shop closed due to restructuration of the shelter.

Most of the inhabitants have been moved either to other shelters in Northern Sweden or to own apartments. Al Tadamon is currently reconsidering its mission.

***Vi som tar emot flyktingar på Stockholms central (Vi som tar emot…) /* We who welcome refugees at Stockholm's central station**

The Facebook group was started in September 2015 with the aim of coordinating urgent relief for arriving and transiting migrants in Stockholm's central station. The group grew rapidly over the first few days and coordinated the collection and distribution of food and cloths; the collection of money to buy tickets for onward travels; transport to transit shelters as well as legal support. The group was initially set as a public group and anybody added to it could post and comment on threads. Several other initiatives grew out of this page, including Refugees Welcome Stockholm

Refugees Welcome Stockholm (RWS)

The group quickly took over the coordination of relief work at the central station. Volunteers set up their own transit shelter in a former night club for refugees who needed to rest during their journey through Sweden while not wanting to officially register in Sweden. After the major influx of migrants decreased with the closure of the Swedish borders the group's mission shifted. Currently the group organizes the community center Rosa Station (pink station) in the Northern part of the city center of Stockholm offering language training and social activities. The group is still very active on Facebook mainly engaging in discussions about migration policies. RWS also organized support for protests against the new and stricter migration law in August 2016.

Vi gör vad vi kan – We do what we can

The initiative was co-founded by playwright and director Paula Stenström Öhman and PR-strategist Petra Kauraisa. Initially they aimed to collect 500.000 SEK to travel with necessities to Lesvos in Greece to provide urgent relief for migrants arriving there. The initial goal was quickly reached and in total the initiative collected almost 11 million SEK and 250 tones of clothes and other non-food items such as shoes, hygiene kits, tents, and sleeping bags. Vi gör vad vi kan emerged as one of the most successful donation campaigns related to the migration crisis in 2015.

Volunteer activism and social media – a four-dimensional model

In the following we apply the four-dimensional model and show how the dimensions play out in the case of volunteer activism. We consider all four of dimensions, however, here, we particularly focus on the question of affordances of Facebook for organizing volunteering activities.

Power relations

Social media can potentially help civil society actors access and circulate information in unprecedented ways, they are, however, embedded in unequal power relations that need to be considered when evaluating possibilities for civic engagement. Facebook is already part of the everyday life of many Swedes with 70 per cent of Internet users visiting Facebook at least from time to time (Findahl & Davidsson, 2015). All the initiatives turned to Facebook as key platform for coordinating their help efforts. During the interviews, it was apparent that Facebook is seen as the only platform where their goals of coordinating volunteer work and financial donations could be met in a cost and time efficient manner. For example, the initiator of *Vi som tar emot…* boils it down to "it only takes like two minutes. The thing that took most time was finding a picture" (Interview 2016-09-16).

This naturalization of Facebook usage is of course not unique for volunteer engagement in Sweden, but it is a telling example of the powerful position that the platform holds.
Besides the almost monopoly position that Facebook achieved, there are platform internal power relations that the initiatives are part of and must navigate. The initiatives analysed here all gained relatively high visibility on Facebook in a very short time. However, during the interviews, only one person expressed surprise about the fast-growing success. All other interviewees were rather conscious about the logics of visibility and power in social media that are related to size and strength of pre-existing networks. Particularly successful - in terms of gaining followers and collecting donations - was the initiative *Vi gör vad vi kan*. During the interview one of the initiators of *Vi gör vad vi kan* stated that the group consisted of strong writers who could express themselves and knew the logics of social as well as mainstream media. Group members for example already had a rather large circle of followers including so-called influencers with equally strong positions and visibility in the network of the Swedish cultural industry. The storytelling ability contributed to the fact that the initiative was perceived as comparatively professional and could use the configuration of power relations in social media for its advantage.

Power relations playout not only in terms of choosing – or feeling the pressure to choose – a platform. Also, the Facebook platform itself is structured through and reinforces specific power relations. There are for example clear hierarchies between administrators of groups and pages in comparison to group members and followers. Administrators and moderators steer the forms of engagement, while posts by members often remain invisible due to the setup of Facebook group or page. Hence, the groups and pages that were set up by one individual reflect personal styles and preference in terms of the tone of the conversation. The founder of *Al tadamon* is particularly explicit

> Yes, it was me who started the group. And then it was only me as an administrator. At the moment, it is only me and another volunteer, but there was a time when we were maybe five. But I must say, I always had a kind of more authoritarian approach to it. And it was my kind of vision that was strong and clear and it worked, kind of. (…) I think it would have been different if it was paid work. I mean then you would sit down and discuss and so on. But since you are giving your free time, it is not like this. (…) We have discussed, but it was mainly I who has written the posts. And we realized that people liked that it is kind of the same tone. They have kind of learned my language and I think that has been important. (Interview 2016-08-26)

She argues that donating your time to volunteer activities like this makes you reason more efficiently and Facebook - with the clear hierarchy between administrators and other users - reinforces this division between people who envision and curate the exchanges and those who are at the receiving end.

Affordances

Technological affordances refer to 'action possibilities' (Gibson, 1979) that are linked to a specific technological infrastructure. Since Facebook played such a central role for the initiatives, we explored its technological affordances more closely. Based on the interview material and the platform analysis, we have developed three sub-categories that specify technological affordances of Facebook in the context of refugee volunteering, namely (i) logistical affordances, (ii) temporal affordances and (iii) visibility affordances.

In terms of *logistical affordances* Facebook's role is paramount in terms of synchronizing action to coordinate bodies and objects in time and space. The access to the platform from

mobile devices was particularly important for coordinating the volunteer work on the ground. Particularly in the case of *Vi som tar emot…* real-time communication via mobile devices was paramount coordinating the efforts at the central station. Although the platform allowed for real-time engagements, at times it was difficult to synchronize the supply of certain products with the actual needs. One story of the group administrator of *Vi som tar emot…* included a post requesting eggs for one of the food stations. Once posted in the Facebook group, the volunteers on the ground were quickly flooded with egg donations. In consequence, the requests for specific products needed to be closely monitored to coordinate the demand and supply.

In terms of *temporal affordances* of Facebook, the administrator and founder of Al tadamon emphazises the need to constantly be active within the group even though the group had to currently rethink the own mission. She argues

> It is fairly easy to get a group with many members, but to keep it active is much harder. And this is what you actually want, you don't want to have a dead group with some thousand members, this is little bit the case now. It is a little bit like people gave up, but it is a job to keep the activity up. And this is what you want, you want to have up to 100 likes for a post and this is what we got when we were the most active, like between 200 to 400 per post. (Interview 2016-08-26)

Hence, the temporal logic of Facebook based on their business model that emphazises permanent updates created pressure for the group to contantly update (Author, 2014), share success stories or any kind of engagement to remain relevant and an active group rather than disappearing from the newsfeed. Particularly during the tricky period of reformulating the mission this created tensions as the administrator confirmed.

One aspect that combines *temporal* and *visibility affordances* of Facebook is related to how the algorithm steers visibility in users' newsfeed. The algorithm privileges interaction over recency, which means that posts that trigger new replies gain more visibility despite their datedness. This has implications for the possibility to coordinate people and help efforts. Carefully curated threads and posts might be messed up through comments on older posts that give the impression that these are the most recent and most urgent requests. The curated thread structure (see figure 4) was particularly important for the group *Vi som tar emot…*,

since this was the only way to make distinction between different needs and areas of works.

> So the whole Facebook structure is rather strict. You can't really divide things after you have set up a certain structure. So if you go for the thread structure, you have to stick with it and then people can comment on it and comment comments, but you can't divide a thread that you have started, because it developed into a different direction. You can't have subthreads or anything. You are basically searching for the right place to post and find information. It really is not meant to be used in that way. (…)
>
> We tried to limit the number of threads, but anyway in between it was like that people started writing in one thread, for example the mosque thread and then all of a sudden everything became much more general and didn't have anything to do with the mosque anymore. Like "we have lots of eggs. What should we do with them?" It was very difficult to get people to write in the right kind of threads and follow the structure. They are just writing wherever people were active the last time and therefore comes up first. (Interview 2016-09-16)

Figure 3: Screenshot of thread structure in the group *Vi som tar emot…*

Furthermore, the distinction between pages and groups also has significant implications in terms of *visibility affordances*. Since Facebook pages are set up mainly with brands and commercial entities in mind, they gain more visibility in the platform, the same goes for open groups. However, since there are potential dangers for both volunteers and migrants connected with visibility in social media, openness was in some cases regulated externally. The management of the shelter in Stockholm implemented a strict media protocol including the restricted access for media to the building as well as posts in social media. This had implications for the outreach and possibilities to engage broader publics in *Al tadamon's* relief work as they were not allowed to post pictures of the building, the clothes shop or residents in the public group on Facebook.

Furthermore, the structure of pages and groups privileges the visibility of posts of administrators over posts by members and followers. This asymmetrical visibility establishes

another layer in terms of power relations within the platform giving voice to the ones organizing relief while marginalizing the voice of the receivers – the refugees – who are members of the groups.

Practices

Media practices and social media literacies refer to specific types of actions in relation to media. Nick Couldry (2012) argues that media practices are an expression of the need to coordinate, interact, build communities involving trust and freedom. The uniting factor in terms of practices of all groups is that they either were professional social media communicators or professionalized during their operations to handle the massive amount of communication efficiently. *Refugees Welcome Stockholm (RWS)* for example relied on a software package *Relation Desk* to coordinate all Facebook communications including private messages, comments and replies to own posts. The software allowed them to forward and distribute messages between different volunteers that were divided into different communication teams. The software also included automated messaging to users trying to get in touch with the group until they could reach out personally. The explicit goal of the communications team of *RWS* was to reply to any engagement that was established in their social media channels. This professionalized way of handling communications was initially set up by one person who was also responsible for training sessions for new communication volunteers. Similarly, *Vi gör vad vi kan* engaged a volunteer to handle all Facebook communication including messages and comments on the page as well as emails during the most intense period of the initiative. *Al Tadamon* and the group *Vi som tar emot…* were the least professionalized in terms of their communication practices. In both cases, it was mainly one person trying to coordinate all communicative efforts. The attempt to include more volunteers in the communication coordination often led to conflicts about administrator rights and "the way this work should be done", as the founder of *Al tadamon* put it.

In terms of media practices, it is crucial to distinguish between inward and outward communications. While the initiatives appear curated and professional in their outward communication, there is always a messier backstage that was in all cases also coordinate with the help of Facebook. *Vi gör vad vi kan*, for example, started out with two secret groups – one for the steering committee and one for the volonteers already engaged – the latter only being open only for those approximately 20 people travelling to Lesvos. For raising additional funds, the public page was started later and attracted much attention. Only later, internal

communication was migrated from Facebook to Slack in the process of professionalizing the organization. Concentrating both inward and outward communications on one platform makes the initiatives of course very vulnerable. Although three of the groups now also have separate websites, it would have been difficult to coordinate their work internally if their Facebook page or group was taken down, for example because of trolling from right-wing groups and coordinated reporting to Facebook, which has been successfully employed to silence earlier campaigns (Dencik, 2014).

Another aspect of considering social media practices is that the role of Facebook for the initiatives changed over time and in relation to the changing context of the volunteer work efforts. All initiatives were newly started and hence evolved, professionalized and changed their focus. The structure of the Facebook platform however does not allow for adaptions to the organizational evolution. It was for example mentioned that it is impossible to transfer from the group setting to a Facebook page. While Facebook groups are set up for community organizing, Facebook pages have a more professional outlook. It is also impossible to link from external websites to Facebook groups, while it is possible to link to Facebook pages. At the same time, page settings are geared towards commercial purposes including analytics features on user involvement and outreach as well as paid for outreach possibilities that are often not affordable for charity, volunteer-based organisations (Author 2016).

Discourses

Social media have previously been discussed in terms of their capacity for supporting the circulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses to broader publics. All four initiatives resonated with public interest in the migration crisis and predominantly positive attitudes towards volunteering related to the migration crisis in Sweden. Particularly *RWS* and *Vi gör vad vi kan* received broad mainstream media visibility and engaged in public discourses on issues of migration. Their engagement ranged from sharing certain articles and writing op-eds promoting safe passage for refugees to Europe and supporting petitions against stricter migration policies to participating in expert hearings with political decision makers. *Vi gör vad vi kan* considered their work as political and in support of pro-migration politics.

> We are politically, religiously and in any other sense independent, but we take political positions. Yes, we do. We wrote an op-ed in Aftonbladet rather early. We support different political campaigns and initiatives like Refugees Welcome and so on.

> (…). We also had an opinion building role. We for example invited different politicians to follow with us to Lesvos to show them the situation. We have been invited to different parliamentary groups of different parties. We were invited to the Civil Minster to give a talk for the Municipalities of Sweden. The think tanks Tiden and Arena invited us to give talks. So yes, we are active like this as well. (Interview 2016-11-21)

Similarly, also the other initiatives engaged in political discourses in support of human and civil rights in Sweden and the European Union. In more general terms, the sharing and circulation of pro-migration arguments was part of the engagement of the groups. However, their focus was on coordinating the logistics of relief. With the closure of the Swedish border, the EU-Turkey agreement and the shrinking numbers of incoming migrants the focus shifted towards engaging more extensively with political discourses (Dahlgren, 2016).

The new situation in terms of incoming migrants altered the character and mission of the groups. *Vi som tar emot…* has turned into a dormant group without any significant activities, while *RWS* started to engage more strongly in the general discourse on migration. Their posts since early 2016 consist mainly – besides announcing activities at the RWS center *Pink Station* – of sharing own blog posts and newspaper articles discussing and criticizing changing migration laws. Hence, the role of RWS changed from merely coordinating urgent relief by for example opening a shelter for migrants in transit to more strongly aiming to influence the discourse on migration. RWS has also been part of state reports reviewing the handling of the increased number of migrants arriving in Sweden in summer and autumn 2015. What started as an adhoc relief group at the central station in Stockholm, they developed into a stable part of the civil society that actively shapes and reshapes public discourse with the help of among other things their Facebook page.

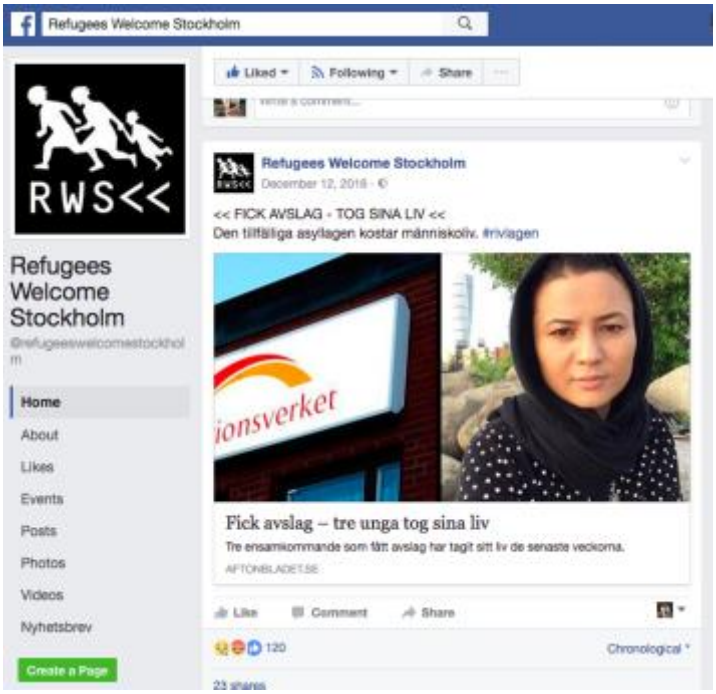

Figure 4: Screenshot of a typical post of RWS

Conclusion

One of the interviewees suggested to consider "volunteering as any other business". It is about personal gains and costs even though it is often presented as altruistic. This might not only be true for the motives of people to volunteer, but it also reflects the professionalization of communicative practices and coordination of volunteer work. Using Facebook – a corporate social media platform that is particularly geared towards businesses – as the main, and in most cases only, site for coordinating and mobilizing for the initiatives, requires activists to adjust their communication accordingly. This includes timely responses and a certain awareness of platform logics in terms of visibilities, temporality and logistics. Although social media have been heralded to diminish power relations and hierarchies, the Facebook platform reproduces existing divides and power relations. This is evident in the case of volunteer activism, for example between coordinating administrators, donors and volunteers and migrants. Especially migrants are rendered marginalized and in some cases even voiceless. This reflects Chouliaraki and Georgieu's (2017) finding that uses of social media in the Greek island Chios by major NGOs tended to marginalize smaller NGOs and migrants. Together, these findings point towards a tendency for social media platforms to create hierarchical orders in contexts of volunteering migration assistance, whether at the site of entry into Europe or at the final destination country. Importantly, hierarchies are not

created by social media *per se*, but by a combination of their technological affordances, the ways in which they are used, the discourses they propagate, and the power relations in which they are embedded.

Therefore, accessing the complex role of social media for civic engagement requires a multi-dimensional approach. Our attempt to consider power relations, affordances, practices, and discourses made the multiple layers of volunteer activism visible that goes beyond utopian or dystopian ways of analyzing social media for civic engagement. Considering all four dimensions in conversation with each other adds the necessary breadth and complexity. The circuit in its entirety constitutes the sum of its dimensions, as it also captures their interrelations. In introducing this approach, we have sacrificed a certain depth in our analysis of each individual dimension in this particular article. We provide more in-depth analyses with a focus on technological affordances and civic engagement (Authors, 2017) and on practices and power elsewhere (Authors, forthcoming). In this article, our main aim has been to outline an approach that can guide such analyses.

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