SOCIAL MEDIA, PARTICIPATION, PEER PRESSURE, AND THE EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS: A FORCE AWAKENS?

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Using focus group interviews, this paper studies the way young people in Sweden employed social media to discuss and mobilise during the on-going European refugee crisis, with a special focus on peer pressure, social interaction and connective action.

In 2015, an unprecedented influx of refugees, predominantly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, entered Europe on foot and in dinghies. The refugee crisis caused a lively public debate, put government agencies under stress, created conflict among EU member states and caused a widespread popular mobilisation aided by social media.

In September 2015, an explosion of voluntary activities occurred, many of which were grouped under the personal action frame (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) of *Refugees Welcome*. Civil society organisations, churches and mosques, and temporary networks set up shop in train stations and in ports, helping refugees with shelter, transport and information, sometimes interfering with official efforts and policy. The outburst of voluntarism was coupled with a boost in popular opinion in favour of continuing Sweden's refugee-friendly policy, also in the face of record numbers (Kärrman, 2015a).

As autumn proceeded, the intensity of volunteer efforts waned in spite of steadily increasing numbers of incoming refugees, also reflecting a shift in popular opinion. In November 2015, the Swedish government made an abrupt change in immigration policy, thereby effectively reducing the number of incoming refugees to a minimum (see e.g. Crouch, 2015). The new government policy was met with approval by a citizenry that seemed to have shifted its opinions rapidly in just a few months (Kärrman, 2015b).

These extraordinary events calls for revisiting a number of recent theoretical developments in participation research: taking into account the vast societal impact of the refugee crisis and Sweden as a country characterised by high levels of both civic voluntarism and social media use, as well as extreme degrees of individualism and social trust (cf. Gustafsson, 2013: 57f), they can be considered to be a critical case for evaluating Bennett & Segerberg's (2013) notions of *personal action frames* and *connective action*, as well as Amnå and Ekman's (2014) *standby citizens* and *latent*

participation, describing emerging personalised ways of interacting with social and political issues of the day in digitally enabled networks, and occasionally becoming mobilised into action.

As one of the core features of connective action is its flexible and individualist characteristics, it is of interest to study how it connects with the fact that political socialisation has been shown in previous research to be associated with influence from friends and family (Lee et al, 2013). What is the relationship between closer friendship networks and the looser connections of local, national and even transnational activism?

This research is exploratory in nature and is not trying to test a hypothesis. It is nevertheless guided by descriptive research questions concerning interaction among young peers in social media, political socialisation, identity formation and mobilisation, all framed by the refugee crisis and wanting to engage with the above-mentioned theoretical concepts. The study will provide tentative answers to the following questions:

RQ1: How did participants experience discussions with friends, family and others, respectively, regarding the refugee crisis in social media compared to other settings?

RQ2: How did participants respond to calls for mobilisation from friends, family and others, respectively, during the refugee crisis, emotionally, socially, and in action/inaction?

RQ3: How did participants engage/non-engage with personal action frames (such as Refugee Welcome) connected to the refugee crisis?

Focus group interviews with Swedish 16-25 year olds were used to allow young people in a formative stage of life (i.e. when political socialisation usually occurs, see Prior, 2010) and who are not necessarily active or organised in politics or social issues to discuss their attitudes and experiences in relation to the refugee crisis with their peers. Focus groups have been shown in previous research to be a good way of discussing attitudes and experiences concerning digital media and participation with youth (cf. Hundley & Shyles, 2010; Gustafsson, 2012; Cammaerts et al 2014; Vromen et al, 2015).

Eight focus groups with a total of 64 participants were recruited. Six of the focus groups were carried during spring and summer 2016 with the two remaining groups scheduled for December 2016. The reason for the time gap was to allow for themes that emerged from the first six groups to be further explored in the second round of interviews. Four focus groups were comprised by 16-19 year olds, enrolled in upper secondary school (gymnasium/high school), three focus groups were comprised by 19-25 year old university students, and one focus group was comprised by 19-25 year olds not enrolled in higher education. The upper secondary school students were recruited by initial contact with schools in southern Sweden (county of Scania) and subsequent engagement with students in class. University students were recruited by engagement with students in various courses at the Lund and Malmö universities in southern Sweden. Participants of the remaining group were recruited through a snowballing technique in social network sites.

Preliminary results present a complex image of perceptions of the refugee crisis in the eyes of Swedish youth. The social networks of friends and family and the discussions that take place in within and without social media affect both those who finally choose to engage in an issue and those who refrain from it, as well as those who are interested in politics and those who are not. The issue itself, rather than the fact that friends are involved in the discussion and mobilisation, created emotional responses. Participants were influenced by their networks, but foremost by the larger conversation and atmosphere going on nationally. Still, friend networks are of utmost importance for recruitment and mobilisation purposes. The question that remains is whether connective action can be sustained for a longer period of time, or if it has to be transformed into organisationally enabled networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Connective action aided by individualised personal action frames might disappear as quickly as it pops up. The results call for further empirical work on the interplay between digitally networked action and other organisational forms.

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