



Digital rurality: Producing the countryside in online struggles for rural survival



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ABSTRACT

Interest in the rural has increased in Sweden during the last decades and the rural has become increasingly present as an object of politics, not least in social media. While social media have been recognised for their significance for social movements generally, less is written about how to understand rural movements online. The aim of this article is to study how politics of the rural is performed in and through social media. Seven Sweden-based Facebook accounts were studied using discourse theory. Three different discourses were identified – a discourse of mobilising action, a discourse of re-representation and a discourse of frustration. Of these, we specifically highlight how the focus on urban norms and the practice of performative re-representation constituted the digital arenas as spaces where people who identified with rural areas were linked together, had their experiences and opinions acknowledged and their rural identities not only re-constituted, but recognised and valued. We also show how the different discourses in turn produced two opposing notions of rural areas: as dying or as alive. These two notions worked to structure the politics of the rural in different ways.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the rural has increased in Sweden during the last decades. The trend is visible in the printed news press where the number of articles containing the word ‘countryside’ went up from 5 576 in 2005 to 32 243 in 2015. Within popular culture, farmers and the countryside have become more prominent, for example in reality shows like ‘The farm’, ‘Farmer wants a wife’ and the success series ‘Danish dirt farmer’. The rural has also become increasingly present as an object of politics. In the party-political sphere, Swedish non-government bills containing the word has almost doubled since the 1990s (Nilsson and Lundgren, 2016). Politics of the rural is also pursued by various new social movements (Woods, 2003) engaged in the struggle for rural survival. These movements have often been provoked by the increased difficulties and ongoing dismantling of social services that affect life in general in Swedish rural and sparsely populated areas.

During the last decades, social media use has become an important component of social movements in general (e.g.

Eckstein, 2014; Lie, 2014). More specifically, in the Swedish context, there are numerous online forums where both large and small rural matters are pursued. But are such social media practices merely an unreflexive sense-making enterprise on the part of rural residents or is it in fact part of a more politically significant activity? With a situation in the Western world where populist movements increasingly gain support, we find the engagement with rural issues in social media, and the frequent expressions of being let down by the establishment, intriguing. What does it mean that such feelings are being discussed in online contexts?

In this article we study politics of the rural in struggles for rural survival in Sweden. We have chosen to focus on how politics of the rural is performed in and through social media and Facebook in particular. Being one of the world’s leading social networking services, Facebook offers users the opportunity to connect and share information and opinions on a large scale, at the same time as the platform’s affordances shape social interaction in specific ways. Moreover, as will be apparent from our discussion, Facebook practices and identities are always intertwined with practices and identities on other social media platforms and in the physical world.

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2. Social media activism and online rural social movements

Social media have been described as an apt tool for collective action (Jenkins, 2006), with great significance for recent social movements and protests. Lindgren (2013) suggests there are two narratives that try to pinpoint the significance of social media in new social movements. According to the first narrative, many recent uprisings were completely conditioned by the uses of social media (see Castells, 2012), and social media provided the very infrastructure of communication and organisation before the major protests of, for example, the Arab spring (Howard and Hussain, 2013) or the Occupy movement (Gaby and Caren, 2012). The first narrative often interprets the intertwining of online and offline activity to imply a furthering of democratic goals, and to be a sign of the credentials of Internet as a democratic medium (Carty, 2010).

The other narrative takes a more cautious stance, suggesting that in order to understand social movements one has to also study the social ties that bind people together outside of social media. It reminds of the risks that come with the commercial character of many platforms (Andrejevic, 2011) and the risks of surveillance (Morozov, 2011). The second narrative also argues that due to the low costs of supporting a cause in the digital world, social media are successful in attracting onlookers, but not in attracting (high risk) activists. In fact, digital activism has sometimes, somewhat derogatory, been referred to as 'slacktivism', potentially distracting from more effective forms of participation (Christensen, 2011). The second narrative warns against concluding that just because social media are used and ascribed significance for the organisation of protests, they are also decisive for their outcome (Cammaerts, 2007).

There is also research acknowledging the way social media can be used in different movements' strivings to mould a collective identity. For example, Kavada (2012, 2015) notes how social media are important for the formation of collective identities within movements that otherwise emphasise the significance of being loosely constructed and inclusive in character. She thus highlights the ways in which social media are never neutral technologies but may point their users in specific directions.

While studies of social media activism often constitute it as a predominantly urban field of interest, there are also studies that have problematized social media use in relation to rural space. Among these, some have emphasised how social media give rural online communities the possibility to communicate 'alternative visions and representations of place' (Jansson and Andersson, 2012:179). Offering a space where a more coherent narrative of positive structural change can be told, social media have been suggested as a potential key to socio-cultural sustainability of countryside communities. In this sense, social media seem to attain greater symbolic significance for small communities than for urban areas (Jansson, 2010). Other studies have focussed more on how social media provide local organisations with access to new audiences, which allows them to quickly spread their messages far beyond the physical space that is the object of the protests (Kavada, 2012).

Most studies of rural space and social media recognise these as interdependent concepts that may be conceptualised in different ways. Some suggest social media interconnect different places and spaces, but that they also produce imaginary rural spaces that may very well have concrete effects (Woods, 2007). Others argue social media have an 'overflow effect' (Elghamry, 2015: 257) from the 'virtual' to the 'real' world, and that the constitution of a critical mass is core to this. In an article on mining protests in the North of Sweden, Sjöstedt Landén (2014) notes that social media were central for the constitution of a broad supporter base that legitimised and strengthened the physical occupation of a road in the

forests of Gällök/Kallak. Rather than dismissing the 'sympathetic onlookers' (Brym et al., 2014: 271) for not taking part in hard-core protests, she shows how the mass of 'followers' on the one hand constituted important support for the demonstrators in legitimising their quest and their feelings of grievance, but also, on the other, how people from this 'mass' contributed with material support: washing clothes, bringing food, and so on. Similar recognition of the role of the 'onlookers' is found in several studies (e.g. Dahlgren, 2009; Kavada, 2015).

While the lion part of the research on social media and political participation and protest has focused on the role played by social media, their functions and to a somewhat lesser degree their content, there is a need for more research that investigates the discourses employed by rural movements in terms of online activism.

3. Aims, methods and materials

Our primary interest has been to explore collective struggles to redefine and promote Swedish rural areas in the light of perceived threats such as cutbacks, unemployment, environmental damages, disputed rural policy and urban norms. We specifically focus on the uses of social media in this quest, and the ways in which rurally oriented and/or rurally based online communities communicate place-political messages. The studied online communities certainly at times pursued *rural politics* in the sense that they debated policies concerning rural areas. We have however primarily viewed the online communication in terms of *politics of the rural* (Woods, 2003) in which rurality itself is (re)defined. By studying the pursued politics of the rural that emerged as a result of networking in a selection of Facebook groups and pages, we wish to shed light on how meaning around rurality was constituted in this context. What specific digital practices were used? What discourses were employed?

Our choice to focus on the Facebook platform was based on the fact that almost all of the Swedish rural movements and initiatives we found online were represented there. Seven Facebook accounts (three so-called 'pages' and four 'groups') were thus selected for analysis. They had all established their Facebook presence relatively recently – between 2012 and 2015 – which may be telling of the surge in the interest in rural issues. Three of the accounts gathered followers from around the whole country, while four had an explicit connection to the north of Sweden – a geographic area that consists of sparsely populated and rural areas.

In order to extract data, we used the Netvizz application (<https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolNetvizz>), which scrapes data from Facebook pages and public Facebook groups using the Facebook API. This includes the actual content of posts as well as their metadata and information about activity related to them (likes, comments, shares). Data were retrieved in April 2016 and covered the full period back to the creation of the respective groups and pages. A total of 18 603 posts were collected in this process. All of them were read to get a sense of the material, but we particularly focused our analysis on the time period lasting between nine months before and ten months after the Swedish election (September 2014), a time of raised political interest in the rural. In addition to the text based data, screen shots were used to gain insights into the design of the interface and the aesthetics of communication.

There is an ongoing discussion about research ethics in relation to online materials (Fossheim and Ingjerd, 2015; Lomborg and Bechmann, 2014). In this study, we only included pages and groups that were set as 'public', meaning that their content could be accessed without membership of any kind. Data from these public accounts is also made available by Facebook through their API. However, while content published online may be publicly

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