

“Is Sweden Finally Waking Up?”

Debating the 2018 Swedish National Election on 4chan

Emma Ricknell

Abstract

Today’s ever evolving media landscape offers a multitude of ways to consume and spread political information and opinions, especially in election times. Yet in this diverse media ecosystem, not all communication occurs in the public sphere. This study explores how the 2018 Swedish national election was discussed in a less accessible international online space associated with alt-right ideology and profoundly offensive content, with focus on how political positions were debated and expressed. The analytical approach applied sees participants in the discussions as members of an electronic tribe, which in turn is situated along an influential, yet often overlooked, hybridized flow of communication that defies previous models of analysis. Results suggest that while support for right-wing political parties and politics is prevalent on the site and is expressed using a common protocol, positions are also debated internally, sometimes adopted only to later be abandoned, highlighting the non-fixed, fleeting aspects of online existence.

Introduction

As the Internet started gaining ground in the early 2000s, the possibilities from a democratic perspective seemed endless. Via the Internet, the individual’s rights and freedom could be strengthened, participation and access to information broadened, and previously unthinkable opportunities for people to engage with each other across the globe would develop; in essence providing grounds for a democratic utopia (Papacharissi 2004). Considering the Internet’s ubiquitous presence in our contemporary lives, with its seemingly unlimited provision of information and ways to engage, it can be argued that a revival of the public sphere has indeed occurred (Blumler 2015, 2016).

Contrasting viewpoints have however also been voiced. Increased access to information and media and ways to connect with other people has not necessarily resulted in more freedom. Instead, the need to bring order to the chaos

Emma Ricknell works at the Department of Political Science, Linnæus University.
E-mail: emma.ricknell@lnu.se

has appeared, and is done by carving out one's own, personalized sliver of the web. When it comes to politically oriented media, the need for simplification can lead to individuals ending up in political realities parallel to each another where the same information and arguments bounce back and forth in "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018) or in a division between news-seekers and news-avoiders (Strömbäck et al. 2013). This development can in turn drive polarization of political views, even weaken social cohesion in society that could have far-reaching consequences for citizen's views on the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Sunstein 2007; Bennett & Pfetsch 2018; Van Aelst et al. 2017). Whether revived or not, the public sphere is from this perspective fragmented, and increasingly so.

Of particular concern are anonymous arenas for online communication; arenas which may provide breeding ground for uncivil, sometimes extreme forms of online political expression, lacking personal consequences (Blumler 2015; Suler 2005). This paper dives into one of the central online spaces where such activity takes place today in an attempt to explore political engagement relating to a central event in citizens' democratic life, namely an election. Over many months in the run-up to the 2018 Swedish national election, intense debate and negotiations on political positions were held in a primarily English-speaking online space: the anonymous, discussion-based image board 4chan. 4chan, specifically its sub-forum "Politically Incorrect" ("/pol/"), is indeed widely associated with alt-right ideology, trolling culture and overall offensive content (e.g. Hawley 2017; Hine et al. 2017; Nagle 2017).

Previous research has demonstrated how /pol/ has been able to exert wide-spread influence on the rest of the Web by a mixture of cross-platform sharing of both mainstream and alternative media as well as significant amounts of original content in the form of memes, often those exhibiting hate to various degrees, and also "raiding" comment sections on the major social media platforms such as YouTube (Hine et al. 2017; Zannettou et al. 2017, 2018). The immediate issue when it comes to analyzing the site is thus that it defies simple divisions between mainstream, alternative and different forms of social media, coherent information flows and media logic. An analysis of the election-related discussions on /pol/ using a conventional approach based upon how interaction between political actors, media and the public has typically occurred would be hopelessly outdated.

This paper aims to bring a grain of order to our understanding of the activity emanating from /pol/ in the Swedish context by approaching the discussions centered upon the 2018 election using a framework adapted to the current digital era. From a wider perspective, the ambition is furthermore to bring to the surface an arguably very influential yet less accessible part of a greater, very complex flow of information and communication that characterizes our current Web. I am guided by two basic questions in my research. First, given

the overall alt-right context of /pol/ as shown by previous research, what political parties do the discussions regarding the Swedish election center upon? Secondly, given the level of influence online previous research has been able to document regarding /pol/, are the users on the forum organized? In other words, are the discussions on /pol/ indicative of users being part of a cohesive, politically oriented group that is able to influence the Web? To answer these questions, I use a unique dataset of discussion threads relating to Sweden on /pol/, covering a time period of about 12 months. I conduct a content analysis of a number of aspects relating to the discussions held surrounding the Swedish election, specifically mentions of political parties and attitudes toward such, as well as a categorization of the types of threads posted.

I view /pol/ as an online forum that exemplifies one corner of what Andrew Chadwick has labeled the “hybrid media system” (2013): a complex and diverse, constantly developing system that has appeared in the contemporary era of digital communication, that does not necessarily replace all aspects of the old system, but instead exhibits hybridization in the interaction between new and old. In the midst of this seemingly chaotic, fragmented media environment, I furthermore argue that /pol/ is an online space where electronic tribes (Adams & Smith 2008) can form, meaning aspects pertaining to participants’ sense of common purpose, anonymity and ephemerality and the entire architecture of the site can help provide insight into people’s engagements and convictions also in the most aggressive of online contexts, where political opinions expressed may be as pronounced as they are offensive, yet not necessarily fixed.

Related Work and Theoretical Framework

As humans, we tend so seek out social contexts, based upon a need for a sense of belonging. Such belonging now takes place online to varying degrees (Adams & Smith 2008), including on 4chan. The context in which this occurs is one where a cacophony of voices and choices confront the average Internet user on a daily basis, emanating from what Chadwick (2013) has described as a hybridized media system. In such a system, old and new media in various formats intermix, the voices of both public and private actors with a wide range of media platforms at their disposal are heard, and a multitude of ways to interact exist for the individual. A hybridized system moves analysis away from any kind of dichotomous idea of the role and impact of more established media sources as opposed to newer, primarily digital ones, highlighting interdependence and diversity rather than one replacing the other. Chadwick’s analytical approach has been argued to fit well with the current need for a reconceptualization of the mechanisms of today’s political communication, able as it is to integrate the above aspects (e.g. Blumler 2015; Bennett & Pfetsch 2018).

With this more comprehensive framework in mind, looking back at individual users, it is not surprising that individuals seek some sort of simplification and cohesion. In an attempt to conceptualize this on-going development, the concept *electronic tribes* has been introduced. Drawing upon the theories of neotribalism presented by French sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1996), Adams and Smith define an electronic tribe as “an exclusive, narrowly focused, network-supported aggregate of human beings in cyberspace who are bound together by a common purpose and employ a common protocol and procedure for the consensual exchange of information and opinions” (2008: 17). With basis in the idea that people join social groups oftentimes primarily to share information and exchange views and opinions in a mutually beneficial way, Adams and Smith see members of electronic tribes as bound by a common purpose and that over time begin to develop their own protocols, rituals and roles shaped by different technological solutions that facilitate interaction and information sharing (2008).

Adams and Smith highlight the technological aspects of electronic tribes by explaining that there are no advanced technological solutions required in order for such to form, but that the technology does have to be advanced enough to support a continuous flow of information as that is what defines the very essence of electronic tribes. Engaging in this flow is described as “storytelling”, meaning the practice of members of the electronic tribe addressing each other in the form of questions, engaging in discussions and together offering solutions. As part of the ingrained want for humans to communicate with each other and to be part of a greater whole, engaging in such storytelling in an electronic tribe becomes particularly important when there is a sense of on-going threat, such as a natural disaster, or when people find themselves in a marginalized position in society (Adams & Smith 2008: 18).

One might however question whether there is merit in introducing a concept such as electronic tribe, as it seems to be simply a synonym of “community”. Adams and Smith (2008) however argue that although there may be similar characteristics shared between the two, communities tend to be larger and also connected to geography in some way. Furthermore, electronic tribes are not particularly stable, compared to a more traditional community in civil society. They are instead characterized by fluidity and ephemerality; electronic tribes can form only to disperse again, similar to how identities existing primarily online contain some aspect of being transitory or provisional (Adams & Smith 2008: 17-18).

4CHAN AS AN ELECTRONIC TRIBE

Applying the concept of electronic tribes to the study of /pol/ is suitable for a number of reasons. First, there is the above characteristic of ephemerality, identified in previous research conducted on 4chan as one of its most

prominent features (Bernstein et al. 2011; Knuttila 2011; Hine et al. 2017; Zannettou et al. 2018). The ephemeral, fleeting nature of interactions on 4chan forms as interaction is based upon a fast-paced, constant flow of new threads, meaning very few users end up even viewing the same web page at the same time (Knuttila 2011). Threads are also removed once the catalog limit of each board is reached, much like a bulletin-board which gets full; sometimes a thread lasts only a few minutes, other times for hours, and are comprised of a combination of comments and images. Once a thread on /pol/ is pushed out it is moved to a short-term official archive where threads in their final state are stored up to a week (Zannettou et al. 2018). In other words, 4chan stands in stark contrast to traditional social media such as Facebook and Twitter, where actions made by users persist over time, making user behavior more transparent (Knuttila 2011).

Another prominent characteristic of 4chan that stands in great contrast to traditional social media is anonymity. This characteristic adds to the applicability of electronic tribes to 4chan, as more fixed, continuous identities of the users are absent in a forum marked by fluidity. The flag feature on /pol/, a small icon that appears with each post based upon IP location, does serve as a form of identifying feature and is meaningful in terms of connecting with the topics discussed, yet comes with the important caveat that such flags can easily be altered using VPNs/proxies (Hine et al. 2017). While the anonymous feature arguably reduces the sense of personal responsibility and accountability, research shows conflicting results regarding its effect on online behavior, such as in regards to aspects of aggression, credibility and participation (Bernstein et al. 2011; Hine et al. 2017). However, the first large-scale study conducted on /pol/ by Hine et al. (2017) is clear in its assessment that /pol/ is home to a significant part of the hate available online; hate which as mentioned above spreads over to traditional social media such as YouTube and Twitter via extensive link sharing and “raiding” of comment sections. Journalist Angela Nagle succinctly describes the kind of environment the 4chan culture of anonymity since the site’s inception in 2003 has fostered as one users go to “air their darkest thoughts” (Nagle 2017:17). Moderation on 4chan can furthermore be considered as very lax (Hine et al. 2017), further allowing for more or less any kind of content.

Finally, viewing 4chan through the lens of electronic tribes highlights the way users on 4chan communicate not only by using the written word, but via images, videos, or a combination of image and text, also known under the term *memes*. Originally coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), a meme can be seen as analogous to a gene in that it replicates, can mutate through user recreation and spread through the dissemination of large numbers of online users, sometimes resulting in viral reach and entering popular culture (Zannettou et al. 2018). Memes are frequently humorous and ironic

and can often contain multiple layers of information and symbolism that can be specific to the online social group, or electronic tribe, providing a medium through which users can communicate and relate to one another as a group (Adams & Smith 2008).

The concept of electronic tribes has to the author's knowledge not previously been applied to 4chan and /pol/, but instead when analyzing online sport fan groups (e.g. Norman 2014) and gamer culture (e.g. Servais 2015). Such topics are however also discussed on the many sub-forums available on 4chan beyond /pol/, and such engagement can be considered as being part of the same pattern of contemporary online behavior of creating one's own media- and information diet. A final aspect connected to /pol/ has however been heavily publicized in recent years, namely the presence of alt-right ideology.

THE ALT-RIGHT CONTEXT

The term "alt-right" can be described as "an ideological island that hosts (all at once) a joke shop, a meme factory, media influencers, a Neverland for lost boys who feel disempowered or a dangerous sociopolitical movement – depending on who you ask" (Collins 2017). While there are studies that suggest that the alt-right movement, which gained significant momentum around 2013 (Hawley 2017) is indeed non-cohesive, even complex (Phillips & Yi 2018) and thus defies a simplistic definition (Heikkilä 2017), analysis of the content on /pol/ indicates that the board exhibits the racist, hateful, xenophobic and socially conservative sentiments generally associated with the alt-right (Hawley 2017; Hine et al. 2017). The inclusion of "meme factory" in the quote furthermore refers to the prolific use of memes on forums like 4chan, where the factory produces many witty and humorous memes, yet at the same time also those carrying very negative, hateful or racist messages (Zannettou et al. 2018).

The alt-right profile of /pol/ forms an overarching context for viewing its users as members of an electronic tribe, but also illustrates /pol/'s position within the hybrid media system as identified by Chadwick (2013). Based upon a large-scale analysis of 4chan posts, Zannettou et al. (2017) show that 4chan is responsible for a large number of both mainstream and alternative news links posted to Twitter, where the latter category contains a number of sources commonly associated with the alt-right, such as *breitbart.com*, *rt.com* and *infowars.com*. In combination with the prolific production and spread of memes that eventually become part of contemporary internet culture (Zannettou et al. 2018), activity and engagement on /pol/ as an electronic tribe can from an analytical standpoint benefit from keeping in mind the greater context of our contemporary hybrid media system, thereby ensuring that an online space like /pol/'s role and function is neither disregarded, nor overlooked.

Data and Research Design

Lacking a long-term formal digital archive searchable by means typically available for online forums, news sites, blogs, social media etc., threads on /pol/ board were collected via the site's short-term archive on a daily basis starting in mid-November of 2017. The search word "swed" was used to capture the threads which contained any reference to Sweden in the top post which initiates each new thread. Thus not able to collect every single comment on /pol/ where Sweden is referred to, this inclusion criterion is nevertheless able to capture all relevant threads, thereby enabling documentation of a near complete picture of the discussions. A similar method was applied by Colliver et al. (2018).

The collection method rendered 5,555 threads from November 17, 2017 to November 30, 2018 of which 831 were related to the September 2018 election. The sub-collection of election-related threads ended on September 25, 2018, when the last such thread was posted. The total collection of threads on /pol/ represents 277,071 comments containing 69,910 images; the election-related threads 67,806 comments containing 18,550 images. On average, Swedish-related threads on /pol/ generated 49.8 comments; for election-related threads the average was 81.6. The starting date for the data during the third week of November, 2017, was chosen due to an impactful election-related political event generating significant activity, namely the publication of the Swedish Democrats' election campaign video on YouTube.

In contrast to previous research specifically using data from 4chan (e.g. Hine et al. 2017), and indeed to much of contemporary research involving human-generated online data that can be analyzed via big data methodology, this paper analyzes a relatively small sample over a longer time period. It also approaches the data more closely in contrast to automated methods. The main reason for this approach is that automated analysis of this type of material comes with significant difficulties. Not only is the material very varied, consisting of written comments, hyperlinks and videos, images in multiple forms such as memes, photos, screenshots and more. Added difficulty comes with the fact that memes themselves often contain text, oftentimes multilayered in terms of meaning (Zannettou et al. 2018). The material furthermore contains extensive jargon, abbreviated or modified words, Internet slang, humor and sarcasm, further complicating an automated approach. While a wholly automated analysis is not impossible, a different approach considering the limited size of the material was chosen.

As the aim in this paper deals with grasping general patterns of the content of the election-related threads, this study uses a content analysis with a mixed methods approach. Content analysis has been defined as a "research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff 2004: 18), allowing for analysis

of frequencies of different types of categories in a larger empirical material containing not only text but also visual media. Of central concern using this approach are aspects of validity and replicability referenced in the quote, raising the importance of quantification of appropriate units, operationalization of theoretical concepts and ensuring quality in the coding process (Krippendorff 2004).

When analyzing the election-related threads, three elements were considered. First, the entire thread itself was identified as one main unit separated from a greater collection of threads on /pol/. Secondly, the very first post in a thread was seen as one type of sub-unit as such posts initiate for example a discussion and thus over time, can be categorized based upon its content. Third, subsequent posts, which can contain text, images, or a combination of both, comprised a second type of sub-unit. With basis in these units, the following coding process was conducted.

As an initial step, threads were coded as being election-related based upon the content of the thread-initiating post, which also comprises the title of the entire thread. Considering the constant flow of threads that characterizes the board, gaining attention to one's own thread requires some clarity wherefore titles often make explicit reference to the election, such as "swedish election", "This year is election in Sweden" or "Nationalists lead the polls in Sweden". For the less obvious threads with titles such as "A Hope for Sweden?", "Sweden NO" or "Will they actually do it?", the election had to emerge in the subsequent text of the thread-initiating post in order to be included as election related.

Lacking a variety of previous research on this type of material, especially research that applies a very close, non-automated analysis, the process of operationalizing measurable indicators from the identified election-related threads was in large part based upon testing and evaluating different possible alternatives in samples of the material. Using a combination of analysis of the content of the two thread sub-units, addressing the first research question regarding attention to the different political parties in Sweden thus entailed 1) a count of party mentions in all posts and 2) a categorization of attitude (favorable or non-favorable) towards a party or combination of parties, meaning multiple favorable or unfavorable attitudes can be present in the same post. Together, this part of the analysis aims to operationalize an analysis of a common purpose among the participants. An electronic tribe formed on a forum with a documented alt-right presence is expected to center discussions primarily on the political options corresponding to such a profile, meaning the Swedish Democrats (SD), but also the party which formed in the election year, Alternative for Sweden (AfS), along with the Nordic Resistance Movement (Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen; NMR). However, activity is not expected to be generated by the *same* group of anonymous individuals who hold the same, fixed opinions over time. The ephemeral nature of existing on /pol/ means that

users may fluctuate in activity over time, which may have an overall impact on the results.

The second research question pertained to investigating the cohesiveness of the discussions and in an extension, the group of participants as a whole, specifically analyzing engagement in storytelling via a common protocol. This means that participants are expected to frequently ask each other questions about the election, initiate election-related discussions and try to come up with answers and solutions together, and that the threads are not characterized entirely by randomness, despite the seemingly chaotic flow of threads on the site. Coding was in this case based upon the categories presented in a content typology analysis in a previous study by Bernstein et al. (2011) of the board /b/ on 4chan, but adapted to better fit the material. The full coding scheme is available in the Appendix.

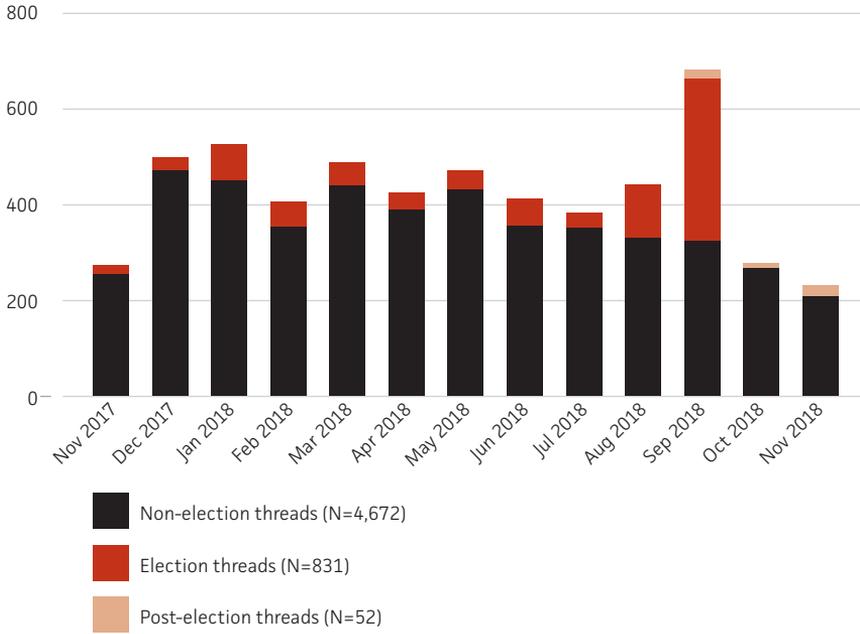
Ethical Considerations

Using data from online forums comes with ethical considerations. While access to 4chan requires neither login nor registration, and, most importantly, posts are anonymous barring the flag feature as mentioned above, participants may still not consider their discussions to be public. However, due to participation being anonymous, obtaining consent is by default practically impossible. On the other hand, the anonymity feature, the openness of the forum, and the fact that /pol/ alone can generate 216,000 discussion threads (corresponding to 8 million posts) in a span of two-and-a-half months (Hine et al. 2017), nevertheless point to the board being of a public nature, and the users being fully aware of such being the case. Furthermore, there are no attempts made in this paper to de-anonymize or map opinions of specific individuals, nor does the coding involve any type of tracking that would pose a risk to personal integrity.

Results

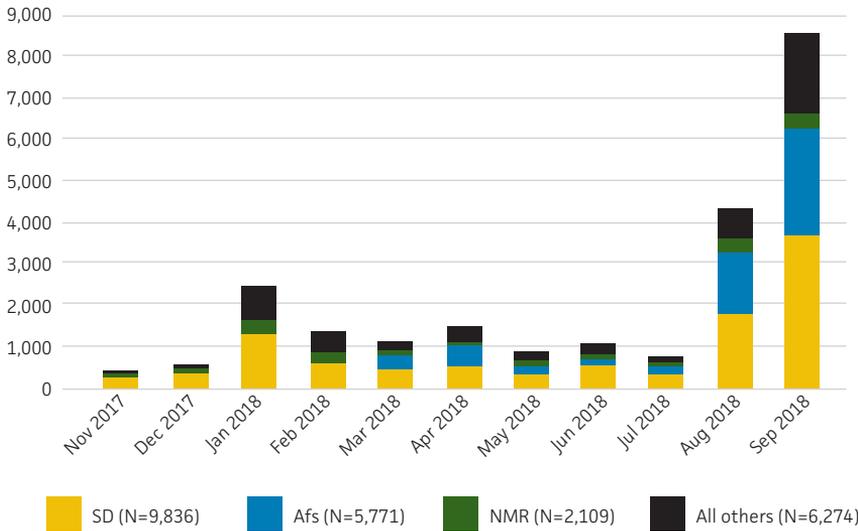
Figure 1 illustrates the overall activity on /pol/ during the selected time period, starting on November 17, 2017. Threads mentioning Sweden total around 300-500 per month up until the election when there is a great increase in activity, and at which time the number of election-related threads make up about half of all the Sweden-related threads in that month. As threads relating directly to the election stop by the end of September, overall activity also slows down.

Figure 1. Swedish Election- and Post-Election-Related Threads in Proportion to the Total Number of Threads on /pol/ Referencing Sweden by Month



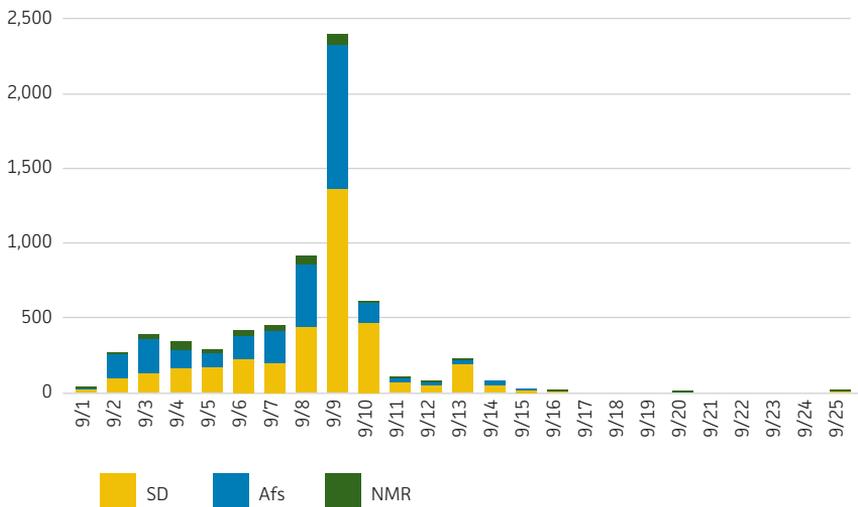
The question is, whether there is a pattern in how the discussions in the election-related threads engaged in political discussions referencing political parties, as well as expressing either favorable or unfavorable sentiments towards them. Figure 2 provides an indication of the first aspect, namely which political parties generated the most engagement among the participants. The count of party mentions shows that the three parties SD, AfS and NMR consistently appear in thread posts, albeit at differing levels over time, with NMR garnering limited interest compared to the other two. This result confirms the expectation that these three parties engage participants on /pol/ the most. Considering however that SD is a party that has been represented in the Swedish parliament (the Riksdag) since 2010 and both AfS and NMR sought to enter the Riksdag for the very first time in 2018, AfS having been launched only seven months before the election, the number of mentions of AfS is very disproportionate.

Figure 2. Mentions of Political Parties in Swedish Election-Related Threads on /pol/ by Month



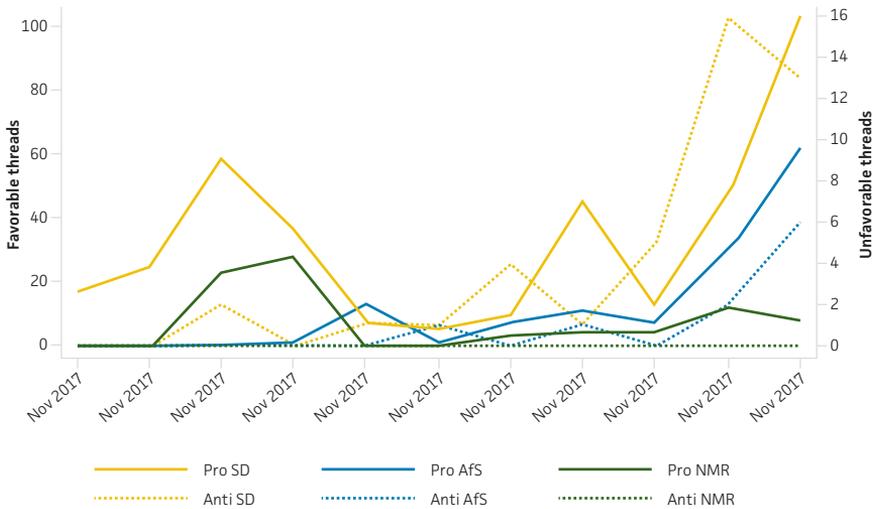
During the two most intense months, August and September, the three parties SD, Afs and NMR combined make up 83% and 77% of all the mentions of political parties. A closer look at engagement during the month of the election (September 1st-25th) provided in Figure 3 shows the intensity of mentions of the parties during September 8th, 9th (day of the election) and 10th, only for that intensity to decrease rather dramatically a few days later.

Figure 3. Mentions of SD, Afs and NMR in Swedish Election-Related Threads on /pol/ During September 1st-25th



Further mapping of the political engagement on /pol/ is provided in Figure 4, where counts of favorable (left hand side Y-axis) and unfavorable (right hand side Y-axis) threads are displayed over time. Starting with SD, the results indicate that favorable opinions expressed in thread-initiating posts fluctuate greatly over time. Prior to September and the election, there are two peaks in the data, one in January and one in June; a result which will be discussed below in the content typology analysis results. Between those two peaks, in the month of March, AfS was launched, potentially resulting in more threads favoring that party compared to SD, yet by the month of the election, threads expressing positive sentiments towards SD skyrocket. Threads expressing positivity toward AfS also increase significantly in September, after having remained at a more stable level compared to SD in the months leading up to the election. NMR is in this context peripheral and around the time AfS is launched loses almost all attention. When it comes to threads expressing criticism against either one of the three parties, such criticism is mainly concentrated to the months of August and September and primarily pertain to SD. A total of 29 thread-initiating posts contain unfavorable views on SD during those two months, compared to 150 favorable.

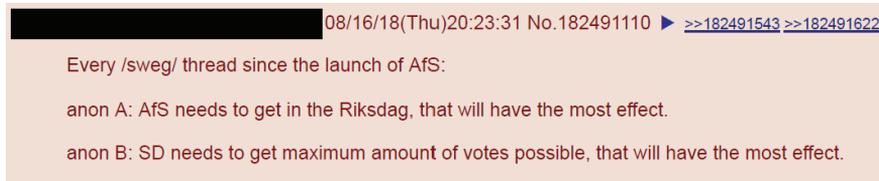
Figure 4. Attitudes Toward SD, AfS and NMR in Thread-Initiating Posts on /pol/ by Month



Typical critical opinions regarding SD consist of claiming that the party is “controlled opposition”, or that the party’s policies are not going “far enough”, making one poster state that “They’re literally just lefties at this point.” Critical views towards AfS consist of opinions that AfS is splitting the nationalist vote, stating that AfS is “troll bait to lower SD votes”, or that “AfS destroying the chances for a Swedish right wing coalition government.” What the favorable

and unfavorable views shown in Figure 4 of the political parties expected to receive the most attention provide is an illustration of the negotiations that occurred on /pol/ regarding which party should be promoted, potentially ultimately be voted on. As noted by Colliver et al. (2018), this time period is marked by intense strategic voting discussions. As the election draw closer, the suggestion is often to place the vote with SD in the 2018 election, and AfS in the next election, while others highlight that change is desperately needed, meaning AfS should be premiered. In mid-August, one user summarizes the discussions on strategic voting since the launch of AfS accordingly, clearly illustrating how the common, overall aim is to achieve an "effect":

Figure 5. Excerpt from Comment Posted on /pol/ August 16, 2018



While joined in a sense of purpose in promoting the election of political parties that can have the biggest effect – in this case, to change the course of Sweden’s trajectory towards falling apart primarily due to current immigration policies – many of the posters on /pol/ express alienation, often contrasting themselves to “normies”, i.e. “normal”, “conventional” people. Under such circumstances, seeing /pol/ as an electronic tribe where people who feel marginalized may end up, the expectation was thus that individuals on /pol/ engage in the constant flow on the board in a storytelling fashion, trying to help each other out, debating differences of opinion and coming up with solutions to problems. The results from the analysis of the content typology of the election-related threads as summarized in Table 1 indeed show that the three most common types of threads, together representing three out of four threads in total, are those that initiate discussions, share content with others and are composed according to a repeating theme. This is similar to the content types found on another subforum on 4chan with the exception that discussions are more common on /pol/ (Bernstein et al. 2011).

Table 1. Content Typology of Swedish Election-Related Threads on /pol/ Nov 2017–Sept 2018. Examples and Frequency.

Type	Examples	%
1) Themed	THIS IS WHERE THE FIGHT FOR EUROPE BEGINS. On the 9th September, Sweden is going to have a general election. This may be the last chance Sweden has to stop itself from falling over the edge before it's too late. After years of the establishment turning their country from a paradise on earth into the rape capital of Europe, the immigration issue is at the forefront of every Sven's mind. We need to keep it there.	24%
2) Sharing content	Swedish nationalist party tells the liberals and social democrats who really carries responsibility for the situation in Sweden in a new awesome video. ----- This is our new populist party in Sweden, they are truly / our guys/. We truly aren't cucks anymore. ----- Swedish electoral debate in 2 minutes /.../ Come one come all and watch the world's most underqualified politicians shout useless platitudes at each other in a language you don't understand. Surely there cannot be a better use of your time!	23%
3) Question, advice or recommendation	decide my vote in the swedish election ----- Did Sweden Democrats win. And how much votes did AfS get. I don't trust the sites i am looking at so I'm asking here for election results.	11%
4) Discussion	Sweden is falling into pieces. We need to get these fucking radicals out of this country! What do you guys think?? #SD2018 ----- Swedish Democrat Nazi Party are going to win the elections in Sweden i hope you are happy with yourselves /pol/ ----- Is Sweden finally waking up?	27%
5) Self-reference	Sweden is officially dead, another 4 years of turkniggers, another 4 years of wasted tax dollars, another 4 years of cuckery. Just fucking kill me /pol/.	1%
6) Request for content	NEED SWEDISH MEMES I wanna help get AfS to 4% in the Swedish election. I have an Instagram of about 100k followers, so when I post it will reach pretty far.	>1%
7) Request for action	A new political party "Alternative for Sweden" wants to do Sweden great again and now need your help! ----- if you are active on social media then begin shilling for AfS (Alternative For Sweden) remember, /pol/ is a NRM board BUT AfS ultimately have to be pushed to punish the faggots in SD LOVE NRM, VOTE AFS !	11%
8) Other	Russia you better not fuck this up. Sweden deserves a break from all of this	2%

Note: Table adapted from Bernstein et al. (2011).

The themed threads are of particular importance as the content analysis resulted in only one specific type of themed thread, namely those generally titled “/SWEG/ Swedish Election General” by the poster. These threads mirror the appearance of those that appeared on 4chan in the run-up to the 2017 elections in Germany and France (Colliver et al. 2018) and together with the threads requesting content and action illustrate an attempt to organize efforts for change around the common purpose of the group, or, provide strategies for solving a perceived problem. For example, when asked a direct question regarding which political party the SWEG threads favor, the original poster responds per below, illustrating the common goal of promoting a specific overarching ideology, albeit not a specific political party:

Figure 6. Excerpt from a SWEG Thread Posted on /pol/ April 26, 2018



While Colliver et al. (2018) were not able to document any significant impact online of these themed threads, they make up a significant proportion of the total number of election-related threads (202 out of 831). Throughout the period of time under study in this paper, the SWEG threads provide updated overviews of the current situation in terms of news, resources such as links, memes etc. meant for sharing, and encourage others to supply the same. A form of common procedure and protocol, serving the same purpose, is thus over time developed. These types of threads also serve as a way of countering the ephemeral aspects of the image board, a way to continue the discussion in a coordinated way (Bach et al. 2019).

Regarding the peaks found in Figure 4 above when it comes to threads posted that are favorable towards SD, the peak in January is largely due to the significant number of SWEG threads posted during that month (47 out of the 202 total SWEG threads); each thread promoting SD. This type of thread furthermore explains the higher count in threads favorable to NMR during this month, as NMR is mentioned as an alternative to support. As these types of threads are not posted as often by the month of March, and perhaps in combination with the launch of AfS this month, positive sentiments towards NMR decline significantly. The content typology analysis can also aid in the analysis of the second peak in thread-initiating posts promoting SD. Out of the 45

threads which favor SD posted in June, eight are SWEG threads and 16 consist of threads of the second category, meaning those that share election-related content primarily for purposes of providing information. A common theme among the content-sharing threads is poll results; such having been particularly positive for SD in June (SVT Nyheter 2018).

Figure 7. Example of the Beginning of a /SWEG/ Thread (accompanying image omitted)

/SWEG/ Sweden election general - we made the news edition
[REDACTED]

08/26/18(Sun)18:13:55 No.183571086

[▶ >>183574699 >>183579101 >>183561011 >>183561648 >>183561938 >>183584326 >>183592942 >>183598911 >>183599196 >>183600889](#)

Ok /pol/ the official election campaign has now begun in sweden. We have little over a mnth left of meme making and online campaigns left. Let's make it fucking count, and not sit around on our asses! Let's fucking save Sweden!

Danish fake news media just wrote and article about us! They are getting scared! The article includes hillarius statemnts such a"What is a meme" "What is a hatefact" and "The movement is foreign and lead by a Englishman". It also features several juicy skurt memes

We have grown to the point that the mainstream is writing about us. Keep it going lads!

NEWS
 >Danish fake news media write a hit piece about how "right wing radicals" use Jonatan Spang as propaganda. He responds by saying he dosen't pick sides and eouraged people to "Vote for me as comedian of the year if you like radical nazi humor"
 /ourguy/ confirmed
<https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/hoejreradikale-bruger-jonatan-spang-i-svensk-valgkamp>

Yet as much space that the SWEG threads occupy in the data, along with the other major categories of election-related threads that encouraged engagement and the exchange of ideas among the participants during the studied time period, especially as the election grew closer as illustrated in Figure 1, the same figure also shows how overall activity starts to drop after the election. While the discussions regarding the election and its result dissipate toward the end of September, discussions regarding the then on-going government formation negotiations take over. A closer look at this activity is shown in Figure 8, where counts of party mentions in the post-election threads are displayed.

Figure 8. Mentions of Political Parties in Post-Election Threads on /pol/ by Month

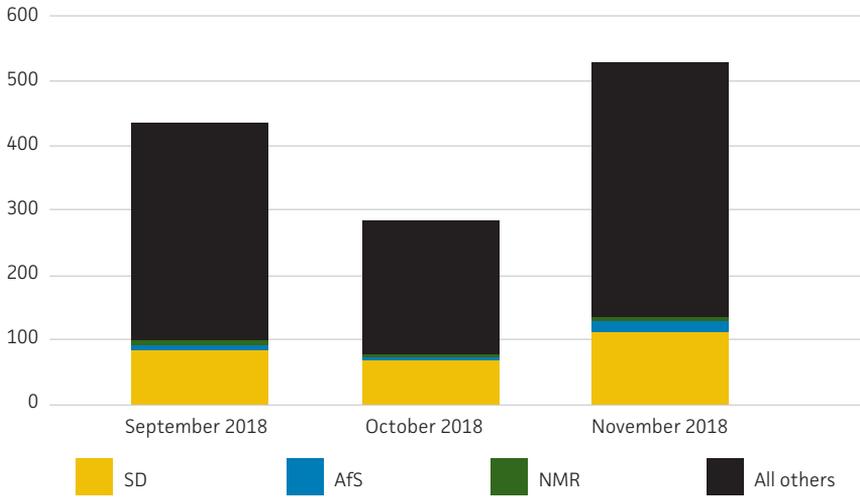
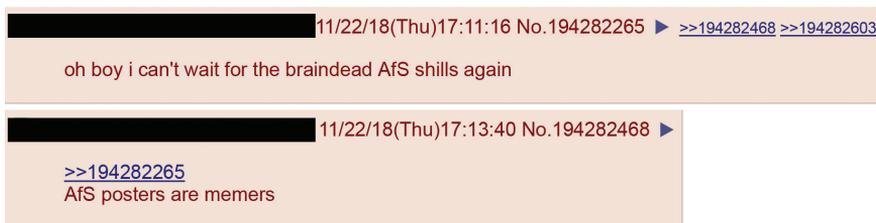


Figure 8 clearly shows that not only is the drop in activity significant in terms of discussions that pertain to parties once the election is over, but in the mentions that pertain to the post-election situation, as parties other than the trio of SD, AfS and NMR receive the majority of the attention in terms of mentions. Heightened activity around an election on a forum that discusses politics is to be expected, as are discussions regarding political parties involved in an on-going government formation process. However, the results in party mentions suggest that there may also be transitory aspects at play if an electronic tribe focused in large part on AfS was formed leading up to the election, only to dissolve or disperse again, in line with the ephemeral feature present on /pol/. Indeed, once the idea of Sweden being forced to hold a new election after a seeming deadlock in government formation negotiations arises by the month of November, opinions regarding AfS such as those shown below begin to appear, completely dismissing promoters of AfS having occupied significant space on the forum only a few months prior.

Figure 9. Excerpt from Post-Election Thread on /pol/ Posted November 22, 2018



Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, an attempt has been made to offer insight into an online space located far from the public sphere where discussions on the 2018 Swedish national election were held among anonymous participants on a primarily English-speaking image board. The results provide an overview of attention to and attitudes towards the main parties of interest to the participants in the discussions, both before and after the election, and also how the participants interact within the confines of the architecture and technological features of the location of the discussions. While the results unequivocally show that the political interests of the participants on /pol/ seen as a group are located to the far right, attention and support for the main political parties in question, the Sweden Democrats (SD), Alternative for Sweden (AfS) and Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR), can fluctuate over time both in relation to each other and the other Swedish political parties. These political alternatives are furthermore intensively debated internally in the context of a national election.

Viewed through the lens of electronic tribes, highlighting in particular the ephemerality of existing in a space like /pol/, the idea put forth in this study is that political positions expressed there are not to be seen as fixed. Instead, affected by living in a time of overwhelming access to new media and information in a hybridized media system, members may join the tribe in search for belonging, identifying with the common purpose expressed among the members and adopting common ways of interacting via the means possible on the platform, only to leave, or disinvest in the act of promoting certain ideas and opinions. This also means that it is difficult to see a place like /pol/ as an expression of a cohesive political conviction, organized and stable, despite the fact that there are some discernable patterns visible in the activity generated by many of the participants following a common procedure and protocol. Considering the fleeting, non-fixed aspects of the activity among the participants, the findings also bring attention to the possibilities of being able to negotiate political positions. So called “filter bubbles” may form, but may also be porous enough to allow for the inclusion of different viewpoints over time.

The perspective presented in this paper can be applied to other online environments, particularly those which feature anonymity and ephemerality. Yet because such features are present, navigation and ultimately understanding of such environments requires a level of literacy into the ways communication occurs, including via memes and through certain typologies of discussion threads as those documented in the above analysis, and also the general structure and flow of a site, which can vary greatly but will impact interactions. Not expanding analysis beyond traditional channels however risks missing a growing number of citizens located in part elsewhere, sometimes in very dark, far less accessible corners of the Internet. This is in turn symptomatic of a significant gap in our understanding of the role these kinds of sites play in

the greater, incredibly complex flow of information and communication online today, although as demonstrated in this paper, can be rectified by applying an updated, integrated approach such as that proposed by Chadwick (2013).

Lastly, the current study is limited in the sense that it does not offer an in-depth analysis of the discussions regarding the 2018 Swedish national election. Election-related threads are also only part of the discussions held regarding Sweden during the selected time period. More extensive analysis involving automated techniques able to manage both text and images can provide a fuller picture of the different nuances of the discussions and different political positions negotiated and debated. While 4chan, despite its considerable influence on online culture, is still considered “fringe” (see e.g. Zannettou et al. 2018), it nevertheless plays a part in the contemporary media- and information landscape characterized by the ever-growing complexity as discussed in this paper, thus warranting research attention.

Appendix

CODING SCHEME

Main unit: *Election-related threads (including post-election threads)*

Qualifier for inclusion: Thread-initiating post contains mentions of at least one of the following:

Indicator	Examples
Swedish political parties*	New election video from Sweden democrats ---- This is our new populist party in Sweden
Party leaders of Swedish political parties	Can Jimmie save us? ---- Sweden’s Prime Minister is a joke
References to the election, such as polls or results	Men Vote to Save Sweden, Women Vote to Destroy It ---- Swedish government Deadlocked
References to the election aftermath, government formation negotiations starting in late September 2018	Sweden one step closer to re-election ---- Communist party leader threatens to save Sweden

*Mentions of Swedish political parties refers to mentions of the party’s full name or abbreviation, slang or jargon, e.g. “moderaterna”, “M” “the moderates”, “the conservative party”, “the cuckservative party”, as well as by images (e.g. by party symbol, picture of party leader).

Sub-unit 1: Thread-initiating posts

Indicator	Coding	Examples
1) Thread ID	Format: 2oYYMMDD-001	
2) Attitudes towards parties	1) Pro SD 2) Anti SD 3) Pro AfS 4) Anti AfS 5) Pro NMR 6) Anti NMR 7) Anti either one of SD, AfS, NMR, or all, pro another party 8) None of SD, AfS, NMR mentioned, pro another party/parties 9) None of SD, AfS, NMR mentioned, anti another party/parties 10) Pro one of SD, AfS, NMR, anti another party/parties 11) No parties mentioned	Nationalist Sweden Democrats Are Set to WIN Next Month's Elections!!! ---- SD is not based and will not save Sweden ---- This is the man that will save Sweden. ---- Facism's loss in Sweden's elections ---- The Socialdemocratic party is Swedens only hope ---- Swedish PM reveals power levels ---- Why are Moderaterna and KD retarded?
3) Content type	Type	Description
	1) Themed	A themed series of posts formatted in a reoccurring way, using similar text and images etc.
	2) Sharing content	Post offering election-related content for comment or simply to click on, usually accompanied by a brief introduction. Commonly contains link(s) to election-related news stories/videos or information.
	3) Question, advice or recommendation	Asking for advice relating to the election (such as what to vote for, how to vote from overseas or if ballots are missing), or a more general question regarding who is winning the election, what a poll result or the election result could mean.
	4) Discussion	Usually in addition to sharing content, such as a meme, posting an opinion, sentiment or argument, encouraging or inciting discussion about an election-related topic.
	5) Self-reference	Thread started by referencing oneself, including some personal information or anecdote relating to the election.
	6) Request for item	Starting a thread to request content, such as memes, previous threads or for a thread to be started.
	7) Request for action	Posting a call to action of some sort, for example to share and repost news, memes or videos relating to the election but also other types of actions such as to print posters. Oftentimes addressing the community itself, by using "we", "boys", or simply "/pol/".
	8) Other	Unable to categorize.

Sub-unit 2: Individual posts in thread

Indicator	Coding
Party mentions* (monthly basis)	0-3,427

*See note on page 459.

PARTIES INCLUDED IN THE ANALYSIS

Represented in parliament

- Centerpartiet (Centre Party), (C)
- Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats) (KD)
- Liberalerna (Liberals) (L)
- Miljöpartiet de gröna (Green Party) (MP)
- Moderata samlingspartiet (Moderate Party) (M)
- Socialdemokraterna (Swedish Social Democratic Party) (S)
- Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) (SD)
- Vänsterpartiet (Left Party) (V)

Others

- Alternativ för Sverige (Alternative for Sweden) (AfS)
- Feministiskt initiativ (Feminist Initiative) (FI/Fi/FI)
- Medborgerlig Samling (Citizens' Coalition) (MED)
- Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen (Nordic Resistance Movement), (NMR/NRM)

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