

The Rise of Online Counterpublics?

The limits of inclusion in a digital age

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege, by employing the concept of *counterpublics*. The term, which has been central to the feminist critique of mainstream public sphere theory, denotes the alternative publics that emerge in response to various exclusions by dominant publics with the goal of targeting and influencing the same. Because the emergence of counterpublics has traditionally been understood as offering the possibility for historically marginalized groups to come together and challenge dominant public discourses, empirical research has often focused on “good” or “progressive” counterpublics. However, the recent rise of racist, antifeminist and climate change denying counter-discourses online, formed by groups that claim to be marginalized from mainstream publics, raises new issues of how we can understand and analyze power and privilege in the public spheres. This thesis therefore sheds light on how *privilege* is reproduced in the context of online counterpublic dynamics. A revitalized power perspective on the public spheres is developed and subsequently used to analyze the reproduction of privilege in three empirical case studies. First, the rationales behind the broader inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public sphere through comment sections is investigated by means of interviews with Swedish mainstream news media editors. Second, the formation of an antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs is analyzed, with a specific focus on how the privileged position of the antifeminist net-activists facilitated its emergence. Last, it is explored how self-identified white feminists were enabled by Twitter’s architecture to reproduce asymmetrical power relations within the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen; a counterpublic initiated by women of color to question their exclusion from mainstream feminism and online feminist platforms. The thesis demonstrates that while online platforms have provided historically marginalized groups with new possibilities to form counterpublics, these venues at the same time pose new challenges to their inclusion. In particular, online platforms provide privileged groups with new possibilities to influence dominant public discourses directly as well as more indirectly through competition with structurally marginalized groups in the emergence of counterpublics.

Keywords: counterpublics, counterpublic theory, privilege, intersectionality, feminism, antifeminism, digital media, online platforms, comment sections, blogs, Twitter

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Chapter 1: The Puzzle of Privilege in the Public Spheres

The existence of public spheres, where people may come together to discuss matters of common concern, regardless of their social position, has long been regarded as a central part of well-functioning democracies. However, since the early 1990s, when the internet was first introduced to a wider audience, the public spheres as we know them have undergone tremendous transformation by coming *online*. In contrast to other types of public venues, online public venues are highly accessible due to their low entry barriers. Through an enormous number of online platforms¹, such as social network sites, blogs and online news media, billions of people interact with each other each day to (among other things) discuss matters of common concern, without having to deal with traditional gatekeepers or other types of cost and barriers that are inherent to offline public venues. How does this new type of inclusiveness affect the conditions for egalitarian public conversations?

In this study, this question is addressed by employing the concept of *counterpublics*. The term has been central to the feminist critique of the lack of power perspective in mainstream public sphere theory. This since it allows for an understanding of the public sphere not as a single entity but as a multitude of diverse interacting and competing publics, of which some are dominant and others subordinated. In relation to other types of publics, counterpublics denote a particular type of discursive arena, which emerges in response to the various exclusions of dominant publics with the goal of targeting and influencing the same. The emergence of counterpublics thus points to the processes whereby members of groups that are excluded or marginalized from mainstream public venues may come together to formulate and circulate counterdiscourses, in order to contest and alter dominant public discourses (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990). Thereby, the concept of counterpublics specifically allows for an analysis of how privilege and marginali-

¹ Online platforms are here understood as “sites and services that host, organize, and circulate users’ shared content or social exchanges for them; without having produced or commissioned [the majority] of that content; beneath that circulation, an infrastructure for processing the data (content, traces, patterns of social relations) for customer service and profit” (Gillespie, 2017, p. 254).

zation are contested and reproduced through public debates, and how the existence of new, more inclusive, public venues may affect such processes.

One important prerequisite for the emergence of counterpublics is the existence of alternative public arenas that provide a possibility for groups that are marginalized in mainstream venues to come together and formulate their interests and needs. On the one hand, scholars have argued that the less costly and less time-consuming possibilities of organizing and participating in political activism online, and the lack of formal barriers to access, may provide such space for more egalitarian public discussions (e.g. Castells, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Shirky, 2008, 2011). Much qualitative empirical research has examined how the existence of more inclusive public venues has enabled historically marginalized groups² to develop their own deliberative forums, and to contest dominant meanings and practices. As will be discussed later in this chapter, empirical studies of online counterpublics have thus often focused on “good” or “progressive” counterpublics.

On the other hand, while online public venues are often understood as opening up new possibilities for the emergence of counterpublics through their inclusiveness, they still operate within the same kind of power structures as other types of public venues. There is a large body of literature pointing to how online public venues have amplified existing inequalities in political voice between marginalized and privileged groups on an aggregated level (e.g. Dalton, 2017; Schradie, 2018; Van Laer, 2010, see also Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014; Van Dijk, 2005; Witte & Mannon, 2010; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009).

What is more, there are privileged groups that are, or perceive themselves to be, marginalized from mainstream public venues for political reasons. These have made great use of the inclusiveness of online public venues in order to find each other and advocate their interests and needs towards wider publics. The existence of more inclusive public venues has been greatly advantageous for the formation of discursive arenas by groups that advocate anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian politics, including the extreme right, men’s rights movements and climate change deniers. The advocacy of these groups often implies either a direct attack on other marginalized groups and communities, or a more indirect attack on their life chances and opportunities (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Daniels, 2009b; McCright & Dunlap, 2011; Rosenbrock, 2012; Gotell & Dutton 2016; Lilly 2016; Marwick & Caplan

² In line with the understanding of privilege and marginalization as structurally conditioned, historically marginalized groups should here be understood as denoting those groups that have been structurally disadvantaged historically in relation to other social groups. For instance, this concerns historically underprivileged groups such as women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, etc. Historically marginalized groups will therefore hereafter be used interchangeably with structurally marginalized groups, as well as traditionally marginalized groups and communities. A more detailed discussion of structural privilege and marginalization is to be found in Chapter 2, in the section *Turning the light on the reproduction of privilege*.

2018; Massanari, 2017). Thus, while the concept of counterpublics was initially used interchangeably with traditionally marginalized groups and communities, later theoretical work has argued for a more “neutral” concept of counterpublics in relation to the structural position of their members. Instead, how participants in counterpublics recognize and articulate their exclusion from wider public spheres through “alternative discourse practices and norms” is considered to be their primary defining feature rather than their (subordinated) social position (Asen, 2000, p. 427; see also Warner, 2002).

Previous research has provided important insights into how historically marginalized groups and communities can work to contest and alter existing power structures in the public spheres, and how members of all kinds of social groups may articulate their recognized exclusion from dominant public spheres. However, with too narrow a focus on traditionally powerless groups, or by partly disengaging the concept from structural inequalities, it is more difficult to explicitly shed the light on how privileged groups *also* may be provided by new possibilities to form counterpublics through online platforms *in competition* with marginalized groups. Moreover, due to counterpublics’ specific function as important sites for the contestation of dominant public discourses, such dynamics can have important consequences for power relations in the public spheres at large.

The purpose of this thesis is therefore to explore how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics. More specifically, the rationales behind the larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in dominant public spheres will be examined, as well as how privileged groups may be empowered by online platforms in order to challenge and alter dominant public discourses to their own advantage. Thereby, this thesis adds to the few but growing number of studies within the field of gender and politics that emphasize the importance of explicitly analyzing how the status quo is maintained. Thus, by focusing on how privileged groups may benefit from existing institutional structures, we can improve our understanding of how structural inequalities are generating political inequalities (e.g. Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014). In relation to this literature, the focus on counterpublics also enables an analysis of how privilege can be reinforced through the ways in which privileged groups may challenge existing dominant public discourses. It will be shown that while online platforms have provided traditionally marginalized groups with new possibilities to form counterpublics, these venues at the same time pose new challenges to their inclusion. In particular, online public venues provide privileged groups with new possibilities to influence dominant public discourses directly, as well as more indirectly by allowing for new ways to contest the claims made by historically marginalized groups. This specifically concerns privileged groups that are (or perceive themselves to be) politically marginalized from

dominant public spheres, or are relationally privileged within a structurally marginalized group.

Privilege should here be understood as denoting *structural* privilege, meaning the kind of privilege (or corresponding marginalization) that is generated by institutional structures that enable (or constrain) agency and thereby condition people's life opportunities³ (Young, 1990, 2000). In order to analyze the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics, counterpublic theory is developed in this thesis. This since existing frameworks primarily allow for an analysis of either how structurally marginalized groups and communities have been enabled by alternative public venues, or for analyzing how counterpublics construct their *perceived* relation to dominant publics. I argue that we need to bring back and broaden the power perspective on the public spheres introduced by feminist political theorists through the concept of *subaltern* counterpublics, which specifically pointed to the members' structural subordination (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990). In particular, this requires that we explicitly focus on how the power differentials *between* and *within* counterpublics themselves are related to counterpublics' *actual* exclusion or marginalization from dominant public spheres. Such power differentials among counterpublics can have important consequences both for how counterdiscourses may be formed internally as well as for how they may respond to dominant publics, hence ultimately for how dominant public discourses may be questioned and altered.

Since online public venues have significantly lowered the barriers and costs to enter and participate in public discussions in very specific ways, the governance and design of online platforms also need to be analyzed in their own right if we want to increase our understanding of how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege. We need to know more about the possibilities and constraints that online public venues provide in relation to the reproduction of privilege, as well as the rationales among those that are constructing them. To explore these issues, three different empirical cases have been strategically selected, focusing on how online public venues are shaped and are shaping counterpublic dynamics.

The first empirical chapter focuses on the preconditions for the emergence of counterpublics by exploring the rationales behind a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres. Specifically, the chapter analyzes the reasoning of some of the main editors in Swedish mainstream news media in relation to the governance and design of the digital platforms for public debates they provide. These are thus gatekeepers of

³ Such institutional structures can have both formal institutional aspects, such as educational, judicial or healthcare systems, physical aspects, such as the organization of buildings and modes of communication, as well as discursive aspects, such as social norms, media and cultural stereotypes and other types of intersubjective meaning making (Young, 1990, 2000). See also the extended discussion of structural privilege in Chapter 2, in the section *Turning the light on the reproduction of privilege*.

some of the venues that host the dominant public discourses that counterpublics seek to target and alter. The chapter has a particular focus on user comments on news sites, since these have paved the way for a much larger inclusion of the number and variety of voices that can participate in public discussions on traditional, mainstream media platforms.

The second empirical chapter explores how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics by analyzing the emergence of a type of counterpublic that historically has been formed by privileged groups in competition with structurally marginalized groups. Specifically, it analyzes how political blogs shaped the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in Swedish public spheres, in reaction to the significant advancements of feminist counterpublics and policy aiming at improving gender equality in Sweden, in particular since the 1990s. The main focus of the chapter is hence on the antifeminist counterpublic, while the feminist counterpublics it competes with for influence rather forms a background to the case.

The last empirical chapter focuses on how online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* counterpublics, by analyzing the emergence of a counterpublic initiated by an intersectionally marginalized group. Specifically, it explores the competition for voice between self-identified white feminists and women of color within the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhite-women, which was started as a direct critique of how the voices of women of color have been marginalized within mainstream feminism in general and on online feminist platforms in particular.

The remainder of this introductory chapter will be devoted to a more detailed description of the gaps in previous research on privilege and marginalization in the public spheres. It will also be briefly discussed what theoretical work that needs to be carried out in order to study the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics, and I will elaborate on research design. First, however, the contributions of this thesis will be situated in the context of the larger theoretical debates within democratic and feminist political theory, where the increased inclusion and diversification of different voices, interests, opinions and perspectives through the emergence of counterpublics hitherto has been seen as a main remedy to political inequality.

Rethinking the public sphere in terms of inclusion: a feminist critique of classic public sphere theory

For public venues to transcend from being merely public spaces into becoming public spheres, they need to somehow contribute to enhancing democracy, and not just facilitate public discussions (Papacharissi, 2002). In the following sections it will be discussed how this transcendence has previously

been conceptualized, with a specific focus on how privilege (and marginalization) have been brought in, and then removed, from these debates.

In democratic theory, political equality⁴ is often considered to be intrinsic to democracy, implying that all citizens should have equal ability to influence the decision-making processes through which political preferences are formed and whose outcomes condition their lives (Erman & Näsström, 2013). As a normative ideal, Iris Young (2000) writes, “democracy means political equality” (p. 23). In order to remedy political inequalities, the debates within democratic theory and feminist political theory alike have often focused on how an increased inclusion of different voices, interests, opinions and perspectives could be achieved (Dovi, 2009). While traditional public sphere theory has focused on the importance of rational-critical debates in which social and economic power is bracketed within the context of formal democracy, feminist political theorists have instead pointed to informal exclusions and their detrimental consequences for political equality in the public spheres (e.g. Felski 1989; Fraser, 1990, 2007; Mansbridge, 1998; Pateman 1987; Young, 1996, 2000). This thesis should be seen as a contribution to these debates, by investigating the relationship between inclusion and political equality in the context of the current transformations of the public spheres.

It was through *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962/1989), that Jürgen Habermas brought the concept of the public sphere to the center of democratic theory by pointing to the crucial importance of rational-critical debates for the functioning of democratic societies. The public sphere thus provides an arena separated from the state as well as market relations and private talk, where citizens can critically discuss and debate common matters, and thereby monitor state authority. Habermas described how the bourgeois public sphere had emerged out of the eighteenth century salons, coffee houses, newspapers and other public venues, but how it later was transformed and disintegrated due to the emergence of broadcast media and advertising as well as the social democratic welfare state. These developments thus hindered the type of unrestricted public discussions free from market relations and state control, which were characterizing the bourgeois public sphere.

A main prerequisite for the ideal (bourgeois) public sphere was an open society with democratic institutions (Caulhun, 1992; Fraser, 1990). Due to the formal access to public information, free speech, free press, free assembly and a representative government, the merits of the argument rather than

⁴ Political equality is usually defined as the inclusion on equal terms of all those affected by the political decision-making process. Following Young (2000), “equal terms” refers both to the presence of equal rights and the opportunity to speak as well as to question the proposals of others, and to the absence of domination from others. Moreover, to be “affected” by a decision-making process implies that “decisions and policies significantly condition a person’s option for action” (p. 23).

the identity of the speaker would prevail. This since social status ideally would be put aside in favor of the argument “as if” the participants in the discussion were social and economic equals (Fraser, 1990, p. 63). In Habermas’ public sphere theory, equality in public discussions would thus be secured by the bracketing of social cues such as gender, race and class in favor of the good argument. However, due to a range of social and economic inequalities in existing democracies, it has been argued that the formal inclusion in public deliberation is insufficient in order to secure political equality. In fact, by only securing formal access to decision-making processes while neglecting existing social, economic and cultural differences among individuals and groups and thus “treating unequal citizens equally”, these existing inequalities are reproduced (Näsström, 2013, p. 161). Therefore, it has been argued that the informal rules, such as practices and norms, that structure social relations, are as crucial to political equality as are the aforementioned institutions, legislation or other types of formalized rules that secure formal inclusion.

It was precisely the neglectance of these types of informal exclusions⁵ and their importance for the very constitution of the bourgeois public sphere that spurred the feminist critique of Habermas’ classical public sphere theory.⁶ When *The Structural Transformation* was translated into English in the late 1980s, there was an immediate response from feminist scholars who questioned the lack of power perspective in Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere in general, as well as his idealization of the bourgeois public sphere in particular (e.g. Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Ryan, 1992). It was in this context that Nancy Fraser wrote her influential article *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* (1990), in which she argues that due to the way informal exclusions constrain deliberation on equal terms in today’s stratified societies, the public sphere rather needs to be conceptualized as a plurality of spheres of which some are dominant and others subordinated.

While acknowledging Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere as being of crucial importance to democratic societies, Fraser argues that the public venues that constituted the bourgeois public sphere were not in fact very public or democratic at all, since they openly excluded women, ethnic minorities and the lower classes from entering. Moreover, even though the public venues that hosted the official public sphere later opened up for the formal inclusion of the lower classes, women and people of color, the informal exclusion of these historically marginalized social groups persists. The

⁵ Following previous literature “marginalization” will hereafter be used interchangeably with informal exclusion (see Dovi, 2009).

⁶ Habermas (1992, p. 428) later revised his earlier idea of a single public sphere that could be analyzed in isolation from alternative public spheres, and acknowledged the importance of the exclusion of women from the historical bourgeois public sphere for its constitution by structuring the relation between the public and private sphere in a gender-specific fashion.

concept of *the* public sphere therefore ignores the fact that in addition to the dominant public spheres, subordinated social groups that have been either formally or informally excluded from mainstream public venues have in parallel formed alternative sub-publics.

Feminist theorists have thus questioned formal inclusion and the bracketing of social cues as sufficient conditions in order to guarantee political equality in public deliberation since some speakers, no matter their formal inclusion, still suffer from informal exclusion due to their social position. In relation to the problem of informal exclusion in the wider public spheres there is one solution in particular that has been suggested, namely the formation of subaltern counterpublics.

The classic solution to the problem of exclusion: the formation of subaltern counterpublics

Fraser's argument, which has become widely acknowledged, is hence that there is not just one, but multiple public spheres, in which different publics are competing for access to and influence over the political agenda – including dominant publics and *subaltern counterpublics*. Dominant publics are understood as public discourses formulated by dominant social groups in the official public sphere. Due to their privileged positions as, for example, white, male, heterosexual and middle-class, dominant groups have historically benefitted from a larger formal as well as informal inclusion in the official public spheres in order to formulate and advocate their interests and needs.⁷ In contrast, subaltern counterpublics are defined as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

Such contestation is made possible through the counterpublic *dynamics* that refer to the two functions or goals of counterpublics: “On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68, see also Asen, 2000; Warner, 2002). The former function hence refers to the inward-oriented goals, implying that counterpublics function as sites where their members can come together to formulate interests and needs. Such activities are moreover facilitated by safe communicative spaces, where counterdiscourses may be formulated out of reach of dominant discourses. Fraser (1990, p. 67)

⁷ Which public venues host such dominant public discourses can of course vary between different times and contexts. While venues such as French salons and British coffeehouses were important arenas for the official public discourse that constituted the historical bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century, traditional mass media, in particular mainstream news media outlets with large audiences, represent crucial venues for dominant public discourses in more contemporary settings (see e.g. Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017).

describes how “perhaps the most striking example” of a subaltern counterpublic – the U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic in the late-twentieth century – developed on alternative public venues such as “journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals and local meeting places”. The second function implies that subaltern counterpublics provide a possibility to develop common ideas and positions for the purposes of targeting and influencing dominant publics. These more outward-oriented activities can thus be expected to take place on public venues from where dominant publics may be targeted, such as mainstream news media or other “communicative spaces that are attended by mainstream audiences, but allow counterpublic-minded individuals to voice and agitate for their ideas” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017, p. 4).

As Fraser and other feminist scholars have argued, alternative public venues may present a crucial opportunity for subordinated social groups to be able to come together in order to formulate their interests and needs and to contest existing power structures: “This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies” (Fraser, 1990, p. 68; see also Felski 1989; Fraser, 2007; Young, 2000). Also, previous empirical research on the possibilities of historically marginalized groups to organize and gain political influence points away from the parliamentary arena and towards the public spheres when it comes to forwarding their preferences onto the political agenda (see e.g. Cornwall & Goetz, 2005; McBride, Mazur, & Lovenduski, 2010; Heath, Schwindt-Bayer, & Taylor-Robinson, 2005; Squires, 2008; Weldon, 2002; 2019). By public exposure, protest and shaming “[t]he public sphere is [...] a main tool through which organized citizens can limit power and hold powerful actors accountable” (Young, 2000, p. 174).

Subaltern counterpublics are hence described not only as an advantageous way for subordinate social groups to organize, but also as a necessary means for marginalized social groups to have a voice in unequal societies. The inclusion of more voices, interests, opinions and perspectives through the emergence of subaltern counterpublics has thus been theorized as a primary solution to the problem of informal exclusions of historically marginalized groups from the dominant public spheres and thereby as crucial for destabilizing existing power structures in public debates. While the concept of counterpublics has been crucial in order to criticize the lack of power perspective in the classic public sphere theory, we will however see that in its current formulation it provides less useful tools for analyzing the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres, or for analyzing counterpublic dynamics on public venues where the lack of inclusion no longer seems to be the primary problem.

The problems with the classic solution: empirical and theoretical gaps in previous research on counterpublics

Following the conceptualization of subaltern counterpublics as a central solution to the problem of exclusions in the public spheres, previous research on counterpublics has had two main focuses. On the one hand, there has been an empirical focus on “good” or “progressive” counterpublics as well as counterpublics formed by structurally marginalized groups. On the other hand, scholars have argued that we need to broaden the concept in order to also capture other types of counterpublics in addition to the subaltern ones, and thereby make the concept more “neutral” in relation to counterpublics’ structural position. However, by partly disengaging the concept from structural inequalities, there are few tools offered whereby the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves can be analyzed, which impedes an analysis of the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

Following how the concept of subaltern counterpublics originally was coined to describe how groups that historically have been marginalized and/or excluded from dominant publics have formed their own, parallel, publics, previous empirical research on online counterpublics has often focused on “good” or “progressive” counterpublics (although with some notable exceptions, see e.g. Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). This includes studies of online counterpublics such as feminist hashtag activism (Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Portwood-Stacer & Berridge, 2014, 2015), anti-racist movements (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), minority communities (Eckert & Chadha, 2013), asexual communities (Renninger, 2015), anti-globalist/alter globalization movements (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Langman, 2005), the Zapatista movement (Kowal, 2002), and many more. This research has in particular demonstrated the ways in which historically disadvantaged groups and communities have made great use of online platforms in order to find each other and formulate alternative identities, interests and needs internally, and to what extent they have managed to promote these counter discourses externally towards wider publics, in particular mainstream media. This is in line with the focus on “good” movements rather than their opponents in research on social movements in general and on the internet in particular. As Jessie Daniels (2009b, p. 46) notes: “Much of the scholarship about new social movements on the Internet is guided by a conviction in the liberatory potential of the Internet to transform society in more democratically inclusive ways and therefore tends to focus on progressive movements”.⁸

⁸ One reason for the focus on progressive movements could simply be that they are easier to access. However, just as for activists in such counterpublics, “the Internet provides a relatively inexpensive venue for widespread communication of their ideas unimpeded by monitors or

While such research is crucial to improving our understanding of how online platforms may enable structurally marginalized groups to target and alter existing power structures, it provides us with less knowledge about how structurally privileged groups can make use of online platforms to preserve, or even reverse, the status quo through the emergence of online counterpublics. As Roggeband (2018, p. 34) points out: “theoretical arguments are skewed towards groups that seek to take issues forward, not those that work to defend the status quo or keep change at bay”. Moreover, even though a number of studies have shown how, for example, right-wing extremist groups have used online platforms for internal communication, recruitment and advocacy (e.g. Caiani & Parenti, 2009; Cammaerts 2007a, 2008; Daniels, 2009a, 2009b; Tateo, 2005), and how groups on the radical right and the radical left are competing for political influence through the emergence of online counterpublics (e.g. Neumayer 2013) the focus is rarely on how these online political activities are connected to structural privilege or marginalization.

As alluded to above, subaltern counterpublics is a concept that originated from feminist political theory to describe how historically disadvantaged social groups have formed counterdiscourses on primarily alternative public venues in order to develop their own identities and interests by in-group discussions to then target and challenge dominant discourses. Even though Fraser in her original article was clear that not all subaltern counterpublics are virtuous and that some have “explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian” intentions externally, or internal problems with informal exclusion/marginalization, they are still argued to expand discursive space if they “emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). These exclusions should thus be understood as primarily based on the fact that they belong to a historically disadvantaged social group. Hence, the emergence of counterpublics and a progressive politics advocated by and for historically marginalized groups have often been used interchangeably as if it was the same phenomenon (see e.g. Palczewski, 2001).

In later theoretical debates it has however been pointed out that not only are there subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian agendas – some counterpublics are actually not even subaltern in the sense that they rather are composed of privileged groups. Hence, counterpublics can also be formed by structurally advantaged groups in terms of economic resources, as well as other types of capital that can be important for effective advocacy work. To capture the existence of other types of counterpublics in addition to the subaltern ones, this literature has advocated for a neutral concept in relation to their structural position (Asen, 2000; Warner,

wardens” also for activists in extremist white supremacist organizations and other “obscure subcultures” (Daniels, 2009b, p. 46).

2002, see also Brouwer 2006; Downey 2007; Downey & Fenton, 2003). Instead, the core of counterpublics is understood as their “recognition of various exclusions from wider publics of potential participants, discourse topics, and speaking styles and the resolve that builds to overcome these exclusions” (Asen, 2000, p. 438).

However, while partly disengaging the concept from structural inequalities has been argued as a necessary move in order to capture a larger variety of counterpublics, it has the additional consequence of reducing the possibilities of analyzing counterpublic dynamics from a power perspective. Hence, we are left with few theoretical or analytical tools with which to analyze power relations in the public spheres besides the unequal and contestatory relationship between counterpublics and dominant publics. Such tools are thus necessary in order to further explore the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres. Next will be discussed how a redirection of analytical focus towards the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics can be undertaken theoretically as well as empirically.

Exploring the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics

Counterpublics specifically function as sites where members of marginalized groups may come together to contest and alter dominant public discourses. This makes them central to the understanding of processes whereby current power structures are challenged and reproduced. In order to explore the reproduction of *privilege* in the context of online counterpublic dynamics, we however need to move the analytical focus away from how historically marginalized groups may form counterpublics in order to challenge and alter existing power structures. Instead, we need to know more about how privileged groups may benefit from existing institutional structures, as well as the conscious and unconscious actions and interactions that contribute to the reproduction of asymmetrical power relations (see Bjarnegård, 2013). In the following sections, I will briefly outline how such redirection of analytical focus has been undertaken within the scope of this thesis. The first section argues for the need to bring back and broaden the power perspective on the public spheres, which was introduced by feminist scholars. Secondly, to enable an analysis that focuses specifically on how *online* platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege, the institutional context provided by the design and governance of online platforms themselves needs to be brought into the analysis. Thirdly, the three research questions that this theoretical framework leads up to, and by which the overarching research problem can be explored, are presented. Lastly, the research design of this thesis will be briefly elaborated on.

Counterpublics' centrality to power relations in the public spheres

From Habermas' earlier notion of a single public sphere it has since been widely acknowledged that there is rather a plethora of different public spheres. These multiple public spheres moreover include a wide range of different interacting and overlapping *publics*, of which some are more dominating and others are subordinated. Warner (2002) points to how publics are relations among strangers that are characterized by their self-organization through discourse. For example, the circulation of newsletters, journals, magazines, etc., was crucial for the emergence of modern publics. In this way, publics differ from discursive arenas that are rather organized by "state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church" (p. 51). Moreover, publics are often organized around specific issues (Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2015).

Among the universe of different publics, there are those that rather function as enclaves or satellites. Enclaves are publics that enclave themselves, in order "to survive or avoid sanctions", while a satellite public on the other hand "seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time" (Squires, 2002, p. 448). In contrast to enclaves and satellites, or other more autonomous public spheres that simply seek independence from the official public spheres, a signifying feature of counterpublics is that they are not isolationist but actively engaging in publicity in order to contest and alter dominant public discourses in the wider public spheres or the state (as Fraser, 1990, points out, however, counterpublics may be enclaved involuntarily). In relation to other kinds of publics, counterpublics are thus particular in the way whereby they explicitly articulate and contest their exclusion from dominant public spheres. Thereby, the concept of counterpublics "illuminate the differential power relations among diverse publics of a multiple public sphere" (Asen, 2000, p. 425, see also Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002). Moreover, as part of the larger universe of publics, counterpublics should be understood as emerging through "communicative acts within specific contexts" rather than signifying formal organizations (Renninger, 2015, p. 4, see also Warner, 2002). Building on this literature, counterpublics are here understood as 1) issue-specific discursive arenas formed through communicative acts, to 2) articulate and contest their (actual or perceived) exclusion and/or marginalization from dominant public spheres.

To reiterate, previous literature on counterpublics has made important contributions in chiseling out their specific subordinate and contestatory relationship vis-à-vis dominant publics, as well as their function as safe spaces for in-group discussions and empowerment for historically marginalized groups. However, in order to enable an explicit analysis of how *privi-*

lege is reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics, we need to go beyond focusing primarily on the formulation of empowering counterdiscourses within counterpublics or the unequal and contestatory relations between counterpublics and dominant publics. Since structurally privileged groups also can form counterpublics, and since social structures intersect dynamically, we also need to analyze the power differentials *between* different types of counterpublics – but also the power differentials *within* counterpublics themselves. In order to do this, I suggest a broader and more specific typology that takes counterpublics' social as well as political base for actual exclusion and/or marginalization into consideration. For this purpose, the concept of *non-subaltern counterpublics* can function as a complement to the concept of subaltern counterpublics, to enable an analysis of how privilege is reproduced in the emergence of counterpublics with different structural positions and, sometimes, competing political agendas.

To enhance our understanding of how structural privilege is reproduced in *online* counterpublic dynamics, we however also need to analyze the specific opportunities and constraints for counterpublic emergence that the architecture of online platforms provides. In the next section it will therefore be suggested that the emergence of online counterpublics should be analyzed as mediated by the affordances of online platforms.

Online platforms as purposely constructed mediators of counterpublic dynamics

The types of (physical or mediated) public spaces that have been crucial to the development of the public spheres have varied over time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the circulation of pamphlets, journals and newspapers, read and discussed in coffeehouses and salons, constituted important venues for the development of the historical bourgeois public sphere (Squires, 2002). Later, these were replaced by the mass media, as well as the alternative public venues such as journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, cafés, bookstores, local meeting places, etc. that Fraser (1990) and Felski (1989) point out as important public venues for the emergence of the U.S. feminist counterpublic, or the Black press and popular culture which has been pointed out as crucial for the emergence of Black counterpublic spheres in the U.S. context (Squires, 2002). Even if it has been argued that counterpublics may emerge on various types of public venues, in dominant as well as in alternative public spheres (Asen 2000), the existence of alternative venues for public talk which are more inclusive than the public venues hosting the dominant public spheres, has thus been put forward as a crucial condition for marginalized groups to come together and formulate their interests and needs.

The advent of web 2.0 in the early 2000s has been pointed out as particularly important for providing the infrastructure for a new type of online public venues that could offer such functions. From being mainly platforms for consumption of content provided by a few professional producers, the development of web 2.0 with its diversity of “free web platforms and inexpensive software tools” meant that it now also became fairly easy for anyone to produce and share their own content, as well as to interact with other users in an unprecedented way (Manovich, 2009, p. 319; see also van Dijck, 2013). Today, many of the online public venues that came with web 2.0, such as social media, blogs, online forums, websites, etc., could be added to the alternative public venues that previously have been pointed out as crucial for the emergence of counterpublics (Riegert, 2015). Due to the ways in which such online public venues offer new possibilities to enter and participate in public debates, these can be understood to have increased both the formal inclusion (by offering new platforms and software for producing and sharing content) as well as the informal inclusion (by lowering the barriers and costs for people to enter, voice their opinions and to interact) in the public spheres.

Although some have warned that the great diversity of online public venues, and the increased ability to select which information and interactions one is exposed to, will lead to more “deliberative enclaves” and thus echo-chambers of like-minded individuals (Sunstein, 2001), others have instead argued that such fragmentation precisely can function as an important prerequisite for the emergence of counterpublics (Dahlberg, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002). Indeed, compared to the beginning of the 1990s, much of counterpublics’ activities have now moved online, not least due to the possibilities of the “relatively low-cost means of disseminating counter-publicity and of making contacts and alliances between geographically dispersed groups” (Downey 2007, p. 117-118). The recent rise of online counterpublics through digital media technologies can moreover be understood in light of the nature of online political mobilization, which tends to be organized through more spontaneous, loosely connected and rapid communicative actions, compared to the more formal organization of traditional (offline) social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Much recent literature has pointed to the importance of analyzing how the architecture of online platforms for communicative action such as different social media, comment sections in mainstream news media and blogs in particular are enabling and shaping counterpublic dynamics (e.g. Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Kaiser, 2017; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017, see also boyd, 2010). Previous research has also demonstrated how the governance and design of online platforms seems to be important for defining the groups that will use them and how they can use them, but also for defining which groups can voice political messages effectively, and ultimately for which publics may emerge (boyd, 2011; Dahlberg-Grundberg & Örestig, 2017; Freelon, 2015; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011). This points to

the importance of situating an analysis of the reproduction of privilege between and within different online counterpublics in the context of the specific opportunities and constraints that the technological architecture of online platforms provides.

Including the governance and design of online platforms in the analysis hence departs from two interlinked assumptions: First, the design of online platforms as well as the policies that govern their use shape the conditions for human agency – such as the emergence of counterpublics – and thereby mediate structural privilege (as well as marginalization). In other words, online platforms are “active mediators” of social acts and thereby shaping these rather than simply being facilitators (Burgess & Bruns, 2015, p. 96, see also Van Dijk, 2013, p. 29). The second assumption is based on the argument that online platforms are far from the neutral artifacts that they sometimes are portrayed as, not least by the platform providers themselves. Instead, online platforms should be understood as constructed for certain purposes, although perhaps with unintended consequences (Gillespie, 2010; 2017, see also Burgess & Bruns, 2015).

In order to analyze how online platforms mediate counterpublic dynamics the concept of *affordances* will be used. The affordances of digital media platforms can broadly be described as “possibilities for action” (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017, p. 36), and more specifically refers to “the physical properties or features of objects and settings that “invite” actors to use them in particular ways” (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 23, see also Hutchby 2001). The concept of affordances thus enables an analysis of how the materiality of digital media platforms shapes how they are used, as well as of how these platforms are shaped by the social context within which they are constructed and understood. Therefore, the concept of affordances has been particularly pinpointed for offering a framework that enables the study of how new media technology are shaping, as well as are shaped, by social acts (Lievrouw, 2014, see also Davis & Chouinard, 2016). *Online* counterpublics should thus be understood as counterpublics that have emerged primarily through the affordances of online public venues.

In analyzing how the affordances of online public venues mediate the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics there will in addition be a specific focus on two aspects of affordances. The *functional* aspect of affordances refers to their inbuilt technical functions, hence the material enablers and constrains which are designed into objects. This also includes the policies that govern the use of these technical functions, which for example could concern moderation rules or if anonymous accounts are allowed or not. The *relational aspect* of affordances refers to how these functions and policies are perceived by their users as well as by their designers. This partly entails the capacities of the users to perceive affordances as inviting, but also the intentions and ideas among the designers of these functional aspects. Hence, these two aspects of affordances allow for an analysis

of how the social and political base for the emergence of counterpublics is related to the use of digital technology.

Research questions and purpose

By employing the concept of counterpublics, we can improve our understanding of the processes whereby dominant public discourses are contested and altered through the emergence of certain sub-publics on alternative public venues. A focus on how the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* and *within* counterpublics themselves moreover enables an analytical shift towards how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics. This redirection is thus important since such dynamics can be expected to have consequences for the internal formulation of counterdiscourses as well as for how counterpublics may respond to dominant publics. Moreover, digital public venues are not only shaping the conditions for online counterpublic dynamics through their affordances, but are also intentionally shaped by their designers (although perhaps with unexpected consequences). Therefore, we need to know more about the ideational context within which online platforms that allow for a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres are constructed. There are thus three dimensions of the overarching research problem that need to be studied:

1. *What are the rationales **behind** the governance and design of online platforms central to dominant public spheres?*
2. *How do the affordances of online platforms mediate power differentials **between** counterpublics?*
3. *How do the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials **within** counterpublics?*

Guided by these three questions, the purpose of this thesis is to explore how online platforms are shaped and are shaping the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics. In order to do this, three empirical cases have been investigated with various methods, to capture and illuminate the partly different phenomena pointed to by the three research questions. Next, this research design will be briefly elaborated on.

A strategic selection of empirical cases

The three dimensions of the overarching research problem guide each of the empirical chapters in this thesis, in which three different empirical cases are investigated. While these chapters also provide interesting empirical insights in their own right, their purpose within the framework of this thesis is primarily theory development. The empirical cases have therefore been selected

strategically, in order to maximize the information in relation to each of the research questions and thereby showcase important logics in order to develop existing theory (Small, 2009; Yin, 2018). In order to single out relevant cases, I have in particular sought a theoretically interesting variation along two dimensions in relation to the research questions: types of counterpublics in terms of their actual exclusion and/or marginalization from dominant publics, and types of online platforms in terms of the affordances they provide in relation to counterpublic dynamics. Moreover, a combination of different methods has been used since the empirical chapters partly aim at capturing different kinds of phenomena. This includes qualitative interviews, social network analysis and different kinds of textual analyses.

The first empirical chapter explores the rationales among those that are “setting the stage” for the emergence of counterpublics through their position as gatekeepers in the dominant public spheres. In particular, the larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres through the introduction of different types of formats for user participation in mainstream news media is investigated, with a particular focus on comment sections.⁹ Theoretically, mainstream news media represent a relevant case in relation to the emergence of counterpublics since they are one of the most central venues in the dominant public spheres, and therefore can be expected to be one of the main targets for counter-publicity. At the same time as user comments in mainstream news media have implied a much larger inclusion of the number of voices as well as type of interests and perspectives among the general public in relation to previous formats (such as letters to the editor), they have since their introduction over a decade ago been beset with problems. In particular, comment sections on mainstream news sites have been highlighted for providing a highly visible online space for right wing populist counter-publicity as well as for climate change denial/skeptic counter-publicity (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015; 2017, Kaiser, 2017). By means of interviews with some of the main gatekeepers in Swedish news media, the chapter seeks to understand their main rationales in making decisions over the design and policies of comment sections connected to their sites. In addition, I analyze how these rationales are related to the central democratic values of inclusion, equality and quality of public conversations.

In relation to how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics, we need to know more about how structurally privileged groups are enabled by online public venues in the emergence of counterpublics, in competition with counterpublics formed by structurally marginalized groups. Antifeminist movements have historically consisted of structurally privileged groups that have mobilized against the gains of feminist movements and actors. At the same time, political blogs have been

⁹ Readers’ comments sections, comment sections and user comments will hereafter be used interchangeably.

demonstrated by previous research as online platforms particularly beneficial to historically privileged groups who already have a strong voice in public debates, such as white male professionals (Hindman, 2009; Schradie, 2012). The second empirical chapter therefore uses both network and textual analysis to investigate the antifeminist counterpublic that emerged on Swedish political blogs in the end of the 2000s, in reaction to the great advancements for gender equal policy in Sweden during the last decades.

In exploring how online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* counterpublics, it is important to improve our understanding of how relationally privileged groups within counterpublics formed by structurally marginalized groups are enabled by online platforms. The third empirical chapter therefore analyzes the competition for voice within the emergence of a feminist counterpublic initiated by feminists who are intersectionally marginalized. Empirically, the chapter analyzes the emergence of the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, which started off in August 2013 as a direct critique of how the voices of women of color have been marginalized within mainstream feminism in general and on large online feminist platforms in particular. As one of the largest social media platforms globally, Twitter's architecture has moreover been pointed out as particularly inclusive. Delimiting the emergence of the counterpublic that was formed through the hashtag to the most visible tweets ("Top Tweets") during the first week of the hashtag's existence, the chapter explores how self-identified white feminists in different ways were enabled by Twitter's inclusive design in order to reposition themselves within the hashtag conversation and thereby competed with the voices of women of color.

Together, the three empirical chapters improve our understanding of how digital media platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege by exploring how dominant discourses may be upheld and contested through the governance and design of online platforms, as well as how privileged groups in various ways may be enabled by online platforms in order to challenge and alter dominant discourses to their own advantage. Next, the particular contributions of the theoretical, methodological and empirical work in this thesis are elaborated on.

Contributions

The explicit focus on the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics first necessitated a revitalized power perspective on the public spheres, which also takes into account the power differentials between and within counterpublics. One important contribution of this thesis is therefore a broader and more specified typology of counterpublics in relation to their *actual* exclusion from dominant public spheres. This makes it

possible to distinguish analytically between counterpublics that primarily are structurally or politically marginalized in the dominant public spheres.

Turning the analytical focus towards the reproduction of privilege moreover enables an improved understanding of how already privileged groups can benefit from the inclusiveness of online platforms, and what consequences this can have for the possibility of marginalized groups to challenge and alter dominant public discourses. The first empirical chapter demonstrates how inclusion, rather than equality (or quality), was prioritized by the editors mainly for economic reasons in relation to the governance and design of user comments in mainstream news media. This indirectly implies that privileged groups that have been politically marginalized from mainstream public venues can now find new ways to influence dominant public discourses directly. The second empirical chapter shows how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics, by providing privileged groups that are politically marginalized (for example due to their anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian agendas) *additional advantages* in relation to marginalized groups. Thus, while the antifeminist bloggers perceived themselves as marginalized from mainstream media platforms, they could at the same time be described as part of a privileged group whom previous research found to be most likely to use online platforms for political purposes in general and to run influential political blogs in particular—namely, well-educated white male professionals. Moreover, the possibility of anonymity enabled them to participate in public debates with opinions that were perceived as socially stigmatizing in the Swedish context. In relation to the competition *within* counterpublics, the third empirical chapter shows that while Twitter's affordances provide marginalized groups with new possibilities to form counterpublics, these at the same time provide relationally privileged groups with new possibilities to (unconsciously or consciously) intervene in and distort counterpublic conversations to their own advantage.

The focus on how online platforms *mediate* privilege moreover contributes an increased understanding of the importance of what potential users bring to the platforms for how they can use them (in counterpublic dynamics). On the one hand, the affordances provided by online platforms are partly similar to the extent that in relation to traditional public venues they are lowering the barriers and costs to participate in public debates. The empirical chapters demonstrate how this relative inclusiveness favors those who, due to their social position, have access to the right kind of resources in order to be able to *self-select* their own voice, rather than being dependent on a selection by others. Moreover, this self-selection is facilitated by a strong, relational, feeling of *entitlement*, which in particular has been related to privileged groups: Namely, the perception that one's voice deserves to be heard since this has been the norm historically, and that one is hence able to make an important contribution in this particular context. On the other hand, online platforms are also partly providing potential users with different types of

affordances, which may have consequences for counterpublic dynamics. In particular, while very inclusive platforms have been shown to provide historically marginalized groups with additional opportunities to form counterpublics, this inclusiveness also makes them more difficult to maintain as “safe spaces”. This means that it is difficult to exclude privileged others from the conversation and thus to pursue it undisturbed. At the same time, privileged groups are rendered an additional advantage in forming influential counterpublics on more resources-demanding, and hence less inclusive, platforms, such as political blogs.

Lastly, the findings of the dissertation illuminate the limits of a larger inclusion as a central solution to political inequality (in the public spheres) and suggest a more complex relationship between inclusion and political equality in public debates, which is in need of further investigation. While in particular feminist political theory has focused on how an increased *informal* inclusion would translate into increased political equality, the findings of this thesis illustrate how bringing in a larger number, as well as diversity of voices, interests, opinions and perspectives in public deliberation can have unexpected and paradoxical consequences. The additional advantages that the affordances of online platforms provide to relationally privileged groups in counterpublic dynamics hence highlight how a larger inclusion can be an insufficient solution to political inequality if the domination of privileged groups is not somehow explicitly regulated/challenged.

Outline of the dissertation

This thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework needed to analyze how online platforms are mediating privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics is further elaborated on. The chapter is divided in two main parts. First, a revitalized power perspective on counterpublics is developed, which takes the structural advantages (as well as disadvantages) that different types of counterpublics may have at hand into consideration. A broader typology of counterpublics is elaborated on, based on counterpublics’ social and political base for exclusion and/or marginalization. The concept of non-subaltern counterpublics is introduced, in order to capture also those counterpublics that are in fact not subaltern, while still enabling an analysis of power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves. In the second part of Chapter 2, the ways in which the governance and design of online platforms can be included in an analysis of online counterpublic dynamics are discussed in more detail, as well as how the concept of affordances can inform such an analysis. The chapter concludes by reiterating the research questions that guide the empirical chapters. In Chapter 3, the research design is elaborated on. This includes detailed reflections on the strategic selection of cases, as well as on the combination

of methods that have been used to explore these cases. However, in order to relate the analytical tools directly to the research questions and more specific theoretical frameworks for each of the chapters, a more precise presentation and discussion of these are to be found in the empirical chapters. Lastly, the ethical considerations that followed from my methodological decisions are discussed, with a particular focus on issues pertaining to personal integrity, safety and transparency when one researches online environments. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 the empirical case studies are analyzed. In order to increase our understanding for the rationales behind one important prerequisite for the emergence of online counterpublics, namely the architecture of digital public venues, Chapter 4 examines the rationales behind the governance and design of formats for user participation in Swedish mainstream news media. The chapter builds on qualitative interviews with 26 editors on different levels within 14 of the most widely read regional as well as nationwide Swedish newspapers. The chapter shows how the inclusive (and later slightly more restricted) governance and design of these relatively new venues for public debates has mainly been driven by economic incentives, rather than being a design primarily considered to increase the quality of the debate or the equality in political voice among participants. In contrast, the measures that were employed in order to curb the overrepresentation of some voices primarily concerned different kinds of exclusions. In addition, the chapter illustrates how the lack of traditional gatekeepers on online platforms has led to the proliferation of a “self-selection logic”. Chapter 5 then moves on to analyze who might benefit from such logic in the competition *between* counterpublics. Specifically, the chapter analyzes how the affordances of political blogs mediated the emergence of a Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, in reaction to the great advancements for gender equal policy in Sweden during the last decades. By analyzing blog texts as well as the hyperlinking within the blogosphere it is shown how the affordances of blogs have been conducive to the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context. In particular, the privileged position of several of the leading bloggers motivated their antifeminist blogging as well as enabled access to capacities that have been pointed out as important for influential political blogging. In addition, the affordance of anonymity offered a possibility to be very public with political opinions that were perceived as stigmatized in Swedish society at that time. In Chapter 6, the analysis zooms in on the power differentials *between* counterpublics. By analyzing the most visible tweets (“Top Tweets”) within the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, the chapter shows how the affordances of Twitter enabled self-identified white feminists to (seemingly unconsciously) occupy space in the hashtag conversation and thereby compete with the voices of women of color. In particular, the affordances of Twitter constrained the possibilities of restraining access to privileged others within the hashtag discussion (even if their presence indeed was contested), as well as enabling an exaggeration of invisible (white) privilege. In Chapter 7 the findings of the empirical chapters are summarized and

the empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions of the thesis are discussed. In particular, the advantages of relational privilege in online counterpublic dynamics are elaborated on as well as its implications for the power differentials between and within counterpublics. Lastly, the findings are related to the literature within feminist political theory that is written from a perspective of inclusion. While this literature has been immensely important in order to theorize and investigate how underrepresented and structurally disadvantaged groups can reach greater political influence and representation, the logics that underpins the additional advantages of already privileged groups in the digital age in addition urges more research on the downsides of inclusion, as well as on the ways in which democratic exclusion could be undertaken in the public spheres.

Chapter 2: (Non-)Subaltern Counterpublics Mediated by Online Public Venues

The main purpose of this chapter is to chisel out a theoretical framework that enables an analysis of how privilege and marginalization is contested and reproduced through public debates, now also mediated by online public venues. The first part of the chapter focuses on the concept of counterpublics, since it specifically allows for such analytical focus. However, in order to explicitly analyze how online platforms mediate the reproduction of *privilege* in the context of counterpublic dynamics, it will be suggested that we need to focus more on how the power differentials *between* and *within* counterpublics themselves impact the emergence of counterpublics. Therefore, a broader and more specified typology of counterpublics is developed, which allows for an analytical separation between counterpublics formed by groups that are primarily structurally or politically excluded or marginalized in the dominant public spheres. The second central aspect of the theoretical framework builds on the concept of affordances, which allows for an analysis of how aspects related to the design and governance of online platforms shape counterpublic dynamics. Affordances can broadly be described as the possibilities and constraints for action that are built into online platforms. The construction of these technical enablers and constraints (the functional aspect of affordances) of online platforms moreover depends on the rationales among their designers and in addition demands certain capabilities of their users (the relational aspect of affordances). The affordances of online platforms are hence understood as part of the institutional structures that condition the emergence of online counterpublics.

Dropping the subaltern – are all counterpublics the same from a power perspective?

In the feminist critique that was raised against the lack of power perspective in Habermas' classic public sphere theory, the emergence of subaltern counterpublics on alternative public venues was put forward as a solution in particular to the problem of informal exclusions of historically marginalized social groups from the dominant public spheres in democratic societies (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990). The concept of subaltern counterpublics pri-

marily derives from Fraser's and Felski's texts,¹⁰ and in their empirical examples they are both referring primarily to the feminist counterpublic sphere in the U.S. context, which empowered (some) women to gather and exchange experiences of oppression as well as formulating and voicing demands towards dominant publics.

Even though the (U.S.) feminist counterpublic is put forward as a typical example of a subaltern counterpublic, Fraser briefly discusses the fact that not all subaltern counterpublics are progressive or advocate democratic and egalitarian politics. Also anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian subaltern counterpublics exist, as well as those with democratic and egalitarian political agendas albeit not practicing these values internally. No matter their external advocacy intentions or internal practices, however, Fraser contends that all subaltern counterpublics which "emerge in response to dominant publics" still help to "expand discursive space" as well as contribute to a "widening of discursive contestation" which in stratified and multicultural societies is beneficial to participatory democracy (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

Felski (1989), for her part, briefly problematizes the conceptualization of (feminist) counterpublics as a single discursive arena that can function as a representative forum for marginalized social groups. Hence, to claim that the feminist counterpublic sphere can function as a representative forum for all women masks the structural inequalities within the group of women and suppresses the voices of disadvantaged subgroups, such as women of color, in relation to the group of white middle-class women. The main focus in Felski's argument however is on how the feminist counterpublic can function as an arena for disseminating counter-publicity vis-à-vis dominant publics, even though the feminist counterpublic should rather be conceptualized as "coalitions of overlapping subcommunities" (Felski, 1989, p. 171).

Fraser (1990) and Felski (1989) thus explicitly refer to certain types of social groups, namely those that have been structurally disadvantaged historically, when arguing for the necessity of counterpublic spheres in order to contest and challenge dominant publics. Later influential texts within counterpublic theory, which mainly build on Fraser's conceptualization of subaltern counterpublics, point out however that not only are some counterpublics anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian, but some are actually not even subaltern in the sense that they are not structurally underprivileged. These groups have thus not been historically excluded or marginalized from access to the dominant public spheres. On the contrary, it is argued that counterpublics can be composed of quite powerful groups in terms of economic resources, as well as other types of capital. Moreover, since counterpublics may operate on mainstream public arenas as well as succeed in their goal to influence dominant public discourses, to delimit the scope of counterpublic activities

¹⁰ Fraser took the term counterpublics from Felski's text, and added the term subaltern from Spivak (1988) (see Fraser 1990, footnote 22).

to only concern certain (alternative) public venues would similarly be problematic (eg. Asen, 2000; Downey 2007; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Warner, 2002).

To capture the existence of other types of counterpublics in addition to the subaltern ones, it is thus argued that we need to drop the subaltern in front of counterpublics and instead denote them all “counterpublics”. “Is the feminist counterpublic distinguished by anything other than its program of reform?” Warner (2002, p. 85) asks rhetorically, and then compares it to other types of counterpublics such as U.S Christian fundamentalism, or artistic bohemianism. He then points out that these function in a similar way as “a scene for developing oppositional interpretations of its members’ identities, interests, and needs” (Warner, 2002, p. 86). Likewise, Asen (2000) argues that for counterpublic theory not to be reductionist, it needs to go beyond defining counterpublics in terms of operating on particular arenas, by their topics of advocacy or by their participants’ structural position. Instead, Asen suggests that the counter in counterpublics rather is signifying “participants’ recognition of exclusion from wider public spheres and its articulation through alternative discourses and norms” (Asen, 2000, p. 427). Counterpublics should therefore be defined as “the collectives that emerge in the recognition of various exclusions from wider publics of potential participants, discourse topics, and speaking styles and the resolve that builds to overcome these exclusions” (Asen, 2000, p. 438). To be “counter” is thereby defined as a constructed relationship rather than by any essential markers of marginalization or difference in relation to the wider/dominant publics (Asen, 2000, p. 437).

The argument is thus that we need to look beyond the content of the claims, which persons are making them, or on which type of platforms this is done, and instead focus on the core of what is “counter” in counterpublics, which henceforth is defined as their *perceived* subordinated relationship to dominant publics.

However, even though we agree that not all counterpublics could be called subaltern, and that they all have a common denominator in that they recognize, articulate and contest their exclusion from dominant publics – does this imply that all counterpublics are (kind of) the same from a power perspective? Others have instead argued that there are more fundamental differences between and within alternative publics that we need to recognize and also theorize to be able to analyze their ability to respond to dominant publics. In *Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres*, Squires (2002) argues that we need to go beyond differentiating between various types of subaltern publics only in terms of understanding them as based on different group identities. Instead, we should analyze what type of kinds of resources they have available, since these will mark how they (can) respond to dominant publics. Squires uses the history of the African American public spheres to illustrate her argument

that some publics are stronger in the sense that they have “ready access to organized forms of association and publicity, such as independent media production, political action committees, professional organizations, etc.” (Squires, 2002, p. 457). Taking these kinds of resources into consideration when analyzing counterpublic dynamics, would make it possible to analyze “how constituents of these publics interact and intersect, or how politically successful certain publics are in relation to others” (Squires, 2002, p. 447). To enable such an analysis, a typology of alternative publics is presented, including *the enclave*, *the counterpublic* and *the satellite*. Enclaves are characterized by few resources, and often operate in hidden spaces with the goal of preserving their culture and building resistance towards a very oppressive state and dominant publics. Counterpublics, on the other hand, have a higher level of resources (media, political, legal) and are interacting with and openly contesting dominant publics and the state. In contrast, satellite publics operate separately from other publics since they do not desire to be part of them, and are instead striving to form their own separate spaces and worldviews. While Squires importantly points out the differences in resources available to different kinds of alternative publics, this typology does however not differentiate between the resources available to different types of *counterpublics*, and how this impacts their ability to influence dominant publics.

Moreover, research on anti-democratic publics has demonstrated that there are in addition other differences between alternative publics. In particular, Cammaerts (2007a, 2008) early on used the example of extreme-right movements and activists in Europe and the U.S. to illustrate how anti-democratic forces and discourses have been enabled by online platforms such as blogs and online forums. Cammaerts (2007b, p. 73) has in addition developed the concept of *anti-publics* to separate anti-democratic and reactionary publics that “explicitly challenge or question democratic values”, from progressive emancipatory counterpublics, as well as from autonomous publics that are defined as simply independent from dominant public spheres. This research importantly demonstrates the existence of other types of counterdiscourses than democratic ones, and makes a conceptual separation between anti-democratic publics (*anti-publics*) and other publics. Cammaerts is however less clear on the relationship between these anti-democratic publics and other types of counterpublics or dominant publics, even if it is pointed out that the *anti-publics* often manages to influence dominant publics.¹¹ In addition, the concept of *anti-publics* does not cover how the power differentials within publics that are formulating counterdiscourses

¹¹ For example, in the conceptual map used to present a normative model of the “Interacting public spaces”, Cammaerts places *anti-publics* outside the democratic civil society to demonstrate their fundamental difference from other types of publics. The model is however unclear on how *antipublics* interact with or compete with other counterpublics, or the dominant public spheres (see Cammaerts 2007b, p. 74).

are affecting their internal dynamics and subsequently how they can respond to dominant publics.

Why a “neutral” concept is not enough

An influential critique of the concept of subaltern counterpublics has thus been that it is too narrow a concept, which misses out on the many other types of counterpublics that actually are out there, trying to influence mainstream mass media and the state. We should therefore not constrain our theoretical, or empirical, analyses of counterpublics to specific “topics, places or persons” since this represents a reductionist view on counterpublics and would reduce them to group essentialization and “identity politics”. The original idea expressed by Fraser was however not (necessarily) that subaltern counterpublics should be defined by specific topics, persons or places, but rather that they are formed by specific social groups which are defined by their *subordinate structural positioning* versus dominant publics in an unequal society, or as Fraser puts it: “I have argued that in stratified societies, like it or not, subaltern counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics” (Fraser, 1990, p. 70).¹² Moreover, while Fraser has put forward group identity as an important constitutive element of social groups and counterpublics,¹³ Young (2000) on the other hand rejects the idea that identity politics have much to do with the struggle of historically marginalized social groups. Instead, social groups, and their group identity, are constituted by their social position, which is conditioned by social structures.¹⁴ This understanding of social groups hence enables an analysis of group differentiation as something relational rather than stemming from an essential identity, and how power differentials between, as well as within, social groups that are forming counterpublics, are conditioned by *structural* advantages and disadvantages.

In contrast, to primarily distinguish counterpublics on the basis of their *perceived* relation to dominant publics misses out on the *actual* structural inequalities that may exist between and within different counterpublics

¹² This is also underlined by the fact that Fraser took the term *subaltern* from Gayatri Spivak’s, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 1988), in which Spivak argues that the representation of marginalized Third World groups, and hence their further disempowerment, depends on the structural position of those who speak on behalf of the Third world “subaltern”, for example Western intellectuals (see Fraser, 1990, footnote 22).

¹³ See for example Fraser’s discussion and critique of Young’s conception of social groups and oppression in *Justice Interruptus* (Fraser, 1997).

¹⁴ As Young (2000) argues, demands that a certain group identity or definition should be positively asserted are certainly often part of the political struggle of historically marginalized groups. However, such claims of recognition are rather part of or means of overcoming the structural oppression of these groups, hence “claims against discrimination, unequal opportunity, political marginalization, or unfair burdens” (p. 104). Young therefore reserves the label “identity-politics” for politics that “consist simply in the assertion of one identity against others, or a simple claim that a group be recognized in its distinctiveness” (p. 103).

themselves (that some are formed of privileged groups, some of subordinated groups, and others of both). Such structural inequalities would in addition be key to understanding the power dynamics that characterize counterpublics' internal formation process as well as their ability to influence mainstream mass media and the state. However, research on counterpublics still typically focus on the power struggle between counterpublics and dominant publics, and/or the empowering formulation of counterdiscourses within counterpublics. In addition, even though counterpublics that can be described as non-virtuous has been given some attention (see, e.g., Kaiser 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017), the empirical focus has largely been on analyzing how "good" or "progressive" counterpublics, formed by traditionally marginalized groups and communities, have been enabled by online platforms (see, for instance, Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Palczewski, 2001; Renninger, 2015, see also Asen and Brouwer 2001).

A consequence of previous conceptualizations thus seems to be that the interpublic contestation between different counterpublics, as well as the intrapublic contestation within counterpublics seldom is theorized or empirically investigated from a power perspective. Thus, by making counterpublics' perceived exclusion from wider publics their defining feature, the concept manages to also capture those counterpublics that are formed by structurally privileged groups that are (or perceive themselves to be) politically excluded or marginalized from dominant public spheres. However, the focus on counterpublics' constructed relationship to the dominant public spheres takes us further away from an analysis of how structural advantages and disadvantages affect counterpublic dynamics. Hence, it masks the profound power differentials that may exist between and within different counterpublics precisely since counterpublics are constituted by various social groups, and often with competing political agendas.

Lessons from the social movement literature: well-resourced countermovements and power hierarchies within movements

While the literature on counterpublics provides few tools for analyzing the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves, the literature on social movements has contributed to our understanding of such processes through the research on countermovements as well as the study of power differentials within the social movements that claims to speak for the most disadvantaged in society. In the following, this research will be described in order to illustrate the prevalence of such power structures, as well as to provide some theoretical and empirical grounding for how they can be analyzed.

Countermovements are generally defined as oppositional movements that are formed in reaction to social movements that have been successful in reaching visibility and influence (Lo, 1982; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Mottl, 1980). It has also been pointed out that other actors than organized social movements can engage in countermovement activities, including less formalized and visible actors (such as counterpublics), as well as state actors and institutions (Roggeband, 2018). The main rationale of countermovements is thus to oppose the social movement and its agenda, and the social movement then has to react to this opposition. This points to how movements and countermovements are engaged in a constant interaction with each other and not just with the state or parts of the dominant public spheres. While social movements (and thus also countermovements) usually signify more formal organizations rather than more loosely connected discursive arenas, it is nevertheless easy to imagine that these phenomena to some extent overlap. When social movements manage to influence dominant publics, the countermovements that are formed in reaction to them could also include counterpublics. Hence, while the scope of many countermovements could also include counterpublics, not all counterpublics have already existing social movements as their primary target.

In the early literature on countermovements, the term was used to denote “reactionary, inherently conservative actors that emerge to oppose emancipatory or progressive social movements” (Roggeband, 2018, p. 21, see also Mottl 1980). Later literature has however argued that there is little difference concerning the nature of social movements and countermovements in terms of their political position or alignment, and that the analysis instead should focus on how the dynamic interaction between different movements creates new opportunities for mobilization (Lo, 1982; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Zald & Useem, 1987). This more mechanistic and ideologically neutral approach to countermovements has in its turn lately been questioned by scholars who argue that an ideologically neutral conception of countermovements makes it difficult to assess the power relations between countermovements and the social movements they oppose (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Roggeband, 2018). In particular, the critique of an ideologically neutral concept of movements and countermovements has been raised within the literature that focuses on the opposition against women’s movements, or feminist actors and organizing. This literature has pointed to how antifeminist mobilizations are often characterized by privileged actors reacting to a threat against their privileged societal position and how such groups hence can make great use of their professional and personal networks in the oppositional dynamics (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Roggeband, 2018, see also Mottl, 1980). In addition, it has been demonstrated that the formation of countermovements can be detrimental in several ways for the advocacy work of the social movement they oppose. Antifeminist countermovements may force feminist organizations to reframe or drop central issues, and in this

way cause a destabilization of the organization or a de-radicalization of its agenda (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012). Hence, the analysis of the interaction between countermovements and the social movements they oppose needs to take the connection between resources and ideology into account in order to better understand the rationale behind the opposition, which actors it mobilizes and which resources they have available (Roggeband, 2018).

While the literature on countermovements has been focusing on the (unequal) competition between countermovements and social movements, the social movement literature has also contributed with critical examinations of the power relations that exist *within* movements themselves (e.g. Bondesson, 2017; Cohen, 1999; Crenshaw, 1989; Strolovitch, 2006; 2008). In particular, Dara Strolovitch (2006, 2008) has expanded our understanding of the workings of intersecting power structures within social movements that claims to speak for the most disadvantaged in society. Strolovitch examined to what extent social and economic justice organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) actually represents the disadvantaged subgroups of their constituents, thus constituents that are disadvantaged economically, socially or politically compared to the rest of the constituency. Strolovitch demonstrates that while most officers at the advocacy organizations expressed a strong commitment to advocate issues that concern the most disadvantaged within their constituency, in practice the organizations put a lot more effort on advocating issues that are central to relatively advantaged subgroups among the organization's constituents than on the issues that primarily affects disadvantaged subgroups among their constituents. Hence, even the interest organizations that explicitly aim at speaking for the most disadvantaged in society at large seem incapable of escaping the same power structures they are working to reveal and challenge.

The theoretical and empirical work on countermovements as well as on the power differentials that exist even within social movements that claim to speak for the most disadvantaged in society, thus explicitly points to how privilege could be reproduced through the competition for political voice between counterpublics as well as how such processes may be manifested within subaltern counterpublics. This research demonstrates how the power differentials between and within political movements may be detrimental to the advocacy work of less privileged groups. In particular, these may affect the (type of) counterdiscourses within alternative public spheres that will reach and influence official public spheres, such as mainstream media and legislative assemblies. However, as alluded to above, previous counterpublic theory and empirical research has provided few tools for analyzing precisely how the power differentials between and within counterpublics condition their emergence. We thus need a more fine-tuned theoretical framework that

allows for an explicit focus on the reproduction of privilege, rather than the contestation of existing power structures.

Turning the light on the reproduction of privilege

While a large amount of research within the growing field of gender and politics has been concerned with the relationship between structural and political inequality, such studies often focus on how marginalized groups may reach political influence rather than how privileged groups manage to preserve their positions. A few studies have emphasized the importance of explicitly focusing on how privileged groups are benefitting from existing institutional structures, in order to increase our understanding of how structural inequalities are generating inequalities in political representation (e.g. Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014). These have in particular focused on the reproduction of male dominance within parliaments. Previous studies on gendered inequalities in formal political assemblies have usually examined how the underrepresentation of women can be explained. In contrast, Bjarnegård (2013) demonstrates that by turning the light towards how privileged groups are enabled by informal institutions, and in particular how male political networks can function to generate crucial assets in order to secure electoral success, we can increase our understanding of the logics that underpin the overrepresentation of men and why the world wide male parliamentary dominance continues to be maintained.

A study of the reproduction of privilege is thus something different from a study of how marginalization is contested, even if such studies can be described as two sides of the same coin. Hence, an explicit focus on the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics demands a shift in analytical focus from how marginalized groups can make use of online platforms in order to contest existing power structures. However in order to shed light on how privilege is reproduced rather than contested, we first need a more theoretically grounded discussion of what structural privilege is, and how it potentially could be reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics. In the following, the concept of structural privilege will be defined and its relational and intersectional character will be clarified. Moreover, it will be discussed how structurally conditioned agency in terms of the emergence of counterpublic can be understood and analyzed, and how privilege could potentially be reproduced within the framework of this kind of power perspective.

Privilege as conditioned by social structures

What is in this thesis denoted privileged and marginalized social groups should be understood as collectives of persons that historically have been

structurally privileged or underprivileged (Young, 1990, 2000). Social structures are hence crucial to the reproduction of privilege (and marginalization). To analyze these processes we thus need to know more about what such structures entail, and how they may be reproduced.

Social structures are defined by Young (2000) as “a net of restricting and reinforcing relationships” which “consist in determinate social positions that people occupy which condition their opportunities and life chances”, and are called structures precisely since they are a relatively permanent phenomena (p. 93-94, see also Frye, 1983). Social structures are the result of everyday interactions and practices that form part of and reproduce major economic, political and cultural institutions. Social structures can have both formal institutional aspects, such as educational, judicial or healthcare systems, as well as discursive aspects, such as social norms, media and cultural stereotypes and other types of intersubjective meaning making that condition peoples’ life opportunities (Young, 1990). In addition, social structures can have physical aspects such as the “physical organization of buildings [...] modes of transport and communication, trees, rivers, and rocks, and their relation to human action” (Young, 2000, p. 96). Social structures are thereby not independent from social actors, but are reproduced by their actions and interactions since “we act according to rules and expectations and because our relationally constituted positions make or do not make certain resources available to us” (Young, 2000, p. 95). The actions and interactions that reproduce social structures thereby have effects on future actions although these effects may be unintended, or even opposite to the intended effects. In this way, therefore, structure and agency are understood as mutually dependent and co-constitutive (Locher & Prügl, 2001, see also Hay, 2002).

Following this understanding of how social structures condition structural privilege (and marginalization), Young (2000) defines social groups as collectives that “are similarly positioned in interactive and institutional relations that condition their opportunities and life prospects” (p. 97). This does not however imply that members of a social group share an essential identity or that social group affinity constitutes a person’s individual identity. Instead, social groups, such as men (and women), Whites (as well as people of color), heterosexuals (as well as sexual minorities), those with able bodies (as well as people with disabilities) etc. are understood as primarily differentiated by social structures.¹⁵ A person’s group identity thus comes into existence not prior to but *because* of its social position. In addition, social groups exist only in relation to other groups. That is, they are defined by how they, in their structural opportunities and constraints, differ from other groups. Thus, structural inequality is the result of differences in such structural opportuni-

¹⁵ In this way, social groups are for example different from aggregates, which are classifications of persons based on already existing attributes, such as hair color, residential area or education level (Young, 2000).

ties and constraints relative to other groups. Structurally privileged (as well as marginalized) positions are hence conditioned by social structures, structures that in their turn are (re)produced through social actors' conscious or unconscious actions and interactions.

Privilege as intersectional and relational

While privilege is conditioned by social structures, structural privilege is not a static condition. Instead, there is a relational aspect to these processes, which means that one's relative position as privileged or underprivileged depends on the specific context one is situated within. Thus, also within groups that are relatively disadvantaged in relation to other social groups, there are those that are privileged in relation to others. Intersectional perspectives have been instrumental in demonstrating that social structures do not only interact in constraining ways, but also by enabling individuals and groups, and moreover, that these positions are relational. As Crenshaw (2011, p. 230) points out:

[...] intersectionality applies to everyone – no one exists outside of the matrix of power, but the implications of this matrix – when certain features are activated and relevant and when they are not – are contextual.

Theories of intersectionality were first developed by women of color as a critique against the treatment of gender and race as “mutually exclusive categories” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). In the late 1980s, legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term “intersectionally marginalized” in order to provide an analytical tool that manages to capture how gender, sexuality and race and other categories of difference also cut across social groups. Crenshaw demonstrated how experiences of racism and sexism often intersect in the lives of women of color rather than being mutually exclusive, which implies that women of color face a combined race and sex discrimination. This does however not imply that intersecting disadvantages or advantages are static entities that can be ranked and simply added onto each other, but rather that they are inseparable dimensions that interact dynamically.

Since the interest in intersectionality emerged from a critique of how previous legal practice as well as feminist theory and research had neglected intersecting disadvantages, a usual focal point for intersectional approaches has been to analyze how different types of discrimination and oppression interact dynamically. In such studies, underprivileged and understudied social groups “at the intersection of multiple categories” are often in central focus. By contrast, more privileged groups, that in previous studies often have been used as the standard, are here instead used as a “source of background comparison and contrast” (McCall, 2005, p. 1782-1783). The other

side of the intersectional coin is however, as Crenshaw points out, how social structures interact dynamically in also constituting structurally privileged social groups. Here, critical whiteness studies as well as research on men and masculinities have demonstrated the importance of explicitly analyzing how social structures interact in privileging groups, in order to increase our understanding of how the lack of such privilege constrains the lives of others. For example, in her work on white women's lives in the United States, Frankenberg explores white women's life histories and shows how their lives are shaped by the social construction of whiteness, hence "[w]hite people are 'raced' just as men are 'gendered'" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). We therefore need to study how the social construction of race affects the lives of those that these structures privilege, hence whites, as well as how the lives of men are gendered, as much as the lives of women – and how these structures intersect.

It may here be important to clarify that while structural privilege (and marginalization) is here understood as relational and thus partly contextually conditioned, this does not imply that everyone is structurally privileged or oppressed in the same way or to the same extent (only depending on the context one is currently situated within). Two things are important here. First, to be excluded or marginalized from a specific context does not imply that one is structurally marginalized. As Frye (1983) points out, one can feel frustrated or sad about such exclusion or marginalization but it is not the same thing as being structurally oppressed, since the latter in contrast concerns systematic barriers and constrains. When analyzing if such exclusion or marginalization forms part of a structural oppression it is thus important to consider its larger context: "[O]ne has to see if it is part of an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people" (p. 13). The opposite focus would hence be relevant for analyzing structural privilege. Thus, we need to consider if it is part of a larger structure that infers systematic openings and opportunities to a particular group, which render these a larger room for manoeuvre in relation to other groups. Again, this does not imply that relationally privileged groups cannot feel powerless or marginalized at times, or most of the time, but as Kimmel (2013, p. xiii) puts it: "[J]ust because straight white men don't feel powerful doesn't make it less true that compared to other *groups*, they benefit from inequality and are, indeed, privileged."

Secondly, while social structures intersect dynamically to render intersectional privilege and disadvantage, this does not imply that all such dimensions render *structural disadvantage*. A classic example is how working class men or men of color in a male dominated, and race- and class-differentiated, society certainly can be victims of oppressive structures such as class oppression or racism, and such oppression can certainly take specific manifestations due to their position as men *and* working class or of color,

but this does not imply that they are oppressed *as men*. As Frye (1983, p. 16) points out: “If a man has little or no material or political power, or achieves little of what he wants to achieve, his being male is no part of the explanation. Being male is something he has going *for* him, even if race or class or race or disability is going against him.” The same logic applies to whiteness. A white woman in a male dominated and race-differentiated society can certainly be oppressed due to being a woman, and this oppression can certainly take a specific form due to her position as both white *and* a woman, but this is not the same thing as being oppressed *because* someone is white. To the contrary, whiteness is working *for the person* in most situations and contexts; hence it implies a structural *privilege*.

The reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics

The understanding of how social structures condition people’s life chances follows from a view of power as contextual and institutional rather than as a resource that is possessed by certain individuals and primarily is expressed in individual and conscious acts of domination over others. This latter view of power includes the understanding of power as the ability to directly coerce others, a definition that often is associated with Dahl (1957), as well as the understanding of power as control over the agenda, put forward by Bachrach and Baratz (1962). It also includes the power to manipulate people’s minds, hence the third face of power that has become associated with Lukes (2005). Such intentionalist or voluntarist understandings of power are thus less useful if we want to analyze how privilege is reproduced through structurally conditioned actions and interactions, which may be conscious as well as unconscious. On the other hand, pure structural power perspectives that understand structures as completely deterministic would similarly offer little guidance if we want to understand how privilege is reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

Counterpublics are by definition formed by groups in opposition to their exclusion and/or marginalization from dominant publics. One of the main purposes or goals of counterpublics is thus to contest this exclusion and/or marginalization by formulating counterdiscourses directed towards dominant publics. Such contestation of existing power structures would thus be impossible to imagine or analyze from a structural power perspective that gives little room for human agency (Hay, 2002, p. 107). How then can structurally conditioned agency in terms of counterpublic emergence be understood and analyzed? Feminist theorists have put forward an understanding of power as relational and located primarily within social structures (Lloyd, 2013; Weldon, 2019). This implies the possibility of individual agency based on the subjects’ “social location or institutional position” (Lloyd, 2013, p. 129,

see also Frye, 1983; Locher & Prügl, 2001; Young, 1990). Power is thus working “through people” by “situating them in relations of sub- and superordination” to each other (Lloyd, 2013, p. 129). From this it follows that power should be analyzed as productive in the sense that it produces structurally situated subjects, and as such, both a potentially constraining and enabling force (Lloyd, 2013; Locher & Prügl, 2001; Weldon, 2019, see also Hay, 2002). In this way, agency is understood as conditioned, however not determined, by the structural context these agents are situated within (Hay, 2002, p. 116). Moreover, while social structures are putting more constraints on some people’s life opportunities in relation to other, more privileged, groups, this does not imply that such conditions cannot be worked around or contested. Thus, also those in underprivileged positions have some room for contesting and negotiating their position and group identity (Young, 2000).

Employing this kind of feminist power perspective has several consequences for the analysis of the reproduction of structural privilege. First, instead of focusing on individual acts of conscious domination over others, it rather turns the analytical focus towards the structural basis of relations of privilege and disadvantage and analyzes how such structures are constructed and sustained (Lloyd, 2013, p. 114). Moreover, in contrast to intentionalist or voluntarist power perspectives, this more contextual or institutional understanding of power entails that privileged groups can potentially be unconscious about their privileges and thus exercise these unintentionally (Young, 1990, 2000). The reproduction of structural privilege is therefore to be understood as a potentially unconscious process. This does not imply that individuals do not harm others intentionally, or that some groups do not benefit from others’ oppression and thus have an interest in maintaining the status quo (Young, 1990). However, to increase our understanding of the reproduction of privilege it is more fruitful to analyze how such conscious, as well as other more unconscious acts, are made possible within a larger institutional logic. For example, it has been argued that in order to increase our understanding of the reproduction of male privilege within formal political institutions, we should not primarily understand it as a “sexist conspiracy against women” (Bjarnegård, 2018, p. 5). Instead, it should be analyzed as part of a larger institutional logic that is favoring men as a group, and in particular ethnic-majority men from privileged economic backgrounds (Bjarnegård, 2013, 2018, see also Murray, 2014).

What is more, social structures in general grant structurally privileged groups more agency in relation to those who are structurally disadvantaged (Locher & Prügl, 2001; Young, 1990). Thereby, structurally privileged groups are generally rendered a larger room for manoeuvre in order to reproduce structural conditions. However, structurally marginalized groups can also work around structures and contest them, for example by forming counterpublics. Third, since power is relational and social structures render intersections of marginalization and privilege, groups can have different

levels and type of agency in different contexts, depending on how they are related to others in that specific situation. Next, it will be discussed in more detail how such agency could be understood in the context of counterpublic dynamics, a discussion that builds on, as well as criticizes, the feminist separation of power as coercive (*power over*) or as capacity (*power to*).

Agency under structural conditions – two sides of the same coin?

The agency of structurally privileged and marginalized groups has within feminist power perspectives usually been conceptualized as two different types of power, which relates to how agency has usually been conceptualized within contemporary power perspectives, namely as *power over* or as *power to* (or power as *coercion* or *capacity*) (Lloyd, 2013; Pansardi, 2012). Within feminist power theory, the concepts of *power over* and *power to* have often been incorporated within an institutional or contextual power perspective. These two types of agency are hence understood “as the result of a system of economic, political, and ideological factors working in tandem” which lead to male domination over women (*power over*), but which also leaves room for women’s resistance to their systematic oppression (empowerment, or *power to*) (Lloyd, 2013, p. 115-124).

This way of normatively separating different kinds of structurally conditioned agency (*coercion* vs. *capacity*) and to link them to certain types of actors (men and women) however makes it difficult to analyze how power structures intersect, which for example renders power differentials within the groups of men and women (Lloyd, 2013, p. 123). Furthermore, the understanding of one type of power as negative and destructive (*power over*) and the other form as positive and creative (*power to*) overlooks how the positive and creative enablement of some is also dependent on the social context they are situated within. This implies that *power to* also should be understood as a relational force, and that the enablement of some groups at the same time can result in constraints on other peoples’ lives. Others have therefore suggested that these two concepts of power simply are two sides of the same coin. A separation of the two would thus be reductionist since it does not take into account that *power to* also is relational (Pansardi, 2012) and in addition essentializes a certain type of power as either normatively good (*power to*) or bad (*power over*).

If we understand these two types of agency as two sides of the same coin, rather than two different types of agency that only certain actors can exert or make use of, it becomes clear that both structurally privileged and disadvantaged groups can form counterpublics. In addition, it points to the fact that the enablement (*power to*) of some groups in the context of counterpublic dynamics can imply constraints for others (*power over*). As previous counterpublic theory and research has suggested, counterpublics present a crucial opportunity for structurally marginalized groups to come together in order to contest existing power structures. In this context, online public venues repre-

sent a new physical structure that offers a larger degree of inclusion in terms of the number of voices as well as types of opinions and speaking styles in relation to traditional public venues, and hence an increased opportunity for marginalized groups to formulate counterdiscourses. However, if structurally privileged groups perceive themselves to be excluded or marginalized from dominant publics, they are in the same way enabled to come together and formulate counterdiscourses by new and more inclusive public venues. In a democratic society, groups that are structurally privileged, but perceive themselves to be excluded or marginalized from dominant publics, could in addition partly be expected to advocate more or less anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian discourses since their social position otherwise would facilitate access to the official public spheres. Moreover, as we have seen, anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian advocacy often includes attacks on marginalized groups and communities. Hence, counterpublics formed by structurally privileged groups could be expected to not only contest dominant publics but also other counterpublics, formed by structurally marginalized social groups. Thus, the structurally conditioned agency in terms of the *power to form counterpublics* at the same time facilitates the domination over other, less privileged, groups.

In addition, since social structures intersect, the competition for voice between privileged and marginalized groups could also be expected to take place *within* counterpublics. Such power differentials within counterpublics could moreover be expected to have an impact on the internal formulation of counterdiscourses, and further, to have consequences for interactions with dominant publics. Thus, structurally marginalized groups' *power to form counterpublics* can be constrained by relationally privileged groups' acts of domination over those who are less privileged *within* counterpublics. As has been pointed out, such reproduction of privilege – through the power differentials either between or within counterpublics – should in addition be analyzed as potentially unconscious, in order to better grasp and explain its logics.

In order to explicitly analyze the power differentials between and within counterpublics however, we need a more fine-tuned theoretical framework since the one we have at hand makes it difficult to analytically separate different kinds of counterpublics in terms of the content of their political demands *as well as* their social position, and thus how the contestation between and within counterpublics impact their formation and ultimately their interactions with dominant publics. The aim of this framework is thus not to undo previous theorizing, but to build on and combine previous efforts in order to enable an analysis of power and privilege in counterpublic dynamics.

Subaltern and non-subaltern counterpublics

In order to analyze the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics, I suggest that there are at least two dimensions that we need to consider: counterpublics' social and political position (see Figure 1). In the following sections, these two dimensions will be explained. First, I will elaborate on the importance of considering counterpublics' *actual* exclusion and/or marginalization in relation to their *perceived* exclusion within dominant publics, hence if they can be described as subaltern or not. Secondly, I will suggest that, in parallel, we need to take the content of counterpublics' political demands as well as their tactics and strategies into consideration, and in particular evaluate whether these could be assessed as anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian. These dimensions should further be understood and used primarily as analytical dimensions rather than fixed and essential empirical entities (see Scott, 1986). Hence, they should help us to identify and analyze important power differentials between and within counterpublics focusing on how structural privilege (and marginalization) is related to counterpublics' political base for exclusion and/or marginalization. However, it will most likely not be possible to neatly fit all kinds of (empirical) counterpublics in either of the dimensions, even though most counterpublics probably come closer to one dimension than to others. Moreover, which dimension they come closer to is up to empirical investigation.

		Social position	
		Non-subaltern	Subaltern
Political position	Anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian		
	Democratic and egalitarian		

Figure 1: Two crucial dimensions: counterpublics' social and political position

Instead of removing the subaltern in front of counterpublics in order to allow for the inclusion of counterpublics formed by structurally privileged groups in our analysis, I thus suggest that we keep the subaltern in front of counterpublics and in addition develop a broader typology of counterpublics. This broader typology should manage to capture those counterpublics that are in fact not subaltern, while at the same time enabling us to differentiate between counterpublics formed by structurally privileged and marginalized groups in relation to their purpose of political advocacy. This is particularly important since we can expect that different combinations of structural and

political exclusion and/or marginalization may have consequences for the opportunities and constraints that counterpublics have at hand in counterpublic dynamics.

In addition to counterpublics' *perceived* exclusion from dominant publics, we therefore also need to analyze the base for their *actual* exclusion from dominant publics – hence if they could be described as subaltern or not. First, we have the type of actual exclusion and/or marginalization that is based primarily on subordinated social position, which Fraser among others has pointed to in the conceptualization of *subaltern* counterpublics. This concerns groups that have been structurally disadvantaged historically in relation to more privileged social groups. Such a type of exclusion in relation to public debates is in today's democratic societies primarily an informal one, and is for example based on norms of protocol and style that silence and hinder historically marginalized groups from participating in public discussions on equal terms with structurally privileged groups (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). Hence, subaltern counterpublics' *actual* structural marginalization is what their counterpublic status is based on. While the interests and needs formulated by such counterpublics are certainly often marginalized or excluded from dominant publics, this political marginalization is strongly related to their actual structural marginalization and/or exclusion from dominant publics. Typical examples of such subaltern counterpublics are women's or feminist movements which advocate the equal rights and opportunities for women in relation to men, or the civil rights movement advocating the equal rights and opportunities for people of color in relation to whites (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1990; Squires, 2002).

Secondly, we have the type of exclusion and/or marginalization that is not structural but rather based on the type of interests and needs that are formulated internally and voiced towards wider publics. Such counterpublics are hence primarily *politically* rather than structurally excluded and/or marginalized in the official public spheres. This exclusion and/or marginalization can of course vary by context and over time, as well as being perceived rather than actual. If such counterpublics consist of structurally privileged groups they are thus not subaltern. As social groups, these have benefited from a larger formal as well as informal inclusion on venues in the official public spheres for citizen conversation historically in relation to structurally marginalized groups, and thereby been dominating these arenas. In addition, due to their relationally privileged position such groups are more likely to have access to important networks and to be supported by resourceful actors, which can be crucial when mobilizing politically.

Hence, while we know that subaltern counterpublics are formed by “members of subordinated social groups” in order to “invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67), we know much less about the rationales and composition of counterpublics whose exclusion and/or marginalization are not based on being part of a structurally subordinated social

group. What we do know, however, is that they are not structurally marginalized in relation to their purpose of advocacy; neither do they perceive themselves to be part of dominant publics. These political formations are therefore defined based on what they are not; they are denoted *non-subaltern counterpublics*. Exactly how non-subaltern counterpublics are composed, or what their main rationales or activities are, is however up to empirical investigation.

Moreover, groups forming non-subaltern counterpublics can of course still *perceive* to be excluded from dominant publics, due to their social position. This is indeed a usual argument among many contemporary antifeminist men's rights movements that claim to be excluded or marginalized from mainstream public debates (on gender equality) due to their position as white, male, middle-class and heterosexual. However, in societies where these movements form and operate they are in fact not structurally underprivileged as men (or as white, middle class and heterosexual) (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Kimmel, 2013). Such counterpublics therefore cannot be conceptualized as subaltern. Since privilege is relational and contextual, we could however also imagine that there are those within non-subaltern counterpublics that belong to structurally underprivileged groups in relation to other groups. Research has shown for example that white working class men are usual activists within extreme right organizations, advocating white (male) supremacy (e.g. Goodwin, 2010). However, to reiterate, Frye (1983) points out that while white working class males certainly are underprivileged in relation to men from the upper classes, they are not structurally underprivileged as men or as whites. In order to identify subaltern, as well as non-subaltern, counterpublics, we hence need to analyze both how the basis of counterpublics' perceived exclusion is related to their actual exclusion and/or marginalization from dominant publics, as well as how this actual exclusion and/or marginalization is related to their political cause. Lastly, since privilege (as well as marginalization) is intersectional and relational, the competition between relationally privileged and marginalized groups could also be expected take place *within* subaltern (as well as non-subaltern) counterpublics themselves, power differentials which may have consequences for the internal formulation, as well as the external promotion, of counterdiscourses.

Anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian counterpublics

Given the focus on the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres and its consequences for participation on equal terms, there are in addition some types of counterpublics and counterpublic dynamics that become more crucial to investigate than others in relation to counterpublics' social position. The second dimension that needs to be considered is thus the content of counterpublics' political demands as well as their tactics and strategies. Spe-

cifically, counterpublics that can be described as anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian may have detrimental consequences for political equality in general as well as for the publics they oppose in particular.

Plotke (2006) argues that anti-democratic political projects can be assessed along two dimensions:¹⁶ first, the more or less explicit anti-democratic themes that are expressed, and secondly, the tactics and strategies employed to support these proposals. Explicit anti-democratic themes are those that openly “systematically and completely” oppose the democratic system and that want to replace it with another type of governing system (Plotke, 2006, p. 13). Such counterdiscourses are for example advocated by the right wing extremist counterpublics that “explicitly challenge or question basic democratic values”, which Cammaerts has denoted *anti-publics* (2007b, p. 73). More implicit anti-democratic themes are those that “imply a rejection of major elements of democratic practices” without the explicit intention to challenge and destroy the democratic system (Plotke, 2006, p. 13). This for example concerns counterpublics that explicitly promote further exclusion and/or marginalization of structurally marginalized groups.

The types of explicitly, or more implicitly, anti-democratic “anti-publics” that Cammaerts (2007a, 2007b, 2008) focuses on, are often brought forward as examples of counterpublics that could have damaging consequences for democratic societies and public debates. There are however also counterpublics that rather can be described as having an anti-egalitarian political agenda. These could have significant consequences for the reproduction of privilege in public debates, since they advocate for the preservation or restoration of (their) structural advantages. One such example is antifeminist counterpublics that advocate politics that would be detrimental for gender equality and women’s position in society (even if this rarely is an explicitly expressed goal of contemporary antifeminist counterpublics, movements or organizations). In addition, the particular tactics and strategies that have been used by antifeminist counterpublics within the larger “manosphere” in order to harass alleged feminist platforms and actors, such as doxing (to reveal personally identifiable information online), revenge-porn (to share intimate photos or videos of another person without their consent), cyber stalking, death threats and other kinds of intimidation and social shaming, can also be deemed as highly problematic from a democratic perspective

¹⁶ In order to conceptualize what is anti-democratic, Plotke uses the following definition of democracy (which I thus adhere to): “Democracy means self-government by equal citizens. As a practical form of this general concept, democracy means that equal citizens choose a government through open elections with freedom of political action. All permanent adult residents of the polity are presumed to be citizens, or to have reasonable option of becoming citizens if they wish to do so. Democracy requires broad freedoms of expression and association. Democracy also requires a set of procedures for choosing leaders and making decisions, as well as understandings about the validity of those procedures. Such procedures and commitments can be disrupted or destroyed” (Plotke, 2006, p. 13).

(see e.g. Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

Moreover, there are counterpublics whose politics are less explicitly anti-egalitarian in its content, but which may still have severe implications for the life prospects and opportunities of already marginalized groups and communities and therefore are relevant to study from an egalitarian perspective. An example of this is counterpublics advocating climate change skepticism/denialism, whose advocates have been described as predominately belonging to privileged groups and whose politics if realized may imply a drastically impaired life situation for the most vulnerable groups in society on a national as well as global level (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018).

As previous research has shown, advocates of antifeminism, climate change denialism/skepticism and white supremacy often belong to privileged groups that mobilize in resistance to social change (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012, c.f. Bécharde, 2005; Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Daniels, 2009b; Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Himmelstein, 1986; Marshall, 1991; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). In addition to non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas, we can also imagine that there are subaltern counterpublics, formed by subordinated social groups who are both marginalized and/or excluded from dominant publics due to their social position as well as due to their anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian politics. Even if the concept of subaltern counterpublics is often closely interconnected with counterpublics with egalitarian and democratic political agendas, these counterpublics are certainly not, as Fraser (1990, p. 67) puts it, “always necessarily virtuous” and may either promote anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian political agendas externally, and/or have internal problems with exclusion and marginalization. An example of such counterpublics could be the parts of the civil rights movement in the U.S., which explicitly advocated that racial equality should be achieved with violent means. Last, we can also imagine that there are counterpublics formed by structurally privileged groups with egalitarian and democratic political agendas. For example, the Occupy movement (which has elements that can be described as counterpublics), is advocating social and economic justice on a global scale, but has often been described as dominated by white, middle-class youth (such counterpublics can hence raise other issues of privilege and power, see Bondesson, 2017).

Power differentials between and within counterpublics

Given the advantages that we can expect that non-subaltern counterpublics have in counterpublic dynamics due to their structurally privileged position, there are in addition certain power dynamics that seem particularly important

when redirecting the analytical focus towards the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

To reiterate, counterpublic dynamics concern the processes whereby counterpublics seek to realize their inward as well as outward oriented goals; when counterpublics come together and formulate their identities, interests and needs and when these counterdiscourses are voiced towards wider publics. In this way, the emergence of counterpublics functions as an important means through which dominant public discourses may be contested and altered. In the first part of this chapter it was argued that in order to analyze the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics, we need to go beyond analyzing the internal formulation of counterdiscourses as only empowering for structurally marginalized groups, or power differentials as only or primarily existing between counterpublics and dominant publics. In particular, we must also direct our analytical focus towards how the power differentials *between* and *within* different types of counterpublics affect counterpublic dynamics. This since the power differentials between and with counterpublics can be expected to have important consequences for the internal formulation as well as the external promotion of counterdiscourses.

While non-subaltern counterpublics with democratic and egalitarian agendas, as well as subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas certainly exist, their emergence is however less crucial to examine if we want to increase our understanding of the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics. This since these types of counterpublics pose less of an obstacle to the contestation of existing power structures due either to their lack of anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic political agendas or structural advantages. In contrast, it would be particularly crucial to examine 1) how the power differentials *between* non-subaltern and subaltern counterpublics shape the emergence of non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic political agendas, as well as 2) how the power differentials *within* subaltern counterpublics with egalitarian and democratic political agendas shape their emergence.

In order to analyze the specific conditions under which *online* counterpublics emerge however, we need an additional framework that specifies the role that online platforms play as mediators of counterpublic dynamics. Counterpublics are often dependent on alternative public venues in order to form. Hence, of importance for counterpublic dynamics are not only the power differentials between and within (certain) counterpublics, but also the institutional aspects that enable or constrain the access to and use of platforms necessary for the formulation and distribution of counterdiscourses. Compared to the beginning of the 1990s, where most counterpublic activities took place in offline alternative public venues such as cafés, book-shops and other local meeting places, much of the activities of counterpublics have now moved online. The second part of the theoretical framework will there-

fore elaborate on how online platforms may mediate structural privilege (and marginalization), including the ideational circumstances under which online platforms have been constructed.

Online platforms as mediators of privilege (and marginalization)

The previous part of this chapter discussed how social structures condition the emergence of counterpublics with, sometimes, competing political agendas. In this section it will be argued that to analyze the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics on *online* public venues there is also a need to analyze how public venues as an additional institutional structure shape the emergence of counterpublics. Hence, the ways in which digital media platforms are governed and designed matter for what type of actions that can be taken on them and by whom. In addition, it is assumed that how online platforms are designed and managed depends on the rationales and intentions among their creators.

This theoretical framework primarily builds on the concept of affordances, which was originally part of the reaction against the domination of social constructivist perspectives within research on communication and technologies since the late 1980s: “The question was no longer what communication technologies or media do *to* people, but rather, how people appropriate, understand, make sense and continuously reconstruct them” (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 22). Hence, digital media platforms were mostly framed as an outcome or expression of culture, and the technologies’ social and cultural meanings and appropriations were the primary analytical focus. Even though the social constructivist perspective still persists as the dominant theoretical perspective within communication studies, there has also been a growing “third way” the last two decades. Within this approach, the social and material character of new media technologies has been conceptualized as mutually constitutive, which challenges both technical as well as social/cultural determinism. This implies that it becomes important to not only focus on the reading of “text” (as content) as an analytical strategy to understand the social context of different phenomena, but also how these texts/contents relate to – or are interconnected with – the materiality of the technological devices that constitute new media technologies (Lievrouw, 2014).

In this context, the concept of *affordances* of communication technologies provides a middle ground by pointing to how both the material and the social matters for how physical properties, or design, of objects or settings (for example, different digital media platforms) are perceived, used and constructed (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Hence, it provides an opportunity to analyze the dynamic link between the materiality of digital media platforms and the

social context within which they are constructed and understood (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Lievrouw, 2014). The concept of affordances was originally coined by Gibson (1977) and later developed by Hutchby (2001), among others. While agreeing with social constructivists that artifacts could be “read” in different ways depending on the social context they are situated within, Hutchby (2001) argues that in addition there is only a certain set of possible ways in which artifacts could be interpreted, depending on their physical design. Hutchby therefore suggests that we should understand artifacts, such as new media technologies, as possessing different types of affordances, which constrains or enables certain use:

[...] affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. (p. 444)

Affordances should however not be confused with merely the technological features that enable certain affordances or with the outcomes that affordances in their turn enable (or constrain). Instead, affordances should be understood as the link between features and outcomes, hence the “variable process that mediates between properties of an artifact (features) and what subjects do with the properties of an artifact (outcomes)” (Davis & Chouinard, 2016, p. 2). In addition, unlike features and outcomes that either are there or not, or attained or not, affordances are not binary but may there to varying degrees. The variability of affordances is moreover “[...] influenced by the materiality of a technology or the capabilities of the user” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 40).

This points to how both the physical design of online platforms as well as the surrounding social context matter for whether and how affordances are perceived, as well as for how they are shaped. Hutchby (2001) denoted this the *functional* and *relational* aspects of affordances. Hutchby’s formulation of the functional and relational aspects of affordances hence offers a way to analytically separate between the physical properties of affordances and the social context within which these physical properties are created and understood. Hence, the *functional aspect* of affordances will here refer to the design and governance of online platforms while affordances’ *relational aspect* refers to whether and how potential users perceive these functional aspects, as well as the intentions and ideas among their constructors.

While digital media platforms provide a large variety of different types of affordances, the focus of this chapter will hereafter be on the affordances that could be argued as particularly important to the emergence of online counterpublics. These affordances hence facilitate access to public venues in order for counterpublics to come together and formulate their interests and needs internally, as well as voicing these towards wider publics. In particu-

lar, this concerns the affordances of *association*, *visibility*, *anonymity* and *metavoicing*. In the following, these affordances will be explained in more detail with a focus on their functional and relational aspects.

The functional aspect of affordances: the technical enablement of visibility, association, anonymity and metavoicing

The first aspect of affordances is maybe the most obvious one since it concerns the physical properties of online platforms. The *functional* aspect of affordances is partly referring to their inbuilt technical and regulatory features, hence the material enablers and constraints which are designed into objects. In the context of online platforms, technical features, such as buttons and scroll bars, and regulatory features, such as a rule that a user has to register before entering the site, are visible to users through their external interfaces (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 31). Previous research has moreover shown how these functional aspects of affordances affect discussions on online platforms. For example, the identity control of participants in online political discussions that regulates the possibility of anonymity through some type of registration has been pointed out as a decisive factor in the type of discussions that are made possible, since it could constrain the level of extremist and hate speech as well as demand a higher obligation to participate and respond (Sæbø, Rose, & Molka-Danielsen, 2010; see also Citron and Norton 2011). Another example of how inbuilt technical and regulatory features can be used to shape the content of online discussions is how the editors on the online discussion forums Slashdot and Reddit have created an advanced system of voting and moderation among the users, which enables the users to sort among the large numbers of posts submitted on these sites each day (Reddit, 2015; Slashdot, 2015, see also Poor, 2005). The functional aspect of affordances can also be related to the concept of *discourse architecture*, which is the idea that “packages of technological characteristics” of online public venues can enable or constrain certain democratic discussion norms. For example, certain behavior in online discussions can be enabled or constrained by the possibility to “pre-select desired content, the amount of text they are allowed to enter per post, the presence of ‘reply’ features, and the ability to filter or report offensive behavior” (Freelon, 2015, p. 776).¹⁷

¹⁷ Freelon (2015) shows that the specific design features of online platforms can predict what types of democratic discussion norms are generated on them. Through an analysis of similar political debates within three Twitter hashtags as well as readers’ comments sections in two US newspapers, Freelon demonstrates that the architecture of Twitter facilitates a discussion characterized by communitarian discussion norms, while the discussion in the newspapers comment sections rather is characterized by both liberal individualist as well as deliberative discussion norms. Freelon explains these differences in discussion norms by how these two digital public venues are designed and governed: while Twitter-functions such as the personalized timeline and the hashtag makes it possible to engage in specific (in-group) discussions,

As we can see, however, it is not only the physical design of online platforms that may have consequences for the functional aspect of affordances, but also how they are governed and managed. This includes the specific policies the platform providers decide upon, such as those related to “the realm of property, privacy, and acceptable behavior” articulated in their end-user license agreements (EULAs) or terms of service (ToS) (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 38). Online platforms are also managed through the algorithms¹⁸ that curate what is visible and the protocols¹⁹ that steer the users in specific ways (Burgess & Bruns, 2015, p. 98, see also Gillespie, 2010, 2017; Van Dijk, 2013). For example, Massanari (2017) demonstrates how Reddit’s governance and design enable certain kinds of “toxic techno cultures” including antifeminist and misogynistic activism. Among other things, Reddit’s policies regarding offensive content is pointed out for enabling this particular kind of discussion culture to flourish.

Similarly, there are arguably particular sets of affordances that are beneficial to the emergence of (certain) counterpublics. To reiterate, we know that counterpublics have two main functions: on the one hand they present a possibility for those who perceive themselves to be excluded and/or marginalized from dominant publics to come together and formulate their interests and needs internally, and on the other hand they enable such groups to advocate their interests and needs externally vis-à-vis the wider public spheres (Fraser, 1990; Young 2000). Both the “internal” as well as the “external” functions of counterpublics are thus facilitated by a number of affordances that increase the inclusiveness in public debates in relation to traditional public venues. First, the enhanced possibility for *association* through online platforms has been pointed out as a crucial affordance in relation to the formation of online communities (boyd, 2010; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Treem & Leonardi, 2013). In particular, online platforms facilitate connections between individuals and between individuals and content (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). What makes online social networks unique is moreover that it is possible to display them to others (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Hence, through in-built technical features such as lists of friends or followers, hyperlinks and metadata tags such as the hashtag (#), it is possible for users that are geographically far from each other to find each other, come together and exchange experiences and ideas, activities that are crucial for the “internal” function of counterpublics.

the more “anarchic” features of newspapers comment sections provide few restrictions on how much and what that can be self-published.

¹⁸ Van Dijck (2013, p. 30) defines an algorithm in the following way: “An algorithm, in computer science, is a finite list of well-defined instructions for calculating a function, a step-by-step directive for processing or automatic reasoning that orders the machine to produce a certain output from given input.”

¹⁹ Protocols can be defined as “formal descriptions of digital message formats complemented by rules for regulating those messages in or between computing systems” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 30).

Secondly, the affordance of instant *visibility* through the self-publication of posts, comments, status updates etc. available to the general public or all others that have access to one's profile enables immediate access to public venues for political opinion building (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). This can be compared with the previous situation, where one had to go through traditional gatekeepers, such as debate editors in traditional media, to be able to reach out with similar opinion pieces to a large audience. The affordance of (instant) visibility through the self-publication of various texts and shorter messages is arguably important both for the internal function of counterpublics, since it provides new possibilities for exchanging experiences and ideas, as well as their external function by facilitating the voicing of these vis-à-vis dominant publics. Platforms such as Twitter and (certain) comment sections in newspapers offer more restricted self-publication with a limit on the number of characters that can be inserted, while other online platforms, such as blogs and Facebook, offer more or completely unrestricted self-publication. However, through the algorithms that structure the flow of published content and communication on social media sites, such as the EdgeRank which structures Facebook's "News Feed", these also govern what content will be visible to wider audiences (Bucher, 2012).

Third, the possibility of a varying degree of *anonymity*²⁰ while participating in public debates, for example by using avatars or other types of pseudonyms, presents a new way to voice political opinions in public without having to reveal one's factual identity²¹ and thus be identified with these opinions personally. Therefore, anonymity has been pointed out as a crucial affordance in relation to online political discussions (Halpern & Gibbs 2013). On the one hand, it has been argued that anonymity may increase the possibility for structurally marginalized groups to speak out in public about their interests and needs, and thereby find each other (Fox & Warber, 2015; Renninger, 2015). On the other hand, the possibility of a higher degree of anonymity has been demonstrated to increase the level of impolite posts in online political discussions (Halpern & Gibbs 2013) as well as extremist and hate speech (Citron & Norton, 2011). Moreover, the possibility of advocating one's cause anonymously or behind a pseudonym presents a possibility for harassing one's political opponents without being identified (Herring & Stoerger, 2014). The possibility of a varying degree of anonymity can thus facilitate the internal function of counterpublics by lowering the social cost

²⁰ Pseudonymity is here regarded as a degree of anonymity, which in relation to revealing a full identity is representing an increased level of anonymity through employing a semi-stable pseudonym across one or multiple platforms (Eklund, von Essen, Jonsson, & Johansson, 2018).

²¹ Important identifiers are for example name, social security number, identity number or digital identifiers such as IP-address. Besides a person's factual identity, anonymity can concern a person's social group identity as well as physical identity, which can be displayed even though the factual identity is hidden (Eklund et al., 2018).

when discussing sensitive topics on (alternative) public venues without revealing one's own identity. At the same time it enables the promotion of political opinions perceived as connected to a social stigma to wider publics. Hence it also facilitates the external function of counterpublics in a particular way.

Lastly, through a wide range of different technical enablers such as retweeting, "liking", "up-voting" or commenting on posts made by others, online platforms provide possibilities to amplify the voices of others, hence the affordance of *metavoicing* (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). In relation to the emergence of counterpublics, metavoicing enables the recognition of others' voices. Recognition is a crucial activity to counterpublics since it confirms the importance of the voices of others internally as well as vis-à-vis other counterpublics and dominant publics. For example, by republishing other people's messages in their entirety (for example via Twitter's retweet-function) or by simply linking to them in one's own blog-post, it can be demonstrated that the voices of others are important to listen to and that their claims are legitimate (although one does not necessarily agree with them) (boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010). To reiterate, depending on community norms, the affordance of metavoicing can however also facilitate the amplification of certain voices in a problematic way, and for example enable anti-feminist and misogynistic activism (Massanari, 2017).

In sum, there are four types of affordances that are particularly important to the emergence of online counterpublics since they enhance the inclusivity of public venues, namely *association, visibility, anonymity and metavoicing*. The next section discusses how these affordances are related to the social structures that in the previous chapter were argued as a decisive factor in an analysis of how privilege is reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

The relational aspect of affordances: the importance of the social in the perception of affordances

The relational aspect of affordances highlights the importance of whether and how affordances are perceived among potential users as well as the intentions and rationales among their creators. While it has been noted that every functional aspect of affordances has its relational counterpart, the relational aspect will however not be discussed in the same specific way since it is more difficult to detach different types of relational aspects of affordances from each other as well from their context. Instead, the relational aspect of affordances will here be outlined in a more general manner in relation to digital media platforms, and then be discussed in more detail in relation to the design and governance of the specific platforms analyzed in the empirical chapters.

To bring materiality back into the equation by analyzing the consequences of functional affordances for social acts could risk that the analysis transforms into a type of “technological determinism 2.0” if we at the same time lose sight of the social (Lievrouw, 2014, p. 27). Many scholars have thus pointed to the importance of also analyzing social aspects of the use and invention of the physical properties and policies of digital media technologies (e.g. Hartson, 2003; Hutchby, 2001; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Norman, 1999; Schmidt, 2007). Norman (1999) separated “real” from “perceived” affordances. Whereas real affordances refer to the actual functions of an object, perceived affordances refer to what “user perceives to be possible” in relation to these actual functions (p. 39). In a similar way, Hartson (2003, p. 322) argued that whether and how the physical enablement of certain activities depends on the perceptions of the user: “[A]ffordances have a relational ontology: their existence as an affordance is relative to the environment of users and usage [...] the effectiveness of an affordance depends on the attributes of both the artefact and the user”. Nagy & Neff (2015, p. 1) instead use the concept of *imagined affordance* to capture what “emerge between users’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers.” Building on these previous conceptualizations of the social aspects affordances, the relational aspect of affordances is here understood as the capacity of the user to perceive the functional aspects of affordances, as well as the intentions and ideas among the designers of these features and policies.

In relation to participation in public debates, the importance of structurally conditioned social positions has in particular been pointed out by feminist political theorists since structural patterns of inequality are directly related to the capacity to effectively engage in public discussions (e.g. Fraser, 1990, 2007; Young, 2000; Benhabib, 1996; Hayward, 2004). These ideas help to specify the relational aspect of affordances, on which the capacity to participate in online public debates depends. First, the social position of the users, which may depend on their education, professional background, wealth, personal networks and connections, generates specific capacities in relation to participation in public discussions. These entail both the ability to communicate in a certain style in order to generate respect and recognition from others, as well as the perception of oneself as an appropriate and even important participant in public debates, and that one’s voice therefore needs to be heard. Such capacities and self-perception have been argued as crucial for the ability to engage effectively in public debates, hence “to introduce topics of deliberation, to make claims and arguments, to pose questions, to articulate objections and criticisms, and to challenge the rules that govern the debate” (Hayward, 2004, p. 3, see also Benhabib, 1996). Finally it is important to again point out the relational character of these capacities and self-perception; hence the perception of one’s own position as, for example, well

educated and/or a needed voice in a certain debate, also depends on the position of the others who are participating in the same debate.

While feminist political theorists have pointed to some of the capacities that are crucial for participating effectively in public debates in general, the affordances of digital media platforms in addition demands specific capacities from potential users. Research on digital inequalities in access and use has demonstrated how the social position of potential users is directly related to whether and how online platforms are used. To begin with, a large part of the world's population still does not have access to or use the internet, and thus has little opportunity to pursue any kind of online political activism. 80.9 per cent of the individuals in the developed world use the internet, in comparison to 45.3 per cent in the developing world and less than 10 per cent in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Moreover, there is a significant and persistent urban-rural divide in internet access and use within national contexts in the global South, where the rural population in general has considerably less access to the internet than its urban counterpart. Globally, there are about 5 percent fewer women than men online, and the gender gap is most pronounced in LDCs where it amounts to 32.9 percent (International Telecommunications Union, 2017, 2018). Hence, to be able to even perceive any of the affordances of digital media platforms, those with the best chance are in the global North, and rural women of the global South are least likely to have this opportunity.

Within the global North, where the access to and use of the internet is relatively high, there are other types of digital inequalities, which have consequences for the type of internet use that people engage in. In particular, socio-economic inequality has been demonstrated as an important demographic factor behind digital inequalities (Anderson, 2017; Schradie, 2012; Zhang, 2014). Higher education and/or income (often used as proxies for class) have also been shown to be strongly related to internet skills specifically useful for communicating political messages online, but also being male, white or Asian American (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Hindman, 2009; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Schradie, 2018). In relation to political participation, there is much evidence that social inequalities translates to even greater political inequalities online than offline, thus “the politically rich are getting richer through the expansions of online participation opportunities, and the politically poor are becoming relatively poorer in expressing their political voice” (Dalton, 2017, p. 139, see also Schradie, 2018; Van Laer, 2010). Race/ethnicity does however seem to be related in a more complex way to online presence and use. For example, research on the U.S. context points to the fact that while African Americans are less likely to be online than are Whites, they are more active in producing online content than are Whites when online, and more active on some social network sites (SNSs) such as Twitter (Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Schradie, 2011). Other studies have demonstrated that there is a significant racial/ethnic as well as soci-

oeconomic divide considering which types of SNSs are considered as appropriate to use (boyd, 2011; Hargittai, 2007). Even though gender differences in mere access to the internet have disappeared in the global North over time, how online tools are used has remained a highly gendered matter (Bimber, 2000). In particular, there are important inequalities in what type of presence and use women and men are engaging in online. While women tend to be more likely than men to use some social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest), men have been demonstrated as significantly more likely to post about politics on social media (Bode, 2017), to share a wide range of online content (Hargittai & Shaw, 2015; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008), as well as to participate in online political discussions (Albrecht, 2006). Actual and perceived online skills have moreover been pointed out as important factors for explaining the gender gap online. In particular, men's *perceived* online skills have been found to be significantly higher than those of women, which could provide an important part of the explanation for gender differences in online activity, content production and sharing (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006, see also Cooper, 2006).

Whether and how the functional affordances of digital media platforms are perceived as useful in the emergence of counterpublics thus partly depends on the (perceived) capacity among users. As Renninger (2015, p. 6) points out:

[...] with regards to counterpublic communication, the politics of a platform become important when one considers how the platform allows users to communicate in the formats that they would like to in a context they find conducive, comfortable, or inviting. To address this, it is necessary to acknowledge how technological affordances of media technologies play a role in which platform one uses.

The governance and design of online platforms hence not only has consequences for how these in general can be used in the emergence of counterpublics, but also for *who* in particular can use them.

Besides highlighting the importance of potential users' perceptions of affordances, the relational aspect of affordances also points to the crucial role of the ideas and motivations among those who construct them (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Therefore, web interfaces should be analyzed as both reflecting, as well as (non-deterministically) reinforcing, social logics through their design (Stanfill, 2015). This implies that if we want to expand our understanding of how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege we need to understand both which rationales drive design decisions in relation to digital media platforms, as well as how this design enables and constrains certain counterpublic activities. Hence, digital media platforms should be analyzed as purposely constructed (however, sometimes with unintended and unexpected consequences). They should also be seen as "active mediators" of

social acts, such as the emergence of counterpublics, rather than “neutral intermediaries” (Burgess & Bruns, 2015, see also Van Dijk, 2013).

This also goes in line with the argument made by Gillespie (2010, p. 352), that digital media “platforms” are far from the “open, neutral, egalitarian and progressive support for activity” that they have been discursively constructed as, not least by the owners of some of the dominating digital intermediaries, such as YouTube and Google. Therefore, the construction of digital media platforms as a free and open space to speak from (for example by specifically referring to them as “platforms”) should rather be viewed as an attempt to attract new users, advertisers and professional content producers as well as a strategy to avoid legal charges. This does not necessarily imply that all digital media platforms have been constructed for these purposes, but rather that we need to stop assuming that these are neutral artifacts and start to examine the reasons behind why they were designed in a particular way as well as the consequences this design has for different online activities. We therefore need to take seriously the materiality of digital media platforms and analyze under what circumstances they have been constructed, as well as how they shape certain (counterpublic) activities.

Summary of the theoretical framework and research questions

It is through digital public venues that participants in online counterpublics find each other and come together, where ideas are formed and shared, and from where dominant publics are targeted. In the first part of this chapter it was argued that in order to improve our understanding of how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics, we need to shed more light on how the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves shape their emergence. However, such a theoretical framework would on its own still not be enough to understand how privilege is reproduced in the context of *online* counterpublic dynamics. This since we are provided with few tools in order to analyze why a certain type of affordances is provided by certain online platforms, and further, in what ways these affordances enable, or constrain, the reproduction of privilege in this context.

The second part of this chapter therefore argued for the need to analyze online platforms as purposely-constructed mediators of online counterpublics. Partly, we need to examine what rationales drive design decisions in relation to digital platforms central to counterpublic dynamics, and thus, how the social is related to the *construction* of the material. Online platforms are thus not understood as neutral artifacts but as constructed for certain purposes (but perhaps with unforeseen consequences). This becomes particularly

important in relation to the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics since previous research suggests that the governance and design of online platforms play a crucial role for which social groups that can make efficient use of them.

To understand why online platforms are constructed in certain ways, we need to interrogate those who construct them about their design decisions. This would provide a greater understanding of *why* the online scenes that constitute important alternative public venues for the emergence of counterpublics offer certain kinds of affordances. Given the explicit focus on how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege, it would be particularly relevant to explore the rationales behind a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres through the governance and design of online platforms. The research question guiding the first empirical chapter is therefore:

1. *What are the rationales **behind** the governance and design of online platforms central to dominant public spheres?*

The answer to this question provides important insights into how the affordances provided by online platforms in the dominant public spheres are shaped by the ideational context of their designers. However, it gives us less information on how such affordances in their turn shape the reproduction of privilege in the emergence of online counterpublics. In this chapter it has been argued that digital media platforms mediate counterpublic emergence in two interrelated ways, referred to as the functional and relational aspects of affordances. Partly, online platforms provide specific opportunities (and constraints) through their governance and design that in several ways increase the formal as well as informal inclusion on public venues. Secondly, however, these functional aspects of affordances demand specific capacities among users for them to be perceived as inviting, hence the relational aspect of affordances. Since structural inequalities have consequences for which groups that can perceive affordances as inviting to specific action, the governance and design of online platforms also shapes the power differentials inherent to online counterpublic dynamics. In order to explicitly analyze the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics we therefore also need to examine how the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves.

While previous research on counterpublics has mostly focused on the unequal and contestatory relationship between counterpublics and dominant publics, we also know that there are important power differentials between different counterpublics. Counterpublics may be formed by structurally privileged as well as marginalized groups, which may have competing political agendas. Moreover, the power differentials between counterpublics can have detrimental consequences for the advocacy work of subaltern counterpublics.

We therefore need to know more about how the power differentials between counterpublics condition their formation and how the affordances of online platforms are shaping such processes. The research question guiding the second empirical chapter is thus:

2. *How do the affordances of online platforms mediate power differentials **between** counterpublics?*

From a power perspective it would moreover be particularly relevant to analyze how the affordances of online platforms mediate the emergence of non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas. These are thus counterpublics formed by structurally privileged groups, that directly or indirectly attack the opportunities and life chances of structurally marginalized groups. In addition, their tactics and strategies may also involve direct or indirect attacks on subaltern counterpublics with democratic and egalitarian political agendas.

While the answers to the second research question can inform us about how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the competition *between* counterpublics, we also know that privilege is not a static condition, neither are counterpublics formed by groups that are socially coherent. In order to further increase our understanding of the reproduction of privilege in the context of online counterpublic dynamics, we need to know more about how the affordances of online platforms mediate the possibilities of relationally privileged groups to contest the claims of historically marginalized groups *within* counterpublics. Hence, the research question guiding the third empirical chapter is:

3. *How do the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials **within** counterpublics?*

Even though such competition for voice can take place within all types of counterpublics, it would, from a power perspective, be particularly relevant to focus on how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege within subaltern counterpublics with egalitarian and democratic political agendas. This since the emergence of such subaltern counterpublics is a central way whereby structurally marginalized groups and communities can come together to formulate their interests and needs in order to contest existing power structures.

By turning the light explicitly towards the reproduction of privilege from these different analytical angles, the three research questions thus seek to improve our understanding of how power relations in the public spheres may be reproduced and contested, and how online platforms are mediating such processes. In the next chapter, a research design suitable for answering these questions will be elaborated on.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methods

In this chapter the research design of this thesis will be presented and motivated, and I will provide detailed methodological reflections regarding the methods used to gather and generate material, as well as to analyze it. I will also discuss the ethical challenges that emerged in relation to the empirical studies, and the solutions to these. The chapter begins with a discussion of the strategically selected cases, which aims to shed light on the ideational contexts within which online platforms central to dominant public spheres are shaped, as well as how the affordances of online platforms in more alternative public spheres shape the power differentials between and within counterpublics. Since the three empirical cases were selected to partly capture different kinds of phenomena in relation to the overarching research problem, I will then elaborate on how a combination of different types of methods, including qualitative interviews, “netnography”, social network analysis and textual analyses, have been needed in order to gather, generate and analyze the material. The specific analytical tools used to interrogate the empirical material will however be presented and discussed in relation to the analyses in each empirical chapter. Finally, the ethical considerations that followed from these methodological decisions are discussed, with a particular focus on issues pertaining to personal integrity, safety and transparency when one researches online environments.

Finding relevant combinations of counterpublics and online platforms

When considering possible cases, there is of course an enormous number of combinations of online platforms and counterpublics that could be studied. There is for example a wide range of different types of online public venues that are used for political mobilization and opinion building, such as political blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as a large number of different types of online counterpublics which are formed both in more national as well as transnational contexts. In order to identify relevant cases among this large number of possible ones, the selection has primarily been theoretically guided. In particular, it has focused on capturing different types of counterpublics in terms of their actual social and/or political exclusion or marginali-

zation from dominant public spheres, and different types of online platforms in terms of the affordances they provide in relation to counterpublic dynamics. Thus, the cases were selected to maximize the information in relation to the research problem, in order to develop existing theory (Small, 2004, 2009; Yin, 2018).²²

Many of those who analyze social media data only include a single platform in their studies (see Felt, 2016). While each empirical chapter in this thesis indeed focuses on one platform specifically, the selection of cases has also been guided by the aim to achieve a theoretically fruitful *variety* of platforms and counterpublics in relation to the overarching research problem. In previous research, three different types of online platforms in particular have been put forward as conducive to the emergence of online counterpublics: comments sections in mainstream newspapers, blogs and different kinds of social networking sites (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). The selection of cases hence covers all these three types of platforms, and how these mediate the emergence of non-subaltern as well as subaltern counterpublics (see Table 1).

²² In the literature such cases are sometimes also referred to as rare or unique cases (see Small, 2004, 2009), or extreme/deviant cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, while the cases in this study are selected according to the same logic, to maximize the information from single cases in relation to the research problem, they are fruitful examples of an understudied phenomenon rather than representing *unusual* cases, or outliers. Hence, they should be seen as an example of what kind of cases could be fruitful to study if we want to increase our understanding of how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

Table 1: Summary of case selection

Analytical focus	Type of online counterpublic	Type of online platform
Rationales <i>behind</i> dominant public spheres inclusion of counterpublics	Non-subaltern (e.g. right wing extremism, antifeminism, climate change skepticism/denialism)	Comment sections in mainstream news media
Power differentials <i>between</i> counterpublics	Non-subaltern (Antifeminist)	Political blogs
Power differentials <i>within</i> counterpublics	Subaltern (Feminist)	Twitter

Since online counterpublics often emerge on a range of different platforms in parallel, the study of single online platforms in relation to each counterpublic is a limitation. It only captures a part of the counterpublic dynamics rather than being a comprehensive study of the political movement as a whole. The platforms selected are nevertheless deemed to be central in relation to these cases of online counterpublics, since they have provided important venues for the development of these specific counterdiscourses. Moreover, this theoretically driven selection of cases does not imply that these cases are our only opportunity to increase the understanding of how privilege is reproduced in the context of online counterpublic dynamics. On the contrary, it should be understood as an example of how these issues can be studied empirically, and what type of combination of online platforms and counterpublics it could be fruitful to study.

Three strategically selected empirical cases

In the following, the three empirical cases will be described in more detail in order to motivate their relevance in relation to the three research questions, focusing on the types of online platforms and counterpublics they represent.

First, we need to know more about the logics and rationales that shape the governance and design of online platforms that are closely connected to mainstream news media and at the same time open up for a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres. Different formats for user participation on mainstream news media represent such platforms (Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). The *first* empirical chapter therefore investigates the rationales among the some of the main editors in Swedish mainstream news media in relation to the governance and design of

formats for user participation connected to their sites, with a particular focus on comment sections (see Hermida, 2011, p. 17 for a list of examples of other such formats)

Comment sections provide a possibility for readers to comment on all or selected articles published on the news sites without having to go through the traditional gatekeeping process. These are one of the most common formats for user participation in mainstream news media worldwide and have, together with blogs and social network sites, been pointed out as particularly conducive to the emergence of counterpublics (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017, 2015; Kaiser, 2017). It has also been demonstrated that these forums facilitate a wider range of ideas and type of expressions to appear compared to traditional formats, such as the letters to the editor (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). On the other hand, it has been shown that only a very small part of the (Swedish) population claims that they regularly use the possibility to comment on news articles (Bergström, 2008; Karlsson, Bergström, Clerwall, & Fast, 2015). In addition, when examining who actually is commenting on the world's top news media sites, this group has been shown to be extremely skewed towards privileged groups such as men (Martin, 2015; Pierson, 2015).²³ Moreover, user comments have been highlighted for providing highly visible online spaces for right wing populist counter-publicity and for climate change skepticism/denialism (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015, 2017; Kaiser, 2017), as well as for racist, sexist and homophobic content in general (Gardiner et al., 2016; Loke, 2012; Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009).²⁴ Consequently, the rationales behind these relatively new and more inclusive platforms for public debates provide a relevant case in order to illuminate the ideational context within which new public venues in the dominant public spheres conducive to the emergence of

²³ Since many news sites allow for commenters to be anonymous or to use pseudonyms, it can be challenging to investigate patterns of social inclusion within comment sections. Martin (2015) therefore partly uses female- and male usernames/pseudonyms as a proxy for identifying if the users are women or men. The material collected for this study cover 15 of the most popular online news services in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Denmark, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

²⁴ Moreover, it seems like abusive and aggressive comments are affecting certain subgroups of journalists more than others. In a study of all the 70 million user comments that have been left on the site of the UK national newspaper *The Guardian* since 2006, it is shown that women journalists in particular, but also male journalists from ethnic minority groups as well as journalists who are gay are targeted by these kinds of user comments. While most of the regular opinion writers at *The Guardian* are white men, 8 of the 10 most abused writers were women (of these were four white and four non-white). Moreover, the two men among the ten most abused writers were black, two of the women and one of the men were gay and two belonged to religious minorities (one was Jewish and one was Muslim). In contrast, the 10 regular writers who were the least abused by user comments were all men (Gardiner et al., 2016).

anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic non-subaltern counterpublics are constructed.

The study builds on interviews with some of the central gatekeepers in Swedish news media, and mainly focuses on their rationales in relation to the governance and design of user comments at the time of the interviews (Feb 2014–Jan 2015). Hence, what is of interest is the reasoning among the editors-in-chief, as well as web editors, digital developers, debate editors and others who are in a position to make the more principal as well as practical decisions related to the governance and design of these forums. Swedish news media was a very early adopter of online publication and of different formats for user participation on its web and mobile sites, including comment sections. Online publication was introduced already in the mid 90s, and by 2009 all of Sweden's largest mainstream news media (*Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*) had introduced reader comments on news items (Karlsson, 2011). In addition to their early adoption of online features, Swedish mainstream media has a strong position among the Swedish public (Bergström, 2008; Bergström & Wadbring, 2012). This is usually attributed to the Swedish media system, which is characterized by a “democratic corporatist model”. This implies a strong public service as well as a strong journalistic professionalization and autonomy (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Petersson, Djerf-Pierre, Strömbäck & Weibull, 2005; Shehata & Wadbring, 2012). We can thus expect that these editors, as some of the main gatekeepers in the dominant public spheres, do reason around these matters as it lies within their professional role to do so. Moreover, with their historical role as central gatekeepers in the dominant public spheres, the Swedish editors could also be viewed more likely to be driven by intrinsic democratic values, in relation the multinational companies that are responsible for the governance and design of some of today's largest venues for public conversations such as Twitter, Inc. or Facebook, Inc.

The *second* empirical chapter sheds light on how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in the competition *between* counterpublics. In particular, we need to know more about how online platforms have mediated the emergence of non-subaltern counterpublic with anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic political agendas in competition with subaltern counterpublics with democratic and egalitarian political agendas. The chapter therefore analyzes the emergence of an influential antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs in the end of the 2000s, in reaction to feminist counterpublics and the great advancements for gender equal policy in Sweden during the last decades (the material gathered and generated is delimited to the years 2009–2017).

Both contemporary and older research has demonstrated that antifeminist movements often consist of privileged social groups, which mobilize mainly in reaction to the achievements of feminist and women's movements (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Himmelstein, 1986; Marshall, 1991; Blais &

Dupuis-Déri, 2012; c.f. Béchard, 2005). Even though contemporary antifeminists often claim that “feminism has gone too far” and thus that today’s societies are (more than) gender equal, they still operate in societies where men are structurally privileged as a group and for example are heavily dominating in positions of power (see e.g. Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Kimmel, 2013).²⁵ Antifeminist counterpublics are hence relevant to study from an egalitarian perspective.

Online platforms such as blogs (weblogs) have moreover been pointed out as central to the contemporary construction and promotion of antifeminist discourses (Lilly, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Blogs are one of the more interactive features of the internet that usually are captured under the Web 2.0 umbrella, which became the name for the new set of digital production applications such as social media and blogs in the early 2000s. Blogs made their definitive entry as a central part of the public discourse in the mid 2000s, with 57 million blog readers as well as 12 million who maintained a blog only in the U.S. in late 2006 (Hindman, 2009). Even though it has been demonstrated that only a small percentage of the general public read political blogs on a daily basis, media professionals as well as those elected to political office and other influential elites are frequent consumers of blogs and use them in their work, which gives widely read political blogs a certain agenda-setting power (Drezner & Farrell, 2008; Woodly, 2008). Political blogs were therefore pinpointed early for changing the structure of how political communication works through their ability to mobilize opinions, their increasing influence on traditional media, and the possibility for non-media elites to use them in influencing public debates (e.g. Woodly, 2008). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that blogging in particular is a very resource-demanding activity in general and that running a political blog with a widespread readership in particular is an activity that much has been reserved for societal elites (Hindman, 2009; Schradie, 2012).

The emergence of a non-subaltern counterpublic with an anti-egalitarian political agenda on political blogs thus provides a relevant case in order to increase our understanding of the underlying logics behind the reproduction of privilege in online public discussions and how this is related to the inclusive design of online platforms. Using mainly blog material, I analyze how the affordances of blogs shaped the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context, and how the antifeminist activists’ social position has facilitated their use of blogs in their political activism.

While the second empirical chapter focuses on how online platforms mediate the competition between counterpublics (by analyzing the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in reaction to feminist achievements), the

²⁵ Also in Sweden, which is often highlighted as a particularly gender equal society, there are still great problems with gender inequalities concerning, for example, sexual harassment, wages, pensions, health and positions of power (see e.g. SCB, 2018)

third empirical chapter seeks to analyze how online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* counterpublics. In particular, we need to know more about how online platforms mediate the competition for voice within counterpublics that claim to advocate for groups that are intersectionally marginalized, and thus particularly disadvantaged in the dominant public spheres, such as mainstream media. The third empirical chapter therefore analyzes the power differentials within the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen. The hashtag was coined by the American writer and activist Mikki Kendall in August 2013 as a direct critique of how the voices of women of color have been marginalized within feminism in general and on large online feminist platforms in particular. #solidarityisforwhitewomen quickly generated a huge response from Twitter users all over the world as well as received widespread attention in many large digital as well as mainstream media outlets, such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and *The Huffington Post*.

Twitter, launched on July 15, 2006, has in recent years grown to be the second most important social media platform after Facebook with over 321 million monthly active users worldwide (Twitter Inc., 2019). In contrast to Facebook, however, where interactions are built primarily on already existing relationships, Twitter opens up interactions among millions of users outside one's real life network (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014, p. 176). Even if Twitter users are often popularly described as belonging to media and political elites, in fact (in the U.S. context) women are using Twitter to a slightly larger extent than are men and Black internet users are more than twice as likely to use Twitter than their White and Hispanic counterparts (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Due to its inclusive design, Twitter has therefore been argued to be "in the unique position to allow all users, regardless gender and race, an equal opportunity to participate in discussions unrestricted" (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014, p. 178).

In relation to the previous chapter on the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic on political blogs, this chapter thus provides a more challenging case for exploring how the inclusive governance and design of online platforms mediates privilege since it focuses on 1) a type of counterpublic which, in contrast to antifeminist counterpublics, aims at challenging existing power structures, and 2) an online platform that, in comparison to political blogs, has been praised for its inclusive architecture. By delimiting the emergence of #solidarityisforwhitewomen to the most visible tweets ("Top Tweets") during the first week of the hashtag's existence, the chapter explores how self-identified white feminists in different ways were enabled by Twitter's inclusive design to challenge the hashtag's main claim about the marginalization of women of color within mainstream feminism.

What conclusions can be drawn from the empirical case studies?

Which kind of knowledge can then be generated from a study based on a strategic selection of theoretically relevant cases? On the one hand, each of the studies gives us important empirical insights in and of themselves. They inform us about how gatekeepers in mainstream media reason around their governance and design decisions regarding comment sections, about the emergence of contemporary antifeminist counterpublics, as well as about the specific expressions that power differentials within feminist counterpublics can take online. On the other hand, the combination of the three studies also enables a more holistic understanding of the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres. This is because the combination permits an analysis of how the different underlying logics behind the construction of online platforms are related to the logics that underpin the competition between and within online counterpublics. Moreover, it allows for an analysis of the differences and similarities in how power dynamics between and within different types of counterpublics are manifested online.

While the combination of cases enables greater insights into the logics whereby privilege is reproduced in public debates, what type of generalizations can be made? While cases selected to be representative of a larger population usually aim at generating results that are *empirically generalizable* to the whole population of cases (also known as *statistical generalization*), a strategic selection of cases instead aims at generating *analytical generalizability* (Yin, 2018; Small, 2009). Hence, while empirical generalizations can tell us something about the empirical conditions in other cases (within the wider population of cases), an analytical generalization is placed on a higher level than the specific empirical case conceptually with the aim to expand and generalize theories. An analytical generalization should hence be made as a claim, by providing supportive arguments. The aim with analytical generalization is however not only abstract theory building, but also improving our understanding of previous case-studies on other concrete situations, as well as defining further research on additional concrete situations (Yin, 2018, p. 38, see also Small, 2009). In line with this logic, the cases in this study were selected because they can tell us something about how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in public spheres, rather than about the (empirical) conditions in the larger (empirical) population they may be cases of.

Moreover, the three case studies are situated in different national contexts. This may be of importance for how the insights from the empirical chapters can be transferred to other settings, since online platforms and how they mediate the reproduction of structural privilege are studied in particular structural contexts. Two of the empirical chapters are situated in the Swedish context. The first empirical chapter is based on interviews with gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream media, and the second chapter analyzes a Swedish

blogosphere. The emergence of the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhite-women in the third empirical chapter can be described as mainly situated in the U.S. context. While the hashtag was trending globally, American feminists of color started it and it was mainly a critique directed against the historical and contemporary marginalization of women of color within white/mainstream feminism in the U.S. context (at least in the analyzed Top Tweets). Among the Twitter users that figured in the Top Tweets during the first week of the hashtag, most were thus referring to the U.S. context, regardless of whether the themes were structural racism, popular culture or specific incidents.

On the one hand, the different structural contexts need to be considered in order to uncover and understand the dynamics that unfold in each case. For example, the role of Swedish news media historically as well as the public discourse on feminism and the great advancements for gender equal policy are particular to the Swedish context, as is the public discourse on race and feminism to the U.S. context. It is thus important to contextualize each case, as well as to provide enough “thick description” of it, in order to enable other researchers to transfer the knowledge generated to other studies (Schwartz-Shea, 2015). This contextualization is primarily done in the empirical chapters but also to some extent in the discussion of the selection of the empirical cases, which can be found in the section above.

On the other hand, the cases are situated in a similar structural context in relation to the specific setting in focus, hence digital media platforms. In Sweden, the percentage of the population that has access to the internet is extremely high in an international comparison (92.9%) as is the degree of skills connected to internet usage in the population (International Telecommunications Union, 2014; Internet World Stats, 2017b). Thus, the threshold to access online public spheres is unusually low in the Swedish context and little dependent on factors such as class, gender and race/ethnicity. Similarly to Sweden, a relatively large percentage of the U.S. population has access to the internet (87,9%) (Internet World Stats, 2017a). Moreover, even though there are some adoption gaps in the population, in particular among those older than 65 and those with less than high school education, there are small differences in adoption rates based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, income or rural/urban communities (Pew Research Center, 2017). Thus, in both the Swedish and the U.S. context there seem to be few structural barriers to access the internet which could impede on the emergence of online counterpublics. This means that the conclusions that may be drawn from these studies need to be further contextualized in order to be transferred to settings where, for example, a very small and skewed part of the population actually have access to and can use online platforms, which still is the case in many parts of the world today (see Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

Data gathering and generating material

This section provides a motivation and discussion of the different methods used for data gathering and generating material for the three empirical chapters. First, the rationale behind why and how semi-structured qualitative interviews were used in order to capture the underlying rationales among editors in Swedish mainstream media will be elaborated on. The interview-study will in particular be related to the methodological considerations that are important to expert/elite studies. Secondly, the strategies for identifying and classifying antifeminist blogs will be outlined. In addition, the main methods used for data gathering and generating material from political blogs will be presented. Lastly, the challenges and considerations that the gathering of Twitter-data evoked will be discussed. In particular, this concerns the difficulties that can follow from being dependent on the access-regimes of social media platforms.

Interviews with gatekeepers

The aim of the first empirical chapter is to explore the rationales among the central gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream news media in relation to the design of the different formats for user participation on their news sites. The underlying assumption is hence that these rationales are underpinning design decisions that shape the affordances of these online public venues, which in their turn are mediating the emergence of counterpublics.

Qualitative interviews are particularly suitable when the aim is to “get into people’s minds” in order to understand the underlying causes and motivations behind actions, as well as the role of ideational factors such as norms and values (Rathbun, 2008). These perceptions and underlying logics would in contrast been difficult to capture if the main material had consisted of, for example, transcripts of the actual debates in different forums for user participation, or if I had only studied the design and policies of the platforms without asking the editors about their motivations (see Richards, 1996). Moreover, semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable when the interviewees’ own logics and ideas are the main focus of the interview, since the open-ended questions allow for the persons interviewed to develop their own thoughts (Rathbun, 2008). Semi-structured interviews with central actors within the main newspaper and broadcasting companies in Sweden were therefore used as the main method to generate material for the first empirical chapter.

Experts and/or elites?

Individuals who are interviewed due to their “specific contextual knowledge of a given research field or [...] their internal knowledge of the structure, procedures and events in a given organization”, could be categorized as ex-

perts (Littig, 2009, p. 100). The editors interviewed in the study could thus be partly described as experts, since they were interviewed due to their specific roles within the news organizations and the experiences and knowledge about the subject matter that follows from these positions. In addition, the editors arguably also fall within the category of elites. Elites are usually defined as individuals that hold particularly influential and high status positions within a society. In expert interview studies the interviewees are often characterized as informants since the researcher primarily are after their (expert) factual knowledge about certain processes and settings (Littig, 2009). Elite interviews, on the other hand, are often characterized as respondent-interviews since the researcher primarily are after mind-set, reasoning and thought processes of individuals central to political processes (see Richards, 1996). In my case, the interviewees were thus used both as respondents and informants. On the one hand, the interviewees were asked for specific knowledge about design decisions and the decision-making processes that were related to these design decisions. On the other hand, my main interest during the interviews was in the respondents' own perceptions and motivations in relation to these design decisions.

Characterizing the interviewees as experts/elites is of importance as it can contribute to an increased understanding of the context in which the interviews take place, as well as increasing the awareness of the particular challenges that often arise in relation to these kinds of interviews. This in particular concerns issues of sampling and access, but also how the power asymmetries in the interview situation tend to be in favor of the interviewee (Littig, 2009).

A strategic selection of interviewees

In line with most expert/elite interview studies, the selection of respondents in this study can be described as a strategic or purposeful sampling. This since it aimed at capturing the perceptions of specific respondents with certain experiences in line with the purpose of the study, rather than being a statistically representative sample of editors from all Swedish newspapers. Such a representative sample would thus be less useful in relation to the purpose of the study since it seeks to capture the perceptions of individuals at specific positions, such as the editors-in-chief and digital developers at some of Sweden's largest broadsheets, and not the perceptions of digital formats for user participation among Swedish newspaper editors in general (see Small, 2009).

Since the purpose of the chapter was to explore the rationales among the central gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream news media, the newspapers initially contacted for the study were selected on the basis of their scope. Hence, these are the most widely read Swedish daily newspapers based on their printed editions, as well as the number of daily visitors on their web and mobile sites (Tidningsutgivarna, 2015). Based on this initial selection,

the sample was then varied in two important ways. First, the size of the media was varied, to capture perceptions among editors within the major media companies in Sweden as well as at the smaller/more regional or local newspapers (however with the largest readership among the newspapers within their respective regions).²⁶ Secondly, the sample included both editors-in-chief as well as the editors that worked with the governance and design of different formats of digital user participation and/or with the digital user participation on a daily basis, such as digital editors or debate editors. In this way, it was possible to capture perceptions among both the editors working more practically with online publication and formats for user participation “on the ground” as well as among those higher up in the organizational hierarchy who are more in control over the conditions that the former are working under (such as the strategies of the media company). From this sample, 27 editors²⁷ were interviewed on 14 different regional as well as nationwide Swedish newspapers.²⁸ The interviewees thus consist of editors-in-chief and/or publishers as well as debate editors, news directors, web editors and digital developers that work with these issues in practice on a daily basis (see Appendix B for a complete list of the interviewees and their respective positions at the newspapers).

Access to interviewees

Access to interviewees can be a problematic issue, particularly in elite or high-level interview studies, since they often concern individuals with a certain set of access barriers (Littig, 2009). Access to the editors was however in most cases unproblematic. All editors-in-chief were first approached with an email that briefly introduced the research project, and in addition stressed that their contribution would be very valuable to the project given their specific positions. In addition to their own interview, the editors-in-chief were asked to suggest other suitable interviewees at the editorial offices that in particular were occupied with the design and/or the practical/daily work with digital formats for user participation. Thus, a snowball method was used to identify the remaining respondents. In most cases the editors-in-

²⁶ This selected sample also implied that the political orientation of the newspapers varied, including 2 politically unobtrusive (Dagens Industri, Metro), 7 Liberal (Göteborgs-Posten, Helsingborgs Dagblad, Nerikes Allehanda, Sundsvalls Tidning, Sydsvenskan, Uppsala Nya Tidning, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning), 4 Moderate (Borås Tidning, Norrköpings Tidningar, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, Svenska Dagbladet), and 1 Social Democrat (Aftonbladet). This variation was however not actively sought since it was not predicted to have any particular impact on the results, a prediction that was confirmed after an initial analysis of the empirical material.

²⁷ Including: 12 editors-in-chief/publishers, 1 managing editor, 7 web editors/digital managers, 4 opinion editors, 2 news directors and 1 dialogue editor

²⁸ Including: Aftonbladet, Borås Tidning, Dagens Industri, Göteborgs-Posten, Helsingborgs Dagblad, Metro, Nerikes Allehanda, Norrköpings Tidningar, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, Sundsvalls Tidning, Svenska Dagbladet, Sydsvenskan, Uppsala Nya Tidning and Vestmanlands Läns Tidning.

chief provided contact information to other relevant staff, and in some cases the editors-in-chief themselves contacted the other staff at the editorial office that they perceived as relevant. If an editor-in-chief did not respond immediately to my question via email, I always repeated it after the interview. Usually, however, the initial contact with the editors-in-chief facilitated the contact with the other staff at the editorial office. Apart from being part of the sample of interviewees, the editors-in-chief thus also in practice functioned as gatekeepers to other staff at the editorial office. In relation to the study this primarily helped me to get into contact with relevant staff at the editorial office, rather than imposing any problems for the study in leading to some kind of selection bias. In a few cases, however, access to the editors-in-chief, and hence also the other editors within the same editorial office, was more difficult. In line with problems that are usually related to access in elite studies, this in particular concerned the access to the editors at two of the largest daily newspapers in Sweden (Dagens Nyheter and Expressen), who I was unable to reach despite repeated attempts.

Approaches to the interview situation

An additional issue specific to expert/elite interviews is the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, which often is described as characterized by a power asymmetry in favor of the interviewee. On the other hand, the interviewer still has the benefit of knowing both the theoretical context of the study as well as knowledge transferred from other interviewees, and is also in control over how the interview-answers will be interpreted and described in the analysis. Even though the status of this asymmetrical relationship thus could be questioned, it can still be wise to keep in mind that interviewing experts and elites might demand certain preparation to be able to establish a good rapport with the interviewee in order to get as developed answers as possible and thus increase the validity of the study (Björnehed, 2012; Littig, 2009; Richards, 1996). In the interviews with the gatekeepers this power asymmetry was however probably most prominent in relation to the problems of access to some of the editors-in-chief at the largest Swedish newspapers. In relation to the interview situation itself the preparations were not beyond what usually is to be expected, hence to be well-prepared to create confidence and to avoid taking up more time than is needed. In this case it particularly concerned the study of the governance and design of the digital formats for user participation at the particular newspaper in question, in detail, before the interviews. In this way, I could prepare questions that concerned the specific design decisions these editors had taken, and avoid unnecessary issues.

Gathering and generating material on political blogs

The purpose of the second empirical chapter is to analyze how the affordances of blogs mediated the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic. This implied that a range of different blog material that provided information about the formation of the blogosphere as well as about the bloggers themselves needed to be gathered and generated. This was done in several steps. First, it was necessary to identify and classify antifeminist blogs. Building on this initial classification, two types of network analyses were then performed in order to identify influential actors in the network, as well as to analyze the structure of the blog network. Building on these findings, relevant blog material was then collected from the most influential blogs in the blogosphere. In addition, the interaction with some of the bloggers generated extra material, both in terms of their direct reactions to an early version of the chapter as well as additional blog-material that was created as a response. In the following, each of these steps will be described in more detail.

Identifying and classifying antifeminist blogs

The first step in gathering and generating blog-material was to identify and classify antifeminist blogs. To do this, a number of criteria were applied. The first blogs were identified through articles in mainstream news media, and more specialized magazines, through which it was possible to detect some of the central antifeminist bloggers. From their blogs, I then retrieved a couple of search words that frequently occurred in the narratives and the argumentation presented in the blog posts. Several of these words or entire concepts have been invented by the antifeminist bloggers themselves, and could therefore be described as typical for the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere. To extend the initial number of blogs, the search words (such as *jämställdist* (“gender equalist”), *misandri* (“misandry”), *mansförtryck* (“the oppression of men”)) were subsequently queried on Google, which gave me a larger number of blogs to start from.

In the next step, a snowball method was used to identify additional antifeminist blogs through the blog-rolls (the lists of links to other blogs, commonly found in the sidebars of the blogs) of the already identified blogs. The antifeminist blogs were thus identified both due to their ties to others in the network as well as due to their ideological content. Therefore blogs present in the blog-rolls that did not meet these criteria were excluded. The limitation of such snowball sampling is however that it can be difficult to find isolated single actors or sub-sets of actors that are not connected to the rest of the network. It is therefore important that the initial nodes were found in such a way that very influential actors could be identified (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). In the case of the antifeminist blogosphere this potential prob-

lem was avoided through the initial search for influential focal points to start from. Bloggers that neither showed up in the initial media search, nor through connections to any of the other antifeminist blogs (connected to these initial focal points), are probably not very influential in the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere.

Since the blog-rolls also contained a large number of blogs that either did not contain any antifeminist claims, or that partly contained antifeminist claims but whose content mainly focused on other issues, it was first necessary to examine if the blogs were part of a more narrow antifeminist blogosphere or not. This delimitation was necessary for at least two important reasons. First, since the study sought to analyze the emergence of an *anti-feminist* counterpublic on political blogs, the antifeminist blogosphere needed to be somehow delimited. Further, if all blogs that in some way contained antifeminist ideas had been included this would have generated hundreds and hundreds of additional blogs to classify, and would thus have resulted in an infinite network analysis.

A blog was classified as antifeminist when the main purpose of the blog was to advocate antifeminism (i.e. claims that I defined as antifeminist in the Swedish context). A central claim in the contemporary antifeminist discourse is that men are discriminated against by an omnipotent feminism in control over the state and the media. A usual claim in the blogosphere was hence that feminism (in Sweden) has gone “too far” and needs to be stopped and reversed. Moreover, it is usually advocated that men and women’s different choices in life, which underpin inequalities between men and women as social groups, do not depend on unequal societal structures but are due to biology. Further, gender as a concept and gender studies are advocated against as unscientific (see also Chapter 5 for a more comprehensive discussion of the definition of antifeminism).

The classification of the blogs as antifeminist was done in four main ways. The primary one was to use the blog’s “about-page”, in which the content and purpose of a blog often is described. This kind of page was used by slightly over half of the antifeminist bloggers, whereby it was possible to assess if the main purpose of these blogs was antifeminist advocacy. For the blogs that did not have an “about-page”, the first and/or last ten blog posts were analyzed to see if the content mainly corresponded to making antifeminist claims.²⁹ In addition, the blogs were assessed to see if they contained particular posts and links with antifeminist ideas and claims. These were often highlighted through hyperlinks in the sidebars of the blogs’ main page to supply background information on, for example, the bloggers’ views of feminism and descriptions of the particular version of antifeminism that they

²⁹ The last ten blog posts were used when the first blog posts were difficult to locate or did not provide enough information in order to determine if the blog could be classified as antifeminist.

declared themselves supporters of. Hence, the presence of these kinds of particular posts was assessed as a good indicator of the main purpose of the blog. Lastly, a couple of the blogs were included as part of the antifeminist blogosphere due to their reaction to an important event within the blogosphere, namely the resignation of one of the core bloggers in November 2012. These blogs were thus included in the analysis since they in reaction to this event declared themselves as part of the blogosphere. All in all, the classification rendered 62 blogs that were identified as antifeminist and included in the network analyses.

Two network analyses of the antifeminist blogosphere: links in blog-rolls and blog posts

Building on the initial identification and classification of antifeminist blogs, two types of network analyses were undertaken in order to understand how hyperlinks in blog-rolls and blog posts have actually been used in order to form an antifeminist counterpublic, as well as to interact with other publics. Besides providing a detailed understanding of the overall structure of the blog network as well as its relation to other issue areas and media platforms, the network analyses also enabled the identification of a group of more influential actors in the network. The first network analysis is a social network analysis (SNA), based on the hyperlinks to other blogs in the blog-rolls. The second one is an issue network analysis based on hyperlinks in blog posts. In this way, it was possible to capture both the more official picture of the network portrayed to others through their blog-rolls as well as the daily interactions in the blogosphere through the hyperlinks in blog posts. Both analyses were undertaken in the beginning of 2017; the links in blog-rolls were collected in February and the issue network analysis was done in April. This means that the networks that are analyzed should be understood as snapshots of the type of contemporary network that the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere developed into. Hence, it is expected that there are blogs that will no longer exist at the time of publication and that others have been newly created. It is also possible that the study captures blogs that at the time of the analysis had ceased to be updated. However, if links are still provided to these blogs in the blog rolls at the time of the analysis, they will show up as part of the network.

Influence in a networked blogosphere

In order to understand how hyperlinking in blog-rolls and blog posts had been used in the emergence of the blogosphere, I needed to identify relatively influential actors in the network. In networks, the influence of individual actors is dependent on where they are embedded, since the ties to others in the network can impose both constraints and opportunities rendering structurally favored and less favored positions (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). To identify what influence means in a specific network, however, we need to

think about what it is in that context that can be an advantageous – or disadvantageous – position in relation to others in that network.

Influence is within SNA generally defined as many out-links to other actors since this enables the actors in a specific network to provide other actors with information, while many in-links rather is understood as a sign of prestige (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). This however often concerns the analysis of networks that primarily exists outside the internet, where out-links often imply actual contact with other actors. In the context of blogospheres, where relations consist of hyperlinks, in-links rather than out-links would be a sign of both prestige and influence. Thus many in-links implies that others in the network either often read the blog themselves or direct others (in the network) to the linked blog by recommending it in their blog-rolls or blog-posts. Many out-links, on the other hand, can easily be supplied by anyone with a blog without indicating that anyone else in the network is reading or visiting the blog in question. Out-links therefore provide us with little information about the centrality of actors in terms of influence in the blog-network. Influence is therefore here defined as a blog's centrality in terms of many in-links, rather than out-links, both in blog-rolls and in blog-posts/overall linking. Having many in-links *and* out-links will in addition be interpreted as an indication of an ambition to build a network of antifeminist blogs since blogs with many out-links become hubs both for ideological influence as well as information about other blogs (Bruns, Kirchhoff, & Nicolai, 2009).

Analysis of links in blog-rolls

In order to systematize the analysis of how hyperlinking in blogs has been used to form an antifeminist counterpublic, an SNA was done based on the links in the blog-rolls of the antifeminist blogs. A social network can be thought of as a collection of social actors (nodes) with interconnections, or relations, between them (edges) (Sun & Qui, 2008, p. 1769; see also Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). SNA is a quantitative method for analyzing such interconnections in order to identify how actors are situated in relation to each other as well as how the network is structured. Blogs, as well as other types of websites, provide excellent material for performing an SNA since they are interconnected through hyperlinks. In contrast to many offline contexts, linking on the web is made explicit due to its hyperlinked structure. Links between actors are thus very easy to identify and map, both manually and by software programs (Herring et al., 2005).

The SNA analyzed the links in the blog-rolls of the antifeminist blogs, based on the manual identification of antifeminist blogs described above. These types of links are often persistent over time and are therefore a strong sign of “long-term network of recognition between peers” since they constantly appear on the blog's first page. Blog-rolls have therefore been argued to be a particularly useful way to map a network of blogs (Bruns et al. 2009,

p. 2; see also Rogers & Marres, 2000). In addition, blog-rolls function as an efficient way to network among likeminded bloggers and are therefore a good indication of “ideological affinity, common objectives, or shared interests” (Caiani & Wagemann, 2009, p. 69). Links in blog-rolls therefore provide us with important information for analyzing the structure of the blogosphere as well as to identify influential actors within the network.

What is of interest is the binary presence and absence of ties to other blogs in the blog-rolls, while there is less information about tie strength. Only 33 blogs in the network were at the time using blog rolls. Since it is the number of in-links that is most important for centrality in the network, the lack of blog-rolls on some blogs is however considered as less problematic for the study and rather becomes a part of the analysis itself. Based on the links in blog-rolls, an “adjacency matrix” was manually constructed. An adjacency matrix is a simple square matrix, where every actor has a row and a column. For a present link between two actors a one is entered in the cell and in the absence of a link a zero is entered (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). Hence, if a blog was linked to in the blog-roll of another blog, a one was entered, while a zero was entered if no link was found. Links to one’s own blog were excluded from the matrix. The complete one-mode network adjacency matrix was analyzed in UCINET, a software package for the analysis of social network data (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) and the results were visualized in NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002).

To analyze the relative influence of the blogs (nodes) in the network, two types of centrality tests were applied: *Freeman’s approach* and *Bonacich’s approach*.³⁰ *Freeman’s approach* assesses how many others in the network are linked to a specific node. If the network is directed, as is the case here, it is in addition possible to test two different types of degrees: *in-degree* and *out-degree*. In this study, *in-degree* measures the number of incoming links from other blogs, while *out-degree* measures the number of blogs that a specific blog is linking out to (in their blog-rolls). While *in-degree*, as argued, is a better indication of influence in blog-networks, *out-degree* is rather an indication of an effort to expand the network itself through the inclusion of all other possible blogs that support a blogger’s views in the blog-roll (Sharman, 2014).

For a more nuanced measurement of the bloggers’ relative influence *Bonacich’s approach* for degree centrality was used. In addition to the number of incoming and outgoing links, *Bonacich’s approach* assesses the number of secondary connections attributed to the nodes providing these links. *Bonacich’s approach* has therefore been acknowledged as superior to *degree*

³⁰ There are other tests for measuring the relative influence of actors in networks, such as closeness and between-ness. These centrality tests were however assessed as less relevant for analyzing influence in blogospheres. This is because these are more focused on assessing the impact of geographical proximity, which can be necessary for actors to connect and interact in offline environments but is of less relevance in blogospheres (see Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

centrality when it comes to measuring influence (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005). In some types of networks, links to nodes with few secondary connections are a better indication of centrality since they imply a greater ability to exert influence over these nodes. In the context of a networked blogosphere, however, influence is rather achieved if nodes that are very well connected are linking to the writer in their blog-roll. To have many secondary connections indicates greater visibility and thus a larger readership. Therefore, *Bonacich's approach* was in this study computed with a positive Beta parameter (between zero and one).

In the second part of the SNA, the overall structure of the blogosphere was assessed. To do this, a general density measure was used. This density measure signifies the percentage of links that are present in relation to all possible links. To identify a smaller group of highly interconnected influential bloggers, the antifeminist blogosphere was then divided in several clusters depending on the blogs' scores on *Bonacich's approach*. The density of the different clusters was subsequently compared with the overall density of the blogosphere. In this way it was also possible to assess whether the network consisted of smaller groups of highly interconnected central actors, of a single very influential "star" or of "lonely islands" either made out by single blogs or group of blogs without any interconnections.

Analysis of the overall linking in blog posts and comments

One drawback with performing a network analysis only built on hyperlinks in blog-rolls is that this type of analysis is unable to capture the much larger amount of hyperlinking that constantly is going on in the blog posts. An analysis of this kind of hyperlinking provides a better understanding of the bloggers' (constant) content creation and their interaction with other bloggers in blog comments (Bruns, 2007). Moreover, while many in-links in blog-rolls can be interpreted as a sign of respectability, the overall linking in blog-posts could be a better indication of the strength of ties between the bloggers, in terms of their frequency of interaction (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

In order to further qualify the analysis of the structure of the network as well as its influential actors, an additional network analysis was performed using the networking mapping software IssueCrawler.³¹ The use of IssueCrawler implies that the network analyzed rather is an *issue network* than a social network, since IssueCrawler primarily is designed for identifying "networks of Websites which form around the interlinkage and exchange of information pertaining to specific issues or topics" (Bruns, 2007, p. 5).

The first step inserted all the URLs of the blogs that had been classified as antifeminist in IssueCrawler. The inserted URLs, or "starting points", can

³¹ IssueCrawler is supplied freely by the Amsterdam-based Govcom.org Foundation at www.issuecrawler.net.

thus be described as an expert-selection, since these were identified based on a number of criteria formulated by the researcher (as described above). IssueCrawler then crawls the sites specified. The settings were set to one crawl iteration drilling down to a depth of three layers. In the next step, a co-link analysis was made which captures and retains the sites that are linked to by at least two of the starting points.³² This means that if any of the starting points were not linked to they were not retained in the network.

Gathering and generating blog material

In order to understand how the blogs' affordances had mediated the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, blog material was subsequently gathered and generated from the blogs that were assessed as more influential in the blogosphere according to the SNA and the issue network analysis. In total, 30 of the most influential blogs were selected for further analysis. From these more central blogs in the antifeminist blogosphere I first made a strategic selection of blog posts, which provided information important to the study. This included the very first blog posts published on each blog, the bloggers profile/"about"-pages and statements that concerned the bloggers' reasons for anonymity/pseudonymity. The latter blog posts were identified in two main ways; first a search was conducted on the blog itself for "anonymity", secondly a search on Google on "anonymity+blogname" was conducted.

In addition, other material was generated through participant observation of the blogosphere as well as subsequent interactions with the bloggers. This part of generating material for the study was partly inspired by methods of digital ethnography, and in particular by netnography. This means that the study can be defined as a qualitative and partly interpretative study of net based political activism, in which the main material is collected from online platforms (Kozinets, 2002, 2015).³³ Partly, this generation of blog material meant that I observed the interaction between the bloggers, which could be described as a kind of participant observation. Even though I was not there in person, for example by creating my own commentary-alias and interacting with the bloggers, I could follow how they interacted with each other in the

³² This was done per-page and not per-site, since the former setting is better at capturing the conversational links in blog posts (while the latter reduces all crawled pages to their base URL and therefore is likely to be contaminated by the presence of blog rolls) and therefore is the recommended choice for analyzing blogospheres (Bruns, 2007).

³³ However, it differs from a fully netnographic study in that it could not be described as a full immersion of the field site, given that I have neither spent a very long time following the activities on the blogs, nor (voluntarily) interacted with the participants in the study (i.e. the antifeminist activists. Contrasting examples of studies that could be described as fully netnographic are Gabriella Coleman's and Sylvain Firer-Blaess's respective studies of the online based movement Anonymous, during which they resided for several years in online environments interacting with activists within the network (Coleman, 2015; Firer-Blaess, 2016).

blog texts and the commentary fields as a kind of “invisible observer”. Moreover, several of the bloggers gave me feedback on my work after having found an early version of Chapter 5 online. They wrote about it on their blogs and they contacted me directly. This suggests a kind of member checking on the initiative of those studied. Member checking has been highlighted as an important part of an ethnographic research approach as it provides an opportunity for the people studied to take part of the study’s results before publication. The idea is that the people studied should have an opportunity to evaluate if the researcher has managed to capture the participants’ understanding of their own situation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009). It is important to note that member-checking does not mean that the persons studied have the possibility to “approve” of the analysis (or not), and that the analysis then would be amended according to their approval. Instead, it provides a possibility to improve the analysis through a deepened understanding of their world of ideas. One criticism the bloggers had against my study, for example, was that I described them as antifeminist, while some of them had chosen to use other denominations, most of which were invented by the persons behind the blogs themselves such as *jämställdist* (“gender equalist”) or *ekvalist* (“equalist”). Although the persons I studied often described themselves in a different way, I however chose to refer to the blogosphere as antifeminist as the rhetoric and the political objectives of the bloggers I studied are consistent with other contemporary antifeminist movements. The criticism from the persons behind the blogs thus helped me to clarify and develop this argument.

In addition, the interaction with the bloggers generated other kinds of material that informed the analysis. Partly, the unfolding events that followed when the bloggers first found an early version of this chapter, such as the speed with which it was read and commented upon within the blogosphere as well as how the bloggers interacted with me, provided a more in-depth insight into how they used the blogs to mobilize around issues and how they interacted with (presumed) opponents. An additional reaction to their discovery of my text that also generated source material was a post created at *Genusdebatten* (“the gender debate”) (Genusdebatten, 2013), which later grew to be the main online forum for antifeminist debate in Sweden (Bloggportalen, 2017).³⁴ This post asked the participants and readers of the site to “map themselves”, including questions about their political affiliation, gender, age and place of residence (Genusdebatten, 2013). The respondents were also requested to state their name/blog name and the URL-address to their blog (if they had one). So far (February 2017), this post has generated 87 responses, including 16 of the most central antifeminist bloggers.

³⁴ This post was furthermore clearly a reaction to an early version of Chapter 5 that was found online by the antifeminist bloggers.

Moreover, both the “invisible” participant observation and the particular circumstances that surrounded the member checking in this study demonstrate how the low barriers to access certain online spaces in combination with unclear boundaries between private and public venues and conversations can raise difficult ethical issues. These will be discussed in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

Gathering Twitter data: the challenges with access

The main purpose of the third empirical chapter is to analyze how the affordances of the social media platform Twitter mediated the power differentials within #solidarityisforwhitewomen during its emergence. This meant that I needed to gather Twitter data that could provide information about the power dynamics in relevant parts of the hashtag conversation. The choice of material was however partly restricted by Twitter’s access regimes.

All research that relies on material generated on social media platforms is to a large extent dependent on what type of restrictions the platform provider has concerning what type of data can be accessed. Sometimes these restrictions are clear to the researcher. For example, we know that if Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API), which provides access to public Twitter data, is used we will only be supplied with at the most 1% of the available data. Often, however, it can be difficult to know exactly what these restrictions consist of since they are “hidden” in the API, or in the specific algorithms that govern which data are visible in newsfeeds or search-engines provided by the platforms (Burgess & Bruns, 2015, p. 98). Algorithms that provide results in order of “relevance” have furthermore become an increasingly popular way for platform providers to organize the data presented to its users, for example through newsfeeds and search engine results. Hence, only the platform providers have full access to the algorithms, protocols and interfaces (such as APIs) that curate what is visible on these new public venues and hence also what type of data is possible to extract from them (Burgess & Bruns, 2015; see also Gillespie, 2010).

Before 2011, researchers were nevertheless able to gain quite unrestricted access to large amounts of Twitter data from its “public timeline”. In addition, a number of free of charge user-friendly online tools such as *Twapper-keeper* made it fairly cheap and easy to gather and analyze Twitter data. In 2011, however, Twitter changed its API and became much more restrictive in granting researchers unrestricted access to Twitter data. Twitter’s much more restrictive interpretation of the Terms of Service of its API also forced the closedown of the free of charge and user-friendly online tools for retrieving and analyzing Twitter data. Full access to the Twitter stream now has to be purchased from *Gnip*, which is a Twitter-owned company that provides unrestricted Twitter data at a rather high price (Burgess & Bruns, 2015; Felt, 2016). Twitter has also donated its full data set to U.S. Library of Congress,

but this source is not yet available and will most likely only be available for a few selected researchers in the future (Felt, 2016).

To gain full access to Twitter data currently demands both programming expertise in order to handle the data, as well as substantial financial means. Therefore, most researchers instead resort to capturing Twitter data through Twitter's API either by creating their own tools or by using a number of free tools, such as Storify, Netlytic and DMI TCAT. These tools are thus restricted by Twitter's API, that, for example, only allows access to 1% of the total current volume of Twitter activity. Moreover, none of these free tools are able to access tweets in Twitter's public timeline older than a week or two (Felt, 2016). This naturally limits researchers' ability to select cases primarily due to their suitability in relation to their research question; cases instead rather have to be selected instantly as they evolve in real time. Hence, the regimes that govern access to Twitter data have substantial implications for the type of research on Twitter that can be undertaken.

The implication of Twitter's access regimes for the study of #solidarityisforwhitewomen

The first major implication of Twitter's access regimes in relation to the study of #solidarityisforwhitewomen was the difficulty to systematically gather historical material on Twitter. The case of #solidarityisforwhitewomen was selected some time (one year) after the hashtag was coined, due to its suitability in relation to the research question guiding Chapter 6. Therefore, it was not possible to use any of the free tools by which tweets can be systematically gathered and analyzed, such as DMI TCAT (which in addition is still affected by the restrictions of Twitter's API). Moreover, without the substantial financial means that would make it possible to buy unrestricted access to tweets older than a week or two, the only remaining option was to use Twitter's own search engine by which specific hashtags can be entered as search words and historical tweets can be gathered manually. However, the problem with this way of capturing tweets is that it is not possible to automatically gain access to metadata, such as sender, recipient(s), timestamp and tweet type (Felt, 2016), which would have facilitated a systematic analysis of the social network that was involved in the hashtag-conversation under study.

Moreover, the number of tweets within a trending hashtag-conversation can rise to tens of thousands per day (not including the large number of conversations that tweets including the hashtag are part of). Thus, to make a qualitative study of these manually gathered tweets feasible, a smaller number of tweets needed to be strategically selected. A possibility within Twitter's own search engine is to make use of an algorithm that finds the tweets that have caught attention within Twitter, which are called *Top Tweets*. Top Tweets are for several reasons a suitable material for analyzing the power differentials within #solidarityisforwhitewomen. First, when searching Twit-

ter, for example by simply clicking on a hashtag, most clients will by default return a list of Top Tweets (Burgess & Bruns, 2015). This suggests that Top Tweets in fact represent a widely viewed depiction of a hashtag conversation, since these tweets are what most users will see in relation to a certain hashtag. Moreover, Top Tweets are defined by Twitter as “popular Tweets that many other Twitter users have engaged with”, suggesting that they are shared via “Retweets, replies, and more” and are thereby part of a “wide-spread conversation” (Twitter Inc., 2015). Even though we know very little about how the algorithm that generates Top Tweets is constructed, this formulation most likely implies that Top Tweets are made by users within the Twitter environment who have many followers and thereby many potential retweets and other type of interactions with other Twitter users. Previous studies have also shown the importance of how influential as well as ordinary users in this way may rise to prominence on Twitter, as well as to elevate others by networked gatekeeping actions, and thereby produce “crowdsourced elites” with critical influence within the publics that emerge (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). A further motivation as to why the corpus of Top Tweets therefore in particular is a suitable material in relation to the research question that guides the third empirical chapter will be elaborated on later in this chapter in relation to the discussion of how the Top Tweets will be analyzed.

The selection of Top Tweets and its implications

It was mainly during the first week of the hashtag’s existence that the counterpublic dynamics that this study aims to uncover could be traced in the Top Tweets that included #solidarityisforwhitewomen (August 12th–18th 2013). The scope of the material was therefore limited to these Top Tweets. In total, 460 tweets were collected. There are three main reasons for limiting the selection of Top Tweets to the first week of the hashtag. First, we know that ad hoc publics such as #solidarityisforwhitewomen generated through Twitter hashtags are often formed rapidly, and then quickly decline (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). An initial analysis of the Top Tweets showed that already during the last days of the first week the hashtag-conversation had moved from the Top Tweets to other media platforms. This was in particular demonstrated by the fact that the majority of the Top Tweets in the end of the first week mainly contained hyperlinks and/or referred to other media platforms, rather than being involved substantially in the hashtag conversation themselves. Moreover, an additional analysis of the Top Tweets during the second week of the hashtag (August 19th–25th 2013) showed that the proportion of tweets that hyperlinked and/or referred to other platforms had amounted to around 80% of the conversation. At the same time, the total number of Top Tweets had decreased by half compared to the first week. Thus, it was mainly during this first week the counterpublic dynamics could be traced in the Top Tweets.

In addition to this material, other Twitter data was collected, building on an analysis of the Top Tweets initially collected. The collection of this additional material was made possible by changes in the algorithm that generates Top Tweets, as well as changes in Twitter's own search engine. After analyzing the first selection of Top Tweets, tweets that concerned how self-identified white feminists should "shut up and listen and learn" to the hashtag conversation emerged as a central manifestation of the power relations within the emergence of this specific counterpublic (this argument will be further developed in Chapter 5). Since the first gathering of Twitter data for this empirical chapter in 2014, Twitter has changed the algorithm that selects which tweets will be highlighted as Top Tweets. This resulted in the number of Top Tweets generated by the algorithm growing considerably in size. Moreover, Twitter's own search engine now allows for the insertion of search words within a hashtag, which means that it can also retrieve tweets within a specific hashtag that contain certain words. This made it possible to search for a larger number of Top Tweets that specifically were engaging in the "listen and learn" discussion within #solidarityisforwhitewomen, which provided an enhanced opportunity to analyze the dynamics within the hashtag discussion. Thus, a search for Top Tweets during the first week of the hashtag that contained the words "listen", "listening", "learn" or "learning", as well as the word "shut (up)" was performed which generated an additional 840 tweets that were included in the research material.

Moreover, it has been argued that one problem with gathering Twitter material based on a hashtag is that tweets that are part of the conversation but do not contain the hashtag itself are excluded (Burgess & Bruns, 2015). In this case including also the conversations that were sparked by the "listen and learn" tweets solved this problem. These tweets were thus replying to tweets containing the hashtag by using the @reply function, and can be found under the original tweets. In this way, all tweets that were directly targeting the "listen and learn" discussion in the Top Tweets could be included no matter if they contained that actual hashtag or not.

Data analysis: textual analyses of interviews, blog-material and tweets

Textual analysis has been the main method used for analyzing the material generated through semi-structured qualitative interviews as well as through the interactions with antifeminist bloggers, and gathered on blogs and on Twitter. Depending on the purpose of each empirical chapter, different approaches to textual analysis have been employed in order to capture different kinds of phenomena. To capture the underlying rationales in the interview-material, a more deductive qualitative textual analysis was used which had

the theoretical definitions of the three democratic ideals as well as rationales traced in previous research as a starting point. Analyzing the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic on political blogs demanded a less complex interpretation process since it mainly concerned capturing more manifest expressions in the blog texts. This included an analysis of how the blogosphere had emerged, how the antifeminist bloggers presented themselves on their blogs, as well as their reasons for anonymity. In contrast, analyzing the power differentials within the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation demanded a more complex interpretation process since it aimed at capturing the power structures that were contested as well as reproduced within the hashtag. The textual analysis in the third empirical chapter therefore consisted of a thematic analysis inspired by aspects of discourse analysis.

While the material gathered and generated for the three empirical chapters has been analyzed using different approaches to textual analysis, all these approaches are at the same time associated with similar challenges in relation to the validity and reliability of the research process. These in particular concern the relevance of the chosen approach to textual analysis as well as the material in relation to the research question and the theoretical starting points of the study, as well as the need to be systematic and transparent throughout the research process (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 16-20). In the following, the selected approaches to textual analysis employed in each chapter will be discussed in more detail in relation to these challenges. Part of this discussion is also found in relation to the presentation of the analytical tools specific to each empirical analysis in Chapters 4–6.

Qualitative analysis of ideas expressed in interviews

In order to analyze the underlying rationales among the main gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream media in relation to the governance and design of forums for user participation on their sites, the analysis in the first empirical chapter was inspired by techniques employed within the qualitative analysis of ideas. This approach was considered suitable since the purpose was to analyze the underlying rationales that guide actions and interactions among actors (Boréus & Bergström, 2017). In particular, the study aimed at capturing the rationales behind the editors' governance and design of their digital platforms for public debates, and how and to what extent these were related to the central democratic ideals of inclusion, equality and quality. The analysis thus focused on how such ideas were implicitly expressed in texts (transcripts of interviews). Following a common approach within qualitative analysis of ideas, to identify the underlying ideational assumptions in the interview transcripts I used the theoretical definitions of the concepts of (democratic) inclusion, equality and quality in relation to public debates as a starting point. These democratic values were then operationalized by being

related to the different design issues that the editors were considering. For example, ideas related to formal inclusion were operationalized as motivations in relation design issues that concerned the formal access to the digital formats for user participation, such as registration. Important themes in the transcribed interviews were thus primarily identified deductively. A more detailed discussion of the framework that guided the analysis can be found in the empirical chapter.

The specific challenges with text content generated by interviews

It is important to point out that the texts that were analyzed in the first empirical chapter were interview transcripts, and thus a transcribed conversation generated by the social interaction between the interviewees and the researcher. This means that the textual analysis in the first empirical chapter also needed to be conscious about how the material had been generated in order to interpret and assess the results.

My main interest in the interviews was in the respondent's own perceptions and motivations in relation to their design decisions. Typically, their decisions in relation to a specific part of the design of the different formats for user participation were first asked for. After that, I probed for their motivations for these decisions or for why they had left these to someone else/not taken them themselves. To create room for such reflection during the interviews, the interview questions were semi-structured, with open-ended answers. The main focus of the interview was thus not to map the specific decisions as such, but these functioned rather as points of departure for understanding the editors' motivations and logics in relation to these decisions.

All interviews except for one (interview 1, which was conducted by phone) were conducted face to face and took place at the interviewees' respective editorial offices. The interviews were all recorded and then transcribed.³⁵ Moreover, being at the editorial offices helped me to understand how the editorial office was organized in relation to its work with digital formats for user participation (for example, where the digital editors were placed in the office) as well as how the editors worked with these platforms in action. On one occasion for example I watched how a digital editor managed the moderation of user comments in real time.

In line with other interpretative research, the purpose of the study was to understand the logics and world of ideas from which the editors operated in the daily activities at the editorial offices. As Björnehed (2012, p. 69) puts it: "The subjectivity of these particular persons, their perceptions and reasoning, does not present an obstacle to the validity of the study. That subjectivity is precisely what is sought." However, even though subjectivity is not a

³⁵ Half of the interviews were transcribed in their totality. The rest of the interviews were almost transcribed in their totality, except for parts that were assessed as irrelevant for the analysis building on an initial analysis of the first transcriptions.

problem, it could still be the case that the respondents tried to whitewash their rationales and motivations, which could weaken the validity of the study. For example, this could be the case if the editors described their main motivations as to create forum for debates beneficial to the democratic process, while in fact they were also being driven by economic incentives when designing their digital formats for user participation. This potential problem was partially avoided by interviewing respondents at different positions within the editorial office, as well as editors-in-chief at both large newspapers as well as smaller regional or local newspapers. The persons working on the ground, as well as editors-in-chief at the smaller regional or local newspapers, sometimes expressed other motivations, which could contradict their superiors or the editors-in-chief at larger newspapers. In this way, thus, contradicting rationales could be identified and analyzed.

Even though the aim was not to cover a representative sample of all news editors in Sweden, there could still be validity-problems in terms of risk of sample bias and unrepresentative results when problems with access to key individuals occur (Richards, 1996, p. 199). In my case there were a few key editors that I was unable to access. The problem of sample bias was however partly avoided with the relatively large number of editors contacted and interviewed, since several other editors at similar positions at large daily newspaper were interviewed. In this way, it was still possible to capture the ideas and motivations among individuals that were making similar trade-offs as the editors that I was unable to interview.

Analyzing the emergence of an antifeminist blogosphere through blog posts and comments

In the second empirical chapter the purpose is to analyze how the affordances of blogs has mediated the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic. The aim of this chapter in relation to the overarching research problem is to increase our understanding for how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics that have competing political agendas, in this case antifeminist and feminist counterpublics. While previous research on contemporary antifeminist activism online has largely focused on the discursive level, and thus analyzed in great detail contemporary antifeminist discourses and how they are structured (see e.g. Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Lilly, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rosenbrock, 2012, see however Massanari, 2017 for a notable exception), the analytical focus of this study was however primarily on the social and material factors that also shape the emergence of (antifeminist) counterpublics.

One part of this analysis was the network analysis of hyperlinks in blog rolls and blog posts described above. To further capture these phenomena, a

textual analysis of blog posts and comments gathered on the antifeminist blogs was undertaken. This analysis primarily focused on what was expressed explicitly, or what was manifest, in the source material. To capture how the affordances of blogs had been used in the emergence of the blogosphere as well as the social position of the bloggers, simple questions were posed to the material. These for example concerned how the bloggers described themselves, why they had started blogging (about antifeminism) and why they had chosen to be anonymous or use a pseudonym. These questions hence enabled an analysis of the bloggers motivations for starting to blog, their (mostly self-perceived/described) social position and how they were motivating their antifeminist activism as well as their use of anonymity.

Such questions hence implied a much less complex interpretation process than the analysis of the underlying rationales in the interviews with gatekeepers or of the power differentials within #solidarityisforwhitewomen. While the textual analysis of the blog-material was less complex than in the other empirical chapters, the gathering and generating of source material however raised more complex ethical issues than in the other cases. These will be discussed further below in the section on ethical considerations online and offline. A more detailed description of each part of the textual analysis of blog material can moreover be found in Chapter 5.

Analyzing the (re)production of power relations on Twitter

The chapter on the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic focuses on capturing how the social position of the bloggers and the affordances of blogs enabled an antifeminist blogosphere to form in reaction to feminist achievements, and thereby on the social and material factors that shape the power differentials *between* counterpublics. The subsequent chapter is in contrast focused on how Twitter's affordances mediated the power differentials between self-identified white feminists and feminists of color *within* the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation. To capture the power dynamics that unfolded in the hashtag conversation, a thematic analysis inspired by aspects of discourse analysis was undertaken with the Top Tweets of the first week of the hashtag as the main source material.

Thematic analysis can be described as "the searching *across* a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). This is a suitable method when we need to systematically analyze data in a subjective interpretative manner in order to identify textual patterns. Hence, it focuses on the latent meaning of texts, rather than on what is explicitly expressed. Thematic analysis was therefore considered useful in order to reveal the power dynamics in the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation through the sys-

tematic identification of themes and subthemes in the Top Tweets. To enable an identification of relevant themes and subthemes, aspects of discourse³⁶ analysis also informed the thematic analysis. This mainly concerned the understanding of language and social practice as constitutive of our reality perceptions and thereby central to meaning making processes, which makes texts (in a wider sense) important to the analysis of power and the maintaining as well as challenging of power relations. More specifically important in relation to the analysis of the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation, such processes affect how different categories of people (and their interrelations) are linguistically and socially constructed and how this impacts their possibilities to act (Boréus & Bergström, 2017; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Moreover, since current discursive structures are often normalized and taken for granted, existing power relations are often regarded as natural (Neumann, 2008). We can therefore assume that when existing power relations are challenged, there will be conscious or unconscious attempts to sustain or reinforce the status quo, while underprivileged subjects might internalize their subordination and thereby also unconsciously contribute to upholding or reinforcing the status quo.

The thematic analysis of the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation hence focused on these kinds of dynamics. Specifically, it analyzed the reactions that followed when unequal power relations were challenged through the coining of #solidarityisforwhitewomen; that is, when women of color questioned the taken-for-granted position of white feminists, and pointed out that their privileged position allows for a room for manoeuvre which excludes or marginalizes others within feminist conversations and organizing. In this context, social practices in terms of actions and interactions on Twitter such as tweeting, retweeting, liking, etc. as well as the texts (in tweets) that are produced and consumed in these actions and interactions were analyzed as part of the conversational processes where such power dynamics can be identified. The specific analytical strategies will be explained in more detail and related to the analysis in Chapter 6.

The understanding of language and social practices as constitutive of our reality perceptions, and thereby also central to the power dynamics that unfold in a hashtag conversation, has further implications for which material would be relevant in relation to #solidarityisforwhitewomen. In particular, texts that can be defined as central to underpinning discursive structures relevant to the analytical focus of the study are of greater interest (Neumann, 2008). This can be operationalized as texts that have a larger ideational influence, for example through their larger visibility in public conversations. The selection of Top Tweets during the first week of the hashtag #solidar-

³⁶ Discourse is here understood as the articulations that constitute the fixation of meaning within specific domains – in the form of text and speech in a more narrow linguistic sense – but also through images, films and social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

ityisforwhitewomen can thus also be motivated by them being defined as the most visible tweets to other Twitter users, as well as to other media platforms that are monitoring the Twitter feed. Hence, to be visible in the Top Tweets can be crucial if someone wants to make their claim heard by the general public. At the same time, it can take considerable prominence within the Twitter-environment to figure among these tweets. Thus, it is likely that the Top Tweet conversation can tell us something about the power dynamics within #solidarityisforwhitewomen.

Ethical considerations online and offline

The empirical studies conducted within the framework of this thesis raised a number of ethical challenges. In addition to the general procedures that characterize good research practice, such as transparency with the research process and results, these studies in particular highlight issues that concern personal integrity and reducing potential and unreasonable harm to the people who are studied, as well as to the researcher (AoIR, 2012; Hermerén, 2017). These issues were moreover particularly challenging in relation to the studies conducted on online environments since there are few established or exact policies regarding ethical considerations when it comes to gathering and generating data online. In the following, the ethical issues that were raised in relation to the empirical chapters, as well as my solutions to these, will be elaborated on.

Interview ethics: informed consent and non-anonymity

Concerning qualitative interviews, there are long since established guidelines for how to handle ethical issues that may occur during the research process. These ethical guidelines primarily concern securing informed consent from interviewees, and other proceedings in order to protect the interviewees from unnecessary harm and exploitation throughout the research process. This includes giving the interviewees the possibility to be anonymous and to access transcriptions and the researchers' interpretation of them, if they so wish. On the other hand, in regards to the latter aspect it is also important to protect the study from being too influenced, or even censored, by the people studied. This could in particular be a potential danger when studying powerful people like experts and/or elites, as was partly the case in the interviews with gatekeepers in Swedish news media. Consequently, before the interview, the interviewed editors were asked to fill in a consent form, which briefly informed them about the purpose of the interview. The purpose of the research project was also described in the initial email to the editors, and it was briefly repeated in the beginning of the interview. In addition, the consent form offered the choice to be anonymous if the editor so wished. None

of the editors however desired to be anonymous. Nevertheless, some of the interviewees wished to read their direct quotes before publication of the results, which I agreed to since it was not regarded as too intrusive for the research project. This was indeed also a way to make the interviewees feel more comfortable with the interview situation, which probably increased the honesty and richness of their answers (Björnehed, 2012). The interviews were all recorded, and permission for this was always asked before turning on the recorder in the beginning of the interview. Moreover, since the interviews only concerned the editors' professional position, and did not touch upon sensitive personal, religious and/or political matters that could be regarded as intrusive for the participants if published, it was considered unnecessary to anonymize the editors in the study (which I would have done if deemed necessary, despite their own consent to non-anonymity). In addition, several of the editors are also public figures due to their positions at some of the major newspapers in Sweden. Thus, it would in any case have been difficult to secure their anonymity when presenting the results of the study.

Emerging ethical guidelines for research on online environments³⁷

Questions of private integrity and what counts as private and public spheres are particularly tricky issues when it concerns material that is collected from and generated on the internet, since there are no explicit boundaries or established guidelines for which type of online forums and communications should be regarded as private or public. Due to the low threshold for access to the field that online environments offer, the study of the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere in particular made me encounter several ethical difficulties concerning the relationship between the researcher and the persons that were studied.

While there are few established guidelines or exact policies regarding ethical considerations when it comes to gathering and generating data online, the Association for Internet Researchers (AoIR) has developed general guidelines for internet research, which include a discussion of online private and public spheres. According to AoIR (2012), ethical guidelines should always be adapted to the context studied. For example, it may be that the online forum studied can be defined as public, based on general guidelines of what can be seen as public/private, but nevertheless perceived as private by its participants. In studies of online environments, it is also important to remember that an internet identity or pseudonym can be as strong as an iden-

³⁷ Parts of the arguments and ideas discussed in this section in relation to the study of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic have previously been published with *Gleerups* (Holm, 2016).

tity outside of the online environment. Making use of a pseudonym is hence not the same thing as being anonymous, since the pseudonym in different ways can be linked to one's real name, as well as being recognized by others in the same forum. Furthermore, AoIR states that the same context-specific considerations should be applied when the potential harm that may arise due to the study is assessed. It must here be considered what potential damage is reasonable, both regarding the persons studied, as well as the researcher. This injury should then be weighed against the benefit that the study provides in terms of new knowledge (see also Kozinets, 2015).

Questions of personal integrity, safety and transparency

In research based on fieldwork, gaining access to the field and to participants often involves difficulties. To be able to obtain access to the field and to interviewees there is usually a need to gain informed consent from the people that are studied, and to be in contact with one or several important gatekeepers to the field site. One advantage with conducting research that primarily involves the study of online platforms as field sites is however that the low thresholds to access due to the openness (of some parts) of the internet can facilitate the data collection or generation process (Kozinets, 2015). In relation to the study of antifeminist political blogs as well as #solidarityisforwhitewomen on Twitter, the low threshold to accessing the platforms (although accessing Twitter data proved more problematic) could thus be described as an advantage. Without having to ask for permission to access internal meetings or central documents, I could easily follow the bloggers public posting and public conversations in the commentary fields as well as the development in Twitter's public timeline, and thereby also the emergence of the counterpublics.

Concerning the study of #solidarityisforwhitewomen on Twitter, there were less problematic trade-offs concerning my presence as an invisible observer and in relation to the personal integrity of the people that were studied through the analysis of their tweets. Even though these Twitter users make their political statements public, we must also recognize that there are (in most cases) people behind these tweets who are unaware that they subsequently will be studied. In line with AoIRs' (2012) recommendations, to protect the Twitter users whose tweets had been included in the selected Top Tweets from unnecessary harm through exposing their personal experiences and/or political opinions, all Twitter users but one in the study were anonymized by erasing their avatar name if the tweet was included as an illustrative example of a theme in the result section. I also made minor alterations to the text in the tweets so that their meaning remained while their authors could not be traced back through a Twitter search. A couple of the Twitter users were however named, since this was considered as an important part of the findings. These Twitter users are however already public figures, and their participation in the hashtag conversation had already been discussed

numerous times in online outlets, on blogs and in mainstream media. Therefore, this information was assessed as already public and not causing any unreasonable harm to the persons concerned.

More acute ethical issues appeared during the course of the study of anti-feminist activism on political blogs. In the following I will discuss two of these; the first concerns the greater possibility of being an invisible observer on digital platforms, and the other concerns the possible consequences of presence as a researcher in the field being noted online, thus a kind of involuntarily member-checking. When collecting the material on the blogs I did not make the persons behind the blogs aware of my invisible “presence”. This was not really an active decision from my side in the beginning of the study. Rather, like many others who use the internet as their primary field of research, I only studied the material that was public to the extent that it was available to anyone with access to the internet and who could understand the language. Moreover, in my study of the antifeminist bloggers, it was clear that they used their blogs to influence the public discourse and thus to reach as many people as possible. Therefore, my assessment was at first that the harm that could be caused by using their pseudonyms in the study would not be unreasonable, since the aim of the blogs precisely was to be as visible as possible to the general public.

When the persons behind the blogs found an early draft of my study online and started to email me and write about it on their blogs, they however made it clear that they were not comfortable with being identified through their pseudonyms in my study. Thus, even though the blogs could be defined as public material, it can thus still be important to reflect upon how the people who are studied experience it. It is possible that it can be seen as an intrusion that the researcher is there to observe, but without making their actions visible, especially if the research itself is making these people visible.

After the interaction with the antifeminist bloggers my solution was to anonymize most of the blogs. In addition, the text quotes from the blogs only appear in the translated (English) version, in order to prevent a direct link to the original (Swedish) text. Not only did it become clear that the bloggers’ public statements contained personal and political information that could be of a sensitive character, but their reactions also revealed that their pseudonyms were an important mark of identity in the online environment and therefore needed to be hidden. In addition, in the study of social networks it can be of particular importance to consider the potential harm of participants since they have little control and may be little aware of their presence in the network that the researcher constructs. Moreover, it was not important to the study that the bloggers’ pseudonyms became known, since the focus of the study was rather on how the counterpublic had emerged than on the individuals as such. Another reason for anonymizing the antifeminist activists who were using pseudonyms was to reduce the risk that I as a researcher would again be too influenced by the bloggers’ reactions. As will be discussed in

more detail in Chapter 5, all of the bloggers who contacted me in a more or less hostile way were using pseudonyms.

However, I decided to not anonymize a few of the most central bloggers who were not using pseudonyms, and in addition had participated openly in mainstream media with their antifeminist advocacy, for example through numerous debate articles in major Swedish newspapers. In these cases, I made an assessment that this information was already public and not causing any unreasonable harm to the concerned persons. In addition, since several of these bloggers are, or have been, well known public figures in Sweden, it would be difficult to anonymize them in an efficient way without losing information important to the study.

Next, the result of the ethical as well as methodological challenges and choices elaborated on in this chapter will follow; thus, the empirical chapters 4–6.

Chapter 4: Setting the Scene: “Old” Gatekeepers Designing New Public Venues

This chapter empirically investigates the rationales behind a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres, by analyzing the ideational contexts within which online platforms in mainstream news media are governed and designed. One main assumption in this thesis is that the ways in which online platforms are constructed matters for which kind of social groups may participate in them, and how these groups can use them. Hence, how online platforms are designed and managed shapes which kinds of publics are formed. Moreover, it is assumed that the governance and design of online platforms is very much dependent on the intentions of their constructors, although perhaps with unintended consequences.

This chapter’s analytical focus is therefore on the rationales among editors in mainstream news media that are in the position to “set the scene” for how counterpublics may emerge and influence dominant public spheres. Based on 27 interviews with editors³⁸ at 14 regional and national Swedish newspapers,³⁹ the chapter seeks to understand their primary concerns when they have made decisions about the design and policies of different formats for user participation on their web and mobile sites, with a particular focus on comments sections. As discussed in Chapter 3, at the same time as user comments have allowed for a much larger inclusion of the number of voices as well as different opinions and perspectives among the general public in mainstream news media, they have also been highlighted for providing highly visible public venues for right wing populism, climate change skepticism/denialism, as well as blatant racism and sexism. Moreover, Swedish mainstream news media were early adopters of online publications and comment sections and this, in combination with the fact that traditional news media has an unusually strong position among the Swedish public, makes them relevant study objects.

³⁸ Including: 12 Editors-in-chief/publishers, 1 Managing Editor, 7 web editors/digital managers, 4 opinion editors, 2 news directors and 1 dialogue editor.

³⁹ Including: Aftonbladet, Borås Tidning, Dagens Industri, Göteborgs-Posten, Helsingborgs Dagblad, Metro, Nerikes Allehanda, Norrköpings Tidningar, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, Sundsvalls Tidning, Svenska Dagbladet, Sydsvenskan, Uppsala Nya Tidning and Vestmanlands Läns Tidning.

In order to relate the analysis more directly to how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege and how such processes are related to inclusion and political equality, the analysis will cover to what extent and how the rationales behind the editors' design decisions can be related to these democratic ideals. In addition, a third ideal – the quality of public debates – is added to the analysis. This since the quality of public debates has been upheld as a central ideal by deliberative democracy, which lately has grown to become a very influential model of democracy within democratic theory (Caulhun, 1992; Dryzek, 2005). The research questions that guide this chapter are:

- *What rationales are driving the governance and design of formats for user participation in traditional news media?*
- *How are these rationales related to the democratic ideals of inclusion, equality and quality?*

The purpose of this chapter is thus to increase our understanding of the rationales behind the governance and design of online public venues that are important to the reproduction of dominant public discourses, but at the same time have opened up for a larger inclusion of counterpublics. The focus on rationales moreover indicates that what is of interest here is not primarily the editors' elaborate motives in relation to the design of the formats for user participation connected to their sites – it is clear from previous research that such motives in many cases may be lacking – but rather the conscious or unconscious logics that drive their decisions. Hence, the aim is to capture the ideational context within which the editors are making these decisions, and which consequences this has for the democratic ideals.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the rationales that can be expected to figure in the editors' accounts based on previous research on traditional gatekeepers' experiences and management of formats for user participation are discussed. After this, the analytical tools specific to this chapter are presented. It is clarified how the rationales behind the editors' design decisions have been related to the democratic values of inclusion, equality and quality in the interview questions as well as in the analysis. The analysis is then presented, demonstrating how and why the value of inclusion is prioritized over equality and quality, and the important role that economic incentives play in the editors' priorities. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion, focusing on the implications of the editor's main rationales for the democratic potential of public debates.

The rationales of “old” gatekeepers in relation to formats for user participation

In this section, previous research on digital formats for user participation in mainstream media will be used to specify some of the rationales that could be expected to guide the decisions of the editors. There are several ways in which readers can participate in discussions on online news sites, or on other sites connected to them, such as readers’ comments sections, online chats with the editorial staff or as invited guests, journalist blogs or online versions of letters to the editor (see Hermida, 2011, p. 17 for a list of examples). Such different formats for user participation have been part of mainstream news media for well over a decade, implying that those who can access the news sites now have a continuous possibility to discuss and express their opinions.

Previous research on the design and policy of formats for user participation in mainstream news media has partly focused on mapping their type and scope (e.g. Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Karlsson et al., 2015). In addition, the deliberative potential of, in particular, user comments, has been examined, as well as how this potential has been affected by different kinds of gatekeeping strategies such as moderation, and the introduction of new platforms for user participation such as Facebook (e.g. Graham & Wright, 2015; Hille & Bakker, 2014; Rowe, 2015; Ruiz et al., 2011; Santana, 2014). This research shows that how these formats are designed and managed matters for the type of public conversation that takes place. In particular, the possibility for commenting anonymously has been pointed out as a factor that leads to more abusive comments and less civil discussions (Rowe, 2015; Santana, 2014).

While the design and policy of formats for user participation have been shown as vital for which type of discussion may take place, there is less research on how specific design decisions are related to the underlying rationales among newspaper editors. Previous research on how different formats for user participation have affected editors within traditional news media has primarily had a journalist practice perspective and thus a large focus on its perceived effects on journalist’s occupational roles, work routines and workplaces (e.g. Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Loke, 2012; Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009). This research suggests that most journalists are struggling with issues related to formats for user participation and their new gatekeeping role, and that they feel trapped between professional norms and the challenges with new digital formats (Singer & Ashman, 2009). On the one hand, journalists appreciate a larger interaction with the readers, as well as a possibility of getting feedback on their work. However, editors and journalists also perceive that comment sections, in particular, are problematic. This is mainly due to the perceived low quality of the comments, and their often aggressive and abusive character, described as frequently including racism, sexism and hate speech (Reich, 2011). The problem of the incivility of user

comments has been highlighted by a number of other studies (e.g. Loke, 2012; Singer & Ashman, 2009); it soon led to news organizations starting to moderate comments as part of their work routine (Hermida & Thurman, 2008).

It has also been argued that formats for user participation in general and user comments in particular have changed the gatekeeping strategy of the editors and journalists in a fundamental way. Since most of the comments received by the newspapers are published, the strategy of gatekeeping has become one of screening rather than selection. If the letters to the editors previously were mainly selected due to their perceived contribution to the debate, comments are instead dismissed only if found or reported to be violating the rules. The assessment criteria have thus shifted from journalistic ones, such as perceived interest value, into less journalistic ones, such as attracting a larger number of readers (Reich, 2011). Studies have also shown that journalists commonly equate erasing users' comments with censorship, which also is an accepted idea in some of the previous research (see Loke, 2012).

While previous research has mostly analyzed the changing role of gatekeepers in relation to these new participatory spaces from a journalist practice perspective, some studies have analyzed the main motives behind newspapers' general engagement in different types of formats for user participation. One rationale that can be expected to figure in such accounts is classic journalist professional values. This includes the democratic role of the media to facilitate meaningful public debates, but also to provide relevant, accurate and impartial information (Curran, 2011; Hayes, Singer, & Ceppos, 2007). While traditional news media historically has been driven by journalistic professional values, the income of the newspapers has at the same time been dependent on their audience, either as subscribers or as targets for advertisers (Weibull, Wadbring, & Ohlsson, 2018). Previous research has shown that a major reason for why these formats were introduced, and are still employed, is their financial value in attracting new readers and thus traffic to their site, which is needed for the newspapers to survive financially during times of increased competition (Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Vujnovic et al., 2010; Hedman, 2009). Building on 65 interviews with editors at market-leading online newspapers in seven European countries (not including Sweden), as well as Israel, Canada and the United States, Vujnovic et al. (2010) specifically explored their economic motives for engaging with formats for user participation⁴⁰ in general. Central to these was the importance of branding the newspaper in relation to the readers in order to build consumer loyalty, to increase website traffic by attracting readers to

⁴⁰ The authors employ the terms "user-generated content" as well as "participatory journalism", which to some extent overlap with formats for user participation. It is however not specified which kinds of formats are included in the study.

the sites and making them stay, and to create competitive advantages in relation to other newspapers, news aggregation sites and social networking sites. However, such rationales were often connected to journalistic professional values, such as to contribute to the democratic public debates. In addition, changes in relation to these formats have been viewed as inevitable and uncontrollable, driven by technical development (or constraints). A quantitative study on editorial offices' motivations for engaging with reader participation in the Swedish context demonstrates similar results, and points in particular to generating traffic, creating loyal readers, as well as creating a customer relationship with the readers as important strategic goals (Hedman, 2009). Several studies have moreover concluded that the great popularity of, in particular, the readers' comments sections came as a surprise to journalists and editors, when these were introduced on the online sites of mainstream news media in the early 2000s. Consequently, there were few strategies from the beginning for how to handle the thousands of comments that were authored each day (Reich, 2011). This lack of editorial strategy for how user comments should be edited and selected seemed to prevail also after their introduction, both within single newspapers and across different news media (Loke, 2012; McElroy, 2013).

The rationales that can be expected to figure in the account of the editors thus include *journalist professional values*, *economic incentives*, *technical inevitability* as well as simply a *lack of clear strategy*. In the analysis it will thus be assessed how and to what extent these rationales are related to the democratic ideals *democratic ideals of inclusion, equality and quality* in terms of the editors' design decisions. In the next section, the three democratic ideals that have been used to structure the interview questions as well as the subsequent analysis will be presented and related to the design and policy of formats for user participation.

Analyzing ideals through design considerations

An important point of departure in this study is the assumption that how (online) discussion forums are governed and designed may have an impact on which groups can participate in them as well as on what type of discussions they enable. The governance and design of online platforms are further understood in terms of their affordances, broadly defined as the inbuilt enablers and constraints that invite or discourage users to use them in certain ways. To reiterate, the *functional* aspect of affordances refers to platforms' inbuilt technical features, while the *relational aspect* of affordances refers to the capability of the users to make use of these inbuilt technical features, as well as the intentions and ideas among their designers (Hartson, 2003; Hutchby, 2001; Lievrouw, 2014; Nagy & Neff, 2015; Norman, 1999; Schmidt, 2007).

The second assumption is that the affordances of online platforms are very much depending on the reasoning of those responsible for the design of the platform in question. Thus, to understand why online platforms central to dominant public spheres are configured in a specific way in relation to the (democratic) ideals of *inclusion*, *equality*, and the *quality* of public discussions, we need to interrogate their constructors. In this study I have therefore sought to understand how the gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream media have reasoned around the design of their own platforms for formats for user participation and what type of considerations they have made when selecting among different technical mechanisms at hand, or if they even have been reasoning at all. By examining the gatekeepers' considerations when making design decisions in relation to these platforms it would consequently be possible to explore which among the (democratic) ideals are prioritized and why.

In the following section, these ideals will be defined theoretically, and then follows a discussion on how these theoretical ideals could be operationalized in relation to the design of formats for user participation and what kind of interview questions and analytical tools this operationalization generates.

Three ideals central to democratic public debates

Three ideals have in particular been highlighted within democratic theory as central to public debates beneficial to a democratic society: the *inclusion*, *equality*, and *quality* of the discussion (Caulhun, 1992; Dryzek, 2005; Fraser, 1990, 2007; Habermas, 1989; Young, 2000). These ideals are not only central to democratic theory, but their realization could in addition be argued to partly be a consequence of the *governance and design* of the deliberative setting. Moreover, the ideals are relevant to analyze in relation to the reasoning of the editors since they are, by definition, the ones formally in charge of the governance and design related to these specific settings for public debates. Important to note also is that the ideals, which will be discussed below, are just ideals, rather than descriptions of existing settings or institutions. Instead, they are thought-constructions that can help to function as a theoretical sounding board when analyzing the ideas that the editors express in relation to the platforms for public debates that they provide on their sites.

The first ideal concerns the possibility of being able to participate in public debates, hence the barriers that could hinder *inclusion* of relevant participants. According to this ideal, everyone affected by the outcomes of public debates should have the possibility to participate. Two aspects of inclusion have been pointed out as particularly crucial in relation to public debates. The first concerns the formal possibility to even enter the public venue, hence the formal barriers that could hinder access to public debates, implying an inclusion of a maximum number of (relevant) participants. One such

condition is an open society with democratic institutions. Due to the formal access to public information, free speech, free press, free assembly and a representative government, all citizens are hence given the same formal opportunity to participate (Caulhun, 1992; Fraser, 1990). In more formal political decision making processes, such as voting or public hearings, it is easier to imagine how those affected by the outcome of the process could be formally hindered from entering. Most public discussions are however taking place in more informal settings, such as online discussion forums, where the outcome of the discussion is not a specific political decision or policy. In order to reach a maximal inclusion in these public forums in terms of access, the ideal rather implies that individuals with a maximum of perspectives and interests concerning a specific issue debated should have the possibility to enter the deliberative setting, and not be left out either purposively or unintentionally (Young, 2000, p. 54).

However, even though all those affected by the outcomes have the formal possibility of entering public venues, there could still be informal barriers that hinder participants from entering or from contributing after having entered, such as not being treated with respect or taken seriously. Formal inclusion is therefore not enough to solve the problem of exclusion, since exclusion partly is due to informal norms that result in marginalization, such as an “internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others” (Young, 1996, p. 122). The second aspect of inclusion thus concerns the informal inclusion both in terms of access and to be able to actually participate after having entered. In addition to the formal inclusion of a maximum number of (relevant) participants, an increased informal inclusion can hence imply allowing for a wider range of different voices, opinions, speaking styles, etc. to actually be heard. To include the voices of those who are marginalized from entering due to class and status hierarchies it has moreover been argued as important to have formal structures that actively bring in marginalized groups to public debates (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002), and for an increased inclusion within debates, the establishment of informal norms that accept other ways of debating has been put forward as imperative (Young, 1996, 2000).

Political equality is often defined as equal decision-making power (see Erman & Näsström, 2013; Young, 2000). While feminist theorists previously have understood political equality to be intrinsic to (democratic) inclusion (see in particular Young, 2000), for analytical purposes inclusion will here be explicitly understood as a means to political equality. Hence, in relation to inclusion, political equality could be described as the overarching democratic ideal. In the context of public debates, political equality implies that the relations between discussants should be free from any type of domination that hinders participation on equal terms (Young, 2000). For public debates to be beneficial to democracy they should contribute to the political equality

among citizens. The ideal of political *equality* hence concerns the relation between the discussants, and in particular that they should be able to participate on equal terms, free from the social domination of others.

In addition to the ideals of inclusion and political equality, the *quality* of the debate, has been added as a third ideal. This ideal has been added for two main reasons. First, the quality of the debate has been upheld as a central value in particular within deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is a model of democracy, which puts focus on the centrality of public debates to a functioning democracy. Secondly, the deliberative model of democracy has been very influential both within democratic theory in the last decades, but also when it comes to how public debates should be designed in practice. We can thus suspect that the editors have also been influenced by these kinds of arguments, a reasoning which would be important to capture if we are interested in how the editors' rationales can be related to the tension between central values within democratic theory. Central to this idea is that rational critical arguments which follow "norms of reasoned discourse" should be the core of the discussion (Caulhun, 1992, p. 2). In contemporary deliberative theory, the quality of public debates usually refers to the idea that preferences should be supported by some type of reason giving and presented with respect and openness to other speakers' claims (Dryzek, 2005). The ideal of the quality of public debates as formulated by deliberative theorists has moreover been criticized in particular by feminist political theorists for creating a normative ideal in order to judge which type of arguments and speaking styles are "better" than others, with increased informal exclusion as a consequence (Fraser, 1990; Hayward, 2004; Young, 2000).

Operationalizing the ideals: interview questions and indicators

This section discusses how the democratic ideals can be related to the functional and relational aspects of the affordances of formats for user participation within mainstream news media. How they have been operationalized in the interview questions and subsequently analyzed will be clarified. As we have seen, in practice the ideals tend to be overlapping and sometimes merge into one another. For analytical purposes I have made a clearer and somewhat simplified distinction between them, whereby interview questions have been formulated and the material analyzed.

The affordances of formats for user participation formed the starting point of the operationalization. Concerning their functional aspects, comments sections in mainstream news media had at the time of the study mainly facilitated public *visibility* through a fairly simple and instant self-publication, where the user basically writes in text and pushes a "Submit" button at the end of the article. While there are sometimes limitations in length, such limitations are often quite generous. In addition, some sites require users to register, but most often the users are not required to register with their real name or iden-

tity. This implies that users are often afforded at least a certain degree of *anonymity* through the possibility to post comments anonymously, which in practice however can imply that users instead are using the same kind of pseudonym to comment on different sites. What has been stressed is thus the lack of technical features to control the access to and content of this type of formats for user participation (Freelon, 2015; see also Singer, 2009; Trice, 2011).

Concerning the relational aspect of affordances, journalists and editors themselves perceive that the readers who are contributing with comments rather belong to a smaller, specific group, than represented by a diverse strata of the population, and that these platforms can be easily manipulated by users with a specific agenda (Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009). Quantitative studies on audience participation in the Swedish context have confirmed these observations by showing that only a small percentage of the population regularly uses the possibility to comment on articles (Bergström, 2008; Karlsson et al., 2015). Moreover, those with middle and high education, the young and those interested in new technology were overrepresented among those who were frequent commenters (Bergström, 2008). It has also been demonstrated that men tend to be overrepresented among those that comment on news articles in western news media (Martin, 2015; Pierson, 2015). In addition, among this small segment of the population there seems to be an overrepresentation of those who perceive user comments as an opportunity to voice racist, sexist or homophobic opinions, or climate change skepticism/denialism (Gardiner et al., 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Loke, 2012; Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Toepfl and Piwoni, 2015, 2017). Such contributions may also potentially impede the contribution of other participants.

During the interviews, the respondents were usually asked about the type and purpose of the formats for user participation on their news sites (and partly outside), as well as their strategies, responsibility and control in relation to these venues. To begin with, the editors were all asked what types of formats for user participation were dominating their sites. Since there are so many varied forms of formats for user participation on the news sites it was necessary to delimit the rest of the interview questions to one, or a few, types of formats for user participation that were in use. This was then followed by some general questions concerning the main purpose of having formats for user participation on their sites. In addition, I asked about the editors' room for manoeuvre in relation to the formats for user participation in order to clarify the editors' ability to actually make decisions over these matters. After these initial concerns, the interview questions were more specific and concerned what kind of technical mechanisms were in place within the framework of the formats for user participation employed on their sites. The editors were also asked about how they perceived the quality of content of the comments as well as the availability of these venues to different groups

of readers and users, and what responsibility they perceived themselves to have in relation to these issues (see Appendix A for a full description of interview themes and questions).

The interviews were then analyzed by relating the three democratic ideals to the different affordances of formats for user participation. Concerning formal inclusion, I have analyzed how the editors have reasoned in relation to the mechanisms they have at hand in order to include a maximum number of participants. This mainly concerned the introduction of different formats for user participation in the first place, but also the mechanisms they have at hand in order to include or exclude users from commenting such as the different software used for user comments, pay walls, different kinds of registration procedures, the possibility of simply blocking users, and how they select which articles are open for comments on their site or on Facebook. Regarding informal inclusion, the analysis has focused on the editors' rationales in relation to including a maximum of variation of voices, opinions, expressions and argument styles in relation to the mechanisms they have at hand to manage the discussions. This mainly concerned the moderation of comments, as well as to what extent anonymity was allowed on their sites. In relation to the ideal of political equality, how the editors reason around whom is able to participate in the debates on their sites has been examined. Also analyzed is whether the editors perceive that any voices are overrepresented and, if so, what actions they have taken to balance representation and opinions in the formats for user participation. Regarding the ideal of quality, the focus has been on the editors' concerns when it comes to the content of the discussions; in particular regarding how the claims in the discussions are presented and argued for, and if the editors have taken any active measures with the explicit purpose to improve the content, such as moderation of user comments.

In order to capture how the editors' rationales are related to these ideals, how these underlying motivations are related to their design decisions has been analyzed. The rationales that can be expected in the editors' motivations were hence described in the section on previous research above, and include *journalist professional values*, *economic incentives*, *technical inevitability* as well as simply a *lack of clear strategy*. The analysis however also holds open the possibility that there can be additional rationales that influence the editors' design decisions. Themes and subthemes in the interview material were assessed as important if they were expressed by several actors, and thus recurring, and in addition could be argued for as relevant to the research question. When themes and subthemes were expressed throughout all, or very close to all, interviews, these are presented as general themes in the analysis. When many but not all interviewees expressed a theme, examples are given of interviews where they were expressed. In addition, it is noted if there were any exceptions. In order to systematize the reading of

interview transcripts the software Atlas.Ti was used to identify central themes and subthemes in the interviews.

An overview of the current governance and design of formats for user participation in Swedish news media

Before analyzing the editors' rationales in relation to the governance and design of the formats for user participation on their news sites, this section will be used to describe the main elements of the formats for user participation at the 14 newspapers at the time of the study (see Appendix C for a full compilation).

Even though other types of formats for user participation have become more frequent over time, all of the editors at the newspapers that had user comments connected to the articles on their site, claimed that this was the most common way for the readers to participate and express their opinions on the news sites. Of the 14 newspapers in the study, one had however chosen to either not introduce user comments in the first place (Nya Wermlands-Tidningen), one had chosen to close down their readers' comments sections (Göteborgs-Posten) and one employed them only minimally (Sydsvenskan). Instead of user comments, *Sydsvenskan* had introduced a forum for shorter debate articles where the readers could vote if they agreed or not with the writer (*Åsikter*), while *Göteborgs-Posten* had an editor that continuously was in dialogue with readers mainly in a personalized chat-format, but also through different types of social media.

All the newspapers that had kept user comments on their sites required some kind of registration to be able to comment. While about half of the newspapers allowed users to be anonymous also in relation to the editorial staff when registering, almost all newspapers allowed anonymity when commenting. There was also a wide variety among the newspapers concerning how frequently the user comments were "switched on" after articles, and most had restrictions on what type of articles would have user comments connected to them. One newspaper also had restrictions on how many comments a user profile could contribute with under each article (Svenska Dagbladet).

All of the newspapers employed some kind of moderation system, which implied that comments were read and then erased either before or after they had been posted if they were judged as incompatible with the paper's moderation policy. While the majority of the larger newspapers employed a policy of post-moderation of user comments, almost all of the smaller/regional newspapers employed a policy of pre-moderation. In addition, all of the newspapers had instructions connected to the user comments that described the rules for commenting on their particular site. These typically describe

what type of comments are not allowed according to a legal framework, rather than what type of comments could contribute to the discussion. Moreover, several of the larger news sites have outsourced much of the moderation of comments to the same company, *Interaktiv Säkerhet* (“interactive security”), which moderates the comments on the web sites after they have been published, according to a legal framework. In addition to the varying frameworks for moderation, the different software that was employed for the user comments did often allow for the readers to either “up vote” user comments that they thought were good or report the comments that they perceived as offensive to the editorial staff by a “report-button” next to the comment.

Regardless of their design and policy in relation to user comments, almost all newspapers had at the time at least one public Facebook page, where the editorial staff continuously published articles, which readers with a Facebook profile could like and/or comment on. All newspapers somewhat post-moderated their Facebook pages, but in general much less frequently than they moderated the user comments. Moreover, the editors in general perceived that Facebook was a forum for discussion that had grown rapidly recently, and the public Facebook pages currently hosted their most frequent interaction with their readers outside their own sites.

In sum, almost all of the newspapers employed user comments and had at least one public Facebook page, and had installed some type of registration and moderation systems in connection to these. In the following, the analysis will mainly focus the editors’ rationales in relation to the governance and design of these two types of formats for user participation, to see to what extent and how these can be related to the inclusion, quality and equality of the discussion on these sites.

Prioritizing inclusion, discarding equality (and quality)?

The first part of the analysis demonstrates how the editors mainly understand inclusion in terms of a possibility to create a relationship with the readers and to increase traffic to their sites, a necessity in the(ir) new digital reality. In the second part, it is shown that besides the moderation of offensive and/illegal comments, the fostering of a debate that minimizes the social domination of some voices over others, is in general not a priority for the editors for commercial, moral and technical reasons. Last, while the “open gates” to the newspapers partly have been closed primarily through registration and moderation to curb the level of illegal and/or offensive comments, quality was mainly understood as an unexpected consequence of these measures, and otherwise primarily pertaining to the content produced or selected by the editorial staff. Formats for user participation in general and user comments in particular were hence handled according to a new logic

compared to previous content production, whereby inclusion of a maximum number of participants and perspectives is prioritized over the quality of the discussion, and the equality among the contributors.

Inclusion

The ideal of inclusion partly concerns the formal barriers to entry into public discussions, and hence an inclusion of a maximum number of participants. It also concerns the informal inclusion of a maximum of perspectives, here operationalized as allowing for a wider range of voices, opinions, expressions and argument styles. This section demonstrates how the gatekeepers mainly understand both aspects of inclusion as a possibility to create a stronger relationship with the readers and to increase traffic to their sites. Economic incentives as a primary driving force behind inclusion were present in the accounts by editors at all newspapers, and at all editorial levels. However, such incentives were more clearly expressed by editors at the smaller, regional, newspapers, as well as in relation to the recently increased presence on Facebook among the newspapers in general.

How to survive – creating a digital relation to the readers

This section examines the main rationales behind the engagement with different formats of user participation on the online sites of mainstream news media in Sweden. While the editors, as we can expect, are also motivated by various journalist professional values, what stands out are the strong economic incentives driving inclusion through the necessity to create a digital relationship to the readers as well as to increase advertising revenue.

Digital publication has caused a major shift in the relationship between the readers and the editorial staff. From being almost closed to the public in terms of participation in the production of news, the papers are now more or less forced to have more of an open conversation with the readers who give constant feedback either through comments or “clicks”. As one of the editors points out: “From having been reporter driven and within editorial control it has become extremely reader-driven and user-driven if we’re talking about the Web, it’s a huge change that has occurred.” (Interview with Anders Nilsson, Publisher, Norrköpings Tidningar, author’s translation⁴¹).⁴² To understand how the editors negotiate between different values in relation to their digital platforms, we thus first need to understand the main rationale behind opening up their platforms to the readers. This is probably easiest to grasp in light of the present “crisis” of traditional news media with fewer single cop-

⁴¹ All the quotes from the interviews have been translated by the author. This information has however hereafter been removed to increase readability.

⁴² “Från att ha varit reporterstyrkt och redaktionsstyrkt så har ju det här blivit oerhört läsarstyrkt och tittarstyrkt, och användarstyrkt om vi pratar webben, det är ju en jättestor förändring som har skett.” (Intervju med Anders Nilsson, publisher, Norrköpings Tidningar).

ies as well as subscriptions sold, followed by a great loss in advertising revenue; therefore the newspapers need to adapt their business model to a new digital reality. A general theme during the interviews with the editors was namely that one of the main purposes of the newspapers online activities – and maybe even the main one – was to build a digital *relation* to the readers by creating reader interactivity through different types of formats for user participation, on their own news sites or outside them. In this way, the newspapers would continue to be relevant to their audience despite the recent competition from various online platforms: “It is our main task, to engage people, and then we have to be where people are and not only in some mailboxes if you pay so and so much. What used to be the town square is perhaps what social media is today” (Interview with Katrin Säfström, Editor-in-Chief, Nerikes Allehanda).⁴³

One central rationale for creating a strong, digital, relationship to their readers through a larger inclusion in terms of both the number of participants as well as types of voices, opinions and argument styles on their platforms was hence to remain relevant as providers of journalist material and platforms for public debates, as part of their democratic role. In addition, an important purpose of user and Facebook comments was for the journalist staff to get an additional perspective on their material, as well as concrete feedback from the readers such as news tips or corrections in their texts. In this way, they perceived that the interaction with the readers improved their own content production. A small part of the user and Facebook comments was also re-printed in the papers, for example to sum up different opinions on a current matter. The rationale for creating this digital relationship with the reader, was however not only to fulfill a journalistic ideal in creating an engaging and relevant journalism that many could take part of: finding new ways to engage their readers was in general strongly related to the need to increase traffic to their sites:

The good thing about this is that if you have the right topics in the local debate, you’ll get traffic. We follow the traffic very closely and if you are to identify what goes best digitally, most visits and most clicks, most involvement in any way, it’s local issues and opinion material about local issues. (Interview with Cecilia Krönlein, Editor-in-Chief, Göteborgs-Posten)⁴⁴

⁴³ “Det är vår viktigaste uppgift, att engagera människor, och då måste vi finnas där människor finns och inte bara att vi finns i vissa brevlådor om du betalar si och så mycket. Det som förr var torget det är ju kanske sociala medier idag” (Katrin Säfström, chefredaktör, Nerikes Allehanda).

⁴⁴ ”Det fina i det här är att om man har rätt ämnen i den lokala debatten så drar man trafik. Vi följer ju trafiken väldigt nära och ska man pricka in vad som går bäst digitalt, mest besök och mest klick, mest engagemang på något sätt, så är det lokala frågor och opinionsmaterial kring lokala frågor” (Intervju med Cecilia Krönlein, chefredaktör, Göteborgs-Posten).

To create a digital relation to the readers also had the purpose of making the reader come back to the newspaper over and over again in a way that a subscriber of the paper edition used to do: “If we can build a relationship with them we believe that they will stay longer as subscribers or that they will enter HD.se more often” (Interview with Lars Johansson, Editor-in-Chief, Helsingborgs Dagblad).⁴⁵ An important rationale behind a larger inclusion was subsequently to generate readers that were faithful to the paper by almost regarding it as a friend; that the paper was the one you would turn to find out the latest information about what was currently going on locally, subject-wise, etc.: “Yes, well the purpose of everything we do [digitally] is to increase the use of the site [...] One should go in every day, and preferably several times a day and you should feel like it is us you should turn to when something happens” (Interview with Daniel Lundström, Digital Manager, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).⁴⁶ Hence, nurturing a strong and frequent relationship to the readers through reader interaction was in several ways a means to increasing traffic to the news sites. Increased traffic was in turn crucial to raising the online advertising revenues, in order to survive in a new digital age: “Everything’s really about getting as many clicks as possible. The entire digital media industry is about creating traffic and on the traffic you can sell, and make money.” (Interview with Anders Nilsson, Editor-in-Chief, Norrköpings Tidningar).⁴⁷

One factor that could affect how and to what extent economic incentives were present in the editors’ rationales is the ownership structure of the newspapers. While many Swedish newspapers previously have been locally owned, the ownership structure has changed dramatically in the last decades towards a much larger concentration of ownership. Today, a few business groups own most of Sweden’s national as well regional as newspapers,⁴⁸ a

⁴⁵ “Har man en relation så tror ju vi att de stannar kvar längre som prenumeranter eller att de oftare kommer in på HD.se om man kan bygga en relation med dom” (Intervju med Lars Johansson, chefredaktör, Helsingborgs Dagblad).

⁴⁶ “Ja alltså syftet med allt det vi gör är ju egentligen vi ska få upp användandet av sajten liksom. [...] Man ska gå in varje dag, och helst flera gånger per dag och man ska känna liksom att det är till oss man ska gå när det händer nånting” (Intervju med Daniel Lindström, digital chef, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).

⁴⁷ “Allt handlar ju egentligen om att få så mycket klick som möjligt. Hela mediebranschen digitalt handlar om att skapa trafik och på trafiken kan man sälja sen, och tjäna pengar. Så i all presentation handlar det om rubriksättning, om bildsättning. Man vet att finns det en bild med så blir det alltid mer kommenterat än om det inte finns en bild. Men också handlar det om att inte bara vara traditionellt journalistisk utan också om ett personligare anslag framförallt när man jobbar med social medier” (Intervju med Anders Nilsson, chefredaktör, Norrköpings Tidningar).

⁴⁸ The newspapers included in the study are characterized by the following ownership. Private ownership: Bonnier (Dagens Industri, Sydsvenskan/Helsingborgs Dagblad), Schibsted Sverige (Aftonbladet, Svenska Dagbladet), Stampen (Göteborgs-Posten), AB Custos (Metro). Owned by foundations or partly by foundations: Mittmedia (Nerikes Allehanda, Sundsvalls Tidning, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning), Gota Media (Borås Tidning), Norrköpings Tidningar-

change that has increased the efficiency and coordination of the editorial offices. Among these business groups there are in addition different types of owners, including private companies, foundations and organizations. There is a tendency for the larger national newspapers to be owned by private companies (such as *Bonnier* and *Schibsted*) while the smaller regional or local newspapers are owned by foundations that have traditionally been less steered by profit interests (such as *Gota Media* and *Mittmedia*). However, most foundations are today run as professional operations with demands for financial surplus in order to secure their survival. The differences depending on ownership have thus decreased over time (Weibull et al., 2018).

This is also reflected in how the relationship between being relevant and engaging the readers through employing different formats for user participation and the need to increase the traffic to their sites was present in the accounts from editors at all newspapers and at all levels of the editorial office. In addition, such accounts were even more clearly expressed by the editors at the smaller, regional, newspapers (see however interview 18 for an exception). Supposedly, these newspapers were more affected by the loss of advertising revenue and the new competition from various other online platforms for news and public debates:

There are several aspects to this. One is simply the marketing of us. We are here in Värmland and we are a major actor. We show what's happening and you can discuss with other värmlänningar (i.e. inhabitants of the region). Advertising you could almost say, to create a relationship with existing readers as well as subscribers and visitors, and in extension get new ones who enter the site more often and to some extent pay for journalism. That's one part of it. The second part is simply to get clicks, to put it bluntly. We want people to read what we do and the more the better. Many visitors make the journalist happy, the web happy, the advertising department happy and the advertisers happy, by extension. (Interview with Magnus Östlund, Webb Manager, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen)⁴⁹

Since a primary purpose of the reader interaction was to remain relevant by engaging the readers and thereby also increasing traffic to their sites, the design of the interaction with the readers was hence in most cases focused on fostering this relationship rather than to foster a specific type of debate or

koncernen (Norrköpings Tidningar, Uppsala Nya Tidning), Nya Wermlands Tidningen-koncernen (Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).

⁴⁹ “Det är väl flera aspekter på det här. Ett är ju helt enkelt marknadsföring av oss. Vi finns här i Värmland och vi är en stor aktör. Vi visar vad som händer och ni kan diskutera här hos oss med andra värmlänningar. Reklam får man väl nästan säga, vi syns, för att skapa en relation både med befintliga liksom prenumeranter och besökare, samt i en förlängning få nya som går in på sajten oftare och i någon utsträckning även betalar för journalistiken. Det är väl en del. Den andra delen är väl helt enkelt att få klick, för att uttrycka det krasst. Vi vill ju att folk ska läsa det vi gör och ju fler desto bättre. Många besökare gör ju skribenten glad, webben glad, annonsavdelningen glad och annonsörerna glada, i förlängningen” (Intervju med Magnus Östlund, webbcchef, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).

platform for debate. To create a relationship with the readers, and thus to increase traffic, was hence the primary way through which the editors understood the ideal of inclusion, and also how they primarily negotiated how low or high the barriers to entry and participate should be. However, even though the editors from the beginning had perceived that maximizing inclusion would benefit the relationship with their readers, as well as to “democratize” public debates, the troublesome effects of this design led them to reconsider this initial strategy. The next section examines the editors’ rationales when changing their strategies in relation to inclusion in terms of both formal access to their platforms and ways of participating after having entered.

Changing strategies, keeping the ideal?

Including a larger number of potential readers on their platforms, as well as types of opinions, argument styles, etc. was thus described by the editors as a way to survive in a new digital era. To engage the readers as much as possible, the user comments were initially designed mainly with a maximum of inclusion in mind, hence making the forums for user comments as “open” as possible with unmoderated and anonymous comments by unregistered users on most articles. Soon, however, the news sites were filled with offensive and/or illegal comments that affected the branding and legitimacy of the newspapers as well as causing legal problems. Since discovering these downsides of inclusion, the gatekeepers have primarily been more selective on which articles are open for comments, as well as using registration and moderation to curb the level of illegal and/or offensive comments and thus partly closing the open gates and regaining control over their platforms.

Many of the editors had been in a similar position since the first introduction of user comments. They remembered how these forums from the beginning were thought to improve the relationship with the readers, but also to make public debates more democratic by designing them as “totally” open with neither registration nor moderation by the newspapers (or having any other type mechanisms for self-moderation by the users):

In the beginning it was almost a hype [...] everyone was supposed to start commenting and God so democratic it would be, that one must be anonymous, and why you should be, that was a bit unclear... That you would get such an amazing contact with readers which was not the case at all because you only received quick comments and an occasional “vomit” pretty much. (Interview with Maria Ripenberg, Debate Editor, Uppsala Nya Tidning)⁵⁰

⁵⁰ “I början var det ju nästan en hype [...] alla skulle börja kommentera och gud så demokratiskt det skulle bli, att man måste vara anonym, och varför man skulle få vara det, det var lite oklart... Att man skulle få en så fantastisk fin kontakt med läsarna och det fick man ju inte alls för att man fick ju bara ta emot snabba kommentarer och en och annan ”spya” sådär (Intervju med Maria Ripenberg, debattredaktör, Uppsala Nya Tidning).

The editors in general perceived that their focus on maximizing inclusion was damaging public debates as well as the relationship with their readers, and could lead to severe legal problems if hate speech and defamation was published on their sites.⁵¹ The initial strategy to foster a maximum of inclusion had thus failed and led to unexpected and unwanted consequences. Some of the newspapers then chose to close down the user comments, and instead focused on formats for user participation more controlled by the editorial office, such as pre-moderated chats. Others decided to not even introduce user comments on their sites, since they were perceived as too offensive and too resource demanding. Most of the newspapers had however chosen to keep the user comments, but instead restrained the ability to comment anonymously and freely on all articles. Most news sites at the time of the study were selective about which articles they turn comments on for, and all editors claimed that they had learned which type of articles generated a lot of the type of comments that they perceived problematic to have on their sites, such as racist and sexist ones. In addition, all newspapers had introduced either pre- or post- moderation of user comments, a moderation that primarily focused on removing illegal and/or offensive content.

However, while the introduction of moderation had been one of the primary ways to solve the problem of illegal and/or offensive comments, it was the possibility to comment anonymously that was viewed as a major reason why the discussions in the user comments had derailed: “My conclusion was that something disturbing happens with people when they get the opportunity to express themselves anonymously in a public arena, and it was the effect we saw” (Interview with Jan Helin, Publisher, *Aftonbladet*).⁵² A solution that *Aftonbladet*, and some other new sites in the study, had employed was to introduce software that required users to comment with their Facebook profile, in order to curb anonymity. However, despite the fact that anonymity was perceived as a major reason for the problems of incivility in the comments, many of the newspapers in the study had kept the possibility to be anonymous when commenting. This possibility hence differs a great deal from the requirements for similar, but older, types of (offline) formats for user participation. For example, when it comes to the letters to the editors, readers are typically required to fill in their name and address to be published, and they are thus not able to be anonymous to the editors (even though they can often sign with an alias in the paper).

⁵¹ A larger discussion around user comments also disrupted in the media following the assassins in Norway by Anders Behring Breivik in 2011, where the openness of these forums were questioned as well the responsibility for what was being expressed (Interview with Carina Stensson, Debate Editor, *Svenska Dagbladet*).

⁵² “Min slutsats var att det händer något obehagligt med människor när man får möjlighet att uttrycka sig anonymt på en offentlig arena, och det var den effekten man såg” (Intervju med Jan Helin, publisher, *Aftonbladet*).

One important rationale for continuing to have these “gates” into the newspapers more open than the previous ones was according to the editors that the online environment has brought with it a particular culture which implies that the readers expect to be able to comment anonymously. Hence, the editors perceived that they needed to adapt in order to keep attracting readers to their news sites and that they also might lose this contact with their readers if they started to demand a more thorough registration process: “Different traditions have developed online and in the paper, that’s the simple explanation. People want to be anonymous online [...] we have probably adopted us mostly to how the readers, the customers online, want it really” (Interview with Lars Johansson, Editor-in-Chief, Helsingborgs Dagblad).⁵³ Several of the editors-in-chief admitted that the difference in requirements for publishing online or offline was illogical, and that they rather would have wanted the same requirements regarding registration for publishing user comments if it was either technically or culturally feasible (e.g. interviews 5, 10, 12, 18).

In addition, while it was perceived as difficult to enforce non-anonymity specifically in relation to user comments, several of the news sites in the study had introduced different types of registration models in order to enter the sites so that they could keep better track of the readers and/or to make them pay to access the content (through pay walls). The rationale behind this strategy was hence rather to increase revenues than to curb inclusion: “When this kind of thing that you need to register comes up, it should not be difficult, it should not be much, and it should be as easy as possible” (Interview with Anders Nilsson, Publisher, Norrköpings Tidningar).⁵⁴ Moreover, this somewhat closing of the previously open gates through registration also seems to have partly been outside the direct control of the editors-in-chief themselves. Instead, these mechanisms were part of a digital package including pay walls, which had been decided upon by the business group (e.g. interviews 1, 14, 18).

While the inclusion on the news sites themselves for various reasons had been restrained, a recent development was that much of the interaction with the readers in terms of comments on articles in fact had moved to Facebook. All of the news sites in the study, including those that did not have or had closed down the user comments, had one or several public Facebook pages where they shared articles that Facebook users could comment on. Facebook was pointed out as the most important forum for reader interaction outside

⁵³ ”Det har utvecklats olika traditioner på nätet och i pappret, det är väl den enkla förklaringen. Folk vill vara anonyma på nätet, fast dom inte är anonyma på sätt och vis då. [...] vi har nog anpassat oss mest efter hur läsarna, kunderna på nätet, vill ha det egentligen” (Intervju med Lars Johansson, chefredaktör, Helsingborgs Dagblad).

⁵⁴ “När det kommer en sån här grej om att du ska registrera dig, det får inte vara krångligt, det får inte vara mycket, och det ska vara så enkelt som möjligt” (Intervju med Anders Nilsson, publisher, Norrköpings Tidningar).

their own platforms, and had in some cases become even more important than the user comments on the news sites (while in other cases there were still many fewer comments on Facebook). The main rationale for creating one or several public Facebook pages was generally stated as to attract more traffic to the sites. Facebook was thus viewed as an important entrance to the news sites. Hence, by getting Facebook users to click on articles published on their Facebook pages they would generate more visitors to the news sites. Therefore, all editorial offices had more or less developed strategies concerning which types of material should be published on Facebook. The purpose of these strategies was therefore to generate as many likes, comments and shares as possible, and thereby become more visible to other potential readers in their news-feeds. Hence, in relation to the user comments on their sites, the rationales for engaging in user participation on Facebook were even more clearly driven by economic incentives.

Facebook was in addition seen more as an “open forum” in relation to other types of formats for user participation, similar to how the users’ comments were designed in the beginning: “There we have a more or less open forum, where one can write freely, really, the only thing we sometimes do is if we go in and take away some comment that we do not think we can stand for. It’s happened only on a few occasions” (Interview with Daniel Lundström, Digital Manager, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).⁵⁵ Even if the Facebook pages carried the names of the newspapers, their own brand was still not as affected by the content of the discussion, as was the case with the user comments on their own sites: “It is probably a difference because there is an arm’s length to the brand Aftonbladet. People know that all sorts of weirdness is going on in Facebook and in Facebook’s comments, it does not “splash” at Aftonbladet in the same way even if it is an Aftonbladet-page” (Interview with Jan Helin, Publisher, Aftonbladet).⁵⁶ The possibility of having a similar interaction with the readers on Facebook had opened up an opportunity to again have an open forum for reader interaction. Inclusion as an ideal was hence still the priority, with the primary aim to increase the traffic on their sites.

⁵⁵ “Där har vi ju mer eller mindre öppet forum, där får man ju skriva fritt egentligen då, det enda vi gör ibland är väl om vi går in och tar bort nån kommentar som vi inte tycker att vi kan stå för. Det har väl hänt vid några få tillfällen då” (Intervju med Daniel Lindström, digital chef, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen).

⁵⁶ “Där är det ju nog en skillnad för att det finns en armlängds lucka till varumärket Aftonbladet. Folk vet att allt möjligt knas pågår på Facebook och på Facebook’s kommentarer, det stänker inte på Aftonbladet på samma sätt även om det är en Aftonbladet-sida” (Intervju med Jan Helin, publisher, Aftonbladet).

Equality

The ideal of political *equality* concerns the relation between the discussants, and in particular that they should be able to participate on equal terms, free from the social domination of others. While none of the editors stated that the editorial office had investigated the social composition of the commenters on their sites, they all clearly perceived problems with equal participation in the formats for user participation on their sites and especially in the user comments. This was mainly described as some voices being overrepresented in the discussions and dominating others. Especially anti-immigrant and/or racist opinions were generally perceived as largely overrepresented in the user comments, no matter what subjects the articles concerned. However, besides the moderation of offensive and/illegal speech, and to some extent registration and encouraged non-anonymity, to foster a debate which minimized the social domination of some voices over others was in general not a priority for the editors for commercial, moral and technical reasons. There had however been a few attempts to actively work with the design of the formats for user participation, which could be described as mechanisms for ensuring equal participation.

Equality – not a general priority

Upon the introduction of user comments there seem to have been a general understanding of a larger formal as well as informal inclusion as benefitting public debates since “everybody” would have the possibility to participate. Due to their more inclusive design in terms of both access and types of opinion expressions and argumentation styles that were allowed, some editors still perceived that user comments provided a platform for more people to express their opinions and hence implied the inclusion of “new” voices:

It's usually a number of old men who throughout the years are sitting and writing letters to the editor. That is why I also think that this with comments has broadened it all of a sudden. It is clear that they are not as polished at all times, but they've at least as wise opinions, or stupid opinions, as letters to the editor writers had, but they had a more polished exterior. Hence, something happened when the comments came, it became easier for more people to comment. (Interview with Thelma Kimsjö, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning)⁵⁷

Even though the possibility of including a more diverse set of voices, opinions and speaking styles through lowering the thresholds to make a contribu-

⁵⁷ ”Det är ju oftast ett antal gubbar som genom alla år sitter och skriver insändare. Det är därför också jag tänker att det här med kommentarer, nu breddas det ju plötsligt. Det är klart att alla är ju inte lika polerade alla gånger men dom har ju minst lika kloka åsikter, eller dumma åsikter, som insändarskribenterna hade men dom hade ett mer polerat yttre. Så det hände något när kommentarerna kom, det blev lättare för fler att kommentera” (Intervju med Thelma Kimsjö, chefredaktör och ansvarig utgivare, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning).

tion was brought up by many of the editors, most editors however found that the effect had been the reverse in practice (e.g. interviews 9, 17, 18, 21, 26). In line with previous research that has found that only a small part of the Swedish population engages in commenting on news articles online (Bergström, 2008; Karlsson et al., 2015), the editors in general perceived that a few commentators were very frequent and extremely active in commenting. This was in addition perceived to make certain opinions and voices overrepresented in the user comments and these had started to dominate these forums. Moreover, all editors perceived that especially anti-immigrant and/or racist opinions were very frequently expressed in the user comments. It was commonly acknowledged that these types of comments could follow any kind of news story, whether it touched upon issues related to immigration, or not. Several editors also perceived that the user comments in practice have been used as forums for opinion building by the extreme right:

We also know that there will be a more or less bombing of certain types of reactions that are not always local from Örebro. So if you write about immigrants, anti-immigrant views can come from across the country, and then one can get the impression it's extremely xenophobic here in Örebro, but it's not necessarily so. In this way, some groups use user comments for their advocacy. (Interview with Katrin Säfström, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Nerikes Allehanda, see also interviews 9, 26, 17, 18)⁵⁸

There was thus not only a perceived problem with a general incivility in the comments, but also that some types of opinions were much more common than others. Moreover, many of the editors expressed a concern for how these types of opinions and speaking styles “scared away” other readers from commenting, since they did not want to participate in such forums (e.g. interviews 5, 6, 26, 20). Besides the problem of overrepresentation of some voices, it was also brought up that some groups of journalists were much more exposed to offensive commenters than others: “It is obvious that you are more exposed if you have a different background, if you are a woman, and you are more exposed if you are left-wing. It is very clear” (Interview with Carina Stensson, Debate Editor, Svenska Dagbladet).⁵⁹

Even though the editors clearly seemed to view the overrepresentation of certain opinions and the domination of some voices over others as problematic, the social composition of those who commented was not something that

⁵⁸ ”Vi vet ju också att det blir mer eller mindre bombing av viss typ av reaktioner som inte alltid är lokal från Örebro, så blir det då att man skriver om invandrare så kan det bli invandrarfientliga synpunkter från hela landet, och då kan man ju få uppfattningen att det är otroligt vad det är främlingsfientligt här i Örebro, men så behöver det inte vara så. På så vis så använder ju en del grupper den här typen av kommentarsfält för sin opinionsbildning” (Intervju med Katrin Säfström, chefredaktör och ansvarig utgivare, Nerikes Allehanda).

⁵⁹ “Det är ju uppenbart att man är mer utsatt om man tex har en annan bakgrund, man är mer utsatt om man är tjej och man är mer utsatt om man är vänster. Det är väldigt tydligt” (Intervju med Carina Stensson, debattredaktör, Svenska Dagbladet).

they kept track of or specifically investigated. None of the editors stated that they had examined the social composition of the contributors in the user comments on the news sites. Moreover, while such statistics are easy to access on Facebook, this information was mostly used to closely monitor which types of publications drew most traffic, hence which ones generated “likes”, “shares” and “comments”. When the editors were asked about it, it seemed partly like ensuring the equality of the discussions was not something that they thought was a part of their job, partly that an unequal composition was not problematic in itself, or that they did not really know how to go about ensuring it: “We have probably more recognized it, no more than that” (Interview with Anders Ingvarsson, Editor-in-Chief and publisher, Sundsvalls Tidning).⁶⁰

Different kinds of exclusions as the main mechanisms for generating equality

While equality in the discussions was not considered a general priority among the editors, there were however, as alluded to above, some strategies employed in order to curb the overrepresentation of offensive and/or illegal comments. Although these measures were partly an effect of a perceived moral responsibility to not provide platforms for hate speech or defamation, they were also aimed at curbing the damaging branding and legal effects of comments or they were an inevitable consequence of a new digital package that had been decided upon by the business group, as described above.

The main strategies for handling the problems with the overrepresentation of certain voices in the discussion have primarily been the moderation of illegal and/or offensive comments, the encouragement of non-anonymity and to restrain the ability to comment on certain material that was commonly known to attract problematic comments. In a few cases, users have also been suspended. The main idea behind these strategies in relation to the equality of the discussions has thus been to increase the barriers to entry as well as to restrain certain types of expressions, and thereby to curb the number of racist, sexist and otherwise illegal and/or offensive comments. Hence, if these types of expressions declined, then other voices would be more likely to participate. Subsequently, the exclusion or marginalization of some types of opinions, expressions and argument styles was the main strategy of fostering equality in terms of equal participation in the discussions. Hence, mainly formal as well as informal exclusions were used in order to curb the inequality in the discussions.

Moreover, in relation to exclusion in terms of the moderation of comments, the editors generally expressed it as being a difficult balance between moderation of offensive and/or illegal speech and to moderate away certain

⁶⁰ “Vi har nog mer konstaterat det, inte mer än så” (Intervju med Anders Ingvarsson, chefredaktör och ansvarig utgivare, Sundsvalls Tidning).

opinions. When erasing comments, the commentators often accused the editors for “censoring” the users’ contributions. The editors were however all agreed that this very frequent critique was a misunderstanding between refutation and censorship, and that the right to publish whatever people wanted on their platforms had nothing to do with freedom of expression. They all maintained that they had the right to decide what was published on their sites, which they also usually explained for those upset when their comments were erased. However, they clearly did not want to be perceived as an “opinion-police” which they thus often were accused of being:

[...] and then one does not want to sit there and censor arbitrarily [...] we are indeed often blamed for it, but it’s a small group of people that lead the allegations. But we listen as well. It’s a difficult question, but we really do not want to be a platform for dark opinions, while we obviously want to have an open and free democratic discussion. (Interview with Carina Stensson, Debate Editor, Svenska Dagbladet)⁶¹

They (the guidelines) are quite general and it is all about the fact that we do not want an opinion filter but to remove anything that is direct defamation, hate speech [...] typically such freedom of expression offenses. (Interview with Jan Helin, Publisher, Aftonbladet)⁶²

Even though “cleaning out” these platforms from offensive and/or illegal comments would hopefully make other groups more inclined to participate, as the editors themselves expressed it, they had noticed that the same people still were commenting, just switching the type of words they were using to escape being redacted. This made the editors continually change their moderation rules accordingly: “We have raised the bar for what should be approved. Those who comment can try to get around the rules so then you must sharpen them all the time” (Interview with Peter Fellman, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Dagens Industri).⁶³

The overrepresentation of some voices, opinions and speaking styles was however in most cases not actively counteracted except for the moderation of illegal and/or offensive comments. Some editors claimed that the newspapers should instead steer the conversation by the type of content they provided themselves (e.g. interviews 24, 7), and others perceived that other users

⁶¹ “[...]och sen vill man ju inte sitta där och censurera godtyckligt [...] vi blir ju ofta anklagade för det, men det är ju en liten grupp människor som anför de anklagelserna. Men vi lyssnar ju också. Det är en svår fråga, men vi vill verkligen inte vara en plattform för mörkeråsikter, samtidigt som vi naturligtvis vill kunna ha ett öppet och fritt demokratiskt samtal” (Intervju med Carina Stensson, debattredaktör, Svenska Dagbladet).

⁶² “Dom (riktlinjerna) är ganska generella och det handlar ju om att vi vill inte ha ett åsiktsfilter där utan ta bort sånt som är direkt förgripligt mot enskild person, hets mot folkgrupp [...] typiska sådana yttrandefrihetsbrott” (Intervju med Jan Helin, publisher, Aftonbladet).

⁶³ “Vi har höjt ribban för vad som ska godkännas. De som skriver kan ju försöka komma runt reglerna så då får man ju skärpa till det hela tiden” (Intervju med Peter Fellman, chefredaktör och ansvarig utgivare, Dagens Industri).

actively counteracted overactive users (e.g. interviews 2, 22). Some editors had also noted that the presence of the editorial staff in the conversations resulted in fewer offensive comments and a wider representation of voices (e.g. interviews 5, 20, 9).

There are however a few examples of how the domination of certain voices has been particularly targeted, both by mechanisms connected to the user comments or as part of the creation of other types of formats for user participation. One example of the former is how *Svenska Dagbladet* restricted the number of comments to three per article and user, which was partly to hinder some users from dominating the forums with their opinions (Karén, 2012). One example of the latter is the opinion forum *Åsikter* launched by *Sydsvenskan* in January 2014. This is an online debate forum similar to letters to the editor, but with the difference that the editorial staff is actively contacting underrepresented participants in order to balance up the discussions: “It is a completely different category that contacts *Åsikter* than those who commented before, it’s a much broader [representation] at *Åsikter*. But I also work actively with contacting people and ask them to write texts, which was not the case before” (Teresa Lindstedt, Editor of *Åsikter*, *Sydsvenskan*).⁶⁴ These are therefore strategies that could be characterized as active measures to curb unequal participation; that some groups are kept out from public debates due to informal structures and norms with the consequence that other voices are overrepresented and dominating the conversation. These types of measures however were neither frequently employed, nor frequently discussed by the editors in the interviews. Instead the most usual measures employed to increase equal participation, hence moderation and registration, were rather targeting the legal and/or branding consequences of a larger inclusion in terms of both access and types of voices, opinions and argument styles allowed for. This could probably be best understood in the light of the main preoccupation of the editors: to interact with as many readers as possible, in order to build a relation with the readers and to increase traffic and thus raise advertising revenues. This is how we can mainly understand the increased inclusion rather than the equality between the participants in the debate, however with some exceptions to the rule.

Quality

While the previous section demonstrated that the editors, for mainly economic reasons, prioritized inclusion over equality, it could however be that other democratic values than these were considered in the design of the for-

⁶⁴ “Det är en helt annan kategori som hör av sig till *Åsikter* än de som kommenterade förut, det är en mycket bredare (representation) på *Åsikter* än de forum som vi haft innan. Men jag jobbar också aktivt och vänder mig till personer och ber dem att skriva texter, det förekom inte tidigare” (Intervju med Teresa Lindstedt, redaktör *Åsikter*, *Sydsvenskan*).

mats for user participation. The quality of the content of public debates in terms of “the good argument” has been upheld as an important ideal within democratic theory as well as within the journalist profession itself, and it could potentially be an important ideal in relation to how formats for user participation are governed and designed. However, also in relation to the quality of the conversation, inclusion persisted as the overarching ideal. An important consequence of this is that while previous similar content (such as letters to the editor) was selected by the editorial staff if it was perceived as contributing to public discussions, comments are rather erased if they are judged as illegal or offensive. User comments are thus published through a “self-selection logic”: they are there depending on those who decide to comment, rather than being selected by the editors due to their quality. On their own sites, the editors themselves, or other parts of the editorial staff, was thus perceived as the main, or only, guarantees of quality.

Quality equals quantity?

There was a general perception among the editors that the content of the discussion in the user comments was on quite a low level in terms of quality. Typically, the idea was that the discussion sometimes could be of some kind of quality in terms of constructive discussion or arguments, or the expression of new ideas, which of course was perceived as something positive, but that most of the time it was not:

Certainly sometimes something constructive or a good tip comes from the comments, which is great, then you have reached someone that you would not have reached otherwise. But most of the times they are not, and then one might wonder, is this how democracy was meant? (Interview with Katrin Säfstöm, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Nerikes Allehanda)⁶⁵

A common perception among the editors was that if there happens to be a constructive discussion, this is more of a somewhat unexpected positive consequence of user comments. This can also be exemplified by how an increased quality of the comments often was an unexpected side-effect of a new design of the news site, such as the introduction of pay walls with some kind of enforced registration to be able to comment:

At the same time, we have changed our system [...] this spring and it made it more difficult to comment since a login was required. Not that you had to enter your name, but a login simply. And that has led to fewer comments. At first, I was very against it. It felt poorer, you were used to the comments being so important. But I would say that the quality of the comments has im-

⁶⁵ “[...] Visst kommer det något konstruktiv eller att det är något bra tips, då är det ju jättebra, då har man nått någon människa där ute som man inte skulle ha nått annars. Men merparten är ju inte det och då kan man undra, är det såhär demokratin var tänkt?” (Intervju med Katrin Säfstöm, chefredaktör och ansvarig utgivare, Nerikes Allehanda).

proved and that commenting has increased on Facebook instead. They take other ways. (Interview with Anders Ingvarsson, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Sundsvalls Tidning)⁶⁶

On the other hand, the perceived low quality of the user comments and Facebook comments were not seen as particularly problematic among the editors in general since this content partly exists according to another type of logic than similar published material, such as debate articles or letters to the editor (note however some exceptions, e.g. interviews 17, 20, 22). In contrast to comments, this material is selected by the editorial staff, and then often edited by journalists themselves. This difference becomes particularly clear when the editors described their main active strategy for improving the content of the user comments, namely by moderation either by the editorial staff or *Interaktiv Säkerhet*. All the editorial offices employed some kind of moderation of user comments, and most of them also of Facebook comments. Moderation basically implies that comments are scanned and removed if not holding up to the moderation rules. The editors-in-chief at all editorial offices described that they had both a legal and a moral responsibility for what was being written in the comments, but also a commercial responsibility for how it would affect the branding of the newspaper. The moderation of comments was hence described as mainly focusing on reducing illegal and/or offensive comments, following the press' ethical rules. This included hate speech or defamation, or otherwise offensive comments, such as racism, sexism and personal attacks on reporters, but also commercial or copyrighted material were refused. Otherwise, most comments were accepted.

There was a general tendency that the larger, national newspapers employed post-moderation (i.e. that comments are removed after they are published), while the smaller, regional newspapers to a larger extent employed pre-moderation (i.e. that only the comments that are approved by a moderator are published) (see Appendix C for an overview). The choice of moderation-type was primarily due to legal and resource reasons. According to Swedish legislation, one is legally responsible for the comments published on one's site if one pre-moderates.⁶⁷ Hence, the editors at the larger national newspapers, that reportedly could receive thousands of comments each day,

⁶⁶ "Samtidigt så har vi bytt system [...] i våras och det gjorde att det blev krångligare att kommentera helt enkelt, det krävdes en inloggning. Inte att man var tvungen att uppge sitt namn, men en inloggning helt enkelt. Och det har gjort att artikelkommentarerna har minskat. Till en början så var jag väldigt emot det. Alltså det kändes fattigare, man var ju van att artikelkommentarerna var så oerhört viktigt, men jag skulle säga att nivån har höjts och att dom har ökat på Facebook istället. Dom tar alltså andra vägar" (Intervju med Anders Ingvarsson, chefredaktör och publisher, Sundsvalls Tidning).

⁶⁷ The Supreme Court of Sweden had at the time of the study legislated that the readers' comments sections are legally separated from the rest of the online site of the news outlet if the user comments are un- or post-moderated, which implies that the users themselves are legally responsible for un- or post-moderated comments (Högsta Domstolen, 2014).

perceived that pre-moderation would be too resource demanding in order to not get into legal troubles. The editors at the smaller regional newspapers however, received many fewer comments and thus stated that they employed pre-moderation, in order to be in control of the content they published.

In relation to formats for user participation, and in line with previous research, the interviews thus show how the gatekeeping by the editorial staff has changed from selection by the editorial staff to a “self-selection logic”. This implies that comments are erased if they are judged as illegal and/or offensive, rather than accepted if they contribute to the discussion. For example, when relating the user comments to the letters to the editor, one editor explained that the difference was that the latter had been selected to be included in their paper while user comments had not:

There is also a difference compared to the letters to the editor, where we actually have made a selection when we present it in the newspaper [...] and then, of course, our responsibility is somehow greater since we have looked into it a bit more, compared to a comment that we have not chosen. It's rather there because someone has chosen to write it in. [...] It is not a selection in the same way. There, you choose the best [content], and here you sort the worst out. (Interview with Christofer Ahlquist, Editor-in-Chief, Metro)⁶⁸

Comments are thus seen as belonging to a different type of material quality-wise, since they adhere to a different publishing logic. That comments were of a lower quality in terms of being well argued, constructive or innovative in relation to the rest of the content, was not considered as a major issue. The value of the user comments is rather that they provide a forum that can include a larger number of participants and type of opinions and argumentation styles.

Quality equals the editorial staff?

The editors were thus skeptical about the possibility of having a high quality discussion in the user comments. Instead, they focused on minimizing the legal, moral and branding impacts of the forums for user participation on their sites. The editors in general claimed that they had tried many different strategies to avoid comments of low quality. This included different types of registration and moderation, as well as more interaction by the editorial staff in the user comments. They had also in general been more selective concerning which articles they would open for comments. Nevertheless, the discussions quickly derailed: “No matter which texts we open (for comments) on

⁶⁸ “Det är ju lite skillnad också gentemot insändarna, då har ju faktiskt vi också gjort ett urval när vi presenterar det i tidningen [...] och då blir ju ansvaret på något sätt större på oss att vi har kollat upp det här lite mer, jämfört med en kommentar som vi inte har valt. Den är ju där för att någon har valt att skriva in den. [...] Här blir det ju inte ett urval på det sättet. Där väljer du ut det bästa, och här gallrar du ut det sämsta” (Intervju med Christofer Ahlquist, chefredaktör, Metro).

our own site, they have a tendency to be taken over by trolls after seven minutes, who want to write about how bad immigration is” (Interview with Pia Rehnquist, Editor-in-Chief, *Sydsvenskan*).⁶⁹ Therefore, when imagining what could be done to improve the quality of the user comments it most often concerns more involvement with the editorial staff. This could imply that someone from the editorial staff was present as a moderator so that they could steer the discussion better, or to organize more “chats” with journalists or other relevant persons where the editors are steering the discussion more towards certain subjects and are answering direct questions. Compared to other types of online forums for discussion, there were at the time of this study however few and not very advanced types of self-moderation tools inbuilt in the software of the user comments. In addition, some of the mechanisms that actually exist in the software employed (such as up-vote, report) were not frequently mentioned by the editors as a strategy to improve the quality of the discussion and thus seems to rather have simply followed with the software used for the user comments. Moreover, there are no ways for the users to gain responsibility within the forums and start to moderate the comments themselves. The possibility to provide a platform where the users themselves could grow as a community to improve the quality of the discussion was mentioned only once during the interviews, but it was concluded that such possibilities had not been developed yet due to the lack of commercial incentives:

I also believe that this to a large extent is driven by the fact that while this is the journalistically most interesting development; it is not the most interesting development commercially. And when journalism in one way or another is breaking down in its business models you have to put lot of effort into developing things that we do not talk about now, such as developing advertising products, advertising models, to learn to structure your data. This is still a pretty strict editorial matter and no one has really understood how to capitalize on this type of reader interactivity yet. (Interview with Jan Helin, Publisher, *Aftonbladet*)⁷⁰

In contrast to the general disappointment with the quality of the reader interaction in the user comments on their own sites it is interesting that the editors perceived the discussion on Facebook as more “self-sanitizing” and

⁶⁹ “Vilka texter vi än öppnar på vår egen sajt så har dom en tendens att tas över av troll efter sju minuter som vill skriva om hur dåligt det är med invandring” (Intervju med Pia Rehnquist, chefredaktör, *Sydsvenskan*).

⁷⁰ “Jag tror också att det drivs mycket av att den här delen är den publicistiskt mest intressanta utvecklingen av journalistik, men det är inte den mest kommersiella utvecklingen av journalistik. Och när journalistiken på det ena eller andra sättet krisar i sina affärsmodeller måste man lägga massa kraft vid att utveckla sådant som vi inte alls pratar om nu, som att utveckla sina annonsprodukter, annonsmodeller, lära dig strukturera din data. Det här är än så länge ett ganska strikt publicistiskt spörsmål och ingen har riktigt förstått hur man ska kunna kapitalisera på den här typen av läsarinteraktivitet” (Intervju med Jan Helin, publisher, *Aftonbladet*).

actually could be handled by the users themselves, without interference by the editorial staff:

What we have learned is that when we put out our stuff on Facebook and have the possibility to comment there, then the conversation is often very very good. We have for many years struggled to maintain a reasonable level of discussions on our own website, just like all other newspapers, and not quite succeeded. It requires an enormous amount of resources to clean them up. But when you upload texts on Facebook and they are shared and people comment on them, it is somehow self-sanitizing in a way that we think is very interesting. (Interview with Pia Rehnquist, Editor-in-Chief, Sydsvenskan)⁷¹

On Facebook there are however a number of self-moderation tool such as the possibility to respond directly to others' comments, up-votes (likes), as well as a strong real-name policy and culture. Even though the conversation on Facebook was perceived to function much better than the one on their own platforms, the editors did not however strategize to improve the discussion on their own sites through more self-moderation, and most had kept the possibility for commenting anonymously. On their own sites, the editors themselves, or other parts of the editorial staff, were hence perceived as the main, or only, guarantees of quality.

Concluding discussion

This chapter has examined the rationales behind the governance and design of some of the digital platforms for public debates central to dominant public spheres, in order to understand some of the logics behind the larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres. At the time of the study, this in particular concerned the affordances of visibility and anonymity through a relatively unrestricted and instant self-publication of (more or less) anonymous user and Facebook comments on platforms closely connected to some of the largest mainstream newspapers in Sweden. As several of the editors themselves commented during the interviews, the exact design and policies of these platforms can however change rapidly, which is exemplified by the development of comments via Facebook during the time of the interviews. However, what this chapter aims at capturing is not the editors'

⁷¹ "Det vi har lärt oss är att när vi lägger ut våra grejer på Facebook och har kommentarsmöjligheterna där, då blir samtalet ofta väldigt väldigt bra. Vi har ju i många år kämpat för att hålla en vettig nivå på diskussionerna på vår egen sajt, precis som alla andra dagstidningar, och inte riktigt lyckats. Det kräver enormt mycket resurser att hålla efter dom. Men när man lägger ut texter på Facebook och dom delas och folk kommenterar där, så är det på något sätt självsanerande på ett sätt som vi själva tycker är väldigt intressant" (Intervju med Pia Rehnquist, chefredaktör, Sydsvenskan).

reasoning around specific platforms as such, but rather the uncovering of the inherent logics that this reasoning sheds light on.

Before elaborating on the results it is however important to recall the limitations and expectations of this study. First, two of the largest newspapers in Sweden were inaccessible (Dagens Nyheter and Expressen), which makes the results slightly biased towards the smaller, regional newspapers, even though editors at various levels on several of the other larger metropolitan or national newspapers were interviewed. Secondly, the context of the Swedish public spheres is exceptional in the way that traditional news media (still) functions as a central passage for public debates, as well as regarding the strong norm of professionalization and autonomy among journalists. We can thus expect that the editors within Swedish mainstream news media are relatively unwilling to let go of their gatekeeping role, at the same time as they can be expected to be very willing to adapt to new conditions in order to keep their position in providing central venues for public debates. Due to the strong norm of professionalization and autonomy among Swedish journalists and their historical role as central gatekeepers in the dominant public spheres the Swedish editors could also be viewed as a more likely case to be driven by intrinsic democratic values, in relation to the multinational companies that are responsible for the design and governance of some of today's largest venues for public conversations such as Twitter, Inc. or Facebook, Inc.

In relation to the underlying logics in the reasoning of the editors, three things in particular stand out: First the strong relationship between an increased formal as well as informal inclusion of the readers through different formats for user participation (in particular through user comments and Facebook comments) and the income of the newspapers, as being perceived a necessary part of their new business models, in order to survive in the new media landscape. Second, how the priority of inclusion in terms of both formal access and types of voices, opinions and argumentation styles allowed for rather than equal participation or the quality of the content has led to a "self-selection logic". That is, what is published is rather a consequence of the fact that those who decide to comment perceive that they have something important to say, rather than this content being selected by the editors depending on its quality, or with the aim to balancing different kinds of voices. Third, that the measures that were employed in order to curb the overrepresentation of some voices, and hence inequalities among the discussants (and to some extent the quality of the discussions), primarily concerned raising the barriers to entry and to participation through different kinds of exclusions.

It is clear that formats for user participation are handled according to a different logic than previous content production, implying that inclusion is prioritized over the quality of the material, as well as the equality of the voices represented. Even though the editors perceive themselves to be equally legally and morally responsible for the content in the user comments not

being offensive and/or illegal, they do not perceive themselves to be equally responsible for ensuring either the quality or the equality of the discussions in these forums, compared to the content on the rest of their platforms. This could be seen as quite remarkable given the kind of public visibility that are given user comments both on the newspapers' web and mobile sites as well as on their public Facebook pages, where they have thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands visitors or followers. However, the rationale of having such formats connected to their sites is primarily that the editors perceive them to be a way to build a relationship with the readers as well as to increase traffic, and subsequently advertising revenues. This then confirms the results from previous studies in the Swedish as well as other western contexts (see e.g. Reich, 2011; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Vujnovic et al., 2010; Hedman, 2009). Compared to traditional formats for user participation, such as the letters to the editor, inclusion through digital formats for user participation is directly related to the income of the newspapers, as part of their new business models. Moreover, the editors have a clear perception that the online culture differs from the one offline and that (potential) readers are placing new types of demands on their product that they, the editors, are trying to keep up with, which makes them prioritize inclusion.

Even though the idea of open user comments as an ideal platform for making public debates more democratic has long been rejected by most editors, the ideal of inclusion is still prioritized and has partly moved to other platforms, such as Facebook. Facebook is also more strongly related to generating traffic to the news sites in comparison with the user comments on their own platforms. At the same time, the editors' legal responsibility as well as the brand of the newspapers is much more distant on their Facebook pages than on their own sites. The editors also perceive that the quality of the discussions is often higher on Facebook, due to Facebook's real-name policy. However, at the same time there is a strong idea that their readers demand anonymous comments on their own sites.

Hence, although the editors in practice are providing new platforms for public debates that in most cases are very easy to access, they are still rather considering themselves as gatekeepers than as platform providers of these spaces for discursive interaction. This is partly shown in their unwillingness to trust the users to self-moderate these forums, and how the editors mainly view their own role as being the one who is in charge of the civility and quality of the content of the debate. On the other hand, they run these forums with a different type of logic than the rest of their sites and printed editions, when it comes to their quality as well as the balancing of voices; here, the "old" gatekeeping responsibilities are seen as outdated since the online culture demands another type of gatekeeping role, or they are affected by technical and commercial constraints. User comments are thus published through a "self-selection logic": they are there depending on those who decide to comment, rather than being selected by the editors based on their quality.

While inclusion was still the ideal prioritized in relation to formats for user participation, it was also widely acknowledged that the previous type of inclusion on these platforms had led to the overrepresentation of certain voices, in particular racist ones. These experiences had resulted in the editors reevaluating the benefits of inclusion and taking certain measures, which were similar across all editorial offices although with some differences in scope. These measures mainly consisted of either increasing the thresholds for entering the discussions, through some kind of registration model, or moderation of legal and/or offensive comments. Hence, it primarily concerned different kinds of exclusions. Thereby, the editors hoped to curb the overrepresentation of some type of opinions and argument styles, which were perceived to hinder others' participation in the discussions. Similar measures were also believed to increase the quality of the discussions. However, in several cases, an increased equality as well as quality of the discussions was rather an unexpected consequence of an increased exclusion due to the introduction of pay walls and other measures that also partly appeared as outside the control of the editors themselves.

Consequently, the gatekeepers in the Swedish mainstream news media have opened up for an increased inclusion of (certain) counterpublics by providing additional affordances to their readers to express themselves both regarding scope and type of content, but mostly withdrawn from their previous gatekeeping responsibilities in relation to these forums (although they have to some extent started to regain them). However, while inclusion was still a priority in relation to this type of content due to primarily economic incentives, different kinds of exclusions were more strongly related to the equality (as well as the quality) of the discussions.

Subsequent developments

The design and governance of online platforms for public debates are in constant flux, which makes it challenging to focus a study on the governance and design of certain types of platforms. During the period this chapter was researched and written, the governance and design of formats for user participation connected to the online sites of traditional news media in Sweden changed in several noteworthy ways.

One significant change is that most newspapers that had readers' comments sections during the time of the interviews later closed down the comments sections on their sites, or kept very few articles open for comments. In addition, all newspapers but the free sheet *Metro*, have introduced pay walls for accessing most or part of their content. In some cases, commenting on articles is only possible for subscribers. All newspapers had however kept the possibility to freely comment on articles on their Facebook pages. The link to their Facebook page is often placed in the end of debate-articles on

the sites, with an invitation to comment on the article. Facebook thus currently appears to be the main format for user participation in relation to the news sites.

Another interesting development is that several of the newspapers that during the time of the interviews stated that they either had closed down the comment sections or refrained from introducing them on their sites due to their problematic and costly consequences, now had (re-)introduced them. Moreover, this re-introduction had been implemented with a new software for commenting, namely *Ifrågasätt* (“to question”). In relation to previously used software for user comments such as *Disqus*, which allows users to be anonymous (although they have to register with an email address), *Ifrågasätt* demands that the user registers with their personal code number and post-code. Moreover, the site owner may demand that the users state their own name when commenting (this function was employed on some news sites, while others still allowed commenting with an alias). The company that has developed *Ifrågasätt* claims that their general objective is to create a serious public debate free from trolls and hate, in which a larger number of voices can be heard. In relation to publishers, however, it is claimed that the main objective of the platform is “to drive traffic, create engagement and generate content on publishers’ websites” and that *Ifrågasätt* in relation to social media platforms “help to generate traffic to the client’s own site, to keep the traffic there, and to make it return more often” (*Ifrågasätt*, 2018).

Even though these changes are significant and seem to partly diverge from the accounts of the editors at the time of the interviews, they are at the same time mirroring the underlying logic of the rationales that appeared during the interviews. The transition to comments on Facebook, as well as to pay walls, was already under way. It was also obvious that the editors for some time had perceived the readers’ comments sections as difficult and expensive to keep track of, and that they would have preferred another type of system if it was technically and culturally feasible. *Ifrågasätt* seems to offer such a new system, which has the purpose of generating traffic at the same time as it reduces the illegal and/or offensive comments by enforcing non-anonymity. At the same time, pay walls have become a new income-generator for the newspapers, where comments instead function as an attractive part of the deal that you get if you pay for an online subscription. Hence, while economic incentives still appear as primary rationales behind the governance and design of formats for user participation in traditional news media, it partly seems to have led to a larger exclusion in terms of pay walls and enforced real-name policy. At the same time, comment is still free on Facebook, which is more strongly related to traffic generation and thus advertising revenues. In addition, with new technical possibilities that reduce the troublesome (and expensive) side effects of user comments, while keeping their traffic generation purpose, inclusion seems to make new inroads at several newspapers.

Chapter 5: Competition Between: Antifeminism on Swedish Political Blogs

In the previous chapter it was demonstrated how the traditional gatekeepers had partly withdrawn from their previous role when providing new platforms for public discussion, which subsequently have “opened the gates” for a much larger number of voices, as well as a larger diversity of arguments and speaking styles to be heard in public. Given this increased inclusion of counterpublics through different types of online public venues – who actually gets heard? In this chapter the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs in the late 2000s will be explored in order to increase our understanding of how online platforms mediate the emergence of non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-egalitarian political agendas, in competition with classic subaltern counterpublics aiming at challenging existing power structures.

Antifeminism is an understudied topic in research in general and studies of the emergence of antifeminist counterpublics online are scarce. Moreover, the few studies of contemporary online antifeminism that exist tend to focus their analyses primarily on the content of antifeminist discourses, rather than on the social and material factors that also shape their formation (see e.g. Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Lilly, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rosenbrock, 2012, see however Massanari, 2017 for a notable exception). This chapter thus also contributes to this literature by focusing on how the social position of the antifeminist bloggers enabled them to perceive the affordances of blogs as “inviting” to counter-publicity.

Antifeminist counterpublics mainly mobilize in reaction to feminist achievements for the preservation and/or restoration of societal norms and structures that give additional privileges to men as a social group, sometimes with violent means, including harassment and intimidation. As a country, Sweden has a recent history of a strong consensus around gender equality in public debates; for example most parliamentary parties declared themselves feminist in the 1990s or in the beginning of the 2000s (Dahlerup, 2011). In the mid-2000s there was however a backlash against feminism in the various Swedish public spheres. The backlash was partly expressed in several online hate campaigns against alleged feminist Swedish authors, journalists, and researchers. Parallel with this development, a number of antifeminist Swedish bloggers constituted a growing antifeminist counterpublic online. Sev-

eral of the bloggers were also given frequent media space in mainstream news media (see e.g. Billing et al., 2009; Ström, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2012b). Their main claim was that feminism in Sweden had gone “too far” and that feminism currently is an omnipotent ideology with control over the mainstream media and the state. Due to the present omnipotence of feminism, they further claim that Swedish men now are the main targets of attacks and discrimination in society, and that this is neglected and silenced in mainstream media. The claims of the Swedish antifeminists are thus very much in line with contemporary antifeminist discourses, such as those expressed by the more organized antifeminist movements in Germany, Canada, and the U.S. (see e.g. Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Kimmel, 2013; Rosenbrock, 2012).

The emergence of an influential antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, previous research has shown that blogging is a very resource-demanding activity, and those who maintain political blogs with a widespread readership in particular often belong to societal elites (e.g. Hindman, 2009; Schradie, 2012). Secondly, it could be argued that Swedish public debates on gender equality during the last decades have formed a relatively strong and positive consensus around feminism. Thus, it seems especially difficult for an antifeminist counterpublic to emerge on political blogs in Sweden at this particular moment in time – nevertheless this antifeminist counterpublic succeeded. How can we understand this, and what role did blogs have as mediators of antifeminist counter-publicity? The overarching question guiding this chapter is therefore:

- *How did the affordances of blogs mediate the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic?*

The purpose of this chapter is thus to improve our understanding of how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics, by analyzing how privileged groups may be empowered by online platforms in order to challenge and alter dominant discourses in competition with marginalized groups. The focus is therefore primarily on the emergence of the antifeminist counterpublic, while the feminist counterpublics it opposes forms a background to the case.

In the first part of the chapter, antifeminism will be defined and discussed in relation to the claims made by the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic. After this, the functional and relational aspects of the affordances of blogs are specified and related to the emergence of antifeminist counterpublics. Next, the analytical tools and strategies that are specific to this study are addressed. The empirical findings are then presented, including a chronological description of how the blogosphere emerged, two network analyses of its structure and central actors, an assessment of the bloggers’ characteristics

through their self-representation, as well as of the use of anonymity within the blogosphere. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion in which it is argued that the emergence of a Swedish antifeminist counterpublic was facilitated by the combination of the specific affordances of political blogs and the social position of the leading group of antifeminists.

Antifeminism and the Swedish case

This section discusses the case of the emergence of a Swedish antifeminist counterpublic in relation to the previous research on antifeminism, with a particular focus on the social base of antifeminist countermovements as well as the contemporary traits of antifeminist discourses.

Antifeminist counterpublics have often been conceptualized within the social movement literature as part of the larger segment of countermovements. It has been argued that if social movements are usually advocating for change in some elements of the social structure, countermovements are instead mobilized in opposition to social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The logic of creating a movement as a reaction to another movement is described as “a general trait of countermovements but [...] especially true of antifeminism” (Marshall, 1991, p. 52).

The main bulk of the research on antifeminist countermovements was undertaken in the early 1980s. This research mainly focused on understanding the social base behind the support for the influential movements that followed what is usually conceptualized as the second wave of feminism (1968–1990s). In particular, the anti-abortion and anti-Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) mobilizations in the U.S. context have been investigated, in order to understand the underlying rationales of these mobilizations as well as their social base. This research demonstrates that the main activists in antifeminist movements were upper and middle-class housewives, who mobilized primarily through neighborhood and religious networks (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Himmelstein, 1986; Marshall, 1991). The main supporters of the antifeminist movements were white, middle-aged men from business or professional backgrounds (Burriss, 1983). In addition, antifeminist countermovements have primarily been economically supported by vested interest groups, whose members perceived their interests, economic and otherwise, to be threatened by the demands of feminist women’s movements (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987).

Despite these findings, the typical antifeminist activist has usually been described as the “marginalized man”: the blue-collar worker in the lower socioeconomic strata who lives in a rural area, is older, less educated, and runs a larger risk of unemployment than the male population in general (Himmelstein, 1986). In the early 2000s, the marginalized man again appeared as a driving force behind antifeminism. In her book *Stiffed. The Be-*

trayal of the American Man, Susan Faludi (1999) described how the men who were raised to think that they would be the breadwinners and protectors of their families grew up to realize that this role had ceased to exist and that they had been abandoned by the elite. However, while Faludi also highlighted that many of the men she interviewed felt marginalized in more ways than merely socioeconomically, the idea of the socioeconomically marginalized man has been highly influential both in the popular understanding of anti-feminist sentiments and mobilizations in Sweden (see e.g. Boëthius, 2008; Sveland, 2013; Thente, 2014, see also Strid, 2018 for a similar argument) as well as in more research-based reports on antifeminism in the Scandinavian context.⁷² The current understanding of the underlying rationale of antifeminism hence differs from the findings of previous research, which have demonstrated that antifeminist activists historically often have belonged to privileged groups.

Following the proliferation of online antifeminism during the 2000s, more recent research has analyzed how online platforms have been employed in order to produce and disseminate antifeminist discourses (e.g. Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Gotell & Dutton, 2016; Lilly, 2016; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Rosenbrock, 2012; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). The more or less interconnected online groups and individuals advocating antifeminism and men's rights are within this research usually referred to as the "manosphere". While most of these studies focus on analyzing the antifeminist discourses within the manosphere, it is also pointed out that online platforms have implied a great advantage for men's rights activists (MRAs) and other groups to promote antifeminist claims due to the possibility of forming social networks of like-minded ones in order to "to garner support, air their grievances, and recruit new members" (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016, p. 1). In addition, the particular tools used within the manosphere in order to harass alleged feminist platforms and actors has been highlighted, such as doxing (to reveal personally identifiable information online), revenge-porn (to share intimate photos or videos of another person without their consent), cyber stalking, death threats and other kinds of intimidation and social shaming (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016). The contemporary currents of anti-feminist discourses identified in recent research are moreover helpful for informing the conceptualization of antifeminism in relation to the Swedish case.

⁷² See e.g. the report *Hvordan motarbejde anti-feminisme og høyreekstremisme* [How to counteract antifeminism and right wing extremism] (Bredesen & Tordsson, 2013) on antifeminism and right-wing extremism financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

How to define antifeminism?

It is clear that the antifeminist blogosphere can be described as a parallel discursive arena that has emerged in opposition to its perceived exclusion from the official public spheres; it can hence be characterized as a counter-public (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). However, since some of the most influential bloggers refuse to call themselves antifeminist, how is this denomination motivated? This section discusses how antifeminism has been conceptualized in previous research and relates this to the Swedish case.

As long as feminist movements have existed to promote social change, their antithesis—the antifeminist countermovements—have thus followed suit. However, while antifeminism and antifeminist mobilizations typically emerge as a reaction against the gains of feminist movements, their substantive claims and arguments have naturally changed over time as they oppose the evolving agendas of feminism. According to Kimmel (1987), the main characteristic of antifeminism through history has been the attempt to hinder women from taking part in the public sphere by forcing them back to the private sphere on the grounds of biological differences between the sexes. In more contemporary settings, however, where women's basic rights to voting, education, and employment have been secured for several decades and feminist movements subsequently have pushed the agenda for gender equality further, the core elements of antifeminism can be very different from the more conventional traits described above. Instead of portraying women as the weaker sex, physically unfit for voting, education and employment, a common trait of contemporary antifeminism is instead that men now are the ones who are discriminated against by an omnipotent feminism that is in control over both the state and over traditional media, as well as the private sphere. The contemporary antifeminist current that mainly focuses on men as victims of feminism and feminized societies is often referred to as *masculinism*. Masculinism has in addition been described as a growing antifeminist current, providing an ideological base for many contemporary antifeminist groups and organizations in Europe and Northern America (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Rosenbrock, 2012; Marwick and Caplan, 2018; Schmitz and Kayzak, 2016; Kimmel, 2013).

Antifeminist claims and tactics are consequently context dependent, since feminism itself evolves over time and also takes many different forms in different contexts at the same moment in time. In this thesis, antifeminism is conceptualized primarily as a political reaction to feminism “whose effect is to slow, stop, or push back feminism – a movement for the equality and freedom of women *vis-à-vis* men” (Dupuis-Déri, 2016, p. 23). Specifically, it rhetorically responds to and practically attacks the hegemonic gender equality discourse in a certain context (see Kampwirth, 1996, p. 80). In Sweden, women's basic rights to voting, education, and employment have been se-

cured for a long time. In addition, during the last few decades there has been a strong and explicit consensus regarding a feminism whose core cause has been to advocate against women's structural subordination to men in society (Dahlerup, 2011). In this context, antifeminist discourses could hence be expected to have more contemporary than conventional traits. In order to classify the bloggers in the study as antifeminist, their claims have been identified as in line with the core discourses within other contemporary antifeminist organizations and groups in Europe and Northern America. Central elements in such antifeminist discourse is hence a strong male-victim ideology that blames an omnipotent feminism for the discrimination of men (for example, through the introduction of equal opportunities policy), highly simplified and homogenous representations of a feminism that is equated with misandry or hatred of men, as well as attempts to delegitimize the concept of gender (see e.g. Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Nicholas & Agius, 2018; Rosenbrock, 2012; Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016).

Only five of the bloggers in the mapping explicitly call themselves antifeminists. Most of the bloggers instead identify with other denominations, such as *jämställdist* ("gender equalist") or *ekvalist* ("equalist"), which have been invented by persons within the blogosphere itself. However, even though their denominations differ, the claims of the bloggers are to a large extent similar and in line with contemporary antifeminist discourses. Several of the core bloggers are also clearly inspired by prominent figures within North American antifeminist men's rights movements, such as Warren Farrell (see e.g. Billing, 2011; Ström, 2007). Their basic claim is thus that feminism has gone too far, and that it has started to marginalize men as a social group. Feminism is described as hostile to men, and if nothing is done, it is warned that we are on our way to a women-dominated society, namely *Amazonia*. The claims of the Swedish antifeminist activists are hence characterized by a strong male-victim ideology, thus that men now are victims of an omnipotent feminism and equal opportunities policy. A typical statement is the following made by a blogger in his personal presentation:

I am a gender equalist, I want women and men to have the same rights, duties, and value, even if the sexes differ in behavior, preferences, and abilities. Unfortunately, Sweden is a feminist society where women are given special rights and privileges, while men are discriminated against. (Blog 19, May 5, 2011, author's translation⁷³)

The advocacy to end the discrimination against men in society is hence connected to a feminist oppression, where the Swedish "state-feminism" is described as a monolithic and homogenous (extreme) ideology, which is in control over both the state and the media:

⁷³ All the quotes from the blogs have been translated by the author. This information has however hereafter been removed to increase readability.

The biologist and man-hating Swedish feminism manifests itself every day, in all media and through all channels, it is what now is called 'skåpmatismisandri' or simply everyday hatred. And this is important to feminism since the enmity and hatred directed towards Swedish men is its core and needs to be spread continually in the process of getting new blood into the sect. (Blog 55, May 19, 2015)

Also the universities are targeted for attacking men as a group through the presence of gender studies, which is seen as a part of the omnipotent feminist ideology. Similar to antifeminist groups in Germany and the UK a central theme is to delegitimize the concept of gender as well as gender studies as a scientific field:

As you all know, gender studies and extreme feminism is currently the state ideology in contemporary Sweden. Citizens have no say on this, but are silenced through various government decisions disguised as an equality endeavor. A stance against the ideas of the gender researchers, no matter how absurd they may seem, is considered a stance against equality between men and women. I have pointed out that this is their strongest rhetorical device to overcome critical voices. (Tanja Bergqvist blog, March 27, 2009)

Moreover, reports, articles, etc. that discuss gender inequality from a feminist perspective are often argued to not be built on scientific facts but rather opinions or unfounded assumptions. Differences between women and men as social groups, such as the gender pay gap, are explained by biology rather than norms. This subsequently leads men and women to different individual choices, such as type of profession or the time each devote to their children and housework. Therefore, it is advocated that the adoption of equal opportunity policy and legislation in Sweden that has aimed to target such structural inequalities needs to be stopped and reversed, primarily by legislative changes making the legislation "gender-neutral" and with a larger focus on men's rights (Billing, 2009; Ström, 2007, 2012b). While some of the concrete policy suggestions, such as focusing more resources on men in vulnerable positions, hardly can be described as anti-egalitarian, these are however always related to an antifeminist reasoning.

Even though some of the bloggers themselves do not want to be referred to as antifeminist, it is still important to denote them as such. First, since their claims are in line with those of other contemporary antifeminist mobilizations, it is necessary to use the same denominations in order for this research to be cumulative and to thereby increase our knowledge about the phenomenon. Secondly, denoting the bloggers as something else, for example by using one of their own denominations, would be problematic not only from a scientific perspective, but also from a power perspective, since these denominations have been invented to create a more positive connotation to antifeminist claims (see e.g. Ström, 2011). Using these would rather be contributing to their cause than building on and contributing to previous re-

search. It is however important to keep in mind that antifeminism, just like feminism, not is a monolithic idea; therefore, the core traits of antifeminism as described above should be seen as representing an ideal type that most of the bloggers in this study differ from to a greater or lesser degree.

The affordances of blogs in relation to antifeminist counterpublics

To investigate how the affordances of blogs mediated the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, we need to know more about which affordances are specific to blogs. This section will first focus on their functional aspect, hence *visibility* through the possibility of longer texts that are instantly available to the general public, the opportunities of *association* and *metavoicing* through different types of inbuilt tools, such as blog rolls, comments, hyperlinks in blog posts and more, and the possibility of different degrees of *anonymity* when maintaining a political blog. After this, the discussion will cover which specific capacities seem to be demanded by bloggers in general and influential political bloggers in particular, hence the relational aspects of affordances.

The functional aspects of affordances: the specific types of visibility, association, metavoicing and anonymity that blogs afford

Concerning *visibility*, blogs enable the immediate access to public venues for political opinion building, through the possibility of instant self-publication of longer texts available to the general public that are equivalent to debate articles. To have a well-read blog with thousands of daily readers is thus similar to having one's own opinion or editorial page, but without any of the traditional gatekeepers that can hinder publications. In comparison to the early days of the internet, when setting up a website demanded considerable programming knowledge, blogs today provide an easy way to create an online platform where the user is in complete control over what is published and, for example, if and how comments are moderated (Kübler, 2017). It is also comparatively inexpensive to maintain a blog, which means that it is not necessary to rely on funding from resourceful actors such as benefactors or corporations, or ad revenue, to be able to publish texts (even though you nevertheless need the time). Therefore, non-media elites, who understand how to use the affordances of blogs, now have a new possibility of influencing the dominant public spheres, such as mainstream media (Woodly, 2008).

Secondly, blogs present particular possibilities of *associating* with previously unknown others. Several of the technical possibilities of interacting

and connecting over widespread geographical areas provided by blog platforms can therefore be particularly conducive for counterpublic formation. The possibility of creating a profile including a blog roll with links to other blogs on the first page, as well as hyperlinking to other blogs in the blog posts, provides an in-text-reference system that makes it possible to form a community of like-minded others. The combination of blogs' visibility and association affordances has "made interlinked communities of blogs, or blogospheres, one of the main scenes of online activism, next to social network sites" (Kübler, 2017, p. 36f). Moreover, the incorporation of comments after blog posts makes it possible to both develop argumentation and writing and to enhance a dialogue between the bloggers and their readers, as well as enhancing the network itself through the daily communication in the comment sections. The possibility of connecting over widespread geographical areas in building an online community can also be of particular use to antifeminist constituencies since they historically have been described as quite geographically dispersed (Himmelstein, 1986).

The possibility of hyperlinking either in blog-rolls or in blog posts is a functional aspect of the affordances of blogs that is also related to *metavoicing*. Hyperlinking to other blogs, either in blog-rolls or in blog posts, or reciprocal linking, is a way to recognize the participation of others in the debate and show that it is considered meaningful. To be linked to by influential bloggers in the blogosphere is also an important way to become visible to others and thereby brought into public debates. Subsequently, refraining from linking can be understood as a sign of non-recognition, or even "an act of silencing through inaction" (Rogers & Marres, 2000, p. 157).

Similar to other online platforms, some blog platforms present the possibility of different degrees of *anonymity* while participating in public debates. This possibility is for example offered by the blog platform *WordPress.com*, which is widely used within the antifeminist blogosphere. Unlike other more traditional platforms for political discussions where the participants most often are open about their identity, among bloggers in general it is fairly common to use pseudonyms or only a first name (Hindman, 2009). Moreover, through the use of pseudonyms a new identity can be created that others in the network can relate to, without having to reveal their factual identity. This can be of particular value to antifeminist counterpublics that operate in contexts where antifeminist opinions are perceived as stigmatized or otherwise excluded or marginalized in the dominant public spheres.

Taken together, the functional aspects of affordances specific to blogs can be conducive in several ways to the emergence of antifeminist counterpublics. Partly, the many possibilities of association offered by blogs facilitate internal communication and thus to come together around certain ideas. Moreover, the lowered threshold to agenda setting power through the possibility to anonymous self-publication of longer texts similar to debate articles

implies an ability to quickly disseminate political ideas and to influence wider publics, without having to be identified with these personally.

The relational aspect of affordances: which capacities are demanded from influential political bloggers?

Even though blogs were initially seen as a forum for more equal participation in public debates due to their lower thresholds for access, more recent research has shown the opposite to be the case. A number of characteristics usually connected to structurally privileged groups have been shown as strongly connected to online content production in general, as well as political communication in the form of blogging in particular. Moreover, to maintain a political blog also demands a considerable amount of time, and since it is often a voluntary activity this can pose significant constraints on whom can “afford to blog” (Schradie, 2012, see also Drezner & Farrell, 2008). Schradie (2012) finds that blogging is part of a productive framework that demands more resources than the mere consumption of online content. Thus, while consumption patterns within the general (U.S.) population have become less related to the social position of the user over time, there is still an overrepresentation of those with higher levels of education among those who produce blog content (while race/ethnicity had no significance).

Subsequently, certain resources and self-perceptions appear important to producing and sharing online content in the form of blogging. This trend is also strongly reinforced if we move from simply maintaining a blog to maintaining a widely read political blog. Hindman (2009) shows that political blogging has given a new voice not to the average citizen but rather to societal elites, who have been given a new type of political influence through blogging. Among the top 10 political bloggers in the U.S., eight had attended elite educational institutions, nine were men, and nine were white. The numbers were similar for the 30 most-read political blogs. The lack of the lower educated, women, and non-whites among the most-read political blogs was thus striking; the most widely read political blogs at the time of the study were basically written by “well educated white male professionals” (p. 128).

The functional aspects of affordances of digital platforms for political blogging thus seems to demand certain capabilities from users for them to perceive blogs as inviting to counterpublic formation. In particular, being a highly educated white male professional has been shown as strongly related to influential political blogging. To understand how the functional and relational aspects of affordances have mediated the formation of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic we therefore need to know something more about the resources the antifeminist bloggers have access to through their social position. To examine the characteristics of the most influential bloggers their self-representations will be analyzed as well as how these representations are

related to their antifeminist advocacy. Next, the analytical tools and strategies will be described in more detail.

Analytical tools and strategies

The analysis of the antifeminist blogosphere draws on four different steps. The first step was to identify antifeminist blogs and subsequent blog material. For this purpose, two types of network analyses were undertaken, which have been described in the previous chapter on research design and methods. The social network analysis (SNA) of hyperlinks in blog-rolls, as well as the issue network analysis of the overall hyperlinking in blog posts, enabled an overview of the structure of the blog network and its connection to other issues and media platforms. Moreover, the network analyses enabled the identification of a group of 30 very interlinked blogs that hence were assessed as the most central in the network in terms of their influence in relation to other blogs. These findings will be presented below as a part of the analysis in order to describe how hyperlinks in blog-rolls, blog posts and comments have been used to form a network of antifeminist blogs. A strategic selection of blog material retrieved from these 30 blogs was then qualitatively analyzed. The qualitative analysis was divided into three different parts. In all parts, however, the analysis mainly builds on simple questions that were posed to specific parts of the blog material, in order to assess how the instant self-publication of blog posts, hyperlinking and the use of anonymity had been used in counterpublic dynamics.

The first part of the qualitative analysis focuses on the emergence of the antifeminist counterpublic. In this part, the material mainly consists of the first posts of each blog, which also includes comments made in the comment sections after the blog posts. In addition, two of the most central blogs that were frequently mentioned by the other bloggers as an important ideational inspiration were read in their entirety (Pär Ström's blog *Genusnytt* ("gender news") and *Pelle Billing's blog*). This enabled an assessment of how blog posts had been used to spread ideological content as well as information about other blogs in the network. The sample of blog posts made it possible to follow the emergence of the antifeminist counterpublic in time as well as to what extent the startup of a new blog was influenced and/or facilitated by previous bloggers. The following questions were posed to this material: 1) what motivations were given for starting the blog, and, 2) to what extent was the blogger inspired by other antifeminist bloggers ideologically as well as practically. Since this part of the analysis focused on the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, the time period for the collected material was delimited from the start of the first antifeminist blogs in the beginning of 2009, to the events that followed the resignation of two of the most influential bloggers in the end of 2012. At this point in time, the blogosphere took

a slightly different turn. Thus, what happened after the end of 2012 could be described as a second phase of the antifeminist blogosphere, which was largely built on the network and the subsequent resources that were generated from it during the period 2009–2012.

In the second part of the qualitative analysis, the (mainly) self-described characteristics of the antifeminist bloggers were analyzed in relation to their antifeminist advocacy on political blogs. This allowed an exploration of the relational aspect of affordances. In this part the analysis covered how the bloggers represented themselves in terms of their social position and if/how their rationales for antifeminist advocacy were related to this position. The information about the characteristics of the bloggers was retrieved from the blogs in three different ways. First, some of the bloggers had specific profile pages where they described themselves and their background, such as their sex, type of education and professional background. In other cases, it was possible to glean this information from reading the very first blog posts. When possible, other types of sources, such as articles in the mainstream media, were used to obtain more background information on the bloggers. In this way, possible connections to societal elites, such as government authorities or business interests, could also be traced. In addition, an assessment was made of what type of language was used and how well written the blog posts were, considering spelling, argumentation, and the type of references made to other texts, including articles in mainstream media, government inquiries, research reports, and other types of academic literature. In line with the literature it was here assumed that these types of communicative skills come with a higher education, which in its turn is highly correlated with a higher socioeconomic status or class (e.g. Warschauer, 2003).

The third part of the qualitative analysis focused on the use of anonymity within the blogosphere. This allowed me to explore the functional and relational aspects of affordances in relation to the specific advocacy strategies employed within the blogosphere. The analysis included notes about to what extent the blogs/bloggers were anonymous, and if there were any particular motivations for this choice in the blog posts. Moreover, I discuss the antifeminist bloggers' reaction to my own research as a way of illustrating how anonymity has been used within the antifeminist blogosphere. As was alluded to in the previous chapter on research design and methods, an earlier version of this chapter was uploaded to the website of an academic conference, and thereafter found online in April 2013 by one of the antifeminist bloggers. After the blogger published a blog post about the conference paper, it was quickly disseminated in the blogosphere and generated a huge response among the other bloggers. Through the events that unfolded I was given a unique first-hand insight in how blogs are used in order to compete with feminist counterpublics, and how anonymity is used in this process. The material collected in this part of the study consists mainly of the blog posts

including commentaries that were written about my conference paper as well as anonymous emails to the author.

The Swedish antifeminist counterpublic: a tight network of anonymous but privileged activists?

In order to shed light on how the affordances of blogs shaped the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, the analysis is presented in four different parts. First, there is a chronological description of its emergence. Here, an analysis follows on how the possibility of instant self-publication through blog posts and comments, as well as hyperlinks in blog-rolls and blog-posts, have been used in order to find each other and exchange ideas, hence to come together internally. Secondly, the current antifeminist blog-network is analyzed through two types of network analyses, building on hyperlinks in blog-rolls as well as in blog posts. This provides an additional understanding for how the affordances of association and metavoicing have mediated the emergence of the blogosphere, by demonstrating how hyperlinks have actually been used to form a network of antifeminist blogs. In addition, the most influential antifeminist blogs are identified. Third, the focus is on the relational aspect of affordances. Here, the most influential bloggers' self-described characteristics are analyzed as well as their self-representations in relation to their motivations for antifeminist advocacy. Last, the use of anonymity within the blogosphere is examined.

The emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic

In this section the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic will be followed over time. In particular, how the possibility of *visibility* and *association* through instant self-publication in the form of blog-posts and comments as well as *association* and *metavoicing* through hyperlinks were used in this process will be analyzed.

Up until the mid 2000s, there had been no antifeminist mobilization in Sweden similar to the ones seen in, for example, the U.S. context (Johansson, 2014). To the contrary, Sweden has had a recent history of a strong consensus around gender-equal policies in the dominant public spheres. Women's party groups, feminist organizations, men's consciousness-raising groups and male politicians have all cooperated in pushing policies that, for example, have encouraged female labor participation and the strengthening of men in their role as fathers (Bergman & Hobson, 2002; Dahlerup, 2011). Consequently, Sweden is often taken up (by its own representatives as well as by others) internationally as a role model for gender equality progress and policy.

In the mid-2000s, something however changed in the Swedish mainstream media climate concerning the attitude towards feminism and feminists. An important catalyst of this development, which has been described as a general backlash against feminism in Sweden, seems to have been the broadcasting of the documentary *Könskriget* (“war of the sexes”) by the Swedish state television station in 2005. In the documentary, the central organization for women’s shelters in Sweden (ROKS), as well as Professor in gender studies Eva Lundgren, were severely criticized for representing an extreme feminism that spread hatred towards Swedish men and for having a considerable influence over the Swedish political agenda. The documentary was followed by a large number of critical articles in the mainstream media, criticizing not only the women’s shelter organization and Professor Lundgren, but also feminism in general for having become too extreme and gender studies for being a pseudoscience without any scientific credibility (see e.g. Olsson, 2005; Popova, 2005; Svensson, 2005, see also Sveland, 2013 for a more detailed description of these developments).

In 2007, two years after the broadcasting of *Könskriget*, one of the central nodes in the antifeminist blogosphere, Pär Ström, published his first book *Mansförtryck och Kvinnovälde* (“the oppression of men and women’s domination”) (Ström, 2007), which relied heavily on the arguments in the documentary and which received significant attention in the Swedish mainstream media (e.g. Dahlberg, 2007; Hernadi, 2008). In early 2009, Ström, who already ran a blog with more varied content, started up a new blog, *Genusnytt*. This blog focused particularly on the gender equality debate and his critique of Swedish feminism. Through the possibility of visibility by means of the instant self-publication of texts similar to debate articles, *Genusnytt* could immediately be used as a platform for advocating the same type of antifeminist claims that were made in the book, and *Genusnytt* subsequently became a central platform in the antifeminist blogosphere.

The possibility of instant self-publication was in addition used in promoting a new ideological construct that would facilitate the communication of antifeminist claims in the Swedish context. Even though Ström based his claims on a typical contemporary antifeminist ideology (i.e. Swedish men are now the main group being discriminated against by an omnipotent feminism), he did not want to call himself an antifeminist since this was perceived as having a very negative connotation in the Swedish context (Ström, 2011). This potential advocacy problem was however solved by the invention of a new word in the Swedish language, namely *jämställdist* (“gender equalist”). The argument is that *gender equalism* is considering both women and men, while feminism is focusing on issues of concern only to women and thereby is anti-gender equality.⁷⁴ In other words, to be a *gender equalist*

⁷⁴ This way of inventing new denominations conceptualized as more equal than feminism is far from unique for the Swedish context. For example, the denominations “equalist” and

is to promote gender equality to a larger extent than feminism does. According to Ström, the denomination was invented to create a more positive goal formulation than to simply be anti-something, while at the same time make explicit that the blog distances itself from feminism:

In fact, I think I have put this positive goal formulation on the blog by introducing the term “gender equalism” and “gender equalist”. This blog is *gender equalist*, which automatically implies that it is not feminist, without needing to point it out explicitly. My political opponents, especially the feminists, often call me an “antifeminist”. But I do not call myself an antifeminist. I call myself *a gender equalist*. To call me an antifeminist is part of my opponents’ political fight against me. (*Genusnytt*, July 23, 2011, italics by the author)

Following this line of reasoning, Ström denotes feminists as “anti-gender equalists” in his blog posts. Ström also published a “gender equalist manifesto” on his blog in which the main claims and goals of the initiated movement are described. When the manifesto was posted on Pär Ström’s blog, it received almost 500 comments, most of which were positive and subscribed to the manifesto (Ström, 2012a). This manifesto has also been followed by similar declarations and denominations on other blogs, which largely contain the same ideas. While only five of most influential bloggers within the antifeminist blogosphere explicitly claim to be antifeminist, four of these are also denoting themselves as gender equalists and it has in general been quickly picked up as a denomination many of the antifeminist bloggers adhere to. Nine of the seventeen bloggers that are using any kind of denomination within the top-30 most linked blogs within the blogosphere (according to *Bonacich’s approach*) are calling themselves gender equalists. Moreover, *Genusdebatten*, which during several years was the main debate forum within the blogosphere, declared itself as gender equalist (*Bloggportalen*, 2017; *Genusdebatten*, 2013). Gender equalist has thus been quickly picked up and it is now a usual way to define oneself in the antifeminist blogosphere. To promote antifeminist claims as more pro-gender equality than feminist claims by using blogs as the main platform, became an influential way to communicate antifeminism in the Swedish context, and this newly invented denomination seems to also enable a common umbrella for antifeminism in the Swedish context.

Parallel to the start of *Genusnytt* there was a significant increase in Swedish antifeminist blogs at the end of 2008 and in early 2009 (e.g. blogs 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13). Many of the blogs that started up during this period and in the following years claim to be inspired by these early blogs and their arguments, and they often mention one or several of the other bloggers in their first blog posts (e.g. blogs 8, 12, 14, 16, 20, 35, 51). In par-

“equalism” in a similar way functioned to promote masculinist ideas in English-speaking contexts (see Nicholas & Agius, 2018).

ticular, the blogs run by Pär Ström, Pelle Billing and to some extent Tanja Bergkvist are mentioned as important ideational inspirations for the bloggers who in the following years started up their own blogs. This is how the currently most central blogger describes the circumstances that inspired him to start up his own blog:

I work best when I can specialize and join a group of other enthusiastic individuals. The blog [12] was created in an environment of blog posts from primarily Genusperspektiv, Genusnytt, Pelle Billing and Tanja Bergkvist. I myself did not have a blog, but led the debate forward with long posts in the commentary fields. (*Genusdebatten*, November 9, 2012)

This quotation not only points to the fact that the first antifeminist blogs were used as ideational inspiration by other potential bloggers. It also indicates that the comment sections of the early antifeminist blogs functioned as “training areas” for more inexperienced participants in the online debate. Another example is how another of the currently most central bloggers in the blogosphere first became well known for his comments in the commentary fields, and then when he started his own blog, he stated that he now would be the new “comment commander” in the blogosphere (Blog 34, 2013). Moreover, *Genusdebatten* created a “Backstage-blog” where a commenter could be invited to practice their blogging before exposing themselves to a broader audience: “For those who do not have their own blog, but who want to practice [blogging] without being exposed to all the readers GD [*Genusdebatten*] has, this is a good possibility to publish texts outside the spotlight” (*Genusdebatten*, November 2012). Practicing in the commentary fields of other blogs, or on particular “training-blogs” created within the community, is thus a good example of how relational aspects of affordances are connected to their functional counterparts; through perceiving the affordances of the commentary fields in blogs as a way to practice their writing and argumentation, the to-be-bloggers could develop their capacities even further. In this way, they were able to use the more advanced functional affordances of blogs, such as the longer type of self-publication that blog-posts involve, and then start their own blogs.

Another way to build up an interconnected blogosphere is to use the affordance of *metavoicing* offered by blogs in terms of hyperlinks to recommend other, newly started blogs, in the blog posts of more widely read blogs. Sometimes, there were entire blog posts dedicated to encouraging the readers to discover other antifeminist blogs. This strategy was particularly used by Per Ström in the beginning of 2009, when other blogs that later would become central to the antifeminist blogosphere started up (see for example Ström, 06 February 2009; Ström 16 February 2009). Also Pelle Billing frequently recommended newly started blogs by linking to newly published blog posts:

A new blog worthy to keep an eye on has appeared. [Blog 21] not only writes about gender issues, but also it is one of the main focuses of the blog. Please read the latest post, which provides a nuanced yet staunch critique against present gender truths [...] (Pelle Billing's blog, July 31, 2011)

Previous studies have demonstrated that becoming more visible online, or even viral, can be a function of being picked up by more trafficked sites, or accounts with many followers, in digital networks (e.g. Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2015; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Hence, being recommended and linked to on Ström's and Billing's blogs could help new bloggers to attract many more visitors over a night, which thus reinforced the antifeminist blog-network. This practice was also noted and appreciated in the blogosphere by those picked up by more influential antifeminist bloggers and thereby made visible to other engaged in the antifeminist issue:

[Blog 35] and [Blog 9] also fulfill a function that is very important. In addition to having blogs worth reading, both have well-visited blog rolls that show the new posts of all the blogs they follow. These blog rolls have quite some readers and continuously send traffic to other blogs within our sphere of interest, at least to me. They also seem to be quick in finding new blogs, which means that they help new bloggers with getting traffic. It helped me attracting my first readers. So I want to thank them for that work, it's important. (Blog 28, June 24, 2013)

In addition to giving attention to new blogs by linking to them in the blog rolls and blog posts, blog texts are also frequently shared within the community through hyperlinks in the blog posts. Moreover, the first post of a new blogger is frequently commented on by a number of others in the antifeminist blogosphere, mainly to cheer and welcome the new blogger to the antifeminist online community. Ström's and Billing's blogs were also used to communicate offline-activities, such as the "pub-gatherings", which took place regularly in 2009–2012 in several Swedish cities (Stockholm, Malmö, Norrköping).

In November 2012, however, two of the most influential antifeminist bloggers, Pär Ström and Pelle Billing, stopped blogging, although they kept their blogs and blog-archives open for others to read. In a debate article published the same day at *SVT Opinion*, Ström stated that he had decided to resign from all participation in the debate on gender equality in Sweden due to its harsh atmosphere (Ström, 2012c). Many of the bloggers immediately commented on the resignation of two of the most influential bloggers on their own blogs. It was commonly perceived as a defeat for the advocacy against the influence of feminism in Sweden: "Additional backlashes like this and there will be no opposition left. Swedish public debates on gender issues will then have a similar ability to self-criticism as was the case in the

former Soviet Union” (Blog 12, November 8, 2012). Moreover, one of the remaining bloggers created the online discussion forum *Genusdebatten*, to gather several of the antifeminist bloggers in the same forum under Ström’s and Billing’s gender equalist umbrella. In the first post he writes:

Many have asked the question of what will happen when Pär Ström ends [his blogging]? I have created this blog for those who want to be the answer to this question. The problem I see with our separate blogs is that they are either too narrow and therefore read by too few or they are too wide in reach [...] it is simply not so efficient that all posts are written by the same person. (*Genusdebatten*, November 9, 2012)

This first post on *Genusdebatten* was followed by a long commentary thread (386 comments) where it was discussed what was the best way to organize such a forum practically, what kind of rules should be applied to posts and comments, and what kind of writers should be invited, etc. Several of the most central bloggers in the antifeminist blogosphere participated in the discussion, and some of them subsequently started to write frequently for *Genusdebatten*. *Genusdebatten* subsequently became the main forum for debate within the antifeminist blogosphere and has been one of Sweden’s most widely read and linked professional blog on politics and society (Bloggportalen, 2017).

This part of the analysis thus shows how the early antifeminist blogs functioned to both ideologically inspire and practically train others to start up their own blogs. In addition, the more influential blogs actively promoted newly started blogs, which led to a growing antifeminist blog network and hence counterpublic. When two of the most influential antifeminist bloggers then stopped blogging, those that they had inspired ideologically, and provided a training ground for, as well as promoted to others, thus had the capacity as well as the network to continue to disseminate antifeminist ideas.

Displaying the antifeminist blog network

While the last section described the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic chronologically, this section provides an additional understanding of how the affordances of association and metavoicing mediated the emergence of the blogosphere. Through two types of network analysis it is demonstrated how hyperlinks in blog-rolls and blog posts actually have been used to form an antifeminist counterpublic internally, as well as to interact with other publics externally. The network analyses display the structure of the blog-network, which also enables the identification of a group of more influential actors in the network. These results will subsequently be used as a starting point for further investigation of how the antifeminist counterpublic had emerged.

Social network analysis of hyperlinks in blog-rolls

To systematize the analysis of how hyperlinks have been used to form an antifeminist counterpublic, a social network analysis (SNA) of the antifeminist blogosphere was first undertaken in UCINET,⁷⁵ and the results were visualized in NetDraw. When applied to the antifeminist blog network, *Freeman's approach* (*in-degree* and *out-degree*) demonstrates that there is a group of around 30 blogs that are more highly interconnected in relation to the other blogs, both concerning inlinks and outlinks.⁷⁶ Moreover, several of the blogs that were the most linked to are also the ones that are linking out most to other blogs in their blog-rolls. This suggests that these more central blogs function both as important ideational hubs within the antifeminist blogosphere as well as being key actors for expanding the network itself.⁷⁷ With the exception of one blog, the 30 blogs most linked to by others in the network (highest *in-degree* scores) were overlapping with the 30 blogs that were highest ranked according to *Bonacich's approach*. Since *Bonacich's approach* also measures the secondary connections it was hereafter used as a more nuanced measure of influence for further analyzes of the blogosphere.⁷⁸

In order to analyze the position of the most influential blogs in relation to the blogosphere's emergence over time, the antifeminist blog-network was visualized in *Netdraw* based on *Bonacich's approach* and the blogs' start date (see Figure 2). The blogs were divided into three groups according to their start date. Group 1 consists of the first antifeminist blogs, which were started up either before or in the beginning of 2009. Group 2 consists of the blogs that followed these first blogs, with start dates between 2010 and October 2012. Group 3 consists of the blogs that were initiated in direct connection to when two of the most influential antifeminist bloggers, Pär Ström and Pelle Billing, stopped blogging in November 2012, or after these events.

⁷⁵ UCINET is a software package for the analysis of social network data (Borgatti et al., 2002).

⁷⁶ The four blogs with the highest *in-degree* rating were linked to by 22–23 of the other bloggers (36–38 %) in the network. Following these top-four bloggers, there was a steadily descending line of twenty blogs that were linked to by 10 bloggers or more.

⁷⁷ However, among the ten blogs with the highest *out-degree* rating there were also a couple of blogs (4) that only appeared among the 30 most in-linked blogs (no. 16, 18, 23 and 30).

⁷⁸ Moreover, even if only about half of the antifeminist bloggers used blog-rolls at the time of the analysis, the lack of a blog-roll did not seem to have a decisive impact on their centrality in the blogosphere. For example, there was one blog among the ten highest ranked according to *Bonacich's approach* that did not have a blog-roll. This partly demonstrates that blog-rolls can be important to become a central actor in the network, but also that it not is necessary to have one in order to be central in this blog-network.

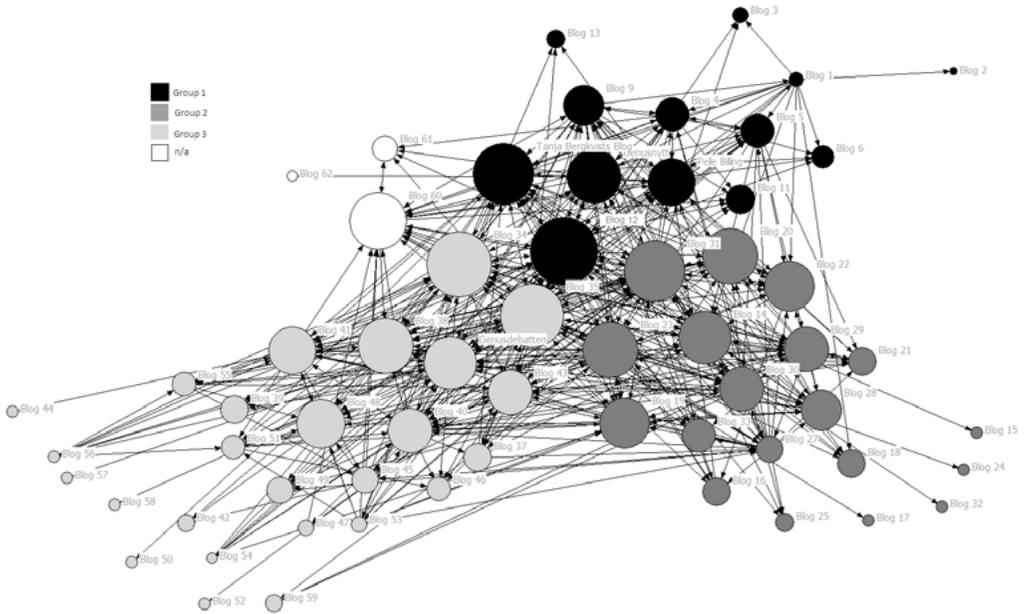


Figure 2. Visualization of the 62 blogs in the antifeminist blogosphere based on *Bonacich's approach* and the blogs' start dates. Note that the blogs have been manually placed to illustrate the blogosphere's emergence over time.

The visualization demonstrates that the most influential blogs at the time of the analysis (Feb 2017) are from all three time-periods. It also shows that there is a group of “satellites” that are much less interlinked with the rest of the network. This implies that the overall structure of the network can be described as a smaller group of highly interconnected central actors, rather than a single very influential “star” or “lonely islands” either made out by single blogs or group of blogs without any interconnections. In addition, a large number of the antifeminist blogs that were linked to in the blog-rolls at this time had not been updated the last year(s), or contained only a small number of posts written several years ago. Nearly half of the bloggers that were the most linked to and thereby could be regarded as most influential in the network were no longer active. Among the ten most influential blogs according to both *Bonacich's approach* and *in-degree*, two had not been updated in over one year and two others were shut down in 2013 and 2012 respectively. Hence, the structure of the blogosphere seems to be relatively stable over time. The fact that the centrality of some of the blogs remains well after they ceased to be updated also suggests that these blogs are kept as ideational inspiration and information archives for others in the network as well as for potential future bloggers.

To further analyze the structure of the blogospheres, UCINET's overall density measure was applied to different groups of bloggers using the blogs' ratings according to *Bonacich's approach*. The density measure was first applied to all the bloggers in the antifeminist blogosphere, which showed an overall density of 14%. This implies that of all possible links in the network, 14% were present, which suggests a network of quite low overall density.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the density was much higher among the more influential bloggers. To further confirm the presence of a smaller group of highly interconnected bloggers, the same density measure was applied to the 50 most influential bloggers according to *Bonacich's approach*, and then to the 40 most influential bloggers, and so on (see Appendix D for a table of the results). This analysis supports the idea that the most important cut-off for a smaller group of highly interconnected influential bloggers would be at the 30 most influential bloggers identified by the centrality measures.⁸⁰ Hence, the group of 30 most influential blogs seems to represent a smaller group of bloggers that has a relatively large influence in the antifeminist blogosphere, and thereby is more central for understanding the emergence of the antifeminist counterpublic. Before we move on to the more qualitative analysis of the 30 most influential blogs, however, the results of the co-link analysis of the overall linking in the blogs will be presented and compared to the results of the network analysis of the links in blog-rolls.

Issue network analysis of the overall hyperlinking

To ensure that the links in blog-rolls provide a valid picture of the structure of the network as well as its most influential actors, a co-link analysis of the overall outlinking in the blogs was done with *Issue Crawler*. Since the crawl captures all sites linked to within the blogosphere, it also enables an analysis of which other issues the blogosphere is related to as well as which other types of media platforms it frequently interacts with. Such information gives us an enhanced understanding of the (online) ideational contexts within which the antifeminist blogosphere has emerged, and how it interacts with other publics through hyperlinking.

A first observation is that the networks depicted by the links in the blog-rolls and the overall linking in the blog-posts have many similarities. Several of the blogs that are most linked to in the blog-rolls are also showing up as some of the blogs that are most linked to in blog posts and comments. Moreover, the co-link analysis depicts a network that is rather tight and small. First, the number of all sites that are linked to by at least two other antifeminist blogs (the "starting points") is rather small in both co-link iterations,

⁷⁹ This can for example be compared with an analysis of the climate skeptical blogosphere (English language blogs only), which had an overall density of 6% (Sharman, 2014).

⁸⁰ While the 30 most influential blogs in the blog-rolls are much more interlinked than the 40 most influential blogs, they are still almost as interlinked as the 20 most influential blogs in the network.

given what could be expected in a network of blogs where linking is one of the main ways to interact with others in the network (69 in total in the first iteration). Moreover, the co-link analysis finds that 23 of the antifeminist blogs are linked to by at least two other antifeminist blogs, and the composition of this group largely overlaps with the group of 30 most influential bloggers according to the SNA (see Appendix D for a more detailed comparison of the results).

The difference that can be observed among the 10 most influential blogs according to the results from the two network analyses is however that some of the blogs that show up as more linked to in the issue network analysis are older blogs that are less central to the more current network displayed by the blog rolls (these are however still within the group of 30 blogs most linked to in the blog rolls). Moreover, two of the women bloggers that are often put forward by other antifeminist bloggers as central to the network, and hence are much linked to in the blog-rolls, are less present in the overall linking in the antifeminist blogosphere. One of the bloggers (Blog 14) is not even present in the co-link analysis. Hence, while the presence of antifeminist women bloggers in the core of the network seems to be how the bloggers themselves want to portray the blogosphere to others, the overall linking in the blog-posts on a daily basis depicts another more peripheral role for these women in the network.

The co-link analysis of the overall linking within the blogosphere also reveals the ideational context that the blogosphere is part of. Here, two main types of issues, which thus was tightly connected to the antifeminist blogosphere, could be identified: blogs that could be described as part of the larger men's and father's rights movement and libertarian blogs. The analysis also shows the importance of the blogosphere's relationship to mainstream media. For example, Sweden's largest mainstream media sites (*dn.se*, *svd.se*, *aftonbladet.se*) are linked. At the same time, links to alternative media sites are completely absent (except for *Newsmill*). So also are links to Facebook and Twitter, which is rare within these kinds of blogospheres. The central role of links to mainstream media, in relation to the absence of links to alternative or social media, thus supports the argument that counterpublics primarily are interested in influencing mainstream media rather than alternative media. In addition, in the analysis of the antifeminist overall linking a number of feminist sites show up, for example the main site of the Swedish feminist political party *Feministiskt Initiativ* [*Feminist Initiative*] and one of the largest feminist journals in Sweden, *Bang*.⁸¹ The overall linking-activities

⁸¹ This effect is strengthened in the two-iteration crawl where the site of one of Sweden's most well-known feminists, Maria Sveland, shows up. Sveland has written several texts published in the mainstream media in which she discusses the proliferation of antifeminism in the Swedish context in particular, as well as a book that describes the emergence of the antifeminist blogosphere as well as her personal interactions with some of the activists (Sveland, 2013).

within the blogosphere are thus mostly concentrated on the interaction within the antifeminist network itself as well as with mainstream media. However, the links to feminist political parties, feminist media and well-known Swedish feminists shows how the competition with other (subaltern) counterpublics also is central to the emergence of this kind of non-subaltern counterpublics.

In sum, the two network analyses clearly display how the antifeminist counterpublic has emerged through hyperlinking in blog-rolls and blog posts, and how it actually functions as a counterpublic by constantly interacting with mainstream media and feminist media platforms. The issue network analysis again demonstrates the tightness and smallness of the antifeminist blog-network, as well as confirming the composition of the group of most influential bloggers. The blogs that were shown to be the most central to the antifeminist issue thus overlap with the SNA (with a few exceptions). The 30 most influential blogs according to *Bonacich's approach*, were therefore selected for further analysis. While the previous analyses have focused on how the functional aspects of the affordances of blogs have mediated the formation of the antifeminist counterpublic, we will now take a closer look at their relational aspects. By analyzing the characteristics of the most influential bloggers in terms of how they represent themselves publically, we will examine what self-perceptions characterize the antifeminist bloggers and what type of resources they thereby have access to, as well as to what extent these are similar to those that have been demonstrated to be important to influential political blogging in particular.

Who are the bloggers (representing themselves to be)?

When examining the characteristics of the core activists of the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere, the differences compared with previous antifeminist movements as well as to the presumed suspects of antifeminist mobilizations are striking – as are the similarities with the usual suspects when it comes to influential political blogging. First, a majority of the bloggers state that they are men. However, their self-descriptions also indicate that a number of women also are present in the leading group of bloggers. Approximately seven of the 30 bloggers are women, and among the 10 most influential bloggers there are four women. Secondly, many of the most influential bloggers do not seem to be the socioeconomically deprived individuals to whom the antifeminist mobilizations in the 21st century are often attributed. Even though some of the bloggers are from other parts of the social strata, the large majority fronting the antifeminist barricades online can be described as well-resourced. Among the 15 most influential bloggers 11 more or less state their occupation, and almost all claim to have (or are going to have) university degrees, the large majority of them within the natural sciences. The women, too, hold relatively high societal positions as researchers and profes-

sionals within the natural sciences. One woman however claims to be “working with administration” and one is a housewife. The most frequent stated profession among the men is engineer, but there are also doctors and those who just claim to be “highly educated academics”. None of the bloggers claims to be unemployed. Moreover, most of the bloggers who indicate their age (18) are born in the 1970s or claiming to be “middle-aged”. This is thus also a quite homogenous group in terms of age. Most of the bloggers claim to be located in the middle or south of Sweden, usually either in Stockholm or in Skåne (Sweden’s most southerly province).

These bloggers thus seem far from the popular picture of the “marginalized man”: the unemployed/uneducated man who sits alone in front of his computer, writing aggressive and misspelled antifeminist commentaries. To further demonstrate this point, the position and background of Pär Ström, founder of the widely read blog *Genusnytt* and one of the most central and influential antifeminist bloggers, could be used as an illustrative example. Ström is an engineer and opinion leader, employed by the Swedish think tank *The New Welfare Foundation*, which also financed the publication of *Mansförtryck och Kvinnovälde* (Ström, 2007). Before this publication, Ström had been very active in the media debate on personal integrity and digital surveillance, topics on which he became a frequently cited expert. Moreover, in 2007 Ström was appointed as an expert on IT issues in a newly founded IT council that was supposed to function as a think tank for the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Swedish Minister of Infrastructure (Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå, 2007). Hence, when Ström started to advocate antifeminist claims online, he was already a well-established expert in traditional media, on IT issues in particular, and a politically appointed expert at a high level, with a think tank as a platform and financial support for advocacy behind him.

Hence, both central and more peripheral bloggers in the online antifeminist counterpublic can be described as well resourced. Many seem to hold university degrees within the natural sciences and are employed in high-status occupations. According to previous research and theory on online content production, these educational resources might result in certain communicative skills beneficial to blogging. Several of the bloggers have also published books and numerous opinion pieces advocating feminist claims, or have other professions such as journalists and researchers that imply constantly working with text. Hence it is not surprising that an analysis of the content posted on the blogs reveals that many of the bloggers in the study possess complex and creative writing skills. They write well-articulated blog posts and use correct language and grammar, often analyzing and discussing current political and feminist debates. Some have developed their own theoretical models to underline their argumentation (e.g. blogs 10, 34). Most of the bloggers also frequently link to mainstream media articles and more scientific sources such as statistical databases and research reports, to underline

their argument or clarify their discussion. Some of the bloggers have also established specific online libraries with research articles, government inquiries, and other types of established scientific sources and relevant literature on their blogs (e.g. blogs 4, 12, 21, 40, 60).

Even though more than two thirds of the 30 most influential bloggers were anonymous or used pseudonyms they thus still gave out a lot of information about themselves. Their social position as highly educated, white, heterosexual, middle-aged men was in fact frequently used as their main motivation for antifeminist blogging and it also worked as an important identity marker in opposition to other, more “political correct”, groups in society:

Especially marginalized is my own group “white, middle-aged, men”. We should rather shut up completely and stay away from the public debate. (*Genusnytt*, February 5, 2009)

According to some people, I’m seen as part of the problem of gender inequality, not only because I’m white, male and employed in a private company, but also since I have the nerve to live in a heterosexual relationship. (Blog 51, no date)

White middle-aged heterosexual man. Engineer living in the south of Sweden. Work as a Senior Specialist within Research and Development in a large global company. Happily married with my teenage love, father of three, homeowner with my own beachfront. Rock singer. Drive a car and boat with much hp. Like to eat meat. In other words, everything that the politically correct people at Södermalm hate. (Blog 34, no date)

Two of the women bloggers, on the other hand, were rather pointing to how women’s traditional role as a housewife had been devalued by feminism, as well as the position of the nuclear family:

A women should pursue a career, preferably prioritizing her occupation before her children. Please watch the debate about housewives again and try to put away your feminist glasses. Listen carefully to what is being said. Housewives are, which is clearly articulated, bad role models for women as a group. [...] The woman who does not live up to egalitarianism (separate this from gender equality) are receiving just as much shit today as the woman who chose to work in the 50s. (Blog 22, September 13, 2011)

Just because I think that the nuclear family is optimal under the right conditions, this does not imply that you cannot live in other ways. [...] I love my husband, I love my children AND I love our little family which I’m prepared to do basically anything for. So shoot me! (Blog 23, December 16, 2012)

Hence, the latter motivations are in line with more classic antifeminist activism within which women historically have been the main leaders as well as activists. Among the men however, the main motivations for engaging in the

antifeminist cause were seldom attributed to the changing roles of women or family-formations. Instead, the usual perception was that they as a privileged group unfairly were lacking a voice in the public debate on gender equality: “More voices are needed in the debate. More highly educated people from the cultural sphere also need to raise their voices” (Blog 38, January 2, 2013). There is hence a strong, recurrent perception among the bloggers that they, precisely due to their position as highly educated, white, heterosexual, middle-aged men, are being marginalized from public debates on gender equality and that they therefore needed to make themselves heard. This is how one blogger that was put forward by *Genusnytt* describes himself:

I’m a married, heterosexual, highly educated white man of 30+, who works in the private sector. In other words I belong to the so-called “patriarchate”. According to many, I do not have the right to express my opinion in the gender debate, which is an injustice that bothers me enormously. Since I feel strongly for all people’s equal rights and opportunities, and in addition have issues with all forms of political correctness, I felt that I should address the matter and make my voice heard. (*Genusnytt*, 25 September 2009)

Central to the relational aspects of affordances is that you need to perceive that you are able to use the affordances of digital media platforms to actually use them. As demonstrated above, many of the persons behind the antifeminist blogs share their characteristics with the group that previous research has shown to be beneficial to influential political blogging; hence they were highly educated white men. In the case of the antifeminist bloggers, the capabilities advantageous to political blogging also coincided with another type of capability which is a usual trait among privileged social groups that historically has been dominating social and political life – namely that you feel *entitled* to be heard in every discussion, since this has been the norm historically. And moreover, even if you are heard, there is a feeling that you are marginalized if you are not dominating the discussion (or even if you are not the only one that is heard). Hence, previous research has demonstrated that even if men and women have the same amount of speaking time in a discussion, men perceive women to be dominating the conversation and thus perceive themselves to be marginalized. Moreover, men’s perception of being marginalized in the conversation *persists* even when women contribute to as little as 30% of the talk. This can thus be explained by the perception of the lack of women’s contribution as the “natural order of things”. Therefore, “women are thought to dominate the discussion when they participate anywhere beyond the minimal level” (Stewart, Shields, & Sen, 2001, p. 164, see also Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto, 1995; Spender, 1989).

In order to capture this feeling of entitlement to unchallenged dominance that seems specific to middle and upper class white men, Kimmel (2013) has coined the concept of *aggrieved entitlement*. This kind of entitlement can thus only be felt by those who perceive that they have lost a position that

they consider as being rightfully “theirs” to other groups, such as women, minorities, immigrants, etc.: “It is that sense that those benefits to which you believe yourself entitled to have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 18). As Kimmel argues, this does not imply that the feeling of powerlessness that these men express is not true or genuine. It is, rather, that their reality depiction (that upper or middle-class straight white men is the group currently most discriminated against in society) is simply not an accurate one. Moreover, Kimmel puts forward the experience of aggrieved entitlement as a crucial driving force behind the men’s rights movement in the US, whose leaders and claims have greatly inspired the most influential antifeminist bloggers in the Swedish context. However, while Kimmel in particular points to the increased economic deprivation of the group of white middle class straight (coupled with increased gender and racial equality in society) as an important component of aggrieved entitlement, the Swedish antifeminists did not express socio-economic marginalization as an important driving force. Rather, they perceived themselves as politically marginalized due to their privileged social position.

This could be compared to the findings of McCright and Dunlap (2011) in relation to advocates of climate change denial, which, similarly to antifeminists, has been forming non-subaltern counterpublics that have managed to influence the political agenda not least through the use of online platforms, particularly in the U.S. context. They demonstrate that in the U.S. context, climate denialist views are a result of an *intersection* between race, gender and political ideology, and that these views are the greatest among conservative white males who self-report understanding global warming very well. McCright and Dunlap further argue that the intersection of privileged social position and denialist ideology can partly explain the unwillingness of the United States to comply with international climate policy since those in this social group “have disproportionately occupied positions of power within our economic system” and thereby have access to the right resources and networks in order to influence the political agenda (p. 1171).

In relation to public debates on gender equality in Sweden, the antifeminist bloggers’ self-perceptions thus give them access to at least two important relational advantages: First, their position as a socially privileged group historically renders a strong sentiment of entitlement in relation to public debates on gender equality – they perceive that they have the right to make out a substantial part of this public discussion also, and thereby to restore the natural order of things, and they also perceive that they have the intellectual means to make a good contribution to it. Secondly, the position of many of the bloggers as belonging to a structurally privileged social group also makes them especially susceptible to perceive the affordances specific to (political) blogs, which implies that digital media has offered these a new platform for disseminating antifeminist counter-publicity.

The use of anonymity in the blogosphere

We now proceed to the fourth part of the analysis, in which I will examine how the affordance of anonymity mediated the emergence of the antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context. This analysis includes both the functional and relation aspects of affordances, and points to how social position matters for how the affordances of online platforms can be used, and the consequences for counterpublic dynamics. This part of the analysis will hence to some extent also concern the advocacy strategies of the antifeminist counterpublic.

One striking characteristic of the antifeminist bloggers is that most of them are more or less anonymous. About two-thirds of the 30 most influential blogs are completely anonymous or using pseudonyms. Instead of using their own names, the bloggers are hence inventing different pseudonyms or aliases under which they blog, have Twitter accounts, and write comments on the blog posts of other blogs. Some of these anonymous blogs are also among those most linked to in the blog-rolls. The possibility of more or less anonymity seems to facilitate antifeminist counterpublic formation in two main ways (in the Swedish context): first, it significantly reduces the individual costs of engaging in the antifeminist cause since anonymity provides the possibility of being highly visible and active in the public debate, without running the risk of being identified. Secondly, anonymity opens up the new possibility of confronting opponents without having to meet them face to face, either in person or more figuratively speaking, for example by signing a debate article.

The possibility of voicing opinions and confronting opponents anonymously could be particularly beneficial for antifeminist counterpublics, since they by definition are mobilizing in opposition feminist movements and ideas, a cause which could be viewed as reactionary and offensive in a context where feminist ideas have reached great influence in the dominant public spheres. As some of the bloggers themselves state, it can be difficult to expose your opinion in public if it differs too much from what is considered acceptable by the rest of society. The bloggers describe how those that are open with their identity are silenced through virulent attacks, and how their engagement in the antifeminist cause could result in problems for their children and families and that they potentially could lose their jobs:

It's all about silencing – or at least making us invisible. The attacks are shameless. The smudge and suspicion leads to those who are publically identifiable maybe losing their job and projects. The threats lead to fear and discomfort (not seldom with images of weapons and violence). The children are harassed in school. You are portrayed as evil itself. There are hidden calls to attack [you]. To be silenced for good. (Blog 38, January 14, 2013)

So, what to do? On the one hand, I think I could have made more constructive contributions to a sensible gender equality debate as non-anonymous, but on the other hand, I think that threats, harassment and general ridicule would have been inevitable given the misandry and strong position of Swedish radical feminism. (Blog 21, January 7, 2014)

And this with being anonymous, the shit in the wake is the price we pay for a decent democracy. It's easy to say that you shouldn't be anonymous when your own opinions are the ones that currently are the "right" ones, and when everything that you do not like should be bundled to [Anders Behring] Breivik, no matter what. Would you have argued that one should not be anonymous if it was your opinions that everyone was attacking? Don't you think that dissidents in Russia or China should be able to be anonymous? Are you cheering when the state media in China are looking for dissidents? (Blog 31, December 13, 2013)

In these accounts, anonymity is described as a necessity for being able to express certain opinions, which currently are not perceived as acceptable by the general public. Therefore, anonymity is seen as giving a possibility for those who are currently marginalized in public debates to have a voice: "[...] it gives powerless people some power to express what they really think" (Blog 48, April 24, 2014).

Considering that the harshness of public debates on gender equality is often expressed as the main reason for anonymity by the antifeminist bloggers, their own use of anonymity is however paradoxical. Previous research has pointed to networked harassment as a core characteristic of the antifeminist groups, men's rights activists, etc. that are forming the so-called manosphere, including doxing (to reveal personal information online) and other forms of social shaming and intimidation (e.g. Marwick & Caplan, 2018). Similar to the larger manosphere, a core advocacy strategy within the antifeminist blogosphere appears to be to write reactive blog posts and commentaries to what are perceived to be feminist claims or activities, where individual feminists often are the targets. A typical way to mobilize within the blogosphere is further to link to organizations, companies or individuals who are believed to have implemented feminist ideas or policies in various settings or for example journalists expressing feminist ideas, and to thereby encourage the readers to contact them or their employers with their complaints or to report events to the Discrimination Ombudsman in Sweden (DO).

While their alleged feminist targets are seldom anonymous, most of the antifeminist bloggers included in this study are. Because the targets of their campaigns are open with their identities while they themselves post anonymously, this strategy has been perceived as very uncomfortable for the individual feminists exposed to their critique. For example, one of the anonymous bloggers started his blog in order to write about every blog post posted by a feminist blogger. Even though his posts did not contain any open

threats, this advocacy strategy was perceived as very uncomfortable for the feminist blogger who perceived that she had gotten an anonymous “stalker” (see Åström, 2013).

To illustrate this point further, I will use the example of the events that followed when the bloggers found an earlier version of this chapter. After presenting a first draft of this chapter at an academic conference in April 2013, the paper was found online by one of the bloggers. The blogger immediately wrote a long blog post about the paper that included long excerpts of it that then were commented upon. The post generated 32 comments, and several of the most influential antifeminist bloggers participated in the commentary thread. My paper was then quickly distributed in the antifeminist blogosphere. Within 24 hours, it had been read and commented on by at least 8 of the 30 most influential bloggers, who also wrote very long blog posts about it, which together generated hundreds of comments in only a couple of hours. The blog posts about the paper usually linked to other posts within the antifeminist blogosphere that commented upon it. In addition, a couple of the bloggers wrote emails to me about their thoughts and queries on my paper, some of which were quite upset. All of the initial emails were also published as “open letters” on their blogs. When I did not provide the answers they were satisfied with, one blogger stated that he would continue to write about the paper on the blog until I would respond in a more satisfying way.

In relation to anonymity it is interesting to note that all except for one of the bloggers that wrote about my paper on their blogs were anonymous, as well as most of those who commented the blog posts. Moreover, it was only anonymous bloggers who contacted me via email. Thus, even when emailing me, the bloggers stayed anonymous by using their pseudonyms. Of the bloggers who wrote about the paper and/or contacted me in a more hostile way all were anonymous.

Thus, in my own experience, the anonymity of the bloggers that wrote about me and contacted me in a more or less hostile way made me feel very uncomfortable. Even though critique constitutes a crucial part of the working process within academia, it is another thing to be confronted by a group of anonymous persons, some of whom claim to be very upset about your work. Hence, regardless of the bloggers’ claimed reasons for being anonymous, the fact that they do not expose their identity seems to provide a means to confront their opponents in ways that would be more difficult if they had to be open with who they were in order to participate in public debates. In this context, the affordance of anonymity thus seems to facilitate a more reactive and (sometimes hostile) advocacy strategy.

Concluding discussion

In this chapter the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic that formed mainly online in the late 2000s has been analyzed in order to shed light on how

online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege in public debates. In particular, the focus of this chapter was to explore how the affordances of political blogs mediate the power differentials between counterpublics by analyzing the emergence of a non-subaltern counterpublic with an anti-egalitarian political agenda, in reaction to the gains of a classic subaltern counterpublic aiming to challenge existing power structures.

In the first part of the analysis it was demonstrated how the affordances of *visibility*, *metavoicing* and *association* were used in combination to form an antifeminist counterpublic, which has been relatively stable over time. First, visibility in terms of the possibility of instant self-publication of longer texts similar to debate articles enabled a dissemination of antifeminist claims, which included the construction and promotion of new a denomination in place of antifeminism. The early antifeminist blogs then functioned to both ideologically inspire and practically train others to start up their own blogs. Moreover, the more influential antifeminist bloggers actively promoted newly started blogs, enabling a networked antifeminist blogosphere to emerge that continued to be highly interconnected over time. The two types of network analyses depicted a hyperlinked network that is rather tight and small, mainly consisting of a group of 25–30 antifeminist blogs. Moreover, the blogosphere’s emergence over time demonstrates that the structure of the antifeminist counterpublic has been relatively stable, and that blogs that ceased to be updated years ago continue to function as central ideational hubs. The efficiency of the antifeminist blog network is further illustrated by the events that unfolded after one of the bloggers found an earlier version of this chapter, which was quickly dispersed in the blogosphere and instantly read and commented upon by many of the central bloggers.

While the affordances of blogs are available to everyone who can perceive them as useable, the third part of the analysis demonstrated how the affordances of blogs could be particularly conducive to the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context. The story about its emergence is hence also a story about how a few well-resourced individuals early saw the opportunities offered by the affordances of blogs, and how these “early birds” subsequently were followed by others that were inspired by their political activism. In the third section it was demonstrated that these early birds in particular, but also that the 30 most influential bloggers in general, had access to precisely the right kind of capacities that would be needed in order to enable a perception of the affordances of blogs as “conducive, comfortable, or inviting” for political activism. The (mostly) self-described characteristics of many of the most influential bloggers are thus similar to the ones of the group whom previous research found to be the ones most likely to participate and mobilize politically online in general and on political blogs in particular—namely, well-educated white male professionals. Thus, contrary to popular belief the antifeminist activists did not in fact seem to be the socioeconomically marginalized men who have been pictured when

attempting to understand the mobilization against feminism in the 21st century. Instead, the analysis of the blogs shows that many of the core activists in the Swedish antifeminist counter public are similar to the type of groups whom previous research indicated were the main supporters of antifeminist mobilizations, in response to the perceived threat to their original societal positions by feminist achievements. As the research on countermovements in particular has demonstrated, antifeminist and other non-subaltern counterpublics that emerge in opposition to counterpublics who challenge existing power structures are often those who are the benefactors of the status quo, or the status quo ante, i.e. the ones gaining from preserving, or reversing, existing societal structures. Historically, antifeminist mobilizations have therefore often been led by women/housewives, while white male professional have often been their supporters. In this contemporary form of antifeminism, these roles however seem to be reversed.

Moreover, the analysis demonstrates how the bloggers' self-perception as belonging to a privileged group (middle-aged, highly educated, white men), although marginalized in the public debates on gender equality, rendered them a strong feeling of entitlement to participate in such debates. Their perception of themselves as well-resourced, although in this instance marginalized, thus appeared to be an important part of their identity building and rationales for antifeminist advocacy. For example, their self-descriptions were often a central part of their motivation for blogging, and even appeared in the name of the blog/their pseudonym. Thus, the social position that by previous research has been pointed out as likely to give access to certain resources beneficial to running a widely read political blog, also functioned to provide an important impetus in the construction of an ideational foundation in the emergence of the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic.

Lastly, the possibility of less public activism through being anonymous or by using a pseudonym presents an additional affordance of political blogs but also a new opportunity to non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas. In this case, it appears to have cut the social costs for engaging in antifeminist counter-publicity and thereby attracted constituencies that may not have wanted to make their claims overtly. Hence, the findings suggest that digital platforms for public debates, such as political blogs, significantly reduce the individual costs of engaging in the antifeminist cause in the Swedish context. The bloggers reaction to an early draft of this chapter also indicates that the use of anonymity is presenting an increased possibility to intimidate opponents. Previous mappings of the Swedish antifeminist blogosphere done by journalists have moreover shown links between some of its core bloggers and the online hate campaigns in which Swedish feminist writers, actors, journalists, and researchers have been anonymously threatened, including with death threats (Söderin, 2011; Sveland, 2013; Wåg & Nilsson, 2012). According to the individuals who have been victims of these campaigns, such anonymous

threats can have the effect of self-censorship or even exit from public debates on certain issues (Sveland, 2013).

While we know that classic subaltern counterpublics often consist of historically marginalized social groups whose aim is to challenge existing power structures, the composition and rationale of non-subaltern counterpublics are more unknown to us. We know however that non-subaltern counterpublics have made great use of online platforms in advancing their political agendas, often in competition with subaltern counterpublics. This chapter thus contributes to advancing our understanding of this phenomenon. By demonstrating how the bloggers, and in particular the early birds, within the Swedish antifeminist counterpublic due to their privileged social position had access to precisely the right kind of capacities to, on the one hand, identify the functional affordances of blogs as “conducive, comfortable, or inviting” and to on the other hand render them a strong feeling of entitlement to participate in public debates on gender equality, which they perceived themselves to be marginalized from. While white male professionals certainly are not marginalized from Swedish mainstream media in general – but to the contrary are still heavily dominating these central public venues⁸² – these kind of antifeminist claims were however at this point in time unusual within Swedish mainstream media. This study hence shows how the larger formal as well as informal inclusion through online platforms could offer alternative venues for the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context, and thereby demonstrates some of the logics behind how online platforms mediate the reproduction of structural privilege in public debates.

⁸² See e.g. Rättviseförmedlingen, 2018.

Chapter 6: Competition Within: Privilege and Marginalization in Feminist Counterpublic Formation on Twitter⁸³

In the last chapter it was demonstrated how political blogs shaped the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic in the Swedish context. In particular, it was argued that this was made possible due to the combination of political blogs' specific affordances and the capacities among the leading group of antifeminists. The chapter thus provides us with an enhanced understanding of how the material structures of online platforms can be particularly beneficial to privileged social groups that perceive themselves to be marginalized on more mainstream public venues. To provide a deeper understanding of how privilege is reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics, the aim of this chapter is to explore how the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* a classic subaltern counterpublic, namely a feminist one. Hence, the focus is on how relationally privileged groups within counterpublics may be empowered by online platforms in order to challenge the claims made by more marginalized groups.

More specifically, the chapter explores how Twitter's affordances mediated the power dynamics within #solidarityisforwhitewomen. The hashtag was started by women of color as a direct critique of how their voices have been marginalized within mainstream/white feminism in general and on large online feminist platforms in particular. As one of the largest social media platforms globally, Twitter has been highlighted for its inclusive architecture. It is thus not surprising that Twitter in particular has been pointed out as an online platform that has enabled feminists to contest oppressive structures within dominant public sphere venues, such as the mainstream media, as well as within feminist organizations. During the last years numerous influential feminist hashtags have been coined, such as #YesAllWomen, #BoardtheBus, #Everydaysexism and #metoo, and the concept of "hashtag feminism" is well established in research on feminist activism through social media (see e.g. Berridge & Portwood-Stacer, 2015; Portwood-Stacer &

⁸³ An earlier version of this chapter has been published in *PS: Political Science & Politics* (Holm & Humberto Ojeda Castro, 2018). The text has since then been considerably reworked by the author, including a new theoretical framework and a more extensive discussion concerning methods and analytical tools. More material has also been added to the analysis.

Berridge, 2014, 2015). Moreover, the possibility in this way to bypass traditional gatekeepers in mainstream news organizations as well as the organizational hierarchies of formal feminist organizations has been argued to be particularly important to women of color and other groups that historically have been marginalized within mainstream feminist and news media organizations (Clark, 2014, 2016; Williams, 2015).

During 2013 we saw intense Twitter debates where women of color questioned the privilege of white feminists to define feminist struggles, such as the one sparked by the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen on August 12, 2013. According to Mikki Kendall (2013a), the creator of the hashtag, it started as a response to the public breakdown of the self-proclaimed “male feminist” Hugo Schwyzer on Twitter, in which he confessed to having abused women of color during his career. The hashtag’s underlying criticism was in particular targeting several prominent online feminist media sites and blogs for excluding and silencing women of color over the years, including *Feministe*, *Jezebel* and *Pandagon*, and it became a forum for voicing frustration towards the ways in which the voices of women of color have been excluded from mainstream feminism.

#solidarityisforwhitewomen quickly generated a huge response from Twitter users all over the world, and it was included in over 75,000 tweets during the first four days (Topsy, 2013, cited in Loza, 2014). The hashtag also generated widespread attention in many large media outlets, such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Huffington Post*, and was reported and discussed on numerous online communities, websites and personal blogs (see e.g. Clayton, 2013; Malik, 2013; Vasquez, 2013; Walker, 2013). Many of the commentators as well as participants recognized it as a unique opportunity for women of color to have their voice heard in public debates:

The #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag made women of color, ‘ethnic women’, even if just for a fleeting, Internet moment step outside of the shadows and grab the mic. We took control of the narrative instead of having it defined for us, and transformed the discussion into an opportunity to put the spotlight on issues that affect us and our communities. (Hossain, 2013)

Hence, due to Twitter’s inclusive architecture and its widespread response, #solidarityisforwhitewomen represents an interesting case in relation to how the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials within subaltern counterpublics. Since the hashtag was formulated as a critique against the exclusion of women of color from online platforms for feminist discussions, it provides a unique opportunity to explore the potential of the inclusive design of social media platforms for elevating historically marginalized voices in relation to more privileged ones. The questions that this chapter seeks to answer are thus:

- *Which power dynamics characterized the interaction between privileged and marginalized feminists during the emergence of #solidarityisforwhitewomen?*
- *How did Twitter's affordances mediate these dynamics?*

While the research points are formulated as two separate questions, this does not imply that the analytical tasks are separate. Instead, the power dynamics and how these are mediated by Twitter's affordances will be analyzed in parallel. Moreover, the main focus of the study is on the interaction between privileged and marginalized feminist voices during the *emergence* of #solidarityisforwhitewomen, which in this case has been delimited to the most visible tweets ("Top Tweets") during the first week of the hashtag.

The chapter is structured as follows. The section following the introduction will provide a historical context to the claims that were raised by women of color in the hashtag discussion, and how white feminists/mainstream feminism previously have responded to such critiques. Thereafter, the functional and relational aspects of Twitter's affordances in relation to the emergence of feminist counterpublics are discussed. Next, the analytical framework is presented, by which the power dynamics in #solidarityisforwhitewomen, and how these are mediated by Twitter's affordances, are captured through a thematic analysis of the Top Tweets. The analysis then begins with an overview of the content of the hashtag discussion, as well as its development over time during the hashtag's first week. This is followed by an analysis of the main claims raised by women of color in the hashtag, as well as how self-identified white feminists responded to these claims. The chapter ends with a concluding discussion centered on the specific ways whereby the inclusive governance and design of Twitter enabled the contestation of existing power structures at the same time as it facilitated their reproduction.

Black and post-colonial feminist critiques – and white feminist responses

To be able to analyze whether and how the communicative action through #solidarityisforwhitewomen reproduced existing power relations, we need an idea of the background of the Twitter conversation and its context (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Interviewed by the online magazine the Bustle shortly after #solidarityisforwhitewomen went viral on Twitter, its creator Mikki Kendall argued that one cannot understand the hashtag and the reaction it caused without putting it in the context of more than 100 years of black feminism fighting against the assumption that gender trumps race and that black feminist scholars enjoy the same status and privilege as white feminists (Tobin, 2013, see also Kendall, 2013a). Thus, the Twitter hashtag

needs to be understood as a reflection of a larger political struggle where feminists of color are trying to show how race is an important factor when understanding the possibility of solidarity and the definition of feminism. This section will discuss how white feminists have previously responded to the critique that has been voiced by women of color, hence the patterns of suppression that have characterized the power dynamics within the historical context that #solidarityisforwhitewomen is part of.

The starting point of the critique against mainstream feminism – for mainly being concerned with issues that affect white, heterosexual, middle-class women – raised by women of color is often placed somewhere in the “second wave” of feminism. Yet, this description itself erases the much earlier voices such as Sojourner Truth, a women’s right activist who is most famous for delivering the speech “Ain’t I a woman” on racial inequalities at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851. It was however during the early stages of the second wave (1970s) that the universalization of white, middle class women’s lives and experiences became an important foundation for modern Western feminism and its subsequent growing societal influence (Ang, 2003, see also Combahee River Collective, 1983). The critique that has been raised by women of color towards mainstream feminism has partly targeted the historical exclusion of women of color from feminist organizations, but also the general marginalization of women of color in forming the Western feminist agenda. Feminist organizations have thus been criticized for being racist and mainly focused on issues that are of concern to white, heterosexual, middle-class women:

By and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist. (Lorde, 1984, p. 116; see also Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000; Mohanty, 1988)

When faced with the critique raised by women of color, the reaction from white/Western feminists can be described as having taken at least two main expressions: silencing or neutralization/depoliticization. First, the critique of mainstream feminism has often been perceived – and called out – as divisive for the feminist movement and thus illegitimate, and in this way has been silenced when it has been voiced (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000). Another type of reaction to the critique, but with a similar silencing effect, has been to acknowledge that more diversity is needed, without changing much concerning one’s own practices, with the result that the status quo is kept in practice. A second kind of reaction can be described as a more active incorporation strategy, which implies that women of color are “invited” to feminism but that their claims in this process are changed and depoliticized (Hill

Collins, 2000; Ang, 2003). Moreover, this invitation to feminism often comes with a request that women of color should teach white women about their situation, including their historical exclusion from feminist movements, so that these old exclusions can be corrected (Ang, 2003). Ang (2003) explains the logic of the incorporation strategy by comparing feminism with a multicultural nation that is trying to control cultural differences within its borders by absorbing them into an already existing community. However, the strategy of trying to incorporate differences among women by absorbing them within an already existing feminist community can be problematic since it overlooks the difficulty of creating a power-free speech situation: “[i]t is a faith in our (limitless?) capacity not only to speak, but, more importantly, to listen and hear” (p. 192). Instead, Ang suggests that feminism should realize its limits and that inclusion as a strategy can be impossible if the aim is to subvert existing power structures: “[feminism] will have to develop a self-conscious politics of partiality, and imagine itself as a *limited* political home which does not absorb difference within a pre-given and pre-defined space but leaves room for ambivalence and ambiguity” (p. 191).

When facing a similar critique about the exclusion of women of color that was voiced through #solidarityisforwhitewomen, the response from white/mainstream feminism has thus reproduced asymmetrical power relations by either being purely hostile, or accommodating in various ways problematic from a power perspective. The power dynamics that have previously characterized similar interactions between historically privileged and marginalized feminists as in the hashtag conversation can hence be described as a silencing or neutralization of marginalized feminists by their more privileged counterparts when raising demands for a more inclusive feminism. In the next section the ways in which the functional and relational aspects of Twitter’s affordances could contribute to sustain or contest such dynamics will be discussed.

The affordances of Twitter in relation to feminist counterpublics

In this section the functional and relational aspects of Twitter’s affordances will be discussed. First, how the affordances of *association*, *visibility*, *anonymity* and *metavoicing* are manifested on Twitter will be described. Secondly, what type of relational capacities these functional aspects seem to demand from potential users and how Twitter’s affordances thereby may shape the emergence of feminist counterpublics will be discussed.

The functional aspects of Twitter's affordances

The functional aspects of Twitter's affordances can be divided into two main types: the overall networking structure that Twitter offers its followers (as well as non-followers), and the specific functions that can be inserted within tweets, and that enable certain types of interaction among Twitter users.

Concerning the affordances of *association* and *visibility*, it has been claimed that one of the primary ways that social networks sites (SNSs) differ from each other is their structural variation regarding visibility and access (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Twitter provides every user with a public platform to insert a maximum of 140 characters in a message (a tweet), which can be seen by other users or visitors on a constantly updated timeline. In relation to the kind self-publication offered by other online public venues – such as political blogs – it is in addition not necessary to write long and well formulated argumentative posts to be highly visible in the public debate through Twitter. In relation to Facebook, where interactions are built primarily on the notion of existing relationships, Twitter also provides its users – and even non-registered visitors of the Twitter website – with the possibility of viewing and engaging with tweets from most other Twitter users.⁸⁴ Through its non-reciprocal network structure and the possibility to “follow” other users by subscribing to their tweets, Twitter users and visitors can to a large extent observe or engage in a dialogue with whatever topic or other user they want, without being determined by the scope of their existing social networks, online as well as offline (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson 2014).

Moreover, Twitter differs in relation to other social network sites when it comes to their user policy regarding *anonymity*. Unlike other social network sites such as Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn, Twitter does not require, or even request, that a user provided their real name when they register (although it is required that they provide an unique pseudonym) (Peddinti & Ross, 2014; Sharma, 2013). Many Twitter users are thus fully or partly anonymous.⁸⁵ Research has also shown that user anonymity on Twitter is strongly correlated with participating in discussion of politically (or other kinds of) sensitive topics, including sexual orientation as well as religious

⁸⁴ Either users can employ the “public” setting which means that their tweets are visible to all Twitter users – and even to visitors of the site without an account – or users can employ the “protected” version, which means that only those accepted as “followers” can see the tweets. Moreover, to employ the public setting is currently the norm among Twitter users and thus by far the most frequently employed setting while the protected alternative only is used by a “small and shrinking minority of Twitter accounts” (Bruns & Burgess, 2016, p. 20).

⁸⁵ Analyzing a random sample of 100 000 Twitter users, Peddinti and Ross (2014) find that 5.9% of the accounts are fully anonymous and 20% are partly anonymous (an anonymous account is defined as an account not providing the first nor last name of the user, or a URL in the profile which could lead to a web page whereby the user could be identified or partly identified, and partly anonymous implies that the user is not providing either the first or last name).

and racial hatred. Moreover, anonymous Twitter users are in general more active on Twitter than identifiable users (Peddinti & Ross, 2014).

In addition to its inclusive design regarding access and visibility, Twitter offers a number of technical functions that are related in particular to the affordances of *association*, *visibility* and *metavoicing*. These can be inserted in single tweets to coordinate action and to build communities around specific issues, to direct claims or demands to a specific audience or specific individuals, as well as to amplify the voices of others. Among these, the hashtag (#) and the hyperlink (the shortened link to other web-based material) has been pointed out as the two main Twitter functions that have been used in political contexts (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Bruns & Burgess, 2011), while the @reply and retweet functions rather have been highlighted as more general practical mechanisms for public conversation on Twitter (Bruns, 2012).

The hashtag was originally a user-generated mechanism that in particular affords *association* and *visibility* through the coordination of tweets around specific themes. In practice, it means that the hash symbol (#) can be inserted in front of a word, or a combination of words. Adding the hashtag to a tweet makes the tweet visible to everyone else clicking on that specific hashtag (including non-registered Twitter users) as well as to the followers of the users who are including the hashtag in their tweets.⁸⁶ The hashtag mechanism thus permits users to quickly start and take part in widespread discussions on specific topics without having to be connected to other users in any other way. The characteristics of the hashtag mechanism have therefore been argued as especially beneficial to a speedy formation of *ad hoc issue publics*, formed as an instant reaction as issues and events are unfolding. This is compared to other parts of the public spheres, such as mainstream media, where the management structure is more top-down, and where such publics only can be formed some time after the actual event, hence *post hoc* (Bruns & Burgess, 2011).

The reply and retweet-functions are user-generated technical functions whereby users can interact with each other in a more direct way, which affords a particular type of *association* as well as *metavoicing*. By inserting “@” before the name of the recipient, a tweet can be directed to a specific user. Hence, the reply-function makes it possible to direct claims, questions, critique or any other type of conversation directly towards any Twitter user, even those that one does not follow, which again points to the barrier-free structure of Twitter conversations (Bruns, 2012, p. 2). Moreover, the retweet-function (RT) allows for a specific type of interaction among Twitter users that is highly related to *metavoicing*. To retweet means sharing another

⁸⁶ Since late 2008, topics (including specific hashtags) that currently are “trending” are also visible in a sidebar (Van Dijck, 2013).

user's tweet with all one's followers.⁸⁷ There can be various reasons for retweeting within Twitter conversations, but it has been highlighted that motivations for retweeting include a will to amplify the voices of others and to spread the tweets to new audiences, as well as to validate the thoughts of others and to make one's presence as a listener visible (boyd et al., 2010). Another way to reinforce claims within tweets is by inserting hyperlinks, which basically is a shortening of longer links so that they fit within the 140-character maximum of the tweets. By using hyperlinks it is possible to link to other kinds of material, such as blog posts, news articles, links to organizations, tumblr, etc. which can both inform different discussions as well as enhance or contest specific claims.

Taken together, the inclusive design of Twitter in relation to access and visibility in combination with the ability to direct claims, information or other types of content directly to other users even if they are not part of their existing social network (offline, as well as online) and the retweet and reply-functions, are in particular shaping how the affordances of Twitter are conducive to a certain kind of counterpublic emergence. In the next section the social composition of Twitter users (in the U.S. context) will be discussed, and which capacities seem to be demanded from Twitter users in order to perceive the functional aspects of its affordances.

The relational aspects of Twitter's affordances

In comparison with other large social media platforms such as Facebook, which were initially only available to students at certain elite colleges, Twitter has attracted different kinds of users, in particular in relation to race/ethnicity and class.⁸⁸ While White as well as Asian American students whose parents have a college education have thus been overrepresented among Facebook users, research on Twitter adoption shows that among young American adults, African Americans have been much more likely to adopt Twitter than Whites, Asians/Asian Americans or Hispanics (Hargittai, 2007; Hargittai & Litt, 2011). More recent studies confirm that this trend has

⁸⁷ Initially there was no specific mechanism supplied by Twitter that allowed retweeting; instead a user had to manually insert the tweet in a tweet of their own, often preceded by "RT @username". Sometime during 2009, however, Twitter introduced a retweet-button within each tweet by which the other user's tweet automatically is inserted in your own timeline, and thus facilitated the retweeting activity (Bruns, 2012, p. 2).

⁸⁸ In the U.S. context, the major demographic differences between those who have adopted social networks sites (SNSs) and those who have not over the last decade (2005–2015) are primarily related to socioeconomic background and age. Hence, those with higher education and income levels as well as younger individuals have consistently been demonstrated as much more likely adopters of SNSs (even though these differences have been shrinking over time). Gender and race/ethnicity, as well as living in a rural or urban area, have however been shown as of less importance when it comes to the adoption of SNSs on the aggregate level (Perrin, 2015).

been persistent over time (in the U.S. context): Black internet users are more than twice as likely to use Twitter as their White and Hispanic counterparts, and women are in addition using Twitter to a slightly larger extent than are men (Duggan & Smith, 2013).⁸⁹ Moreover, African American women (22%) are more likely to adopt Twitter than are White women (15%). In addition, socioeconomic factors such as income and education level make little difference when it comes to Twitter adoption among African Americans, while Whites with lower education and income levels are less likely to use Twitter than are more socioeconomically privileged whites (Smith, 2014).

In addition to the influential use of Twitter hashtags by feminists of color, Twitter has become an important arena for activists that advocate other race-related issues.⁹⁰ The term “Black Twitter” has been coined to describe the popular hashtags which discuss aspects of Black American culture (“Black-tags”), as well as the social activism carried out by African Americans on Twitter, often by starting Twitter hashtags which aim to highlight the police brutality African Americans are exposed to or the racially charged-violence targeting blacks, such as #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter. The latter two became some of the most used hashtags related to social causes during the first 10 years of Twitter (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). These hashtags have also spurred further activism, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016).

However, while Twitter on the one hand has been pointed out as a platform that enables an enhanced ability to reach beyond existing social hierarchies and to contest claims made on more mainstream platforms for public debates, it has also been argued that parts of Twitter’s architecture, such as its following-function and its filtering of “trending topics” and other types of popular tweets, rather privileges some users over others into becoming very influential users (Van Dijck, 2013). This more hierarchical picture of Twitter’s networking structure can in addition be illustrated by research that has demonstrated that only a very small group of Twitter users (10%) are contributing with most of the tweets (90%), and that most of the users (68%) are not followed by anyone they follow (Heil & Piskorski, 2009; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010, see also Van Dijk, 2013).

⁸⁹ Building on data collected in 2013, the same year that #solidarityisforwhitewomen was coined, a Pew Research Centre report on African Americans and technology use further demonstrated important differences in Twitter adoption between online Whites and African Americans in the US. The differences were largest in the age group 18-29 years, where 40 per cent of African Americans had adopted Twitter in relation to 28 per cent of whites. In total, 22% of online Blacks and 16% of online Whites used Twitter (Smith, 2014).

⁹⁰ There is also a significant difference concerning to what extent different ethnic and racial groups encounter and engage in discussions on race-related issues on social media in general. For example, while 27% of black social media users say that at least some of the things they post or share on social networking sites are about race, this only applies to 8 per cent of their white counterparts (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016).

From previous literature and research on Twitter use and political activism we can conclude that Twitter is an online platform which may be particularly conducive to subaltern counterpublic formation, here illustrated by the influential African American Twitter-activism in the U.S. context, as well as the many examples of the effective pursuit of hashtag feminism in different national as well as transnational/global contexts. Due to its high inclusivity regarding access to and visibility in public conversations, as well as its specific conversational-functions, Twitter seems to provide a public space where claims made on more mainstream arenas can be contested by historically marginalized groups. On the other hand Twitter's governance and design also privileges certain users within conversations through its algorithms and filtering mechanisms, which may create inequalities. In the next section, the discussion concerns how the specific power dynamics that characterized the conversation within #solidarityisforwhitewomen can be analyzed, as well as how these were mediated by Twitter's affordances. This includes the theoretical starting points as well as the analytical questions that will be guiding the analysis.

Analyzing power dynamics in Twitter conversations

The coining of the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen challenged existing power relations by claiming that the position of white/mainstream feminism to define the feminist agenda and to dominate public venues for feminist conversations is in fact not a neutral one, but a privileged position that produced an exclusion of women of color/Black feminists from the same agendas and venues. These claims were not made in a vacuum. As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, they rather need to be understood in light of how the voices of women of color historically have been excluded or marginalized from white/mainstream feminism as well as the specific power dynamics that have previously characterized the interaction between privileged and marginalized feminist voices when this critique has been raised. Using the historical context of #solidarityisforwhitewomen as a starting point, the power dynamics that characterized the interaction between privileged and marginalized feminists in the hashtag-conversation, and how Twitter's affordances mediated these dynamics, will be examined through a thematic analysis with the Top Tweets of the first week of the hashtag as the main source material (for a more detailed discussion of the material selected see the section on *The selection of Top Tweets and its implications* in Chapter 3). The thematic analysis has two main steps. First, privileged and marginalized feminists within #solidarityisforwhitewomen are identified through their self-identification with either position. Secondly, to trace the power dynamics present in the interactions between self-identified privileged and marginalized feminists in #solidarityisforwhitewomen, the general themes

and subthemes in the hashtag conversation were identified in order to structure the material in a meaningful way. Furthermore, its focus was informed by some of the theoretical underpinnings of discourse analysis as described in the section on *Analyzing the (re)production of power relations on Twitter* in Chapter 3.

The first analytical task was to identify privileged and marginalized feminists in the hashtag conversation. Since identity markers on Twitter such as profile names and pictures are often misleading, it is difficult to judge their accuracy. Moreover, to categorize Twitter users as either marginalized or privileged (feminists) based on their name or profile picture could be highly problematic even if these were accurate, since it presupposes their relational position instead of analyzing how this position is constructed, re-produced or re-enforced in the conversation itself. Instead, these positions were identified through the Twitter users' own implicit or explicit *self-identification* as marginalized or privileged feminists. This was for example expressed in how they position themselves in the hashtag-conversation, and in particular in relation to its basic claim about how women of color have been excluded within mainstream feminism.

Secondly, a thematic analysis of the hashtag conversation was undertaken. Themes and subthemes in the hashtag conversation were identified by using manual, inductive coding by reading through the selected corpus of Top Tweets repeatedly to identify reoccurring patterns of meaning in the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was thus partly informed by the historical context the hashtag formed part of, in the sense that this provided a background for how the hashtag conversation could be understood, but I was also open to the idea that other relevant themes could occur in the text (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Rather than focusing primarily on the frequency of the reoccurring themes, the centrality of themes was assessed in relation to their importance for the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Therefore, themes that in particular concerned the competition for voice between self-identified white feminists and women of color within the hashtag conversation were given a more detailed and nuanced account than other recurring themes. In addition, how the power dynamics in the hashtag conversation were related to the wider conversation that #solidarityisforwhitewomen sparked was examined, hence when the conversation moved to other media platforms. This analysis in particular focused on publications on other media platforms that were frequently tweeted back into the hashtag conversation, and thereby constituted an important part of the power dynamics within this counterpublic. Lastly, since Twitter's interface is under constant reconstruction it is important to note that the analysis necessarily will be limited to how Twitter was governed and designed at the time when the #solidarityisforwhitewomen went viral, hence in August 2013.

Privilege challenged and (unconsciously) maintained

As stated in the introduction, the analytical focus of this chapter is on how the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* counterpublics. The analysis will show how Twitter's affordances may enable relationally privileged groups to take part in conversations on their own terms and thereby reproduce asymmetrical power relations. Such power dynamics were within #solidarityisforwhitewomen partly constituted by direct contestations and silencing. Primarily, however, they took the form of a specific type of "listen-and-learn" tweets. Through these tweets, self-identified white feminists (consciously or unconsciously) made others aware of their active presence in the hashtag, which is interpreted as a way to reinstate white feminists as central agents in feminist counterpublics, such as #solidarityisforwhitewomen. However, before zooming in on these contestations, an overview of the content, development and spread of the hashtag conversation is presented. It is demonstrated how the functional aspects of Twitter's affordances, such as its non-reciprocal following-structure and the encouragement of open profiles, in combination with the hashtag, the mentions-function and hyperlinking, enabled an environment where marginalized group may come together and reach out with their claims to larger audiences. Through the hashtag, there was an attempt to reorganize the position of white feminists, by questioning it as a given or neutral one. This was primarily done by pointing to the structural racism and direct harassment/abuse women of color are exposed to in general, as well the historical exclusion of women of color from white/mainstream feminist platforms and organizations. A third important theme was how white normativity, in particular within popular culture, reinforces such structures.

An overview of the content, development and spread of the hashtag conversation

In order to give some structure and context to the analysis of the power dynamics that characterized the hashtag conversation in the Top Tweets, this section will provide an overview of the content, development and spread of the hashtag conversation in the Top Tweets during its first week.⁹¹ A number of themes could be identified in the Top Tweets during the first week of #solidarityisforwhitewomen. Even though the lines between some of them are not completely clear-cut, this thematization is nevertheless useful in order to somehow structure the content of the hashtag conversation. Three of the themes were clearly questioning the position of white feminists as a giv-

⁹¹ This analysis builds on the 460 Top Tweets retrieved from Twitter's search engine in August 2014. A more detailed discussion of how these tweets were generated is to be found in the section *The selection of Top Tweets and its implications* in Chapter 3.

en or neutral one. The first one points at the general structural discrimination and direct harassment/abuse that women of color in general are exposed to, that in relation to white women is circumscribing their ability to fully participate in society. The second theme is more directly pointing out the (historical) racism within white feminist organizations, and how mainstream feminism and/or white women are complicit in racism. The third theme is connected to the two latter ones, but rather focusing on uncovering how whiteness functions as a norm against which those identified as non-white are judged. It also focuses on how this white normativity is often completely neglected within (feminist) popular culture itself as well as in how (feminist) popular culture is reported in the news media.

While these three themes attempted to give another meaning to the position of white feminists by signifying it as a privileged position rather than a neutral one, the remaining themes were rather related to how this attempted reorganization of the position of white feminists was contested in different ways by self-identified white feminists. First, there were a few tweets that openly critiqued the main claim of the hashtag, which was called out as divisive for feminism and thus untrue. Secondly, a larger number of Top Tweets pointed partly to the historical silencing of women of color when raising issues of racism within mainstream feminism, but also how this way of silencing was occurring within the hashtag itself in various ways. Third, a type of tweets that emerged as a separate theme within the framework of contestation was how self-identified white feminists were encouraging others to listen and learn from the hashtag conversation and/or stating that they were doing this themselves. While this type of tweet seemingly supported the hashtag's original claim, it also took up space in the discussion and functioned as a way to reorganize the discussion to (again) be centered around the presence of white feminists in feminist debates instead of, for example, how white/mainstream feminism have been complicit in racism or how mainstream feminist media platforms could work to be more inclusive.

Moreover, looking at how the Top Tweets evolved in time during the week in which the hashtag became a trending topic it is possible to see two clear trends. First, the number of Top Tweets diminishes rapidly as days go by. While in the first two days it was possible to collect more than 100 tweets per day, by the sixth day it was only possible to retrieve less than 40 tweets. This hence resembles a type of *ad hoc issue public* that has been pointed out as typical for social media platforms; a fast-paced escalation of collective mobilization through a hashtag and a rapid diffusion of this process into other discussions (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). Secondly, the number of tweets with links to other media platforms was growing each day in relation to the other type of tweets. As the hashtag trended worldwide, various news outlets, online media communities and blogs thus quickly picked up the story about it. Links to these news articles, opinion pieces and comments were then popularly tweeted back into the hashtag conversation. During the

last days, tweets with links completely dominated the Top Tweets. Hence, while tweets targeting the exclusion, discrimination and harassment of women of color accounted for a great majority of tweets in the first two days, tweets which primarily linked to texts on external media sites rather than containing any substantial claims themselves constituted by far the largest theme in the remaining days of the week.

In the Top Tweets of the first week, which thus makes out a very small portion of the total number of tweets, links to over 60 different services were noted. Since these tweets with links did not contain any substantial claims themselves they have not been incorporated as part of the different themes in this work, but instead constitute their own theme in order to give an overview of the substantial content in the actual tweets. Tweets with links could however also be expected to be part of the power dynamics in the hashtag discussion, and the content of the linked material has thus been included in the analysis. In the following I will also give an overview of what the links contained.

The vast majority of these tweets were linking to blog posts either informing about the hashtag or contributing to the discussion in the hashtag by developing its main claims and their historical background as well as pointing to ways forward. These were published either on larger online communities and news and entertainment websites such as *The Salon* and *The Frisky*, on women's lifestyle magazines such as *The Bustle*, *The Hairpin* and *XO Jane*, on feminist websites and blogs such as *Jezebel*, *MsMagazine* and *Feministe* or on personal blogs. The second larger category was news articles and TV and radio programs informing about the hashtag.

Among the most linked texts on external media sites, three in particular stood out in terms of how much they were linked to. The most linked news article was *Al Jazeera's* reporting on the hashtag, which was published already on the first day (12th of August). The article shortly described the content and background of the hashtag, as well as crediting Mikki Kendall for creating it (Al Jazeera, 2013). In addition to this text, several of the frequently linked resources were texts by or interviews with the creator of the hashtag, and other influential voices in the hashtag conversation. One of the most linked texts overall was an opinion piece in *The Guardian*, published the third day of the hashtag (14th of August), and written by the creator of the hashtag, Mikki Kendall. In the piece, she explains the story behind how the hashtag came about, its main purposes and the historical context within which it should be understood (Kendall, 2013a). Another one of the most frequently linked texts was an interview with Mikki Kendall and Flavia Dzodan, a writer and influential voice within #solidarityisforwhitewomen, published in *The Hairpin* on the 16th of August. In the interview, they expanded on the claims they had made through #solidarityisforwhitewomen, and situated the hashtag in the larger context of the exclusion of women of color from large, mainstream, feminist media platforms (Tolentino, 2013).

This brief overview points to the variety of the linked material, as well as the fact that the reporting on and discussion of #solidarityisforwhitewomen in other media was recognized in the hashtag discussion and was perceived as important. Moreover, through these links to other media resources incorporated in the hashtag, the short claims on Twitter could be given a historical and contemporary background and could be expanded to a larger discussion concerning the marginalization of women of color within online feminist media platforms and beyond. In this way, Twitter could be used not only to spread claims by being picked up as a trending topic by gatekeepers on major news outlets, but also to provide a first step to deepen the actual discussion and argumentation that the hashtag was intended to start.

Reorganizing the position of white feminists: structural discrimination, white normativity and racism within feminism

Before exploring how Twitter's affordances *also* provided opportunities for more privileged voices to – in various ways – contest the original claims of the hashtag, this section demonstrates how the Top Tweets during the first week of #solidarityisforwhitewomen tried to render a different meaning to the position of white feminists. Rather than a taken-for-granted position as central to, for example, feminist organizing and agenda setting, it was in various ways pointed out that this was in fact not a neutral position but a privileged one, often at the expense of the continued marginalization of women of color.

A review of the analyzed Top Tweets shows that a large part of them contain claims that are related to the many societal obstacles women of color face which hinder them from being considered a full part of society. One way in which this claim is made is by pointing out the structural differences in economic and job opportunities that women of color are faced with in relation to white women. Others referred to the direct abuse and harassment that women of color are exposed to on a daily basis.

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when affirmative action is wrong but you getting a job through your dad's connections is "working the system"

#solidarityisforwhitewomen is when my relatives and friends are raped/assaulted on reservations and we can't get the US attorney to prosecute

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when they REFUSE to see how pawing my hair without consent & with racist comments is STREET HARASSMENT.

An analysis of all Top Tweets that make a reference to the societal discrimination and exclusion that women of color are exposed to however shows that most of them are concerned with the ways in which mainstream feminism

and/or white women are complicit in racism. In particular, users of the hashtag pointed out how the racism of central historic figures within white/mainstream feminism has been ignored, as well as how its success is built on the housework women of color have been doing for white women. Many tweets also concerned how the white/mainstream feminist agenda focuses primarily on the issues that concern white middle class women while ignoring those that are important to women of color, and how women of color are often expected to contribute with their expertise and knowledge without any compensation or acknowledgement for their work. Moreover, users of the hashtag specifically targeted large feminist media platforms as well as their founders for continuing the historical exclusion of women of color from mainstream feminist venues:

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when your notion of feminist history starts & ends with middle class white women. Not the WOC doing the work.

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when you cry for working moms but keep your nanny until 7 or she's fired.

What does it say when a twitter hashtag is giving more voice to WOC than feminist orgs and media outlets? #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen

Many of the claims in these tweets hence signal a process in which the problems of women become relevant only when white women experience them. Closely related to these kinds of tweets were those that exposed white normativity more in general. Through cultural markers of difference, users of the #solidarityisforwhitewomen hashtag pointed out both textually and visually, how elements that are considered foreign to white culture are immediately regarded as inferior:

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when I'm pretty for a black girl, clever for a black girl, successful for a black girl

When you think children of color must have "normal" names to be successful and their names reflect "bad parenting" #solidarityisforwhitewomen

#SolidarityisforWhiteWomen when they are happy to design African-inspired jewelry but stop make-up foundation shades at 'ivory'

Similarly to conclusions found in other research conducted on Twitter and racial constructions (see Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014), popular culture is pointed out as one of the main producers of white normativity. This could be explained by Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson's (2014, p.182) consideration that "popular culture encompasses the perspectives, images, memes, and ideologies that are preferred by an informal consensus found within the mainstream of a given culture". This was evident in several

Top Tweets that engaged with TV and other references in which whiteness emerges as a clear signifier for presence. Recurrent themes were the TV shows *Girls* and *Orange is the New Black* as well as popular perceptions of singers like Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus:

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when it takes a white woman to go to prison for us to start the convo about women in prison #OrangelsTheNewBlack

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen implies criticizing Beyonce for wearing onesies while applauding Lena Dunham for going topless.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen “This show *Girls* is really feminist... Except there’s no women of color on there, but like everything else!”

Similarly to how the problem of women in prison is only portrayed through the eyes of a white woman in *Orange is The New Black*, or how the experiences of women are presented in *Girls* by following four white women in their daily lives, the claims here are that feminism establishes the boundaries of womanhood only through the perspectives and voices of white women

Among the Twitter users that raised the claims outlined above, there were a number of renowned women of color bloggers, writers, journalists/editors and activists that were frequently visible in the Top Tweets. Except for Mikki Kendall, who was already a renowned blogger, writer and activist before creating the hashtag, journalists/editors such as Aura Bogado and Rania Khalek as well as writers and activists such as Sydette Harry and Lauren Chief Elk participated in the conversation, and several of their tweets were found among the Top Tweets. In the beginning of the #solidarityisforwhite-women conversation several of Mikki Kendall’s tweets were also retweeted by an anonymous account renowned for its activism within Black Twitter (@BlackCanseco), and these retweets subsequently ended up among the Top Tweets.

In sum, this section points to how the claims within #solidarityisfor-whitewomen contested white privilege within mainstream feminism, and in what ways the privileged position of white feminists was highlighted as problematic instead of taken for granted. As we have seen, the content of these claims was similar to previous critiques of the exclusion of women of color from white/mainstream feminism. In addition, the tweets frequently made use of popular culture in demonstrating white normativity, as well as commonly referring to online feminist media platforms as complicit in the exclusion of women of color. While it is difficult to draw any general conclusions about the participants in the discussion from only their Twitter-names/pseudonyms or profile pictures, we can at least say that several prominent women of color journalists, writers and activists contributed in making these claims visible among the larger Twitter audience, as well as (at least)

one anonymous account renowned for its activism within Black Twitter. In addition, while the use of anonymity hence contributed to the spread of hashtag discussion, its initiator and many of its central participants that were reoccurring in the Top Tweets were non-anonymous.

Contestation, silencing and incorporation/normalization

As we have seen, the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen was questioning the marginalization of women of color within mainstream feminism in general and on feminist online platforms in particular. In this section I will move on to analyze the interactions between privileged and marginalized feminists that followed the critique raised by women of color, and how these actions and interactions were shaped by the affordances provided by Twitter. The findings demonstrate that the claims about the exclusion of women of color within white/mainstream feminism mainly were contested in three different ways within the Top Tweets during the first week of the hashtag conversation: to a lesser degree through an open contestation and through silencing of the main claim makers on other media platforms, and in particular through an incorporation/normalization of their claims. These contestations were partly mediated by the affordances of *visibility* and *association* that characterize Twitter's inclusive governance and design; such as the possibility to partake in any conversation through the hashtag function, its non-reciprocal network structure and the possibility to bypass traditional gatekeepers through the mentions function (@). In addition, the analysis suggests that the affordance of *metavoicing* played an important part in the incorporation/normalization dynamics, but rather through the dismissal of the retweet function by self-identified white feminists (which in particular has been put forward as a way to amplify the voices of others within the Twitter environment), in favor of reinstating their own agency in the conversation through an original tweet including the hashtag. Last, the affordance of *anonymity* did not seem to play any major role in these dynamics. This indicates that these self-identified white feminists were unconscious about their role in the power dynamics that characterized the conversation within #solidarityisforwhitewomen.

Delegitimization through open contestation

The first type of contestation that is found in the Top Tweets is perhaps the most obvious one: tweets that openly contest the claims about white privilege within feminism and thereby try to delegitimize them. Self-identified white feminists often articulated this contestation, but also other Twitter users. This open contestation could be interpreted as an attempt to restore the status quo by arguing that claims about white privilege within feminism are

either simply untrue or destructive, since they are divisive for feminism as a movement:

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen Why can't all women just support one another, so freaking ridiculous how there has to be competition btwn them.

While there were many tweets in the larger hashtag conversation that contested the hashtag openly, such as the one above, there were actually very few of these tweets within the Top Tweets. Most often, these tweets were instead found within the conversations following Top Tweets that supported the main claims of the hashtag, which is exemplified by the following conversation:

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when affirmative action is wrong but you getting a job through your dad's connections is "working the system".

@name - because we must blame white feminists for the old boy's network! Argh! HATE WHITE FEMINISTS!

These types of tweets were thus not often found within the Top Tweets themselves, but rather were visible through their engagement with Top Tweets by using the reply-function/mentions (@). Considering that Top Tweets are the tweets within the Twitter environment that Twitter has defined as the most engaging, it is interesting that so few Twitter users managed to derail the conversation by openly contesting it within the Top Tweets. One exception to this was however when the American actress Martha Plimpton, with nearly 170 000 followers, called the hashtag out for being divisive for feminism: "The fun thing about this Schwyzer garbage is it gives women another reason to fight with each other. YAY! #solidarityisforwhitewomen." Plimpton's tweet was subsequently caught within the Top Tweets, however also immediately questioned by many other Twitter users by using mentions (@). These tweeters claimed that #solidarityisforwhitewomen was not "infighting" but rather a way to express how the voices of women of color have been silenced within white/mainstream feminism. Thus, a different type of dynamic characterized the conversation following the Top Tweets than the one on the media platforms it was criticizing. This might indicate that Twitter's inclusive architecture allows for less privileged voices to be heard.

Other ways of silencing

One group of tweets, which together formed a theme on their own, was those that in different ways pointed to how claims about white privilege within white/mainstream feminism have been silenced in various ways when raised.

While an open contestation of the hashtag and its main claims was rare within the Top Tweets, tweets which referred to the fact that such delegitimization of the hashtag was occurring within the overall tweet stream that included #solidarityisforwhitewomen were all the more common. Although there were tweets that referred to this type of silencing more in general, many of the tweets referred specifically to how women of color had been silenced within #solidarityisforwhitewomen when they were pointing out the existence of white privilege within feminism:

#solidarityisforwhitewomen is not intended to bash white feminists. It's just asking them to acknowledge their privilege. Calm down trolls.

#solidarityisforwhitewomen when they don't even feel the need to read the hashtag and immediately blame WOC for being "reverse racists".

#solidarityisforwhitewomen who need me to offer them a disclaimer that my tweets don't apply to all white women

Tweets like those above thus point to the more frequent presence of open contestation within the overall hashtag conversation, in relation to the few tweets of such a kind found within the Top Tweets.

Following the reporting on the hashtag on feminist media platforms during the first week, another type of silencing mechanism was revealed in the Top Tweets. This in particular pointed to how different kinds of feminist digital platforms have been complicit in the exclusions of women of color. To reiterate, according to its creator Mikki Kendall, the hashtag itself started as a critique against how in particular some of the larger feminist media platforms in the U.S. have continuously excluded the voices of women of color and used them for their own purposes. Many of the tweets within the hashtag conversation were also explicitly pointing at how the marginalization of women of color has been a prerequisite for advancing within feminist organizations:

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when embracing white elitist culture is crucial to a successful career at a feminist organization

When #solidarityisforwhitewomen trended globally, the story was quickly picked up by international news media such as *Al Jazeera*, and the creator of the hashtag Mikki Kendall was in the following days explaining the aim and background of the hashtag in large media outlets such as *The Guardian* (Kendall, 2013a). While mainstream media, such as *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian* and *Huffington Post* as well as more mainstream women's lifestyle magazines and websites often recognized and included the voices of women of color such as the creator of the hashtag or other influential voices in the hashtag conversation, there was however a clear tendency that the larger

mainstream feminist online platforms failed to recognize the women of color who had been influential in the conversation (see in particular Little, 2013; Ryan, 2013). Such platforms were also used by white feminists who were criticized in the hashtag discussion to provide an explanation for their actions (e.g. Filipovic, 2013). When the hashtag was reported about on the large feminist websites that the hashtag particularly targeted in its critique, such as *Jezebel* and *Ms. Magazine*, neither the initiator of the hashtag conversation nor any of her tweets were at first mentioned in the reporting, nor was it mentioned that the critique that was being leveled in the hashtag in particular concerned these platforms. In contrast, websites and blogs explicitly produced by and for people/women of color instead provided space for women of color to comment and discuss the hashtag themselves (e.g. *The Root*, *Shine for Harriet*, *Gradient Lair*).

When it was noticed that some of the feminist online publications in describing the hashtag and its development had erased its creator Mikki Kendall (as well as Jamilah Lemieux, the creator of the hashtag #blackpowerisforblackmen) from the story, as well as the feminist platforms' own role in the origin of the hashtag, became widely criticized on Twitter and beyond. This critique was expressed in the readers' comments sections of the websites following the articles, but also on Twitter when the posts about the hashtag were published, by using the reply function/mentions (@):

Ms. Magazine @msmagazine 16 aug Twitter minds the intersectional gap with the #solidarityisforwhitewomen and #blackpowerisforblackmen hashtags. <http://bit.ly/17SoUml>

@msmagazine And y'all forget to credit the hashtags creators. Good job on sucking.

@msmagazine Pockets of Twitter may be intersectional, but by ignoring the identities of those hashtags creators you are perpetuating schism.

@msmagazine Oh, shut up. You're proving the whole point of the hashtag. When we said "take a seat" we meant it.

In the case of the feminist blog *Jezebel*, a parody *Jezebel* account was created to mock the original site and its inability to accurately report the events in #solidarityisforwhitewomen as they unfolded, or to absorb the critique that partly was directed towards the site itself. The critique partly resulted in the texts on the websites being amended to include the originator of the hashtag in the story (or, rather in a short amendment after the piece). These (mis)recognitions of the originators of the hashtag and the (mis)representation of its background and context could hence be interpreted

as a, conscious or not, attempt to erase the agency of the creators/initiators of the hashtag conversation, by silencing them and their actions in the actual text. The different examples of the contestation of the re-organization of the meaning of race in the context of feminism hence show various attempts at re-articulating the position of white feminists within the #solidarityisforwhitewomen hashtag.

Incorporation/normalization

The third recurring theme in the hashtag within the framework of contestation was calls that urged others on Twitter to listen and learn from the hashtag conversation.⁹² Some of these “listen-and-learn” tweets were a direct reaction to the open contestation of the hashtag described above, by targeting the (white, feminist) audience who were voicing criticism towards the hashtag within (and outside) Twitter and urged them to “sit down, listen and read” the tweets instead of contesting them. This claim was thus similar to the tweets that pointed to the silencing of women of colors’ voices within the specific hashtag discussion, which demanded a stronger presence in the hashtag discussion by urging others to stop occupying it:

I really need white feminists to quit being defensive & just listen & adjust their worldview. #solidarityisforwhitewomen

The larger part of the “listen-and-learn” tweets were however of a somewhat different type. Often, these tweets were simply calling out for others to read and learn from the hashtag, or just highlighting the existence of the hashtag and that they were listening to it. These tweets were hence primarily a message to the users’ own followers that had not yet found the hashtag, rather than engaging in the Twitter discussion themselves. Particular to these tweets was also that they were often made by self-identified white feminists and directed towards a white feminist audience:

I suggest every white feminist check out #solidarityisforwhitewomen. A good opportunity for us to listen & learn.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen stream is a well worth read, esp if you’re a white feminist. #listen

Just a note for my fellow cis white feminists: The #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen tag is a good place to educate us. Sit back and listen.

⁹² This part of the analysis also builds on the additional 840 Top Tweets retrieved from Twitter’s search engine in April 2017. For a more detailed discussion of how these tweets were generated, see the section on *The selection of Top Tweets and its implications* in Chapter 3.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen is honestly a huge learning experience for all white feminists. Let's start taking some notes and be better.

These “listen-and-learn” tweets were typically made by Twitter users with non-anonymous profiles, indicated by their use of a real first name/surname and profile picture instead of a pseudonym or other type of avatar. Many were also retweeting other self-identified white feminists telling (“fellow”) white feminists and/or white women to sit back and listen and learn. Several of these tweeters were well-known public figures and/or activists, such as Shelby Knox and Lauren Rankin. These tweets could be interpreted as an honest way to attempt to highlight the hashtag to these users’ own privileged networks. In addition, they were made in an environment where it is less clear that a participant is occupying space from other, more subordinated, voices, since literally no one needs to be quiet in order for someone else to be heard. Previous research on feminist conversations about (anti-)racism has however pointed out how these often become centered around (taking care of) white feminists’ feelings and how white feminists often expect to be educated by those that are exposed to racism. Such redirection of attention from anti-racist critique towards whites’ feelings and needs in relation to this critique, can thus function to reduce anti-racist efforts (Idevall, 2015; Srivastava, 2006). In line with this research, the content of these “listen-and-learn” tweets suggests that the Twitter discussions on race and feminism in #solidarityisforwhitewomen was mainly constructed as an *educational opportunity* by self-identified white feminists. Hence, the discussion was primarily perceived – and thus described as – a tool for them to “learn about intersectionality”. This could be interpreted as a (conscious or unconscious) way to reposition white feminists as agents/subjects also in this feminist conversation, something that also was identified and contested within the hashtag conversation itself:

If you are an intersectional feminist you should be reading #blackpowerisforblackmen & still reading #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen

@name Even now, you're just studying us like we were animals in a zoo. We are women too, not your lesser. #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen

Dear fellow women: PLEASE STOP PATRONIZING THIS HASHTAG BY SAYING IT'S “AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN”. #solidarityisforwhite-women #aaaargh

Is WW assuming we all want you to ~ listen&learn ~ instead of shut up and go away #iamnotYourLearningMaterial

During the first days of the hashtag, the “listen-and-learn”-tweets, and the subsequent reactions to them, constituted a relatively large part of the total number of the initial selection of Top Tweets (around 10%). Notably, also one of the by far most retweeted tweets during the first week of the hashtag was a tweet by a self-identified white feminist urging other white feminists to listen to the claims made in the hashtag, rather than disrupting the hashtag with critique. Moreover, when the hashtag was reported in the international press as well as on feminist websites and blogs, the “listen-and-learn” tweets by self-identified white feminists were often included as a significant part of the story about the hashtag (see e.g. Al Jazeera, 2013). Consequently, even though these Twitter users were urging others to read the hashtag, either through simply highlighting that they themselves were listening and learning from it or by asking others to “sit down and listen” instead of disrupting the conversation, these tweets were in various ways (paradoxically) taking up a significant part of the most visible hashtag discussion. This was also a concern expressed in reaction to these types of tweets:

If you are a white woman, just listen to #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Don't co-opt this space from WOC to elevate our own privileged voices.

@name I am. Just listening. But keep getting interrupted by white feminist women saying other white feminist women should listen.

All I've seen in my feed with the #solidarityisforwhitewomen tag is white women telling white women to shut up and listen... Do it, then?

#solidarityisforwhitewomen is when 75% of the tweets are white feminists who say “we need to shut up and listen to this”

As pointed out earlier, the architecture of Twitter allows for a quick redistribution of other users' claims by retweeting the content. Retweeting also functions as an important way to show support for others in the conversation. As boyd et al. (2010, p. 1) point out: “Spreading tweets is not simply to get messages out to new audiences, but also to validate and engage with others”. However, to either simply retweet the claims of others or to actually just sit down and listen was not considered enough by these Twitter users. Instead, it was perceived as important that their active presence was reinstated through these tweets and hence noticed by others in the conversation. Sometimes, the “listen-and-learn” tweets were almost ironically evident in demonstrating how difficult it was for self-identified white feminists to just actually take a step back without intervening in the conversation and highlighting their own (attempt to) silent presence:

Learning so much from #solidarityisforwhitewomen - sometimes just listening & not speaking is what should be done!

Because I think the #solidarityisforwhitewomen is a time for white feminists like myself to LISTEN, I have tried not to say much.

Trying to shut up, sit back, and listen. If I'm uncomfortable, it's because I SHOULD be. #solidarityisforwhitewomen

It sucks that #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen. This WW is shutting the hell up to listen to WoC. I've had more than enough speaking time.

Ien Ang (2003) provides a way of understanding how these type of tweets were trying to reposition white feminists as the agents in the conversation, in describing how feminism functions as a nation, which only incorporates "other" women to the extent that they are not threatening feminism itself:

In this conception, difference can only be taken into consideration insofar as it is not challenging the rightfulness of feminism as such. Feminism functions as a nation which 'other' women are invited to join without disrupting the ultimate integrity of the nation. But this politics of inclusion can only be entertained by those who have the *power* to include, as pointed out poignantly by Spelman (1988, p. 163): Welcoming someone to one's home doesn't represent an attempt to undermine privilege; it expresses it. (Ang, 2003, p. 203f)

Hence, one way to interpret these claims to "listen and learn" is that when self-identified white feminists publicly state that they are *listening and learning* from the hashtag, they are at the same time (consciously or unconsciously) *inviting* the claims of "other" women to be part of a feminist conversation. Instead of, for example, choosing to simply retweet the critique leveled towards white privilege within mainstream feminism, they are in this way repositioning themselves as agents in the conversation, by calling out that *they* actually are listening. Instead of amplifying the voices of women of color these statements could be seen as initiating a process of normalization through an *inclusion* of critical claims by "other" women within feminism. This in order to control the discussion and to escape a more uncomfortable discussion of white feminism/feminists' own role in racist processes, a move that also was noted within the hashtag conversation:

I want to thank everybody that spoke out yesterday on #solidarityisforwhitewomen. From a WW. Listening, growing, and changing the future.

@name You don't even understand you're trying to control the conversation. Your whiteness controls you #solidarityisforwhitewomen.

White feminists say they want to listen and learn but want to direct the conversation so that they're comfortable #Solidarityisforwhitewomen

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen is wanting cookies by making it seem how much you are “listening” to / “learning” from the WoC in this hashtag.

Another consequence of the “listen-and-learn” tweets is that when white feminists are making it about them being there instead of actually taking a step back and just listening, the conversation is redirected from the hashtag’s original claim into being about the presence of white feminists’ listening and learning instead of, for example, how white/mainstream feminism is complicit in racism:

SMH at all these WW who claim they hear us out but dnt do anything for the racist environment we WoC deal wit #solidarityisforwhitewomen

#solidarityisforwhitewomen who want to say they are listening, rather than admit they screwed up #WhiteWomenofPrivilege will never admit wrong

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when they want to “listen” to this hashtag but take no responsibility for their oppression

The “listen-and-learn” tweets directed to a white, privileged, audience were thus as we have seen in several ways contested within the Twitter discussion as an unfruitful way to contribute to the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation. Moreover, these tweets sparked a discussion of how to be a “good ally” also outside Twitter, in which the idea that white feminists needed to step in and make claims on behalf of others, or just stating that they were “listening and learning” from the discussion was criticized. For example, a much linked and retweeted article within #solidarityisforwhitewomen, which in itself was a critical reaction to the “listen-and-learn” discussion in the hashtag, argued that to listen and learn is not enough and compared the hashtag discussion with a picketing line:

I’d like to see white feminists and feminists with other forms of privilege apply this principle to our collective feminism: to think about how you can amplify the voices of women of color without drawing attention to selves. Don’t silence yourselves, or remove yourselves. That will only weaken all of us. Instead, figure out ways to share your resources with other women who possess less. Step back and help others to step forward. Raise your voices at full volume in response to women of color’s calls. (Wong, 2013)

In a similar vein, around two weeks after launching #solidarityisforwhitewomen, Mikki Kendall wrote *After #SolidarityIsFor-WhiteWomen: So You Want To Be An Ally, Now What* in the women’s lifestyle magazine *XO Jane*. In the piece, she specifically instructed white feminists about how to be a good ally, wherein the first step would be to actually listen without chiming into the conversation yourself:

Step 1. Listen. Not to rebut, or chime in, or do anything else but hear and understand what is being said, blogged, tweeted, etc. Just listen. Understand that your role is not to lead, or speak for women of color. We're more than capable of speaking up for ourselves. (Kendall, 2013b)

Thus, pressure was asserted on white feminists to either just listen without intervening or to do more than just listen and learn. For example, by amplifying the voice of women of color instead of drowning it by directing the attention to themselves. It is however important to, again, note that the architecture of Twitter allows for this possibility by retweeting claims (or to read the tweets from others without participating yourself), but that this possibility was simply not recognized by many of these self-identified white feminists. Moreover, even if the discussion above shows that Twitter also became a platform for contesting the ways in which white feminists occupied space in the conversation, the subsequent articles on central media platforms suggest that another consequence of these kinds of interventions is that they not only derailed and took up space in the specific conversation itself. In addition, they affected the larger discussion that the hashtag sparked, which again became centered on the presence and whereabouts of white feminists, instead of focusing the attention on the original claim of the hashtag, hence the marginalization of women of color by mainstream feminist media platforms.

Concluding discussion

This chapter's main purpose has been to explore how the affordances of online platform mediate the power differentials in the competition for voice within subaltern counterpublics. To do this, the chapter took a closer look at (what Twitter defines as) the most visible tweets in #solidarityisforwhite-women in order to analyze what power dynamics characterized the interactions between privileged and marginalized feminists in the emergence of the hashtag conversation, and how the functional and relational aspects of Twitter's affordances underpinned these dynamics. In particular, these dynamics were characterized by a seemingly unconscious, normalization/incorporation logic, by which self-identified white feminists enabled by Twitter's inclusive architecture claimed to be listening and learning from the hashtag, while at the same time directing attention towards their own active presence in the conversation. The analysis thus demonstrates how the reproduction of privilege (in online public debates) can be a very unconscious and unintentional matter, and how the inclusiveness of online platforms can contribute to such processes.

The first part of the analysis demonstrates how the functional aspects of Twitter's affordances, such as its non-reciprocal following-structure and the

encouragement of open profiles, in combination with the hashtag, the mentions-function and hyperlinking, enabled an environment where marginalized groups may come together and reach out with their claims to larger audiences. However, the second part of the analysis points to how such functions at the same time enable relationally privileged groups to take part in conversations on their own terms and thereby reproduce asymmetrical power relations. Interestingly, however, the affordance of anonymity did not seem to play any crucial role in these dynamics, even though the architecture of Twitter has been pointed out as particularly conducive to the use of anonymous profiles.

While extremely inclusive online platforms for public discussions such as Twitter have been pointed out as conducive to the formation of subaltern counterpublics, they usually do not hinder privileged groups from dominating or distorting conversations (Facebook has however included a link to report fake news). While other forms of delegitimizing and silencing also occurred, the most common contestation in the Top Tweets was a more subtle one; namely when self-identified white feminists (presumably unconsciously) attempted to act as advocates of a claim that was originally addressed to them by tweeting that they were “listening and learning” from the conversation and urging other white feminists to do the same. Self-identified white feminists were not dominating the Top Tweets, at least not in terms of the number of original tweets. But they were there and distracted the conversation. In addition, one of the most retweeted tweets within the Top Tweets was by a self-identified white feminist, directed to other white feminist. Hence, Twitter-functions that can be related to the affordances of *visibility* and *networking* enabled self-perceived white feminists to in several ways intervene in the conversation, and direct the attention to their own presence. Re-tweeting, which can be related to the affordance of *metavoicing*, moreover played a crucial role since it enabled the elevation of privileged voices, and was partly dismissed in relation to more marginalized ones.

In the preface to the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes on the importance of centering her discussion on African American women’s ideas instead of always relating them to those of white feminism:

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. vii)

This quotation explains why it can be so important for oppressed groups to be able to develop their ideas without having to take the interests and/or feelings of more dominant groups into consideration. One way to interpret

that self-identified white feminists were tweeting that they were passive participants, or that other white feminists also should be listening and learning from the hashtag, is that they through these tweets (consciously or unconsciously) reinstated their own (historical) agency. While many women of color urged white feminists to be passive in the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation and just listen and learn from it, tweeting that you are listening is in fact not the same as passively listening. Such tweets occupy space in the conversation and direct attention from women of color's original claim to the white feminists expressing their engagement

The way this was done moreover points to how exercising and thus reproducing privilege often is an unconscious matter, done by ordinary people, just going on with their lives (Young, 1996, 2000). The (presumably) unconscious exercise of privilege through the "listen-and-learn" tweets was also noted in the hashtag-conversation itself. Hence, pressure was asserted on white feminists to do more than just listen and learn. For instance, by amplifying the voice of women of color instead of drowning it in a sea of tweets and directing attention to themselves.

While the functional and relational aspects of Twitter's affordances do create the possibility for a more inclusive and diversified forum for representation in relation to more mainstream arenas for public debates, the analysis thus reveals how a larger inclusion of voices, interests and perspectives is not necessarily equivalent to the absence of (the reproduction of) asymmetrical power relations. Idevall (2015) demonstrates that similar dynamics emerge in other online conversations on (anti-)racism, and specifically on the Swedish anti-racist and separatist feminist platform *Makthavarna* ("the power holders") on Instagram. Despite constant reminders by the administrators of the platform that only those who have experienced racism are allowed to participate in the discussions, whites continue to occupy considerable space through their comments. These often take the form of questions where whites seek to educate themselves about racism or through positive judgments of the forum, or the two in conjunction. Despite the positive content of these statements, they nevertheless imply that "persons with experiences of being racialized are forced to relate to white persons' opinions and feelings in relation to racism" and thereby such comments contribute to uphold asymmetrical power relations (p. 21, author's translation). White commentators also repeatedly occupied space in the comments by stating that other white feminists should back off and learn from those with experience from racism. In this way, the commentators in a similar manner to the self-identified white feminists in #solidarityisforwhitewomen reinstate their active presence in the anti-racist conversation and thereby (re)produce asymmetrical power relations.

The inclusive architecture of online platforms may thus present difficulties in forming the type of *de facto* separatist counterpublics that can be a necessary step in order to find the language and confidence to contest domi-

nant meanings and practices in the wider public spheres. It has therefore previously been argued that offline separatist spaces are a necessary base for contesting mainstream publics and that these offline spaces give way to parallel counterpublic structures online (Travers, 2003). In today's media environment, the idea that all online counterpublics need their offline counterparts in order to contest dominant meanings and practices seems like an unrealistic solution. Unsurprisingly, some online counterpublics indeed lack preceding offline counterpublics since online platforms have offered unprecedented possibilities for people to find each other and come together around certain issues, which, for example, has been the case for the asexual community online (Renninger, 2015). Instead, one way could be to consider the ways whereby dominant groups may contest and distort counterpublic conversations, and how such interventions may be counteracted.

How, then, should white feminists have acted to not distort the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation? One possibility, which the Twitter environment allows for, would have been for white feminists to take an active step back and amplified the voices of marginalized others without reinstating their own presence. This is in line with how Dovi (2007, 2009) argues that the *de facto* inclusion of marginalized groups includes amplifying the voices of marginalized others, as well as, in some cases, limiting the access and influence of overrepresented groups. In relation to the case of #solidarityisforwhitewomen, this implies an exercise of self-limitation to open the space for a democratic dialogue. The architecture of Twitter in fact allows for such a quick redistribution of other users' content by retweeting. Retweeting is in addition not only about making a conversation visible to others as these Twitter users claimed to be intending with their "listen-and-learn" tweets, but is also about validating the claims of others as well as engaging with these claims (boyd et al., 2010). White feminists in #solidarityisforwhitewomen could have exerted their agency through only retweeting the claims made by women of color and thereby amplified their presence in the public spheres. Taking that step would not necessarily mean remaining passive but taking a conscious decision to limit one's own presence. It can thus be concluded that for equal voices to be possible on extremely inclusive platforms such as Twitter, privileged groups (such as white feminists in the #solidarityisforwhitewomen conversation) may be required to take an active step back and to find technical ways to put forward the claims of historically disadvantaged groups without reproducing asymmetrical power relations.

Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks

To address the question of how the inclusiveness of digital public venues affects the conditions for egalitarian public conversations, this thesis set out to explicitly analyze how online platforms mediate the reproduction of privilege. By employing the concept of *counterpublics*, an analysis of how privilege (and marginalization) is contested and reproduced in the public spheres through the emergence of a certain type of sub-publics was enabled. However, instead of using a traditional focus on how members of structurally marginalized groups can form counterpublics to challenge existing power structures, the light was turned towards privileged groups. These groups are either (or perceive themselves to be) politically marginalized from dominant public spheres, or are relationally privileged within a structurally marginalized group. I analyzed how online platforms offer such groups additional opportunities to contest and alter dominant public discourses to their own advantage through the platforms' affordances (i.e. the possibilities for action that are built into platforms through how these are governed and designed).

More specifically, the rationales behind a larger inclusion of (certain) counterpublics in the dominant public spheres were explored, as well as how the affordances of online platforms mediate power differentials between and within counterpublics. To answer the research questions, three empirical cases were investigated: the reasoning of gatekeepers in Swedish mainstream news media regarding the governance and design of the formats for user participation provided by the news sites; the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs; and the competition for voice between self-identified white feminists and feminists of color within the Twitter hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen.

This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings of the empirical chapters, and the main contributions of the thesis are then elaborated on. These contributions mainly draw on the shift in analytical focus towards exploring the reproduction of privilege in the context of (online) counterpublic dynamics. In particular, the findings of the empirical chapters have implications for our understanding of the advantages of relational privilege in counterpublic dynamics, as well as for the limits of the focus on inclusion as a main remedy to inequalities in public debates. Finally, the research that is needed to further explore these limitations from a perspective of exclusion is discussed.

A summary of the findings

The recent rise of racist, antifeminist and climate change denying counter discourses, formed by groups that claim to be marginalized from mainstream public venues, raises new issues of how we can understand and analyze power and privilege in the public spheres. Online public venues are often understood as differently configured than traditional ones, in particular due to how these have lowered the thresholds in terms of both access to and participation within public debates. At the same time these are operating within the same power structures as traditional public venues, and it has been shown that online platforms have amplified existing social as well as political inequalities on an aggregated level. We therefore need to know more about how online public venues mediate the reproduction of privilege, in order to increase our understanding of power relations in the public spheres. Employing a revitalized power perspective of the public spheres, as well as a range of different methods and materials, counterpublic dynamics and their prerequisites were investigated on several different types of online platforms. This section summarizes the findings of the empirical chapters and relates these to the larger research question the chapters sought to answer.

Chapter 4 examined the rationales behind the governance and design of some of the digital platforms for public debates within Swedish mainstream news media, with a particular focus on comment sections. The chapter built mainly on qualitative interviews with 27 editors on different organizational levels within some of the most widely read Swedish national as well as regional or local daily newspapers. The main purpose of this chapter was to increase our understanding of the *rationales behind the governance and design of online platforms central to the dominant public spheres*. Online platforms closely connected to the mainstream news media could be presumed to be highly visible to mainstream audiences and thereby one of the main targets for counter-publicity (Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). The rationales behind the governance and design of different types of formats for user participation in the mainstream news media thus become relevant to study since these open up for a larger inclusion of counterpublics in the dominant public spheres. At the time of the study (Feb 2014–Jan 2015), user comments were still the most common type of digital format for user participation within Swedish mainstream news media.

Most of the editors that I interviewed had long since abandoned the idea that such forums would contribute to democratizing public debates by increasing the inclusion of underrepresented voices, nor did they expect the discussions to hold any quality content-wise. On the occasion that this occurred, it was rather perceived as an unexpected consequence of these platforms. Hence, the inclusive design and governance of these platforms was based on many other types of considerations than to ensure the equality of the participants, or the quality of the discussions. The findings instead point

to a strong relationship between including a larger number of participants, as well as diversity of opinion expressions and speaking styles, on their digital platforms, and the newspapers' revenues. This type of inclusion was hence viewed as a (necessary) part of their new business models in order to survive in a new media landscape, and to build and sustain a (new, digital) relationship with their readers. Increasing revenue was thus the main logic behind the decisions that led to an increased inclusion through user comments (this can be for example compared to how similar spaces for public debates such as letters to the editor previously have been governed by quite different rationales). In contrast, the measures that were employed in order to curb the overrepresentation of some voices, and hence inequalities among the discussants (and to some extent remedy the low quality of the comments), primarily concerned different kinds of exclusions. This included raising the barriers to enter through different types of registration procedures, as well as the moderation of illegal and/or offensive comments.

In line with previous research, the results further point to how the priority of user inclusion rather than equal participation or the quality of the content, has led to a "self-selection logic" in relation to what is published (e.g. Reich, 2011). This implies that what is published rather is a consequence of the fact that those who decide to comment perceive that they should contribute to the public conversation, rather than this content being selected (or even encouraged) by the editors depending on its quality, or with the aim of balancing different kinds of voices. What is more, those who tend to self-select their own voice in public debates have thereby been given considerably larger platforms as well as a considerably larger scope in terms of the types of opinions that are accepted as well as how these may be expressed.

In chapters 5 and 6, two cases of online counterpublic emergence were analyzed to examine which groups can benefit from such self-selection logics in the context of counterpublic dynamics, and to thereby explore the logics by which privilege is reproduced in the public spheres. The second empirical chapter is also situated within the context of the Swedish public spheres, and analyzes the emergence of an antifeminist counterpublic on Swedish political blogs in the late 2000s. This counterpublic explicitly emerged in reaction to the great advancements for feminist counterpublics and gender equal policy in Sweden during the last decades. The chapter thereby sought to increase our understanding for *how the affordances of online platforms mediate power differentials **between** counterpublics*. By mainly analyzing blog texts produced within the blogosphere, the chapter demonstrates that many of the leading antifeminist activists appeared to be far from the socioeconomically marginalized men that popularly have been pointed out as the usual suspects behind online antifeminist activism. In contrast, due to their socially privileged positions the bloggers had access to precisely the right kind of capacities to identify the affordances of blogs as inviting to political advocacy through counter-publicity. Moreover, their

social position rendered them a strong feeling of entitlement in relation to participating in public debates on gender equality. The chapter demonstrates that it was this privileged social position in particular that motivated their antifeminist activism: they perceived themselves to be marginalized from mainstream public debates on gender equality due to their social status as highly educated, white, male and heterosexual. While white male professionals certainly are not marginalized from Swedish mainstream media in general – but to the contrary are still heavily dominating these central public venues⁹³ – these kind of antifeminist claims were however at this point in time unusual within Swedish mainstream media. Furthermore, if it was not for the possibility of a certain degree of anonymity, many of the antifeminist bloggers claimed that they would not have run an antifeminist blog. Hence, the affordance of anonymity cut the social costs for engaging in the antifeminist cause in public and thereby attracted constituencies that may not have wanted to make their claims overtly.

Empowered in particular by the affordances of visibility, networking and anonymity, a core of well-resourced antifeminist activists managed to build up an antifeminist network of blogs online that was rather tight and small, and which remained relatively stable over time. The blogs could be used both as efficient platforms for counter-publicity towards wider publics, as well as ideational inspiration and training grounds for other potential antifeminist bloggers. In addition, the blogs were used to target those that were identified as part of feminist counterpublics, or with the feminist cause in general, either directly or through political advocacy. In relation to how online platforms mediate the power differentials *between* counterpublics, this chapter hence demonstrates how the larger inclusion through the affordances of digital public venues provide historically privileged groups additional advantages in counterpublic dynamics. This applies particularly to those who claim to be politically marginalized from mainstream public venues, such as anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian counterpublics that position themselves against subaltern counterpublics with competing political agendas.

Chapter 6 sought to increase our understanding for how *the affordances of online platforms mediate the power differentials within counterpublics*. The hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, coined by the activist and writer Mikki Kendall in August 2013, has been put forward by activists, journalists and researchers alike as a successful use of online platforms in order to elevate voices that have been marginalized on mainstream arenas for public debates historically. Empirically, the chapter builds on the tweets that (by Twitter's algorithm for identifying Top Tweets) had been defined as the most engaged with/visible to other users, during the first week of #solidarityisforwhitewomen. It demonstrates how exercising and reproducing privilege in (online) public debates can be a very unconscious and unintentional

⁹³ See for example Rättvisaren (2018).

matter, and how the inclusiveness of online platforms can contribute to such processes. In these dynamics the affordances of visibility and recognition appeared to play important roles, while the affordance of anonymity seemed less central.

During the first week of #solidarityisforwhitewomen, there were different attempts by self-identified white feminists to contest the claims made by women of color within the hashtag discussion. The most usual way was through a type of tweet that did not directly confront the hashtag's original claim about the marginalization of women of color within mainstream/white feminism (even if such tweets also were present in the Top Tweets). Instead, it was one that encouraged other white feminists to listen and learn from the hashtag conversation. Typically, non-anonymous Twitter users made these "listen-and-learn" tweets. Except for the fact that some of these tweets made it to the Top Tweet selection, one of the most retweeted tweets within the Top Tweets (which indicates that it could be one of the most retweeted tweets within the whole hashtag conversation) was an example of such a tweet. In addition, some women of color (as well as white feminists) claimed that the "listen-and-learn" tweets dominated their entire Twitter feed.

To tweet that one is listening and learning from a conversation could be interpreted as an honest attempt by these Twitter users to highlight the hashtag to their own privileged networks, in an environment where it is less clear that one is occupying space from other, more subordinated, voices when speaking (tweeting) out. Previous research on feminist conversations about (anti-)racism has however pointed out how such interventions may function to reduce anti-racist efforts, since relationally privileged groups tend to reproduce asymmetrical power relations by redirecting the focus towards their own feelings and needs in relation to the critique that is raised (Idevall, 2015; Srivastava, 2006). Within #solidarityisforwhitewomen, this redirection was followed by a repeated focus on how white feminists should act and take part in the discussion when the hashtag conversation was reported on other platforms, rather than on the hashtag's original claim about marginalization of women of color within white/mainstream feminism. Hence, it appeared to have consequences for how the conversation travelled to the wider public spheres. In relation to the question of how online platforms mediate the power differentials *within* counterpublics, this chapter thus demonstrates how the inclusive architecture of online platforms can enable relationally privileged groups to occupy space within subaltern counterpublics, which may impede participation on equal terms.

In sum, the findings of the three empirical chapters partly demonstrate the importance of analyzing the rationales behind the design and governance of online platforms in order to increase our understanding of how the affordances that shape the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres themselves are shaped. In relation to comment sections, the governance and design were tightly connected to economic incentives, which results in a

particular type of inclusion marked by a lack of traditional gatekeeping in exchange for a legal and moral framework for sorting out the worst content. The findings also demonstrate how already privileged groups are given additional advantages by this type of inclusion, and in particular how it can be beneficial for privileged groups that have been politically marginalized in mainstream public venues, such as those with anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic political agendas. In addition, through the difficulty of restraining access to privileged others and the tendency to exaggerate “invisible” (white) privilege, the affordances of online platforms offer several ways whereby the already advantaged can contest the claims made by marginalized others within counterpublics.

Contributions

By focusing on the reproduction of privilege, rather than on how marginalized groups may contest and alter existing power structures, this thesis contributes both theoretically and methodologically to the study of power relations in the public spheres. In particular, it contributes to a theoretical framework which enables an explicit focus on how the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves shape the competition between privileged and marginalized groups, with, sometimes, competing political agendas. Secondly, the findings of the empirical chapters contribute to our understanding of the additional advantages that already privileged groups are provided through the affordances of online platforms, with a particular focus on counterpublic dynamics. Lastly, the findings of the thesis illuminate the limits of a larger inclusion as a central solution to political inequality (in the public spheres) and suggest a more complex relationship between inclusion and political equality, which is in need of further investigation.

A revitalized power perspective on the public spheres

The concept of (subaltern) counterpublics was coined as part of a criticism of the lack of power perspective in classical public sphere theory. In particular, it highlights how subordinated groups have always been forming subpublics that strive to influence dominant public discourses. More recent literature has pointed out that privileged groups perceiving themselves to be marginalized from dominant public spheres also may form counterpublics with the aim to challenge and alter dominant public discourses to their own advantage. To understand and analyze power in the public spheres, it therefore seems important to turn the light towards how privilege is reproduced in the context of counterpublic dynamics. How can we then study such processes when previous literature has mainly focused on how traditionally

marginalized groups may form counterpublics, or partly has disengaged the concept from structural power relations?

As a solution, I suggest a revitalized power perspective on the public spheres, which allows for an analytical separation between counterpublics formed by groups that primarily are *structurally* or *politically* marginalized in the dominant public spheres. In particular, a broader and more specified typology of counterpublics is suggested, which takes both the social as well as the political basis of counterpublics' *actual* exclusion or marginalization from dominant public spheres into account. As a first step to be able to analytically separate different kinds of counterpublics depending on their social and political exclusion, this thesis introduces the concept of *non-subaltern counterpublics*. In addition, I redirect the analytical focus from power differentials between counterpublics and dominant publics to the power differentials between and within counterpublics themselves. This allows for an explicit analysis of how the competition among counterpublics with competing political agendas as well as different access to crucial resources affects their ability to contest and alter dominant discourses.

This framework becomes important not least in light of the development of a multitude of digital public venues, which offer new opportunities for the emergence of counterpublics through their affordances. Bringing the functional and relational aspects of affordances into the analysis of online counterpublic dynamics contributes to an understanding of how the interaction between the social position of potential users and the material structures of digital public venues affect power relations in counterpublic dynamics. Thus, while online platforms on the one hand are providing similar affordances to different groups in terms of their functional aspects (i.e. their technical features), how these may be used also depends on what potential users bring with them onto these platforms in terms of their self-perception, technical skills, and other types of resources.

Focusing on the reproduction of privilege in the context of *online* counterpublic dynamics also rendered some methodological contributions to the counterpublic literature. Analyzing platform affordances, social positions and conversational dynamics in parallel demonstrates how material and social structures explicitly can be brought into the analysis of counterpublics. This is especially relevant to the growing literature on online antifeminist counterpublics, or other parts of the larger “manosphere”, since it tend to focus primarily on the content of the discourses produced within these online environments. Such analytical focus thus risks to overlook other important aspects of power relations. In addition, the importance of also analyzing the ideational context within which platform affordances is *constructed* – hence some of the important prerequisites for the emergence of online counterpublics – was demonstrated in Chapter 4. The analysis of the Swedish anti-feminist counterpublic in Chapter 5 moreover points to some of the ethical and practical challenges when studying online counterpublics. In particular,

the increased possibility of different degrees of anonymity when making political claims in public may overthrow the expected asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the people that are studied. It gives the people studied a new type of control over the situation, since they often have more information about the researcher than the researcher has about those studied. This can in particular be the case when it concerns political environments that are known to be reactive in their advocacy by primarily attacking their opponents anonymously. To anonymize the material can therefore be an important strategy not only to protect the people studied but also to protect the researcher. This can in addition be particularly relevant when studying non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas, or other groups that can be expected to react with hostility and/or violence.

While turning the light towards the reproduction of privilege resulted in some important theoretical and methodological contributions to the counterpublic literature, this shift in analytical focus however most importantly allowed for an increased understanding of the additional advantages afforded to already privileged groups by online platforms in the context of counterpublic dynamics.

The additional advantages of relational privilege

This thesis set out to explore how online platforms mediate the reproduction of *privilege* in the public spheres. Posing the question slightly differently, the aim was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the power dynamics that characterize (online) public deliberation. The additional advantages afforded to already privileged groups through the affordances of online platforms is an important contribution brought by this shift in analytical focus, which increases our understanding of counterpublic dynamics.

We already know that privileged groups have been advantaged in public deliberation historically, which has resulted in a larger formal as well as informal inclusion of these groups in central public venues. For example, privileged groups have had greater access to important networks and traditional gatekeepers, which has enabled their entry into central public venues. In addition, privileged groups have been listened to and treated with respect in public deliberation to a larger extent since they are perceived as part of the norm and since they thus have a communicative style that is perceived as appropriate. Given such historical advantages in public deliberation, the larger formal as well as informal inclusion through online public venues could therefore be expected to be beneficial to the emergence of subaltern counterpublics with egalitarian and democratic political agendas; a development that has also been demonstrated by previous research. The findings of the empirical chapters in this thesis, however, demonstrate some of the ways whereby the affordances of online public venues also offer new chal-

lenges to such processes by providing already privileged groups with additional advantages in counterpublic dynamics.

Chapter 4 provided the larger picture of the ideational context within which some of the affordances shaping the additional advantages of non-subaltern counterpublics are constructed. In particular, it was shown how inclusion is tightly connected to economic incentives. The priority of inclusion, rather than the equality (or quality) of the conversation, implies that privileged groups are indirectly given new possibilities to influence dominant public spheres with their counter-publicity. Specifically, the possibility of a much larger scope of published material on the digital venues for public discussions leads to a decreased traditional gatekeeping in exchange for a legal and moral framework for sorting out the worst content in discussions. This in turn leads to the proliferation of a “self-selection logic”, which implies that a user is a lot less dependent on being selected by others in order to participate, in comparison to similar offline forums.⁹⁴ Instead, given that the user perceives the affordances of online platforms as inviting, they are primarily dependent on their own self-perception as entitled to participate in the public conversation it concerns.

The feeling of entitlement that follows from a privileged social position has been pointed out as a crucial asset for expressing political opinions (Bourdieu, 1984). While entitlement previously has been related to digital inequality (Robinson, 2009), it remains to be developed in relation to online political activism (Schradié, 2018). The findings of this thesis suggest that entitlement plays an important role in the additional advantages privileged groups are provided with in counterpublic dynamics through this type of inclusion. In particular if this is combined with a greater access to the specific resources that have been consistently demonstrated as necessary to perceive the affordances of online platforms as “inviting” such as education and technical knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the feeling of entitlement can be expected to be particularly prominent in relation to discussions initiated by relationally underprivileged groups and communities.

Chapter 5, on the emergence of a Swedish antifeminist counterpublic, demonstrates how online platforms mediate the power differentials between counterpublics: the antifeminist activists had, due to their social position, access to precisely the right kind of capacities in order to perceive the functional affordances of political blogs as inviting to counter-publicity. This social position also gave them a self-perception as an entitled contributor to public conversations (on gender equality). Previous studies on similar political groups and movements in the U.S. context have pointed to how increas-

⁹⁴ On such platforms other types of gatekeepers and gatekeeping practices certainly occur. However, these are built around other types of logics, of which the ability to self-select your own voice in order to reach visibility in public debates forms an important starting point (see e.g. Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

ing class inequalities, and in particular the relative economic deprivation of the group of middle and working class white men (coupled with increased gender and racial equality), has been an important component of aggrieved entitlement as a political driving force (Faludi, 1999; Kimmel, 2013). In contrast, this study shows that while a perceived economic deprivation can certainly fuel aggrieved entitlement, it is not a necessary ingredient. Hence, the antifeminist bloggers did not express that they were engaging in this cause due to socio-economic marginalization. Rather, they had a perception that, due to their socio-economically privileged position, they were entitled to participate in public debates on gender equality, which they perceived themselves to be marginalized from.

Moreover, the ability to advocate counter-publicity anonymously makes it easier to voice controversial claims in public that are perceived as socially stigmatizing and/or marginalized from mainstream public venues. The affordances of anonymity provided by online platforms have therefore previously been pointed out as conducive for the emergence of counterpublics formed by structurally marginalized groups (e.g. Fox & Warber, 2015; Renninger, 2015). Dominant discourses in democratic societies are however not detrimental for political equality *per se*, and they can certainly get worse for such groups. Thus, the additional advantages of relational privilege also highlights how the affordance of anonymity provides an increased possibility for dominant groups to (unconsciously or consciously) challenge and alter dominant discourses to their own advantage, for example making these *less* gender or racially equal.

What is more, while online platforms have lowered the barriers for accessing public debates, they have also greatly increased the threshold for actually being heard since the competition for voice is so much greater (Hindman, 2009). Thus it is not only the privileged position of the activists themselves in relation to their purpose of advocacy that is important for providing these groups with additional advantages, but also the economic resources and influential networks they addition are more inclined to have access to. In particular, these additional advantages present new opportunities in the competition for political voice, in alternative as well as dominant public spheres, for non-subaltern counterpublics with anti-egalitarian and/or anti-democratic political agendas (i.e. privileged groups who are, or perceive themselves to be, marginalized from dominant public spheres).

The proportions this can take are well illustrated by the recent so called *Cambridge Analytica* scandal, where Facebook data was (illegally) used to strategically target a large number of individuals with racist propaganda. The aim was to spur the nationalist and right-wing extremist alt-right movement in the U.S. When the U.K. based data analytics firm *Cambridge Analytica* was bought by Robert Mercer, a well-known U.S. billionaire and Republican donor, it refocused its activities into fueling the alt-right movement in the U.S. before the upcoming 2016 U.S. elections. In particular, the data *Cam-*

bridge Analytica had retrieved from over 50 million Facebook users was used to identify certain types of individuals who would be particularly susceptible to racist propaganda. These individuals were then targeted with racist messages through invitations to Facebook groups that were locally anchored in U.S. towns. When the Facebook groups grew big enough, people were invited to offline meetings in local venues, which became a start for the growing alt-right movement in the U.S. As the whistle blower Christopher Wiley puts it in an interview with the Swedish broadsheet *Dagens Nyheter*:

That was enough to give the feeling that a movement was emerging and to make them think: “Everybody is thinking like me...[...] They are starting to organize themselves. That is how you create a rebellion. This was how the alt-right movement arose and that was one of the things Cambridge Analytica worked on. (Larsson, 2018, author’s translation)⁹⁵

The *Cambridge Analytica* scandal moreover shows how the fueling of counterdiscourses through online platforms may have an impact on the highest decision-making levels. In addition to spinning local alt-right organizations, Wiley claims that the different catch-phrases used by Donald Trump in his 2016 election campaign such as “drain the swamp” and “deep state”, were first tested in the Facebook groups to later be successfully reused in Trump’s campaign speeches (Larsson, 2018, see also Cadwalladr, 2018; Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2018). Even though the extent to which these strategies actually were effective still remains to be investigated, the example of *Cambridge Analytica* illustrates how the additional advantages privileged groups are provided with in the context of online counterpublic dynamics, present great opportunities to contest the claims of (marginalized) groups with competing political agendas, thereby challenging and altering dominant public discourses. In addition, the example of *Cambridge Analytica* illustrates how these additional advantages become important in the light of how political interests are constructed in the representation process. Recent theories of representation argue that political interests should not be understood as already “out there” ready to be represented by those elected to formal political institutions. Instead political interests are constituted in the process whereby political claims are made and received (see e.g. Saward, 2010; Severs, Celis, & Erzeel, 2016; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Hence, already privileged groups with anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian political agendas are not only offered new possibilities to come together and voice their own interests and needs in public: they are also given additional possibilities to invoke such interests and needs in others.

⁹⁵ “Det räckte för att ge känslan av att en rörelse växte fram och få dem att tänka: “Alla tänker som jag...[...] De börjar organisera sig själva. Så skapar man ett uppror. Det var så alt-right-rörelsen uppstod och det var en av sakerna Cambridge Analytica jobbade på” (Larsson, 2018)

Entitlement as a driving force behind the reproduction of privilege in the context of counterpublic dynamics should however not be understood as a sentiment exclusively belonging to groups that have been the most privileged historically, but as a relational mechanism (that indeed may take different expressions depending on the context). Chapter 6 on #solidarityisforwhitewomen demonstrated how the feeling of entitlement, coupled with Twitter's affordances, invited a (seemingly unintentional) distortion of the hashtag conversation by self-identified white feminists. In relation to the competition *within* counterpublics, the additional advantages rendered to privileged groups in public deliberation thus imply that relationally privileged groups within counterpublics in several ways are enabled to (unconsciously or consciously) hijack public discussions.

In the counterpublic theory formulated by Fraser (1990) and Felski (1989), public venues such as feminist bookstores, journals, local meeting places, etc., are referred to as instrumental for enabling the emergence of subaltern counterpublics. One important aspect of physical public venues is that they are relatively easy to restrain privileged others access to. Today, however, many subaltern counterpublics emerge on digital public venues that have the opposite characteristics: they can make it very difficult to shut privileged groups out from discussions. First, the enhanced ability to network internally, and target wider external audiences by instant self-publication in parallel makes the inward and outward-oriented goals of counterpublics (i.e. to come together to formulate interests and needs internally as well as to target wider publics with counter-publicity) likely to occur simultaneously. Due to their inclusiveness, online platforms are thus difficult to maintain as "safe spaces" for the formulation of the interests and needs of structurally marginalized groups. What is more, the higher the inclusiveness of the platform, the more difficult it is to exclude others from the conversation or to maintain a conversation undisturbed. Thus, on a platform like Twitter, which has been put forward as extremely inclusive, and hence less resource demanding than for example blogs, it is also more difficult to hinder privileged others from attacking, contesting or distorting the conversation. This suggests that non-subaltern counterpublics are rendered an additional advantage through their increased possibility to form influential counterpublics on more resource-demanding, and hence less inclusive, platforms, such as political blogs. Second, the affordance of visibility through instant self-publication to a virtual audience may also exaggerate unconscious privilege since it makes it more difficult to comprehend the space that one occupies from marginalized others in public discussions. Third, the hidden algorithms that are increasingly employed to sort out the "most relevant" information to social media users, while presented as neutral by the social media companies, are in themselves privileging certain tweets over others and thereby contributing to these power dynamics within Twitter discussions.

These findings point to the importance of analyzing how the intersection of a (privileged) social position and political ideology is related to an increased (in)equality in public debates. In particular, we need to further analyze the emergence of non-subaltern online counterpublics. More research is needed on the logics underpinning (aggrieved) entitlement, and how such sentiments are functioning as a driving force behind anti-democratic and/or anti-egalitarian (online) counterpublics, as well as the competition for voice within counterpublics. We also need to know more about the particular ways whereby digital platforms are used to attack subaltern counterpublics and/or marginalized groups and communities. Moreover, we know that far from all non-subaltern counterpublics attack or contest the claims made by traditionally marginalized groups and communities. More studies of non-subaltern counterpublics could thus help to develop a more nuanced typology of different types of non-subaltern counterpublics, as well as a greater understanding of the various ways whereby non-subaltern counterpublics can use the affordances of online platforms. Such studies would, in turn, be crucial for informing both theoretical and empirical analyses of counterpublic dynamics. Lastly, the findings of this thesis demonstrate the need to include a critical perspective on how the affordances of online platforms can underpin power dynamics also within subaltern counterpublics, and how such internal dynamics can have consequences for which counter discourses reach the wider public spheres.

The limits of inclusion and implications for further research

One important starting point of this thesis was the literature within feminist political theory that has been theorizing formal and in particular informal inclusion in public deliberation as a primary remedy to political inequality (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). This literature has been very influential not least in research within the growing field of gender and politics, in order to theorize and analyze how structurally marginalized groups may reach an increased political presence and influence. In this research, the focus on inclusion has thus been instrumental. It thereby forms part of the large literature within democratic theory that Dovi (2009) denotes as “a perspective of inclusion” since it is primarily preoccupied with questions that concern how we can make public deliberation more inclusive. It thus assumes that “democratic representation requires an *expansive* political arena. From the perspective of inclusion, the more inclusion, the better” (p. 1172). The idea of including more and more (subaltern) counterpublics as a remedy to political inequality in the public spheres thus falls under a perspective of inclusion.

While online platforms for public debates are often extremely inclusive in both formal and informal terms as compared to traditional public venues, they still however have great problems with political inequality. This is perhaps not particularly surprising since public discussions on these venues

operate within the same kind of power structures as those on traditional public venues. The persisting, and even enforced, inequalities in political voices online, despite the inclusion of a larger variety and number of voices, interests, opinions and perspectives, nevertheless highlight how certain types of inclusion can be an insufficient solution to political inequalities. Based on the main findings of this thesis, which demonstrate some of the logics whereby relationally privileged groups are provided additional advantages through more inclusive public venues, this final section will be used to discuss the limits of certain types of inclusion as an efficient solution to political inequalities and the need for a more explicit focus on (democratic) exclusion.

One implicit assumption the literature written from a perspective of inclusion makes is that a larger political inclusion will expand and thereby deepen democracy, while exclusion rather is related to counter democratic rationales (Dovi, 2009). What we know from previous research is however that the inclusion of a larger number and variety of voices, interests and perspectives in political decision making can be driven by many other kinds of rationales than to increase political equality. For example, literature on the introduction of different kinds of gender quotas has demonstrated that such political inclusion can be driven by motivations such as gaining international prestige or advantages in power struggles on a national level (see e.g. Towns, 2010; Weeks, 2018). Similarly (albeit concerning a very different public venue), Chapter 4 sheds light on the logics that drive design decisions in relation to digital platforms for public debates. Due to their professional responsibilities and historical role as the main gatekeepers in the dominant public spheres, the editors in traditional news media could on the one hand be viewed as more likely to be driven by intrinsic democratic values. As a contrast, the multinational companies that are responsible for the design and governance of some of today's largest venues for public conversations such as Twitter, Inc. or Facebook, Inc are less likely to be driven by such motivations. The chapter however demonstrates that inclusion in traditional news media settings is primarily influenced by the logics of the new business models of the newspapers forced by a new digital reality. Thus, the inclusion of a larger number and variety of voices on their digital platforms is promoted as long as it can help sustain a (digital) relationship with their readers, and enough advertising revenue through a sufficient number of "clicks". This logic also seems to persist even though the design and governance of the platforms are changing over time. For example, in relation to platform providers, the new software for user comments (*Ifrågasätt*) is primarily promoted as a way to increase traffic and revenue, rather than to increase the equality (or the quality) of public debates.

Moreover, the literature written from a perspective of inclusion often focuses on how marginalized groups, through different types of inclusion, can be provided with increased possibilities for participating on equal terms in

public deliberation. Previous research on how marginalized groups could, or should, be included in political decision-making have for example focused on how the settings for public deliberation can be more accommodating to a wider range of speaking styles and discussion norms, as well as the importance of developing alternative, more inclusive, deliberative arenas (see Hayward, 2004). However, by focusing on how the inclusive architecture of online platforms gives additional advantages to already privileged groups, the empirical chapters in different ways demonstrate how the more inclusive design and governance of many online platforms also benefits those who due to their social position have access to the right kind of self-perception and other kinds of resources and skills to *self-select* their own voice, rather than being dependent on a selection by others. Chapter 5 on the emergence of a Swedish antifeminist counterpublic shows how the greater inclusion of politically marginalized groups can imply more, rather than less, domination. Such an inclusion can grant dominant groups space to compete with relationally marginalized groups for political influence. Chapter 6 on the power differentials within #solidarityisforwhitewomen moreover shows how actions that can be related to an increased informal inclusion, such as recognition, also can function to reproduce privileged positions depending on *how* such recognition is undertaken by more privileged subjects.

While Chapter 4 demonstrated how the increased inclusion of counterpublics in the dominant public spheres mainly was driven by economic incentives, it was also shown how the editors rather needed to focus explicitly on how to *exclude* certain participants, argument styles and opinions in order to increase the equality as well as the quality of the conversation (and to thereby restore the relationship with their readers and advertisers, among other things). This kind of exclusion primarily implied a legal and moral framework for sorting out the worst content among the contributions. This is also in line with how most of the larger social media platforms have increasingly been governed in order to keep up with legal requirements and to nurture a healthy community and the creative output of users, but also to avoid losing users as well as advertisers or damaging the corporate image⁹⁶ (Gillespie, 2017). However, while such adjustments have implied a larger exclusion or marginalization of those who express themselves in a way that is judged as illegal or offensive, the type of inclusion that still persists has given those who self-select (and keep their comments within a certain legal and moral framework) a much larger space for expressing their opinions in very visible public arenas. Hence, even though the worst content, such as blatant racism and sexism, is sorted out, we can expect that the inequality among those commenting (or not) will persist if there are no active measures taken in order to prevent some voices from dominating the discussions.

⁹⁶ Due to the scale of these platforms, moderation of content or the suspension of users is almost always done post publication (if at all) (Gillespie, 2017).

The consequences of such inclusion/exclusion could be illustrated by previous research on the type of groups and political claims that are overrepresented in user comments. On the one hand, it has been shown that men as a group tend to be greatly overrepresented among commentators (Martin, 2015; Pierson, 2015). On the other hand, climate skeptic counterpublics have made great use of comment sections in German mainstream news media to promote their political agenda, vis-à-vis the mainstream perspective (Kaiser, 2017). McCright and Dunlap (2011) have demonstrated that in the U.S. context, climate denialist views are most prominent among conservative white males. Hence, the increased inclusion through user comments in mainstream news media, and similar formats for user participation, seems to indirectly, yet drastically, increase the space for already privileged groups advocating politics that previously have been marginalized by mainstream news media, which could have devastating effects on the world's most marginalized groups. More research that combines an analysis of the social inclusion of commenters and the kind of counterdiscourses promoted on these public venues central to dominant public spheres is needed.

The additional advantages that the affordances of online platforms are rendering relationally privileged groups in counterpublic dynamics, as well as how these affordances can offer various ways for privileged groups to attack or contest the claims or representatives of traditionally marginalized groups and communities, hence highlights the limits of a larger inclusion if the domination of some groups is not at the same time explicitly regulated or challenged. It may here be useful to clarify that understanding inclusion as an important prerequisite for democratic public debates in feminist political theory of course does not refer to a shallow type of inclusion that simply entails a numerically increased presence, but rather an inclusion that entails a larger *de facto* participation on equal terms. While the concept of inclusion in feminist political theory hence has encompassed the norm of political equality, and, consequently, *exclusion* of domination, the exclusion that might be necessary in order to achieve *de facto* participation on equal terms is seldom explicitly theorized or discussed (see e.g. Young, 2000, see also Dovi, 2009 for a similar argument).⁹⁷ However, when redirecting the analytical focus towards the reproduction of privilege in the public spheres, the focus on inclusion and the relative “silence” on the importance of a parallel exclusion becomes less fruitful for the analysis. In order to enable an analysis of the reproduction of privilege as well as how such processes may be countered, it is thus helpful to disentangle exclusion and political equality from the concept of inclusion, making explicit that inclusion *as well as* exclusion are rather means to political equality, than ends in themselves. Given

⁹⁷ For example, in her seminal work *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young states: “[W]hen I refer to a norm of inclusion I shall understand it to entail the norm of political equality” (Young 2000, p. 24).

this disentanglement, more explicit focus is in addition needed on how to *democratically exclude or marginalize* dominant groups as a means to political equality, in particular on more informal political arenas such as public sphere venues.

In relation to anti-democratic politics and organizations, previous exclusion strategies within democracies have primarily concerned the legal prohibition of hate speech and right wing extremist political organizations and parties (Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018). Measures taken to repress anti-democratic politics may also include “explicit and stringent public criticism of anti-democratic political forces” as well as monitoring those associated with relevant organizations (Plotke, 2006, p. 21). Such repressive and exclusionary measures by the state have come under harsh criticism from political theorists for their underlying elitist logics, illiberalism and for the risk of being counterproductive (Malkopoulou & Norman, 2018; Plotke, 2006). Conversely, others have argued that the exclusion of groups that through their presence in politics oppress others can be a necessary means to achieve participation on equal terms. When it comes to the domination of already privileged groups on more formal representative arenas such as parliaments it has been suggested that in order to secure political equality it is not enough to only focus on including more (and more) representatives; we also need to consider the informal or even formal *exclusion* of dominant speakers so that others can be heard (see Dovi, 2007, 2009; Murray, 2014). Dovi (2009) denotes this “a perspective of exclusion”, in contrast to the perspective of inclusion that has previously been dominating within democratic theory. While advocates of the perspective of inclusion have focused on the inclusion of more voices in political decision making processes in order to remedy political inequalities, a perspective of exclusion in contrast acknowledges that the inclusion of an increasing number of voices can be detrimental to political equality if privileged social groups at the same time are able to compete with the voices of disadvantaged groups under the same conditions:

This perspective recognizes that power and influence must be taken away from privileged groups who are overrepresented within democratic institutions if the representation of historically disadvantaged groups is to be improved. Not only do some voices need to be brought in, some voices need to be muted [...] the adequate representation of historically disadvantaged groups may require those who occupy relationships of privilege to shut up, recuse themselves, or even resign coveted positions of authority in order to create space for disadvantaged groups. (Dovi, 2009, p. 1172-1173)

When it comes to formal representative arenas such as parliaments, different applications of the perspective of exclusion have been suggested. Dovi (2009) puts forward *the oppression principle*, which should guide us when deciding whom to exclude. Hence, if the overrepresentation of some voices is resulting either in the direct oppression of others or if it strengthens privi-

leges in a way that sustains the oppression of others, these voices should be marginalized. The oppression principle hence concerns informal exclusion/marginalization. Murray (2014) suggests that we should introduce quotas for men in parliaments, in order to ensure that privileged groups are not overrepresented in formal politics. Through a formal rule that curbs the overrepresentation of dominant groups, such quotas would thus create room for other kinds of voices to be heard. Accordingly, this boils down to a type of formal exclusion of overrepresented privileged groups, such as ethnic majority men from economically privileged backgrounds.

A perspective of exclusion has thus previously mainly been theoretically and empirically applied to more formal actors and venues for political representation, such as elected politicians and parliaments. Considering the implications of the larger inclusion through digital public venues for political (in)equality in the public spheres – what happens if we take the perspective of exclusion to more informal arenas for political representation and advocacy? What new questions would it generate, and what type of further research would it spur?

One such area could be to look at issues related to inclusion from a perspective of exclusion. For example, how should inclusion be designed and governed in order not to increase the power differentials between historically marginalized and privileged groups? How may certain kinds of inclusion benefit not only those who are excluded and marginalized depending on their social position, but also those who primarily are excluded or marginalized due to their political position? Is there any risk that in particular those advocating politics that directly or indirectly attack the living conditions of relationally marginalized groups would be boosted? What consequences does a larger inclusion have for the kind of “safe spaces” or separatism crucial for historically disadvantaged groups to come together and formulate their interests and needs? Another research agenda would be focused on normative issues related to how a perspective of exclusion could be applied to more informal arenas for political representation and activism, such as the public spheres. For example, is it in practice possible to exclude or marginalize in such settings (in democratic societies)? What would such exclusion or marginalization look like? Who should be marginalized? In which phase of the advocacy/representation process should these groups be marginalized? For example, should these be excluded *a priori*?

Pending this research, this thesis directs us to some of the implications a perspective of exclusion on online public spheres could include, without being limited to: For *participants* in online public debates it would imply an active self-regulation of one’s own voice in debates where one is relationally over-privileged. In addition, such an active step back would also imply putting forward the voices of subordinate others if and when possible without occupying space with one’s own voice. For the *designers of online platforms*, it would demand an active exclusion or marginalization of dominant

voices when possible. This not only implies sorting out the worst content in discussions, but also examining the consequences of an increased inclusion in relation to equality, as well as finding ways to actively balance different voices if needed. And last, for *those analyzing (online) public debates*, a perspective of exclusion would imply understanding and acknowledging the difference between marginalized political claims raised by socially privileged claim makers and socially marginalized claim makers, and how the former group may benefit greatly from the inclusiveness of online public venues at the expense of the voices of the latter.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview themes and questions

Below are the themes and questions that functioned as starting points during the interviews that constituted the main material generated for Chapter 4. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the exact formulation and order of the questions should however only be regarded as an example. Different themes and questions were in addition given more focus depending on the interviewees' position at the editorial office (for example, as editor-in-chief, debate editor or digital editor). In particular, questions that concerned larger issues in relation to formats for user participation, such as the purpose, responsibility and strategies for this type of content, were more in focus when interviewing the editors-in-chief, while more technical questions were in focus when interviewing other staff, such as the digital editors. Moreover, two of the interviews (interview 26 and 27) had the character of pilot-interviews, thus there were additional themes and questions posed to these interviewees that are not taken up below since they had less relevance for the study.

Professional background

Tell me a bit about your professional background and how you have worked with formats for user participation at the editorial office(s).

- For how long have you had your current position?
- Have you been in a similar position at other editorial offices (which?) and what other positions have you had?
- Have there been any major changes regarding formats for user participation during this time? Can you shortly describe how you perceive that the discussion about such formats has evolved over time?

Current state and purpose of formats for user participation

- How would you describe the formats for user participation you have today? What are the main components?

- Why do you have these formats for user participation connected to the news site? Why have you chosen this particular kind of format?
- Which are the main benefits with (these kinds of) formats for user participation, and which are the major difficulties from your perspective?
- Do you use the comments in your (journalistic) work besides providing room for discussions on the news site?

Room for Manoeuver

- Who usually has the final decision about the governance and design of the formats for user participation at the newspaper/editorial office?
- (To the editors-in-chief) Would it be possible for you to decide to shut down the formats for user participation at the news site?
- How do you think this would affect the relationship to the readers?
- Where do most initiatives in relation to formats for user participation come from at the editorial office?

Responsibility

- How would you describe the responsibility you have (as editor-in-chief/journalist) for the content that is published in different formats for user participation?
- Does it in any way differ in relation to other editorial content?

Inclusion

- Are comments allowed on all the articles? If not, how do you decide which articles to allow comments on/which to publish on Facebook?
- Why have you chosen the particular type of software you have for commenting?
- What kind of registration is required (if any) to comment, and why have you chosen this type?
- Do you allow for anonymous comments/commentators? Why/why not?

- If anonymity is allowed, what is the difference in relation to previous traditional formats for user participation such as letters to the editor? Why do the logics differ?
- What type of content moderation do you apply and why (why different in relation to different formats)? Has this changed over time, and if so, why?
- What rules do you have for moderation of content? Are these written down (can I have access to these)?
- Who is moderating? Is it done at the editorial office or somewhere else?
- Do you see any problems with moderation of content (some say that it is censorship)?
- How do the readers/users react when you remove comments?
- Is there are mechanism for blocking users? If yes, what type?

Equality

- Do you perceive that (the formats for user participation currently employed at the newspaper) is a forum that is equally accessible for all of your readers? Do you perceive that some types of commenters or perspectives/opinions are overrepresented?
- Do you perceive that (the formats for user participation currently employed at the newspaper) contributes to an increasing variety in the perspectives and opinions that are expressed in public debates? What kinds of perspectives and opinions for example?
- Have you ever more systematically examined the social composition of the commenters or the opinions expressed by these?
- Have you in any ways worked with increasing the accessibility of the formats or the variety of perspectives and opinions expressed? Do you perceive that you have any responsibility in relation to these matters? Why/why not?

Quality

- How would you describe the content of the Facebook/user comments qualitatively?
- How important is the quality of the content of the Facebook/user comments, and why is this important/not so important?

- Do you perceive that the content of the Facebook/user comments affect the newspaper in any way (legitimacy/branding/etc.)?
- (How) do you in any way work with increasing the quality of the Facebook/user comments? How? If no, why not?

Appendix B – Interviews

Below is the complete list of interviews that constitute the main material generated for Chapter 4. The indicated position at the editorial office is the one that the interviewee had at the time of the interview. Typically, an interview lasted around 40 minutes. A few of the interviews were however much shorter, and some longer. In some cases the purpose of the interviews was mainly to probe for very specific information, and in other cases the interviewees had very limited time.

1. Anders Ingvarsson, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Sundsvalls Tidning, 10th of October 2014
2. Mikael Rothsten, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, 20th of October 2014
3. Magnus Östlund Mörk, Web Manager, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, 20th of October 2014
4. Daniel Lundström, Digital Development Manager, Nya Wermlands-Tidningen, 20th of October 2014
5. Katrin Säfsström, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Nerikes Allehanda, 28th of October 2014
6. Herman Nikolic, Digital Manager, Nerikes Allehanda, 28th of October 2014
7. Christofer Ahlqvist, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Metro, 29th of October 2014
8. Linnéa Jonjons, Development Editor, Metro, 29th of October 2014
9. Jan Helin, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Aftonbladet, 3rd of November 2014
10. Lars Johansson, Editor-in-Chief, Helsingborgs Dagblad, 6th of November 2014
11. Magnus Ericsson, News Director, Helsingborgs Dagblad, 6th of November 2014
12. Pia Rehnquist, Editor-in-Chief, Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 7th of November 2014
13. Teresa Lindstedt, Editor of Åsikter, Sydsvenska Dagbladet, 7th of November 2014
14. Anders Nilsson, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Norrköpings Tidningar, 10th of November 2014
15. Thomas Möller, Web Manager, Norrköpings Tidningar, 10th of November 2014
16. Thelma Kimsjö, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning, 11th of November 2014
17. Karin Grahn-Wetter, Web Editor, Vestmanlands Läns Tidning, 11th of November 2014

18. Stefan Eklund, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Borås Tidning, 24th of November 2014
19. Erik Klefberg, Web Manager, Borås Tidning, 24th of November 2014
20. Tobias Hjelm, Debate Editor, Borås Tidning, 24th of November 2014
21. Cecilia Krönlein, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Göteborgs-Posten, 25th of November 2014
22. Caroline Carlsson, Dialogue Editor, Göteborgs-Posten, 25th of November 2014
23. Sofia Dahlström, News Director, Göteborgs-Posten, 25th of November 2014
24. Peter Fellman, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher, Dagens Industri, 30th of January 2015
25. Maria Nilsson, Managing Editor for DI.se, Dagens Industri, 30th of January 2015
26. Maria Ripenberg, Editorial Writer and Debate Editor, Uppsala Nya Tidning, 4th of March 2014
27. Carina Stensson, Debate Editor, Svenska Dagbladet, 27th of February 2014

Appendix C – Overview of governance and design of user comments

Below is a compilation of the governance and design of user comments at the 14 newspapers included in the study at the time of the interviews conducted for Chapter 4 (Oct–Nov 2014). The overview is based on material gathered on the news sites and generated during the interviews, and is focused on aspects of governance and design that were discussed during the interviews and in the analysis.

Newspaper	User comments	Registration	Anonymity	Restrictions	Pre/post moderation	Positive/negative instructions	Outsourcing moderation	Facebook Page(s)	Facebook moderation
Aftonbladet	Yes	Yes (FB)	Yes/No ⁹⁸	Article type	Post	Mainly negative	Yes	Yes	Post/ not so much moderation
Svenska Dagbladet	Yes	Yes (Disqus)	Yes	Article type/3 comments per article	Post	Mainly negative	Yes	Yes	Post
Metro	Yes	Yes (FB)	Yes/No	Article type/7 days after publication	Post	Mainly negative	Yes	Yes	Post
Dagens Industri	Yes	Yes	No/Yes ⁹⁹	Article type	Pre	Negative	Partly	Yes	Post

⁹⁸ Yes/No here means the user has to comment via their Facebook profile which is often personal, however it is still possible to create an anonymous profile and remain anonymous towards the editorial staff concerning real name, address, phone number etc.

⁹⁹ No/Yes here implies that a user needs to register with their name to be able to comment, and sometimes also with an address and phone number hence they are not anonymous towards the editorial staff, but they can still have an anonymous alias when commenting on articles

Vestmanlands Läns Tidning	Norrköpings Tidningar	Sundsvalls Tidning	Uppsala Nya Tidning	Nya Werm-lands-Tidningen	Nerikes All-rahanda	Borås Tidning	Helsingborgs Dagblad	Sydsvenskan	Göteborgs-Posten
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Very few	Yes	Yes	Yes	Very few	No (di- logue/chat)
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes (Disqus)	Yes (Disqus)	Yes (Disqus)	No
No/Yes	Yes	No/Yes	No/Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Article type	Article type	Article type	Article type	-	Article type	Article type	Article type	-	-
Pre	Post	Pre	Pre	-	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre
Negative	Negative	Both	Negative	Mainly negative	Negative	Mainly negative	Both	-	-
No	No	No	No	-	No	Yes	No	-	No
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Post/ not so much moderation	Post	Post/not so much moderation	-	Post/hot so much moderation	Post	Post	Post	Post	Post/not so much moderation

Appendix D – Tables network analyses

Below is a detailed description of some of the results of the network analyses of the antifeminist blogosphere. The first table summarizes and compares the 10 most influential blogs according to the results of the two different centrality tests (*In-degree* and *Bonacich's approach*) and the Issue Crawler analysis. The second table describes the results of applying the density measure to different groups of blogs depending on their centrality according to *Bonacich's approach*.

Table 1: The 10 most influential blogs according to *In-degree*, *Bonacich's approach* and the Issue Crawler analysis

<i>In-degree</i>	<i>Bonacich's approach</i>	<i>Issue Network</i> ¹⁰⁰
Blog 12	Blog 12	Pelle Billing
Blog 34	Blog 34	Genusdebatten
Blog 31	Blog 35	Blog 4
Blog 35	Blog 31	Blog 14
Tanja Bergkvist	Tanja Bergkvist	Blog 31
Blog 60	Blog 60	Blog 18
Genusdebatten	Blog 38	Blog 9
Blog 23	Blog 20	Genusnytt
Genusnytt	Blog 23	Blog 12
Blog 14	Genusnytt	Blog 60

Table 2. Density of the antifeminist blogosphere

<i>No. of most influential blogs</i>	<i>Overall density</i>
5	70%
10	57%
15	48%
20	42%
30	39%
40	28%
50	20%
62	14%

¹⁰⁰ Actor rankings (core network and periphery, by site).

