

Unveiling the radical right online

Exploring framing and identity in an online anti-immigrant discussion group

Abstract

Radical right online discussion groups have grown in importance in the Swedish political landscape, yet the dynamics of these groups are still poorly understood. Apart from their topical import, these groups provide a unique entrance to grassroots discourses of the radical right movement and the mechanisms for radical nationalist mobilization. In this paper, we present an analysis of the largest current anti-immigrant online discussion group in Sweden by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. We argue that this type of social media group needs to be approached as both a “counterpublic” within a wider public sphere and as a “free social space” for social movements. The analysis reveals that the use of external links in the group reflects an active negotiation of frames that both confirm and contradict those of the group, thereby challenging a simplistic understanding of the so-called “echo chamber” dynamics. A form of collective identity can be discerned, mainly through the opposition to various outgroups and through an implicit form of nationalism expressed through the concern of “sacred objects” typically perceived to be under threat.

Keywords: automated text analysis, online counterpublic, radical right, social media, social movement.

Introduction

On Mynttorget square in Stockholm, located near the Swedish Parliament Building, a small group of asylum-seeking Afghan youths began a protest on 6th August 2017 against deportations to Afghanistan. When they were attacked by the neo-Nazi group Nordic Youth two days later, the protesting youth were joined by around 600 supporters and marched to Medborgarplatsen Square in Södermalm, where they continued their demonstration. The developments were closely followed by radical right and anti-immigrant groups on social media.¹ In the Facebook group “Stand up for Sweden”

1 The choice of terms for characterizing these groups is complicated for several reasons. First, it is arguably impossible to find a politically neutral way of naming various groups and networks expressing opinions from the traditionalist, authoritarian and nationalist parts of the political spectrum (Hooghe, Marks & Wilson 2002) because there is often a value-laden discrepancy →

(”Stå upp för Sverige”) numerous indignant comments were posted regarding the Afghan protesters. On 14th August, one member announced that there would be a gathering on Medborgarplatsen in central Stockholm to protest against the presence of the Afghan youths, and a Facebook event was created, to which around 1500 people responded that they would join. In the forum, there were hundreds of comments regarding the event, including practical issues and suggested rules of conduct, as well as comments that built up the energy in preparation for the event. One poster wrote:

Turn out to a man, all friends of democracy, and show that we do not tolerate these arrogant asylum-fraudsters and the repulsive behaviour of their daft supporters! [...] Back Sweden! Back Stockholm! All of these criminal claims-machines out! This is not a strike, it is an invasion and we will stop it!

However, on 19th August, only 100 counter-demonstrators with Swedish flags turned up on the square and were outnumbered by around a 1000 supporters of the protesting Afghans, carrying pictures of hearts. The counter-demonstration, originally planning to be silent, became louder when the police prevented them from coming closer to their designated adversaries. Participants started to shout at the Afghans, using words like “vermin” and “parasites”. A journalist from the major Stockholm newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* relates that a female participant shouted, “I hope you will be raped like animals!” (Bouvin & Dragic 2017). In the end, the counter-demonstrators withdrew without any physical confrontation between the groups.

This incident is illustrative in several respects. Apart from the strikingly hateful language by seemingly ordinary citizens, the respective mobilizations of counter-demonstrators and supporters of the Afghan youth are telling in terms of the different mobilization capacities of groups and networks broadly associated with the right and left in a Swedish political context. Internationally speaking, radical right and anti-immigrant movements have had an upsurge in protest mobilization, with some strikingly large demonstrations, including the PEGIDA² demonstrations in Germany (cf. Dostal 2015) and the international gatherings at the Polish Independence Day marches (Hockenos 2017). In Sweden at the time of writing, similar numerically large street protests have been absent, and even though there were attempts at also creating a PEGIDA mobilization in Sweden, it never took off beyond a few gatherings of handfuls of people (Berntzen & Weisskircher 2016). However, from an online perspective, the

→ between their participants’ own labels and those assigned to them by outside commentators. Second, there is a range of opinions that varies both between, and often within, the counterpublics, groups and networks. In this article, we have chosen to characterize the social media group of our study as “anti-immigrant” and its broader milieu as the “radical right” following scholars such as Rydgren (2007). Here, the term “radical right” is regarded as synonymous with “extreme right” (cf. Mudde 1996). Groups and organizations that clearly warrant a more radical label, such as “neo-Nazi” are termed as such.

2 Acronym for “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes”: English: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West.

relationship between the radical left and the radical right is almost the reverse, and the anti-immigration protesters on Medborgarplatsen comprise only the minuscule tip of an immense iceberg of activities on the Internet. Online there is a large number of active more or less explicitly radical right social media groups, discussion platforms, blogs and alternative media outlets (Dahlberg-Grundberg 2017; Holt 2017).

Despite the increasing interest among social scientists in the radical right both offline and online in Sweden and internationally, empirical research on the topic is still rather selective and fragmented. Studies on the radical right have typically focused on political parties, elections and established organizations, analysing easily accessible data such as formal documents, websites and speeches (e.g. Atton 2006; Caiani, Della Porta & Wagemann 2012; Caiani & Parenti 2009). With a few notable exceptions, there is little research on the grassroots radical right and the role of social media within the radical right milieu (e.g. Askanius & Mylonas 2015; Ekman 2014; Farkas 2017; Schou & Neumayer 2017; Törnberg & Törnberg 2016b).

This paper aims to contribute empirically by investigating the online radical right in a Swedish context, providing insight into activities of the participants of a discussion group and how together they make sense of themselves and the society around them. This arguably takes us towards a better understanding of how contemporary anti-immigrant movements and radical right groups and networks mobilize support for their opinions and worldviews. A deeper understanding of this kind of online space is of high relevance considering that the hatred they foster may play an (increasingly) important role in setting the tone of political discussions, but also to propel offline political action (Simi & Futrell 2015), possibly even contributing the current surges in anti-immigrant violence in Europe (Wahlström & Törnberg 2017).

This also points to a theoretical contribution of our study. Because radical right discussion groups are arenas for public discussion and opinion formation, in opposition to a wider mainstream public sphere, they can be appropriately conceptualized as *counterpublics* (Fraser 1992). Meanwhile, to the extent that they are also arenas for mobilizing political action in conflict with specific political opponents, for developing a collective identity and building interpersonal networks (della Porta & Diani 2006), they can also be theoretically perceived as spaces where radical right *movements* are created and maintained. Therefore, we argue that political social media groups can be analytically approached as both counterpublics within a wider public sphere and free social spaces for social movements. This calls for the integration of different strands of academic literature to understand better contemporary ways of “doing politics” that do not fit easily within pre-existing analytical categories.

Our empirical case is the above-mentioned *Stand up for Sweden*—the largest discussion group in Sweden, with a predominantly racist and anti-immigrant focus. With over 170,000 members at the time of data collection, it had almost as many members as all Swedish Parliamentary parties combined. Even though the membership threshold of this type of internet group is low (see below), its size nevertheless makes it a significant arena, and perhaps also a significant actor, in the contemporary Swedish political landscape. In contrast to formal political organizations, a discussion

group typically provides little in terms of party programmes and common ideological manifestos. Departing from Gillan's (2008) concept of *orientational frames* to capture the meaning-making activities of the group, we argue that these are best captured by studying patterns in a large sample of posts from the group. By scraping the Facebook group, we created a representative sample of all group discussions (in total around 200,000 posts), which was then analysed using a combination of quantitative tools and qualitative analysis, using various techniques such as word collocation analysis, inductive qualitative analysis and social network analysis.

In summary, we explore the dual function of this discussion group as a counterpublic as well as an arena for political mobilization and movement building. Therefore, our analysis is guided by research questions concerning both the relationship of the online counterpublic to the wider public, as well as the presence of frames that contribute to collective action:

- How do the participants within the group relate to the wider public sphere, and how is external information framed?
- Does the group have a distinct collective identity, and if so, how does it manifest through the discourses of the group?

Below, we start by providing a theoretical discussion centred on publics and counterpublics and how they are affected by information and communication technologies (ICT). Subsequently, we provide an overview of our particular case and describe how the empirical material was collected. We then analyse the data with a focus on framing and identity construction within the group.

Theoretical framework

Counterpublics and free social spaces

The public is a notoriously ambiguous concept. Common usage is to designate activities that are not private (or secret), i.e. activities that are visible to strangers and of collective concern (cf. Weintraub 1997). Among other things, public arenas offer the opportunity to voice opinions where they can be heard and disseminated. Related to the latter aspect is the notion of the public sphere, which is the standard point of departure for discussions about counterpublics.

It is hardly possible for contemporary discussions about the public sphere to escape the influence of Jürgen Habermas' seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), outlining the development of a bourgeois public sphere used as an ideal (desirable) type of public deliberation. Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (ibid.:105). Habermas' notion depicts an arena where discussions about the "common good" can be had on a rational basis without regard for the participants' identities or status. Many scholars have debated both the existence of anything like this ideal in

practice as well as the desirability of the kind of norms that Habermas argues should govern the public sphere (e.g. Calhoun 1992).

In a seminal essay, Nancy Fraser (1992) argues that because any public inevitably presupposes a specific range of cultural expressions, and therefore possible expressions of identity, there can be no overarching public that is equally inclusive of everyone. Fraser also points to the existence, as well as the desirability, of alternative publics, in particular, what she terms *subaltern counterpublics*, which she defines as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.” (Fraser 1992:123). Counterpublics are not just sites for the formation of opinion but also “arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” (ibid.).

Notably, counterpublics are not necessarily composed of individuals that are clearly subordinate in society. According to Warner (2002), a counterpublic as such is nevertheless subordinate in the sense that its conduct conflicts with the mainstream public. Nevertheless, Warner observes, there are aspects that a counterpublic shares with the broader public, such as the practice of speaking with an “address to indefinite strangers” (ibid.:86) without which it would not be a public but a bounded community.

Warner also argues that modern counterpublics can acquire a form of agency, but only in a sense captured by rather passive verbs like judge, scrutinize and decide. More active externally oriented verbs can only be linked to the agency of other collective entities like crowds, according to Warner. From a conceptual point of view, this assertion can be regarded as a matter of definition. A public may have opinions, but a collective that acts politically must be defined as something else. However, from an empirical point of view, we argue that the distinction between a public and a crowd or a social movement can be rather blurred, and perhaps increasingly so in the “digital age”.

Each new wave of media has fundamentally altered the structure and nature of the public. In the 20th century, broadcast media restructured publics by changing the ways in which information flowed and by supporting the formation of large collectives organized around a shared understanding of the world. At the same time, mass media characteristically position members of the public as passive consumers rather than participants. In recent years, networked media/social media have introduced yet another change by reorganizing how information flows and how people interact with information and each other. This has led to a typically higher degree of interactivity in public communication and sometimes in much larger collectives than previously, which has been referred to as *digital counterpublics* (Kuo 2016).

However, many observers have also raised concerns about the increasing segmentation and polarization of the public sphere, and a large share of people’s consumption of (and participation in) public communication takes place in virtual islands of public discourse where people hold widely divergent worldviews. The new ICTs, and in particular the structures of major social media platforms, have been claimed to lead to this political fragmentation through the formation of so-called “echo chambers” or algorithmically generated “filter bubbles”, where alleged lack of exposure to contrary opinions and truth claims makes people increasingly inhabit different social realities

(Jamieson & Cappella 2008; Sunstein 2002). In other words, an echo chamber is typically described as a situation where certain ideas, beliefs or data points are reinforced through repetition of a closed system that does not allow for the free movement of alternative or competing ideas or concepts. Another aspect of the growth of new social media as public(s) is the broad range of delimitations between the public and the private, from totally anonymous interactions in some discussion forums and comment threads to the sometimes rather personal nature of interactions on other social media sites.

Social movements and free social spaces in the digital age

Whereas the notions of public sphere and counterpublics are frequently used in the literature on social movements (e.g. della Porta 2013), we have found no entirely satisfactory theoretical elaboration of the relationship between these concepts. It is not our present ambition to provide a definitive statement on this. However, we provide some initial formulations that illustrate our reasons for bringing the concepts from social movement theory to bear on our empirical case.

In a frequently cited formulation, Diani (1992:13) defines a social movement as “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity”. In short, the crucial components here are network, conflict and collective identity. As we saw in the discussion above, the notion of a counterpublic (including digital counterpublics) tends to focus on the construction of identity and the formation of opinions that are (perceived to be) in conflict with those dominant in society. However, in line with Warner’s (2002) arguments about the presumed limits to the forms of agency that we might ascribe to publics, most applications of this concept do not directly relate to direct conflict or mobilizations for various forms of protest. Using a distinction in social movement theory, conceptualized by Klandermans (1984), one might say the typical activities associated with counterpublics concern *consensus mobilization*, that is, creating support for certain perspectives on an issue. However, the literature on counterpublics seldom relates directly to what Klandermans terms *action mobilization*, that is, making those who agree on an issue take joint action to address their grievances.

The social movement literature has historically investigated similar phenomena to counterpublics under names such as *free social spaces* (Evans 1979), *social movement communities* (Buechler 1990), *safe spaces* (Gamson 1996) *cultural laboratories* (Taylor & Whittier 1999), *submerged networks* (Melucci 1989, 1996), *abeyance structures* (Taylor 1989), and more recently, *dense sub-cultural networks* (Diani 2013). As Polletta (1999:1) has argued, these terms typically refer to “small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization”.

Accordingly, these spaces serve not only as shelters against repression and the dominating hegemonic ideologies of the surrounding society but also provide mobilizing

functions in the sense of providing a space for developing strategies, sharing information, evaluating tactics, fostering public speaking skills, creating campaigns and training leaders. The notion of free social spaces has typically been used to describe small-scale settings in the offline world, including for instance the working-class cafés in the French revolution (Haine 1998), the black churches of the southern civil rights protests (Calhoun-Brown 2000) and Mosques and Bazaars in the Arab spring (Bennani-Chraïbi & Fillieule 2003; Hessler 2011). However, the reason for the predominant focus on small-scale, offline mobilizations in the literature is not theoretical but is arguably connected to certain pre-ICT limitations concerning space and time and the historical difficulties associated with the communication and co-ordination of large groups. Contemporary ICTs have introduced new means of disseminating information, co-ordinating collective action, recruiting potential sympathizers and increasing the likelihood of activism (e.g. Micó & Casero-Ripollés 2014; Shirky 2008). These radical changes have been conceptualized by various scholars using terms such as *networked individuals* (Rainie & Wellman 2012), *digitally enabled social movements* (Earl & Kimport 2011) and as a shift from *collective* to *connective action* (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Accordingly, because contemporary digital spaces no longer suffer from previous limitations, we argue that the notion of free social spaces can be broadened to include large, online groups.

Mobilizing ideas

Depending on perspective, politicized social media discussion groups can be regarded as counterpublics in terms of their relation to the mainstream public sphere, and as free social spaces for social movements in terms of their capacity for mobilization and formation of shared collective identity. To understand better the potential of online radical right discussion groups for developing more sustained collective action, one must be attentive to how their participants' ideas about the world are promoted, sustained and articulated in ways that further political action.

While there are several ways of connecting ideas and collective action, such as ideology (Oliver & Johnston 2000) and narrative (Polletta 2006), we argue that the concept of framing best captures the dispersed ideational and interpretive work performed by the discussion group members. Inspired by the work of Goffman (1974), who introduced the concept of frame to sociology to capture schemata used to interpret events around us, movement scholars picked up the concept of *collective action frames*, which is typically defined as “action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns” (Gamson 1992:7).³ Typically, frames are treated as strategically articulated by social movement organizations. The theory has been criticized for being overly rationalistic and overstating clarity and logical coherence in collective action framing (Goodwin & Jasper 1999). One response to this is Gillan's (2008) suggestion that we use the notion of *orientational frame* to

3 Gamson ascribes this quote to a chapter by Snow and Benford (1992), which however lacks this precise formulation.

capture broader underlying orientations that are explicit abstractions from activists' varied and often inconsistent talk. Gillan notes that "an understanding of any movement requires that we look beyond particular claims and actions to the underlying beliefs about society that motivate them" (ibid.:248). We are sympathetic to this conceptual move, which brings framing closer to ideology, yet it does not exclude attentiveness to the more specific collective action frames. Inspired by Gamson's (1992) classic study of ordinary people's interpretations of news in mass media, we wish to highlight three crucial components of collective action frames: injustice, agency and collective identity. The injustice component is the identification of some wrong in society typically linked to emotions like moral indignation. While agency concerns a belief in the possibility of taking (collective) action, the identity component centres on the identification of a "we". More specifically, collective identity can be defined as "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor & Whittier 1999:170). As noted by scholars such as Kavada (2015), collective identities in contemporary movements structured by ICT may be rather open and diffuse. Several authors have emphasized the centrality of adversaries and other outgroups in this shared definition (Melucci 1996). Gamson (1992) also highlights that the identity component of collective action frames also includes the identification of opponents. In summary, articulations of collective identity are key to understanding both the counterpublic and the movement aspects of radical right online discussion groups, and in particular in relation to broader action frames where these identities are linked to perceived injustices.

Research Design, Data and Methods

Our case study focuses on the open Facebook group *Stand up for Sweden* (Stå upp för Sverige), a typical case of a right-wing populist social media discussion group in terms of its content (Flyvbjerg 2006). The group started on 5 February 2017, and was originally named "Stand up for Peter Springare" ("Stå upp för Peter Springare") in support of a Swedish police officer who had received massive public criticism after writing a Facebook post (3 February) where he implied that nearly all criminals he encountered in the line of duty were immigrants. The support group attracted over 100,000 members within three days of its creation (Pisoni 2017); however, some may have been added without their knowledge. On 12 April, the subject of the support group—Peter Springare—wrote a new statement on social media where he urged members of the group to leave it because of the many racist posts in the group. In response, the group administrators changed its name. On one day, the group name changed from its original name to "Stand up for the truth" to "Stand up for the truth, which is relative" to "#Iamsobloodytired" (reproducing the initial sentence of Springare's original Facebook post) to the name it has had since, "Stand up for Sweden". The currently stated aim of the group is "to support the Swedish Police in the struggle against rising crime and reveal the weakness politicians show towards the increasingly unsuccessful integration". At the time of writing, the group consists of 167,538 members (15 March 2018)

and is generally referred to as the largest political Facebook group in Sweden. It can also be noted that an automated search for activities within the group during its first year of existence identified over 217 000 unique users that had actively participated in “liking” posts in the group. It is important to acknowledge that a group of this size is likely to include spam bots and various fake accounts. However, this is generally a rule rather than an exception among social media and given the large corpus that is analysed we believe that this is unlikely to be a problem in this particular case.

Netvizz (Rieder 2013) was used to extract a random selection of all posts between 2 February and 15 November 2017, resulting in a corpus of 4936 posts and 182,558 comments. As a whole, the corpus includes posts, comments, videos, photos and links to a variety of websites. The data were analysed using a combination of an inductive grounded theory-inspired approach (Charmaz 2006) and various quantitative methods, such as collocation analysis and social network analysis. These methodological issues are described in more detail in the steps of the analysis described below.

Because the group is open and public it does not require any membership or approval to read the posts, and the members of the groups are generally aware that their posts are read by and available to a broad public. To ensure anonymity, user names were automatically and irreversibly anonymized in the process of constructing the corpus. Furthermore, the main focus of the analysis lies in broader discursive patterns. To the extent that individual quotes are used, they are translated and somewhat modified, which makes it hard to trace them back to any individual user. However, in translating quotes, our ambition has been to convey the general character of idiosyncratic linguistic usage in the posts; incorrect grammar, punctuation and capitalization in Swedish has generally been translated with similarly incorrect expressions in English.

Results and analysis

The analysis was conducted in two interconnected steps, both focusing on the salient orientational frames in the discussions. In the first step, the focus lies in the framing of perceived injustices, and the second step focuses more specifically on the articulation of collective identity.

Perceived injustice and the framing of external information

As discussed above, a core feature of collective action frames is how ideas about the world are promoted, sustained and articulated, and how this motivates collective action. In our empirical case, much of the activities in the discussion group are related to confirming a common set of general opinions and views about social reality, as well as empowering each other in retaining these ideas in the face of contradictory values and worldviews found in the broader public sphere. A key to this process lies in how the members of the group draw on, and position themselves in relation to, other sites on the internet, and what issues are defined, approached and represented as “problems”.

More than half of the posts in the group are photos, videos or links to other sites. More specifically, our corpus consists of 2355 status updates, 741 photos, 1644 links

and 194 videos. While these numbers would be significantly larger if we were to include all comments (i.e. responses to posts), we have for practical and technical reasons chosen to exclude the comments from the first part of the analysis. The posts that contain links are those that evoke the most heated discussions and reactions in the group, and a large portion of the user participation and activity circulates around these posts. By analysing the character and content of these links, this part of the analysis aims to provide a broader overview of the media ecology or “mediascape” surrounding the group: which external sites are linked, what topics are raised, and how various media types are used within the group.

To study this, we extracted all domain names that are linked in the corpus and illustrated the result using social network analysis. The result is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The nodes in the network constitute domain names and the weight of the ties (illustrated by line thickness) represents the frequency with which the site is linked in the corpus.

To facilitate an overview, the sites are manually clustered in four different media categories: [i] *mainstream media platforms* (e.g. Aftonbladet.se, Expressen.se, helahelsingland.se, hallandsposten.se, [ii] *social media platforms* (e.g. youtube.com, twitter.com), [iii] *radical right populist blogs* (e.g. detgodasamhallet.com, pettersonsblog.se, norum.bloggplatsen.se) and finally [iv] *alternative media platforms* (e.g. nyheteridag.se, friatider.se, samtiden.se). These media categories are rather flexible because some of the sites are difficult to place in a particular category; for instance, some alternative media platforms tend to be rather similar to blogs. There is also a large set of links to Facebook that comprise various images and memes uploaded by the members of the group. These are quite different from the external links, so they are treated as a separate category in the analysis.

The graph provides a broad overview of how the users in the group relate to the surrounding society and media. As we can see, the most frequently linked sites in the corpus are large mainstream media platforms such as Svt.se, Expressen.se and Aftonbladet.se, together with the social media platform youtube.com and the radical right alternative media platform Nyheteridag.se (previously avpixlat.se)

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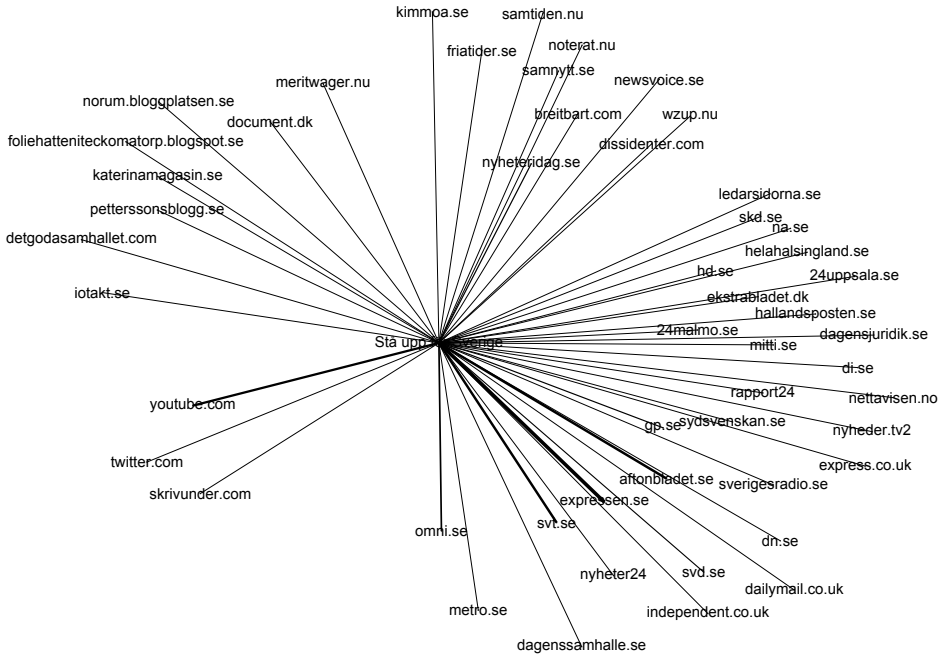


Figure 1. Ego-network of the most frequent links in the corpus.

The domain names are extracted from the corpus and are represented as nodes in the graph. These are manually clustered into four media categories. The tie thickness represents frequency, i.e. the number of times the domain name occurs in the corpus.

To analyse the use of these media categories within the group and their functions in the discussions, we selected the most popular posts (those that generated most reactions) in each media category and analysed the content of the links to which they referred using open coding and a grounded theory-inspired inductive approach (Charmaz 2006). A total of 110 links were analysed until saturation was reached.

In the analysis, we identified three broad themes that are consistently evoked in the links. These themes represent salient orientational frames discernible in the post shared among the members of the group.

Sweden and Swedish values are under threat. This broad theme found in links refers primarily to mainstream media articles claiming that Sweden is suffering from increasing “Islamification” and that Swedish values are challenged because of the prevalence of multiculturalism. One linked newspaper article discusses the increasing commonality of veils in various professions in Sweden. Another article claims that Swedish society was once safe but is now increasingly characterized by violence and organized crime. Closely related to this theme are texts about specific events that allegedly illustrate specific problems associated with immigrants and immigration, and particularly Muslims. Examples are texts about terror attacks where Islamists are involved, the case of a Swede

that was deceived by an immigrant when he was selling his car, various disturbances and violence in the suburbs of Malmö, journalists that were attacked by violent immigrants and the case of an immigrant man attacking a crayfish party. This theme is common in links to mainstream media platforms and, to some extent, in alternative media platforms.

Reverse discrimination. This theme collects news and texts that in various ways are claimed to show that ethnic (male) Swedes are treated unfairly and that immigrants receive special treatment and enjoy privileges. In other words, there is “reverse discrimination” against ethnic Swedes. Articles in this category typically discuss topics such as a woman wearing a veil who did not have to show ID on public transport, men being discriminated against in the #Metoo campaign, immigrants receiving double welfare benefits, the social democrats prioritizing immigrants before Swedes, and the city of Malmö accidentally giving away free apartments to immigrants. This theme is particularly salient in the alternative and mainstream media.

Fake news and the politically correct elite. This is a strong theme that seems to persist in many of the texts that are linked. Typically, their focus is on criticizing established media and what is perceived as the predominantly politically correct elite and on highlighting the alleged hypocrisy of mainstream journalists and feminists. This also includes claims of an “Overton window” (Sw. “snäv åsiktskorridor”) in public discourse⁴ and texts that critically discuss the prevalence of alleged censorship in traditional media, in topics such as the mainstream media exaggerating the number of attacks against refugee housing, journalists no longer being allowed to use terms such as “immigrant-dense areas”, corruption within the government and mainstream media/journalists concealing immigrant overrepresentation in cases of sexual harassment. This theme occurs frequently in all media categories.

From echo chambers to trench warfare dynamics

These three themes frequently occur in the material and represent central frames that permeate a large proportion of the discussions in the group⁵. Generally speaking, these frames are promoted through three types of activities among the group members: confirming, elaborating and contrasting.

Confirming includes sharing neutral news reports in the mainstream media on specific events that are perceived to support or are in line with these shared collective action frames. These included news stories that a court had ruled in favour of banning veils, that immigrants would be controlled more extensively on the border, the freezing of retroactive parental allowances for children born abroad and that Sweden would no longer stop expulsions to Afghanistan.

⁴ This notion basically represents the idea that critics of power will be mocked and silenced (Marsh 2016).

⁵ Another notable tendency is the use of memes and images in the group. The images that are shared often relate to some of the themes above but are expressed with irony and sarcasm. For instance, as one such meme reads: “it’s peculiar that so many immigrants are outraged by our culture and customs, but not by our welfare system”. This theme apparently fulfils a more specific social function within the group, relating to the feeling of a common identity and unity/affinity.

Elaborating is visible in a number of texts that express more developed support for political positions that are shared among the members of the group. This includes polemical articles and debate articles in traditional media, for instance, arguing that Europe needs a new take on its immigration politics, that unaccompanied refugee children cost the Swedish state billions, that immigration costs more than geriatric care and various articles that express support for Peter Springare. Frequently, the main focus of these texts typically lies in developing analyses in opposition to the “politically correct elite” and the alleged “censorship” of traditional media. In other words, they criticize allegedly dominant opinions and ideologies in mainstream society and oppose what is perceived as a system of political correctness and self-censorship where alternative views are suppressed and ignored. This type of elaborate support is particularly common in the links to radical right blogs and alternative media platforms.

Contrasting is an activity that we argue has been underplayed in the literature on echo chamber dynamics. The two previous types of activities serve the purpose of highlighting certain events, news and arguments that are in line with the political position and values shared within the group. However, other links to mainstream media include opinion-challenging information, i.e. texts and articles that represent contrasting perspectives to those of the group. Typically, such links are used to illustrate perceived hypocrisy or contradictions among political opponents. These texts are often mocked and criticized more extensively in the subsequent discussions, often with the intention of dissecting and developing criticism against the arguments presented.

One example of how participants in the group deal with media items that are apparently incongruent with their worldviews is exemplified below in the comments relating to a link to a newspaper article entitled “Four of ten; Sweden safer than the media image”, referring to a survey in which four out of ten respondents regarded Sweden as safer than its media image.

Commenter A: Would like to see exactly how those questions are posed. Am sure that it would be possible to raise objections to the method and the construction of the questionnaire.

[...]

Commenter B: yes, even brå [BRÅ – the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention] is bought by the social democrats, fucking dictatorship we live in.

Commenter C: What you see in the media is a mix of reports about serious violence together with reports about there hardly being any serious violence in the country. Very confusing.

[...]

Commenter D: Which part of the country do those who were asked live? Hardly in Malmö, Stockholm or Göteborg.

Commenter E: Media is bought by left-wing politicians. Have lost their justification to exist, !

These results bring certain nuances to the notion of an “echo chamber” because not only issues that consolidate members’ own positions are shared and discussed, but

also contradicting and opposing views and opinions. This suggests that the notion of “trench warfare” may be a useful analogy for these discussions, in the sense that they often include both confirming and contradicting arguments (Karlsen, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk & Enjolras 2017). However, the general purposes and consequences of confirming, elaborating and contrasting seem to be similar. After all, these trench warfare dynamics follow established frames of interpretation, providing another way of establishing and consolidating the members’ own positions. This means that in the group discussions, opinions and attitudes are thus reinforced through both confirmation and disconfirmation biases. At least in this particular case, trench warfare can perhaps be described as a specific type of echo chamber dynamics.

Overall, the links that are shared often convey news and texts that in various ways serve to maintain and reinforce a set of orientational frames in the form of underlying beliefs and values about society that inspire and motivate the users. These frames focus on what is perceived as “injustices” and “problems” in society, and the posts and following discussions in various ways confirm and legitimize different aspects of these frames. In the next step of the analysis, we focus on another central aspect of collective action frames, namely the construction of collective identity.

The construction of a collective identity

The formation of identities is acknowledged as a central process in theories of counterpublics, as we saw above in relation to the work of Nancy Fraser (1992). The construction of an opponent—an “other”—is a crucial step that provides direction as well as a sense of unity for a social movement (Melucci 1996). In the analysis above, it is clear that a key unifying discourse within the group centres on a critical approach to immigration and immigrants. In the second step of the analysis, we now attempt to investigate this more thoroughly by focusing specifically on the formation of a sense of “we”, and closely relating to this, the formation of certain out-groups.

To investigate this, we used all 182,558 comments as a sub-corpus (thus excluding the posts). Based on the results of the previous analysis, we selected a number of groups that were frequently evoked in the discussions and used word collocation to analyse how these groups are represented in the discussions. Word collocation analysis shows which terms appear more frequently in proximity to a specific keyword across the entire corpus. In this case, the number of words to consider on each side of the keyword was set to five words before and after. The words included in the analysis were selected through a truncated search using the terms *muslim** (Muslim*), *invandr** (immigr*), *feminis** (feminis*), *afghan** (Afghan*), and *flykting** (refugee*). The asterisk (*) indicates that we included any derivative of these word forms. To facilitate reading we will henceforth refer to “immigr*” as “immigrant/immigration derivatives” and “femin*” as “feminist/feminism derivatives”. Common words that occurred consistently throughout all groups were excluded since these contributed little to the analysis.

The result of the word collocation is illustrated as word networks where tie thickness and proximity to the core represent the strength of co-occurrence. This quantitative analysis was supplemented with a word-in-context analysis that shows each occurrence

The top words that surround the words derivative of immigrant/immigration are: “they”, “Swedes”, “Sweden”, “country” and “SD” (acronym for the Sweden Democrat party)⁶ (see Figure 2). This may appear somewhat counter-intuitive, but the word-in-context analysis reveals that the word “immigrant” is to a large extent used in direct opposition to “Swedes”, “Sweden”, etc. For instance, one commenter writes:

New safe Sweden! We have the resources to let in immigrants but do not have the resources to have police stations open during the summer.

As we can see in the graph, there are also a number of strongly negatively charged words with high correlation with the keyword, such as “damn”, “damned”, “hell”, “idiots”, “shit”. Overall, immigrants are to a large extent discussed in relation to receiving refugees (“allowance”, “receive”, “take”, “billions”, “problem”, “job”, “pay”, “cost”, “deport”, “seniors/retirees”, “welfare”) and are generally framed as a problem (e.g. “crimes”, “problem”, “criminals”, “criminality”, “rapes”). Some of these correlations are captured in the following quote [lower-case letters in original]:

just open your eyes and see how things have become in sweden with increased criminality the last years what is the reason well all bloody immigration should have limited immigration several years ago

Words derivative of Muslim (“Muslim*”) connect to similar words as “immigrants”, but also to a number of unique words that relate to various religious and ethnic aspects, such as: “Islam”, “Christians”, “Quran” and “sharia laws”. Similarly, words derivative of feminist/feminism (“feminis*”) in addition connects to words such as: “agenda”, “naïve”, “government”, “pc”, “bitches”, “hypocrisy”, “pathetic” and “destructive”, which are words that are typically connected to an anti-feminist discourse (see e.g. Törnberg & Törnberg 2016a). Both the “Afghan*”) and “refugee*”) corpora strongly connect to terms that relate to the reception of refugees, for instance, “border”, “millions”, “taxes”, “stop”, “asylum seekers”, “illegal”, “deported” and “rejections”.

Among broad generalizations about immigrants, there is also a recurrent distinction made between “good” and “bad” immigrants, where the former are hard-working and thankful for their citizenship. The “bad” immigrants are criminals and live on social security. Most prominently, the “bad” immigrant is Muslim, and many group members (although not all) consider Islam to be a threat to democracy.

Interestingly, it is more difficult to discern any explicit in-group in the material. The group does not represent any specific political party or organization, but rather

⁶ The Sweden Democrats is a parliamentary party in Sweden since 2010. It is ideologically close to the populist radical right parties in the other Nordic countries such as the Danish People’s Party (Danish: Dansk Folkeparti) and the Progress Party (Norwegian: Fremskrittspartiet) in Norway. Peterson (Forthcoming) characterizes it as a “neo-Nazi movement party” because of its origins and remaining ties to the Swedish neo-Nazi movement.

constitutes a looser collective, united largely through opposition to the outgroups and through a shared focus on issues connected to the collective action frames analysed above. However, because the phrase “Sweden Democrats” was found to occur frequently in the discussions, we performed an additional collocation analysis of this group, as illustrated in Figure 3.

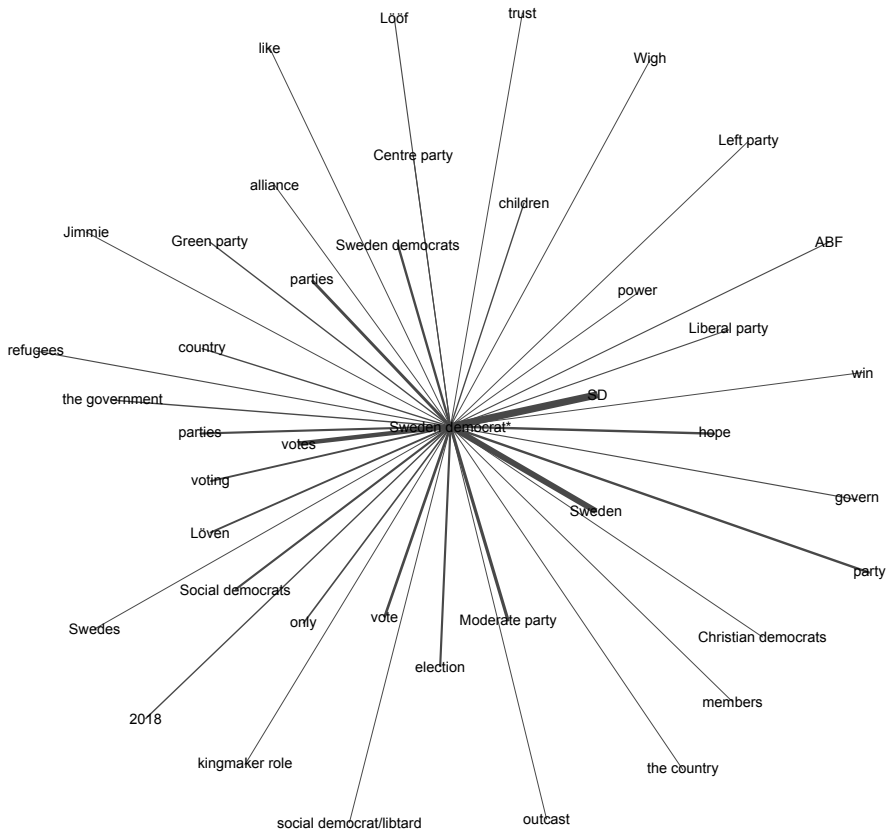


Figure 3. Discursive network surrounding the derivative words of Sweden Democrat (“Sweden Democrat*”).

The network was constructed through a collocation analysis of words co-occurring with words derivative of Sverigedemokrat (“sverigedemokrat*”; Eng. “Sweden Democrat*”). Nodes are words and the thickness of ties and proximity to the core illustrate strengths of co-occurrence. Stop words are excluded. The words that show the strongest correlation with the keyword are “vote”, “SD”, “Sweden” and “hope”.

As we can see in the figure, the word “Sweden democrats” is consistently framed in a very positive way and connects most strongly with words like “Sweden”, “vote”, “hope”, “election”, “political party”, “only”, “2018”, “rule/govern”, “kingmaker role” (Sw. “vägmästare”), “members”, “power”, “outcasts”, “like”, “trust”. The Sweden Democrats constitute a type of in-group in the corpus because they are the group with which most users appear to identify most closely.

To increase the reliability of the analysis further, we used methodological triangulation by performing a *z*-test word analysis, which allows us to investigate the difference in word distribution between two corpora. Thus, the analysis shows words that occur more frequently (relatively speaking) in one corpus compared with the other. This was complemented by calculating a chi-square to determine whether there is substantive significance because this is based on actual counts rather than proportions. In this step, we selected all comments in the corpus (182,558) containing the keywords derivative of Swede (“svensk*”; Eng. “Swede*”) and immigrant/immigration (“invandr*”; Eng. “immigr*”) respectively, creating two new sub-corpora. The results further validate our previous conclusion and the top words in the immigrant* corpus include: “billions”, “illegal”, “allowances”, “cost/expenses”, “criminals”, “they”, “problem”, “stop”, “crimes/criminality”, “pay” and “money”. Top words for the Swede* corpus include “the people”, “pension”, “wake up”, “cowards”, “us”, “law”, “naïve”, “proud”, “home”, “citizens”, “flag”, “women” and “children” (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

Hence, similar to the words “Sweden Democrats”, “Swedes” are framed in a largely positive way and the word is typically used in contrast or opposition to “immigration” and “immigrants”. However, we may also discern a parallel discourse characterized by a certain distance from Swedes: the high frequency of words related to terms such as “wake up”, “cowards” and “naïve” in the Swede corpus indicates that the group seems to identify itself as a sub-group that is close to, but nonetheless somewhat different from, Swedes. This duality is also clearly visible in many of the posts, for instance:

The sleeping population who have not understood anything, sleep in until you wake or die you amoebas

Truth is now regarded as racist. I want to die with the feeling that I have done everything in my power to wake the indoctrinated Swedish people.

An explicit discussion about the boundaries for the in-group and the out-group is found in a thread following a post asking whether second-generation immigrants were welcome in the group. The thread of comments was one of the longest in our dataset, comprising 1645 comments and altogether 4077 reactions (of which 3709 were “likes”). The majority were strongly in favour of an inclusive group and were of the “yes, welcome!” kind. Typical criteria for inclusion that were articulated were to be in favour of “truth” and “justice” and to be against non-European migration and against Islam. Those comments that expressed hesitation similarly inquired about whether the interlocutor was a Muslim and whether he really subscribed to “Swedish values”.

To conclude thus far, while certain outgroups can be distinguished in the corpus in the form of mainly “immigrants”, “Muslims”, “refugees”, “Afghans”, there is no explicit or expressed in-group. While most members seem to identify themselves as “Sweden democrats” and “Swedes”, this is not consistent. The collective identity of the group thus remains rather elusive and ambiguous. What brings the group together is a set of underlying orientational frames pinpointing certain injustices and opposition to various outgroups. These frames are often manifested or evoked in the discussions through certain “sacred symbols” such as the flag, national anthem and various Swedish traditions, such as Midsummer’s Eve and the national day.

These symbols consistently provoked debate in the group. For instance, one particularly long thread in the dataset was initiated by a video clip of a representative of the group handing flowers to the police officer whom the group was originally created to support. The post gave rise to more than 1100 comments and 7700 reactions; however, these rarely related to each other. This police officer thus exemplifies the creation of a type of “sacred object” in the social interactions; objects that become social glue for the group. It was not unusual for the posts to attempt to reveal what they see as an implicit or explicit threat to such sacred symbolic objects.

A revealing example is a post linking to an alternative media news article concerning a priest who suggested changes to the second verse in the lyrics of the Swedish national anthem to modernize it. Although the suggested new lines are clearly nationalist in content and actually include the term “Sweden”, in contrast to the existing lyrics that only refer to “the Nordic countries” (Sw. “Norden”), the 187 comments on the post are unanimously of strong condemnation. The general tone is captured by the following post:

Don't touch the National anthem equal to rape of our country



To conclude, these types of interactions are arguably a key to understanding the coherence and attraction of the group. These symbols or sacred objects are evidently connected to the prevalence of certain nationalist collective action frames.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this paper has been to shed light on a phenomenon of growing importance in the Swedish political landscape, namely radical right social media discussion groups, using the case of the “Stand up for Sweden” Facebook group with approximately 170,000 members. Our results show how the group participants construct and maintain common orientational frames, generally in relation to its surroundings. To assess the mobilizing potential of this type of group, we investigated the use of two main components of collective action frames within the group, namely injustice and identity.

We identified three central injustice themes in the group members' framing of external reality. External media sources were used by group members to demonstrate and criticize: (1) that Sweden and Swedish values are under threat; (2) that Swedes—and especially Swedish men—were subject to “reverse discrimination” and (3) the prevalence of a politically correct elite producing “fake news”. The common denominator of the posts and texts that are shared in the group can perhaps best be described as underlying nationalism manifested through the use of certain symbols or “sacred objects”, such as the flag, the national anthem, cultural values, “Swedishness” and Swedish traditions. Reacting to imagined threats against these symbols produces a sense of unity and common foundation.

We identified three strategies among group members to accomplish this, *confirming*, by linking to news about events that are perceived to be in line with the opinions and political positions broadly shared within the group, *elaborating*, by linking to texts that articulate more developed political opinions and *contrasting*, by linking to texts that represent opposing views and attitudes. While the first and second types of activity fit well with previous formulations of *echo chamber* dynamics, the third type is better described in terms of *trench warfare* dynamics. In this manner, common orientation frames are constructed and maintained through both confirmation and disconfirmation.

On the basis of these injustice frames and in opposition to certain outgroups, group members form what appears to be a rudimentary collective identity. There is a strong and negative focus on groups such as immigrants, Muslims, Afghans and refugees, but also feminists. The “we-ness” of the group is thus constructed in opposition to these groups that are framed as problematic and threatening. The in-group was seldom explicit in the material. While Swedes and Sweden are largely positively framed, we can also discern a certain ambivalence. Sweden is perceived as what needs to be defended, but the majority of Swedes must be “awakened” to see reality. Many members of the group often refer to themselves as “realists”; they allegedly see reality “as it is”. This reminds of the Gramscian (Gramsci 1971) idea of a cultural (counter-)revolution against the mainstream “hegemony”; the Swedish population is generally considered to be infatuated with a mainstream discourse constructed by a politically correct elite and the mainstream media. In this context, many group members invest hope in future electoral successes of the Sweden Democrat party.

The counterdemonstration against Afghan youth mentioned at the outset demonstrates the potential of the group for mobilizing collective action. A partial explanation for this potential is the presence of injustice and identity components in the orientational frames of the group. As shown in previous research, injustice and identity components of frames provide motivation and legitimation for collective action. However, the group members appear to be somewhat more uncertain regarding agency, and more specifically what forms collective action should take. Possibly this is related to the relatively limited experience of the radical right in organizing mass protests in the Swedish context, and the stigma largely caused by the generally successful anti-racist countermobilizations (Peterson, Thörn & Wahlström 2018).

However, seen from another angle, it is perhaps no longer meaningful to distinguish strictly between internal processes of movements and their public activities, i.e. between consensus and action mobilization. Through the use of ICT, opinion formation and (some forms of) protest action can increasingly be seen as sides of the same coin. Discussions, debates, processes of opinion formation and the construction of collective identity are now simultaneously public activities; they can easily spread, reach the Facebook flows of friends and acquaintances, affect web traffic to alternative media platforms, be discussed in mainstream media and thus come to affect the wider mainstream public discourse. In this sense, this type of group should not so much be regarded as closed radical-right bubbles but rather as gateways to spread the views of their members to the mainstream public sphere. This appears to compensate for the current limits in capacity to mobilize people in the streets and may also contribute to explaining the general success of these groups in an online context. This also accentuates the need to approach social media discussion groups as a hybrid between counterpublics and social movement free spaces; public yet somewhat protected from the mainstream public.

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Appendix

Table 1. Z-test word analysis illustrating differences in word distribution between two corpora.

swede* corpus			immigr* corpus		
Word	Z-Score	Chi Square	Word	Z-score	Chi Square
Swede/Swedish*	79,64	7769,05	immigr*	170,91	1009,13
people/folk*	11,41	745,35	mass immigration*	25,08	73,5
clean/pure	5,07	148,93	costs/expense	20,33	9,031
model	3,99	76,05	generation*	15,55	24,60
pension	3,852	129,46	come/arrive*	15,53	355,48
wake up*	3,638	88,81	crime/criminality *	13,91	14,40
cowards	3,135	53,38	they/them/those/these*	13,70	2897,41
police*	2,91	208,04	billions/millions	13,25	21,24
citizenship	2,64	58,93	problem*	12,92	51,157
us	2,58	340,07	immigration policy	10,72	20,90
law	2,37	98,78	stop*	9,91	5,83
time (to)	2,32	67,96	SD	9,84	24,31
race	2,28	40,96	criminals	9,60	1,2
state	2,18	39,06	racism/racist	8,05	20,29
Denmark	2,15	52,89	money*	7,97	70,11
religion	1,90	56,14	allowance/subsidy*	7,83	32,50
good	1,88	36	criminality*	7,56	0,55
citizen	1,84	145,26	receive	7,47	8,99
boys	1,81	29,82	illegals	7,31	4,24
share	1,67	32,26	others	6,89	140,58
taxpayer	1,64	38,36	Sweden	6,66	697,75
flag	1,64	33,98	here	6,63	37,56
women	1,25	156,36	refugees	6,10	12,15
proud	1,18	26,68	pay	5,42	83,09
media	1,17	105,75	more	5,23	33,44
naive	1,04	40,96	people/folk	4,98	120,00
home	0,98	73,46	big	4,84	16,34
government	0,72	99,51	pizza	4,67	0,09
child	0,57	223,02	Springare	4,58	3,43
			Peter	4,33	7,03

The corpora were constructed by selecting all comments containing the keywords “svensk*” (swede*) respectively “invandrar*” (“immigr*”). Asterisk indicates word stemming.

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