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Political Participation as Public Pedagogy – The Educational Situation in Young People’s Political Conversations in Social Media

In this article we argue that young people’s political participation in the social media can be considered ‘public pedagogy’. The argument builds on a previous empirical analysis of a Swedish net community called Black Heart. Theoretically, the article is based on a particular notion of public pedagogy, education and Hannah Arendt’s expressive agonism. The political participation that takes place in the net community builds up an educational situation that involves central characteristics: communication, community building, a strong content focus and content production, argumentation and rule following. These characteristics pave the way for young people’s public voicing, experiencing, preferences and political interests that guide their everyday political life and learning – a phenomenon that we understand as a form of public pedagogy.

Keywords:

education, public pedagogy, social media, young people, political participation, agonism, net community

1 Introduction

In this article we want to highlight the political and educational potential of young people who communicate through social media. When young people participate in the *social media*—digitally constituted media that build on the participants’ shared content and meaning creation and consumption—it can be argued that potential spaces for different kinds of political participation are being constituted. These potential spaces, we think, create *educational situations*, that is, events in specific contexts that are made by and carried forward by the communication of its participants, influencing and shaping them in specific directions. In these situations, young people can be politically socialised in directions that both support and antagonise a democratic society. What we wish to stress is that these kinds of situations can be understood as *public pedagogy*, that is, as various practices, processes and situations and spaces of learning and socialisation that occur both within and beyond the realm of formal educational institutions (Sandlin et al. 2011). So far, this kind of research has been meagrely investigated in the field of education, which is the underlying motive for highlighting this concern.

Contemporary Western society is highly structured by information and communication technology and changes in social life. These changes, according to Manuel Castells (2009), are just as dramatic as the changes in technology

and the economy. Cultural dissemination, individualism and the erosion of traditional institutions and the network character of the society can be seen as contributing to a new type of political situation (Dahlgren, 2009). In this situation, social media provide a possibility for people to take part in the public debate and also to be informally educated. According to previous research, this situation has increased the possibility to navigate and reshape social life as manifested in an increased use of social media (Drotner, 2008; Bakardjieva, 2009; Andersson, 2013).

Knowledge about young people’s political participation (or civic and political engagement, civic activism and the like), including the social media as a site for (will-based) education, makes it possible to examine and discuss one of many educational challenges in contemporary society—namely, the conditions and possibilities for young people to act as political persons (Andersson, 2012, 2013; Olson, 2012a, 2012b). Even though it is argued by several advocates that the increased use of the social media is of important educational value in this respect, little research has been carried out when it comes to considering the educational values and implications of social media in formal and informal settings (cf. Davies et al. 2012) and not least when it comes to stressing the relationship between political participation, social media and education. As Reid (2010) has put it: “Social media are a part of our pedagogical experience from conventional classroom to the many sites of public pedagogy, even if we have a limited understanding or even awareness of these emerging technologies at work around us” (p. 199). Further, according to Giroux (2003, p. 12), when it comes to the realm of education, “educational work needs to respond to the dilemmas of the outside world by focusing on how young people make sense of their experiences and possibilities for

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decision-making within the structures of everyday life". This requires that educators

address the practical consequences of their work in the broader society while simultaneously making connections to those too often ignored institutional forms, social practices, and cultural spheres that powerfully influence young people outside of schools, especially within the on-going and constantly changing landscape of popular culture with its shift away from a culture of print to an electronic, digitally constructed culture of images and high-speed hyper-texts. (Giroux, 2003, p. 12)

Utilising earlier research, *the aim* of this article is to theoretically describe and empirically illustrate young people's political participation in the social media as public pedagogy that is created by young people themselves and that can be understood as an educational situation. This is done by utilising empirical findings from Black Heart, a Swedish net community that, according to the institution itself, addresses young people in the ages of 14 to 28. A *net community* is a digital space constituted by social infrastructures, specific rules and norms built in communication between active participants. Black Heart is the fictitious name of the net community corresponding to the 'black' look of the institution and the music and fashion style of its original members. The communicative participation in Black Heart that has been analysed concerns controversial political conversations on topics such as global warming, meat consumption, homosexuality, abortion, religion, politically extremist parties in school, energy consumption and so on. In other words, conversations on issues that deeply divide a society, generating conflicting explanations, interests, perspectives and solutions based on alternative value systems that in the current situation will never reach consensus, thus showing that the situation of human togetherness is political (cf. Harwood & Hahn, 1990; Hand, 2008, 2007; Hess, 2009, 2004; Andersson, 2013). In order to meet the aim of the article – to theoretically describe and empirically illustrate young people's political participation in the social media as form of public pedagogy – the following question has served as our guide: *What kind of educational situation is generated in young people's political participation¹ in a net community created by and for young people?*

In the sections to come, we first provide a background to the concept of education and public pedagogy. Secondly, we present research in the field of political participation and public pedagogy in the social media. Thirdly, the theoretical framework is presented, followed by fourthly, a description of the method. Fifthly, the empirical findings in Black Heart are presented and finally, we make a case for social media as a site for public pedagogy.

2 Background: Education and public pedagogy

There are several ways to define education. Education could, in a radical theoretical perspective, be understood as a realisation and liberation of human potential; as a tool to incorporate newcomers into a prevailing order; as the production of the rational, autonomous individual; as the socialisation of democratic citizens; as the production of customers and labour workers and so on. Without claiming to give the correct and complete definition of education (it does not exist), we understand *education* to be essentially a social system – a common societal concern based on certain values and assumptions about life in the community aiming at the conservation and renewal of the world. Education is a public and community concern dealing with the relationships between those living in the community; it deals with questions of how each individual's new beginning could take place when considering that each individual is an *initium* – a new beginner (Biesta, 2006, p. 20). Or, in other words, the human being is a beginning, which makes it possible for her/him to begin (Arendt, 1954/2004, p. 182). In tandem with this theoretical framework, the foundation of all education is natality, the 'fact' that humans are born into the world (Arendt, 1954/2004, p. 188). This implies that education can be seen as a place filled with social, interpersonal and intrapersonal processes and situations that may allow the birth of something new in the world – a space for new beginners and beginners – and a vital force in the mutual project of life. Consequently, education may be depicted as a public concern and a vital node in the phenomenon called public pedagogy.

Public pedagogy denotes a research field that is still underdeveloped empirically and theoretically. Public pedagogy could, according to Sandlin and others (2011), be defined as:

various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning that occur beyond the realm of formal educational institutions – including popular culture ... informal educational institutions and public spaces ... dominant discourses ... and public intellectualism and social activism. (p. 4)

Public pedagogy, according to Biesta, is concerned with educational activity in extra institutional spaces: "the political and the educational dimension come together in the idea of 'public pedagogy'" (2012, p. 684). Public pedagogy focuses on "various forms, processes, and sites of education beyond formal schooling" (Sandlin et al. 2011, p. 338-339). It involves learning in public institutions such as museums, zoos and libraries, popular culture, media, commercial spaces, the Internet, figures and sites of activism, public intellectuals and grassroots social movements and so on. Consequently, public pedagogy concerns "spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools" (Sandlin et al. 2010 p. 1) and the "inquiry into the relationships among pedagogy,



democracy, and social action – regardless of where these relationships occur” (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. 4). Public pedagogy, as a concept, appeared as early as 1894 and “in some ways the general axiological import remains consistent – the term in its earliest usage implied a form of educational discourse in the service of the public good” (Sandlin et al., 2011, p. 341-342). This “locates pedagogy within the act of public speech itself” (p. 342). The term public refers, in this perspective, to an idealised outcome of educational activity; “the production of a public aligned in terms of values and collective identity” (p. 342).

With these points of departure in the research field of public pedagogy and in education, the concept of public pedagogy denotes an event. That is, public pedagogy is seen as a concern for “the public quality of human togetherness and thus for the possibility of actors and events to *become public*” (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). The theoretical underpinnings used in understanding and defining public pedagogy as an event of becoming public is grounded in the work of Hannah Arendt. To become public means, in Arendtian terms, a possibility for action in which freedom can appear, a creation of the public sphere: “In this interpretation the educational agent – the public pedagogue – is neither an instructor nor a facilitator but rather someone who interrupts” (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). To interrupt is not to teach actors what to be or to demand particular kinds of learning. To interrupt is to remain open for the opportunities for becoming public by openness to what comes. Thus, when we use the concept of public pedagogy in this article it should be understood in terms of interruption and becoming public (similar to pedagogy as rupture, see Burdick and Sandlin 2013). In the next section, research within political participation and public pedagogy in social media is presented as an example of popular culture that is linked to education.

3 Research in the field of political participation and public pedagogy in social media

This research field is new owing to the phenomenon of social media, which itself is rather new. This explains the limited number of studies in the field. There is, however, an extensive amount of research dealing with digital media, democracy, young people and the political within related fields of research such as the science of media and communication, political communication and political science (Dahlgren, 2007, 2009; Montgomery, 2007; Mossberger et al. 2008; Bakardjieva, 2009; Olsson, & Dahlgren, 2010; Himmelboim, 2011; Östman, 2012). It is, however, hard to find research that may be defined as being linked to political participation and public pedagogy in social media. Such research is mirrored in Loader (2007) and Buckingham (2008), and research such as Wojcieszak and Mutz’s (2009), Fenton’s (2010), Holm Sørensen’s (2010) and Wojcieszak’s (2010). Magdalena Wojcieszak (2010) has, for example, studied neo-Nazi online discussion forums. She finds that the participants understand the conversations as educative. The

participants explicitly say that the conversations have been enlightening and contribute to discovering the ‘truth’ and seeing ‘how it really is’. According to Wojcieszak, these kinds of discussion forums teach debate skills and inform the participants about the way these kinds of skills can be used off-line. They also help the participants to strengthen their arguments, making them able to withstand the arguments of opponents. Wojcieszak has identified a normative pressure to act and live as you learn which, according to Wojcieszak, probably contributes to polarising the political views of the participants towards even more extreme positions. Thus the participants tend to develop even more extreme political views in the discussion forums, which is made possible by the participants’ desire to be educated in directions set by the normative pressure:

online forums offer arguments that rationalise and reinforce member’s perspectives. Members also receive rewarding or punitive replies to their posts and, through normative pressures, might adjust their views to the norm prevalent within the group. (Wojcieszak 2010, p. 649)

Consequently, discussion forums on the Internet contain and create educational situations based on the will to participate.

On the basis of earlier research on the network society (Castells, 2009), the power of communication is visually expressed in social media as a medium that is conditioned and dependent on the communication of its users. Social media represent “places where we go to learn, and places where we learn indirectly as we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and our culture” (Reid 2010, p. 194). It may be argued that “Depending on the particular spaces and uses of social media one examines, one can uncover a variety of public, pedagogic functions” (2010, p. 195). Empirical studies of digital spaces and cultures tend to be more limited. Some empirical work on democratisation and resistance is, according to Sandlin et al. (2011), taken up by Freishtat and Sandlin’s (2010) work on Facebook. And Hayes and Gee (2010) have carried out empirical work on video games such as the Sims and Second Life. In addition, Kellner & Kim (2009) offer deeper insights into YouTube Studies, showing that these sites and practices actually serve to teach the public and how the intended educational meanings of public pedagogies are internalised, reconfigured and mobilised by public citizens. But apart from these eminent studies, empirical research in this field is not exhaustive.

In relation to young people, the research on social media, using the words of Stovall (2010), is characterised by framing social media as being constituted by “co-creating spaces for young people to critically analyse the world while working to change it. Such practices are ‘public’ in the sense that they do not take place behind closed doors. Instead, they are “‘out in the open’ to be challenged and critiqued” (p. 410) (cf. Andersson, 2013).



Overall, the Internet is consolidated in previous research as an increasingly common space for youth socialisation that is yet to be mapped and analysed. In the net community, an example of the social media, the participants' communication depends on the institutional framework of the community, its social infrastructures, its specific rules and norms, a shared history, regular participants and solidarity within the group (Rheingold 1993/2000; Donath, 1999; Herring, 2004b, 2008). Thus net communities are seen as participatory-driven institutions built on communication—as communication communities (Delanty, 2003). In general, this kind of research on social media frames social media, and further net communities, as seemingly new public spaces – dependent on the action of their members. It is on this basis that we can understand the net community as a public institution built on communication.

4 Theory: Expressive agonism

Utilising the depiction of the net community as a kind of social media that opens up for public communication and socialisation, we wish to elaborate theoretically the notion of the political in relation to social media by using Hannah Arendt's term expressive agonism.

The political theory of agonism emphasises controversy as a constitutive dimension and value in the (democratic) society. This dimension stresses that there are always on going struggles about the way society should be organised, and that it is always difficult to decide in advance which groupings will be politically relevant in the future. The progress of society is dependent on political articulations determining how we act, think and consequently shape society. When accepting this idea, the concept of *contingency* is vital in the understanding of agonism; everything could have been the other way around. What we call society, all types of institutional arrangements and so on are only temporary arrangements accepted and anticipated as objective. As Carsten Ljunggren argues: "in Arendt's agonism the person itself, an agonistic subjectivity, is the starting point in the procedure" (2010, p. 22). Expressive agonism offers freedom, the ability of the unique individual to take place (cf. Arendt, 1958/1998). Political life, according to Arendt, is constituted by controversies that should be dealt with in competition between adversaries. Humans may be seen as free when acting in the public sphere. They are free as long as they have the possibility to act – to act is to be free, a value in itself (Arendt, 1954/2004). To act is a disposition of the individual based on knowledge, considerations, habits, traditions and will-based motivation. Thus, in this view, action is not primarily rational. It builds on moral beliefs, emotional and will-based passions in the form of both sympathies and antipathies (Ljunggren, 2007). It is the *political action* – an end in itself when taking responsibility, by entry and appearance on the world stage by words and deeds – of the individual that opens up for pluralism and diversity. This further means that institutions of society must be constantly subject to political rebirth if humans are to be

free. This makes expressive agonism radical – to search, preserve and promote new spaces of freedom – involving new forms of political gatherings and engagement.

Arendt's agonism is expressive and radical since it emphasises difference and the particular rather than similarities and the general as active forces for action, *political* action. As such, expressive agonism is a condition for, and situation of, self-identification. What we want to suggest is that Arendt's expressive agonism offers opportunities to deepen our insight into the net community's potential as a "the public quality of human togetherness and thus [for] the possibility of actors and events to become public" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). More precisely, an agonistic approach to social media, the public and education aims to provide analytical tools for the exploration of *political* opportunities for young participants for joint communication and the exploration of themselves and of different conditions of the social order in society. Before presenting the empirical results from Black Heart, we discuss the methods used.

5 Method

Case study is used as a guiding methodological principle and the methodology itself is called polemic agonism. This methodology has been further developed into what we call political interest play.

5.1 Empirical selection: Black Heart

There are several net communities in Sweden that exist for different reasons and purposes. The net community 'Black Heart' has been chosen because:

- it explicitly targets young people whose age corresponds to the Swedish official definition of young people; age 13 to 26)
- it is driven by young people on a voluntary basis and excludes other types of net communities built up by companies to earn money through young people's communicative activities
- it is semi-public, which means that you can observe the activities but you have to be a member in order to produce content and join in the activities, and it is non-political and non-ideological.

This community describes itself as democratic, equal and lawful. It is guided by a specific framework comprising regulations and agreements, an institutional framework that the members are expected to abide by. If they do not, they can be warned, suspended or expelled. In autumn 2012, when the empirical research part of the project was completed, the community had about 90,000 members. These members are young people from all over Sweden with different ethnic backgrounds, gender, age, culture and so on. The conversations held in Swedish (ten threads defined as politically controversial) that have been analysed amount to a total of 372 webpages containing 3,708 posts (entities created



by the participants in the conversation). The members themselves create the ten threads, choosing what they should be about and in which discussion forum they should be placed. Each discussion forum, for example Food or Politics, contains different threads, each dealing with a different topic. The average age of the participants in these conversations is 17, the gender distribution is even and most participants also take part in other activities in the net community.

5.2 Case study and polemic agonism

Case study has been used as a strategy to approach the cases, their institutional character and the on going controversial political conversations in Black Heart. As Robert Yin (2006) argues, “Case study research enables you to investigate important topics not easily covered by other methods” (p. 112). Direct observation and data collection in a natural virtual environment, on a daily basis, over a three-year period was the method used. Thus the study was longitudinal (i.e. carried out over time), exploratory, descriptive and focused on an increased understanding of the cases (cf. Yin, 2006). Using polemic agonism implies, in this case, a methodology that is discourse-oriented and which views the use of language as constituting political action. Three assumptions guide the use of polemic agonism building on CMDA (Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis): language has recurring patterns; language involves the speaker’s choice; and computer-mediated language can be, but is not inevitably, shaped by technological functions in computer-mediated communication systems (cf. Herring, 2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2010).

Polemic agonism is a type of rhetoric that builds on competition, confrontation and conflict (Roberts-Miller 2002). It requires a substantial debate in which the participants are committed to creating their own arguments—a public dialogue of the self with the self. Expressing and advancing arguments in a community of others means that “one must be open to the criticism others will make of it” (ibid., p. 589). When the communication is built on conflict—a situation in which conflict is viewed as a necessary product of difference creating controversy—it is agonistic. The conversation is agonistic not because the participants seek conflict but because conflict is part of the conversation. Using polemic agonism, we think, reinforces and underlines the persuasive character of a conversation, not necessarily to win the consent of others but also to contribute to effective communication in which argumentation can help to identify disagreements. Polemical agonism is characterised by advancing arguments that clarify the personal attitude and why this approach is taken, which can provoke and evoke criticism and counterarguments (Roberts-Miller, 2002).

5.3 Analysis: communicative conditions and the characteristics of political action

Our analysis has focused on the institutional character and the political conversations in Black Heart in order to

find out the communicative conditions of the institution and the characteristics of the political actions. The analysis was conducted in two phases. In *Phase I* an institutional analysis was made in three steps aiming at 1) contextualising the net community; 2) identifying the conditions for participation in the conversations; 3) identifying the conditions for participation in on-going conversations. In *Step 1* all public parts of the net community were observed and five analytical questions were posed:

- a. How is the community described by itself (by the institution and its members)?
- b. For whom is the net community designed and permitted?
- c. What are the rules and agreements for participating in the net community?
- d. What types of activities are offered?
- e. How is the net community arranged, organised and operated?

In *Step 2* all threads in the discussion forums that had, for various reasons, been closed down were analysed in order to find out why they were closed down; that is, to find out what was prohibited and what was permitted. In *Step 3* the study’s selection of conversations (threads) was analysed using five analytical questions aimed at finding out the conditions for participating in the on-going conversations:

- a. What rules are expressed?
- b. What kinds of social conversational patterns emerge?
- c. How are the participants expected to communicate?
- d. What is permitted and what is prohibited in the conversations?
- e. How do the administrators (ADMINS) participate in the conversations?

In *Phase II*, the concept of *political interest play* was used as an analytical concept consisting of the rhetorical resources of stake and interest. We define rhetorical resources as typified actions that are repeated over time and that participants use and relate to in order to perform certain communicative acts. Thus political interest play is a concept used to understand the phenomenon of effective communication, which can either strengthen or undermine political actions and the political interests that are at hand. The analysis of political interest play involves an analysis on the operational level – how something is said and what this saying constructs in the conversation (cf. Potter, 1996; Billig, 2001; Wetherell, 2001). Potter (1996) argues that *stake* and *interest*, in their strongest sense, are used to show that the person or institution always has something to win or lose. Wetherell (2001) writes that:



questions of stake are key concerns of participants in an interaction. People treat each other as having vested interests, desires, motives and allegiances (as having a stake in some position or other) and this is a problem if one wants one's version of events to be heard as authoritative and persuasive, factual, not interested or biased but the simple, plain, unvarnished truth. (p. 21)

Two main categories of stake, stake confession and stake inoculation (Potter, 1996; Antaki & Wetherell, 1999; LeCouteur, 2001; Augoustinos et al., 2002), have been used to develop two main types of political interest play – *direct interest play*, which is an open and transparent form of rhetoric, and *indirect interest play*, which is a closed and hidden form of rhetoric. In the practical analysis, this involves an analysis of different types of actions that take place and how they operate in the conversation. Hence, different types of political interest play and their functions were analysed. When identifying political actions that could be characterised as *direct interest play*, the focus was on:

- a. explicit recognition that there are political interests at stake
- b. defence of expressed political interests
- c. positions (negative/positive, disagree/agree etc.) based on political interests

When identifying political actions that could be characterised as *indirect interest play*, the focus was on:

- a. disinterest, impartiality or alleged ignorance
- b. the use of 'hybrid voice' – an outside voice is used to argue in favour of political interests at stake
- c. excessive and /or false consensus or descriptions of something as 'natural', neutral or objective
- d. attempts at two or more positions that are projected as equally bad/good

Thus, when analysing the characteristics of political action in the conversations, the concept of *political interest play* has been used and operationalized in terms of direct and indirect interest play. The qualitative analysis was refined in an iterated process and twelve types of political interest play were finally constructed. The contents of these twelve types were examined and they were eventually consolidated into four categories of political action (Challenge, Give support, Apply pressure and Go deep) in order to highlight the characteristics of political action.

6 Results: Young people's educational situation in Black Heart

The excerpt below from the conversation *Abortion – Right or Wrong?* illustrates the main characteristics of the controversial political conversations in Black Heart:

M₁: We can survive without meat, yet we do not refrain from eating it. My question is why this is so. If animals were valued as strongly as humans, people would never eat animals. Or how is it, do they slaughter people where you live?

A₁: I refrain. I value animals as much as humans, if not more. You got the wrong guy to play and discuss this with.

M₂: Okay, you and some other people refrain. But it is still the case that most people do not refrain, and it's people in general I'm talking about. So you don't have to see it as an attack, little man.

A₂: "Attack"? "Little man"? Haha, you make it sound as if I lie under you and take offense? No, I do what I'm amazingly good at, to present arguments. I do not take this argument seriously; you are just talking a bunch of crap.

M₃: Haha, are you good at arguing? When people have other opinions than you, you can't even take them seriously.

A₃: But that's the point. It seems that you have no opinions. You just throw out random arguments.

M₄: I have an opinion, I think abortion is right, and I've said why I think that. You can go back in the thread if you missed it. I also took up the notion that I think people GENERALLY value "our kind" higher. The proof of this is that most of us eat animals even if we could survive without. We breed and eat animals, things that we would never do to our own "kind". If you think what I say is random, then it is your opinion, and I accept it. Nevertheless, I still think the way I do. I do not think it is random anywhere because what I'm saying actually belongs to the discussion, it is not off topic.

This excerpt makes explicit the types of conditions for communication that the participants have to abide by. As shown in the excerpt, participants are required to have a *content focus* (M₅: 'what I'm saying actually belongs to the conversation, it is not off topic'). There is a requirement to stay on the topic and maintain a clear content focus in the conversations. Participants must be able to define, select, apply and add content to the conversation. One aspect of this is the OT-rule, not to be or go off topic, which requires subject and content awareness. Participants are expected to manage and search for information and use relevant sources. They are further expected to be able to evaluate, and select relevant information and the right amount of information. They should be able to make references, hyperlink and apply the information in a new context, namely in the current conversation. In order to maintain a good and welcoming conversation climate, Black Heart uses ADMINS, certain



members of the community that control and govern the conversations. They make sure that the participants follow regulations and agreements in the institution. They take on the role of technical operators, content focusers, conversation organisers, rule followers and supervisors, conflict solvers, listeners and friends. ADMINS, or what could be called *administration educators*, oblige participants to follow the regulations and agreements of the institution.

Controversy seems to be the democratic fuel in the conversations, requiring the participants to meet each other's arguments in the conversations within accepted rules and norms, a requirement to publicly express views and take up political positions. The conversations are strongly characterised by competition, trying to argue against those adversaries who occupy other political positions while at the same time arguing with oneself. This is shown in the excerpt below from a conversation called *Islam, Muslims and The Middle East*.

M₁: I am no fan of religion per se, but I do not understand why everyone is so incredibly critical of especially Islam.

N₁: Maybe it is like Germany in the 20-30???? 20th? century. I quote Jimmie Åkesson [*authors' comments: the leader of the political party 'Swedish Democrats', with right-wing sympathies involving non-/small-scale immigration as a political goal*]; "Islam is our greatest threat." I have no doubt that Hitler said something like that too.

M₂: Yes, and that's why it is so incredibly scary.

L₁: if you read about religions and then compare you should see ^^

M₃: After having discussed with you before, it's pretty clear that the one who needs to read and learn more in this case is you. I have rarely discussed with such an incredibly narrow-minded and prejudiced person, you do not even know what the hell you're talking about.

L₂: I have read a lot about Islam, so it's pretty funny how wrong you are: P??? Do?? you think that when you read about it you do not think that religion is so dangerous, I hate it the more I read about it ^^

M₄: I would hardly discuss with you if I had not been knowledgeable? It's funny how wrong YOU are. You think that everything Islam is about is the oppression of women, etc., and you seem to believe that this is the case in every country.

L₃: I think women are oppressed in the Koran, which is why I also think that they are oppressed in countries where the Koran is followed, period.

The conversations are also characterised by encouragement, confirmations, reprimands and suggestions for appropriate behaviour. Participants are requested to be socially receptive, contributory and friendly. Personal attacks, insults, harassment etcetera are prohibited, although they occur. Participants need to know the regulations and the norms that apply in order to use them in communication. This requires social receptivity, the ability to navigate and interact with other participants. Participants are expected to use specific vocabulary, and have good writing and reading skills. As a participant you are expected to express yourself clearly, and explain, discuss and develop positions that can be comprehended by others. The requirement for this type of ability is based on a desire to understand, and to work for reciprocity and community and content focus.

The characteristic feature of political action in the conversations is confrontational and combative political communication. The political actions of the participants are manifested by publication and testing of personal political positions and thoughts. This testing is done by arguing for one's own political positions, upholding specific political interests and challenging other people's opinions. Thus, this form of political participation requires the participants to be able to consider their own as well as other people's judgments—to familiarise them-selves with how they think and how others think. Four categories of political action have been identified. The most dominant one, a category characterised by direct interest play, is *To challenge*.

To challenge involves a political action in which political interests are at stake. Such actions are characterized by being straight, honest, open, accommodating, confrontational and confirmatory. This is illustrated in the conversation *Global warming is a hoax!*:

C₁: The mass hysteria on global warming have??? has been frightening me for several years now. It is disturbing to see how it has been transformed from an economic idea under?? during the 80's to a racist cult of pure insanity. Nowadays, it just gets on my nerves.

F₁: I totally agree with what you just wrote!

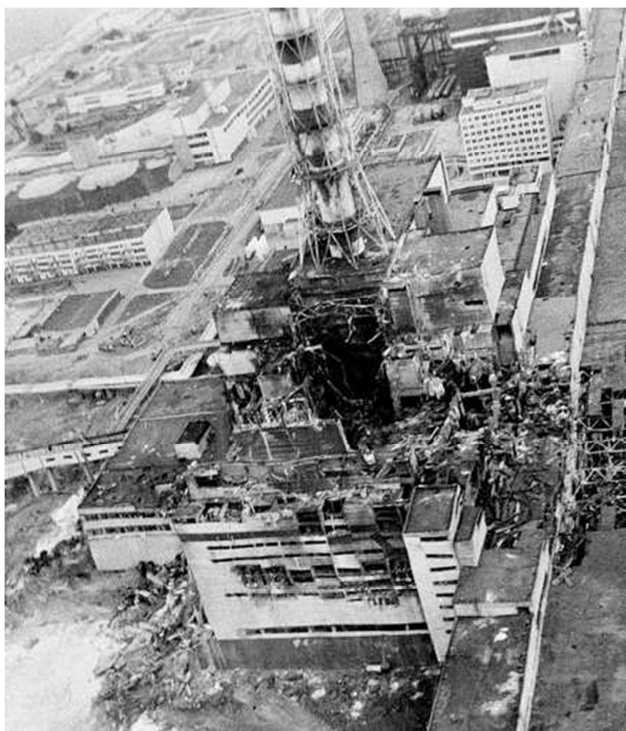
This type of political action involves a public proclamation; it openly inquires, challenging one's own political interests and those of others, making an invitation to join in the public political battle in which political interests are at stake. These types of action contribute to political positioning, at the same time as they create an open, honest place for conversation in which political life is discussed and questioned. Such political action dominates the conversations (66 % of all posts). *Giving support* (22 % of all posts) is a type of political action providing implicit protection of political interests (indirect interest play) which is made visible in the following conversation: *Should the right wing nationalist party of Sweden Democrats be allowed to visit Swedish schools?*:



D₁: Suppose somebody from, say Nordic Youth, had beaten you up, and they later turned up at your school? Do you think you would care that much if a few adults were present?

K₁: There are people who have been beaten up by immigrants. Should all immigrants be kept out of school just because scared victims with prejudices want it that way?

Announcements and defences of political interests are made discreetly by not exposing them openly and simultaneously defending them by calling into question the accuracy of other arguments and pointing out those specific conditions and political interests that are at stake. *Applying pressure* (9 % of all posts) is a type of political action which questions and critiques political interests. It is characterized by demonstrating that there are multiple perspectives in a political issue, which at the same time safeguards its own perspective. This is illustrated in the conversation on *Energy* in which the participant uses a picture to argue in favour of wind energy:



K₁: Nuclear power better than wind power?

These political actions take place through a hidden rhetoric that questions, devalues, and tries to lower the credibility of other participants' communicative actions without putting their own favoured political interests at stake (indirect interest play). Finally, *Going deep* (3 % of all posts) is a type of political action that reveals the motives for those political interests at stake. Such action is characterised by the exposure of one's own personal experiences and political preferences to make visible

personal motives in political interests and positions asserted by an essentially open rhetoric (direct interest play), which clearly addresses and presents personal experiences.

What has now been presented illustrates and constitutes an educational situation. This situation, we argue, is a type of public pedagogy carried out by the political actions of young people when using the social media as public space. We will further elaborate this line of argument in the discussion.

7 Discussion: social media and young people's political participation as public pedagogy

What kind of educational situation is generated in young people's political participation in a net community by and for young people? The political participation that takes place in the net community builds up an educational situation that involves certain vital characteristics: communication, community building, a strong content focus and content production, argumentation and rule following. What is at stake, we argue, is that young people's political participation in the social media generates educational situations. These situations could be described as education as political will formation, which can be seen as a form of public pedagogy that denotes the key event of becoming public.

We suggest that the political conversations in Black Heart, taken together, give rise to an educational situation that is carried out by the participants themselves and their joint acts, building on their will and ability to deal with the conflicts and differences between them that their will and ability give rise to. This educational situation takes place in a (semi-) public space built up by a constant social balance and mutual exchange of meaning between the participants. The social balance is needed because, ultimately, the young participants' joint communicative acting is what carries the institution forward. It is dependent on their willingness and ability to communicate and collaborate, and to contribute arguments, information and content to the conversations.

What we wish to stress is that education, like the characteristics of the social media, comes into existence as a consequence of owning a social space as a practice of communication, making both communication and participation the key elements in education. If we accept this normative standpoint, the educational situation of Black Heart could be viewed as a type of political will formation that has the potential to give birth to educational situations in and through which newcomers' beginnings can occur.

The type of political communication expressed in Black Heart stresses the notion that moral beliefs, emotional and will-based passions, in the form of sympathies as well as antipathies, are crucial for both political and educational action. This further shows that Black Heart has a composition in which communication becomes a



matter of understanding oneself as well as promoting meaning exchanges between participants. It is in the net community's communication, through encounters with other participants, that personal experiences and attitudes have the chance to be challenged and new (political) beginnings may come into existence. The critical element in this communication is the possibility for the person to define him/herself through communicative action taking. It is precisely here that the participation links up with learning and becomes both a political and an educational matter.

The political and educational incentive in this communicative situation can, according to Ljunggren (2007, p. 232), be understood as communication with a double and tension-filled base that is carried forward by both personal and joint willingness in which common values and beliefs must be negotiated, justified and discussed. It is in this negotiation that the participants create what could be considered a creative public (cf. Castells, 2009). Their interaction forms networks of communication that produce a shared sense of content. In this way, young people constitute an active, connected and, for each other, 'loud' public together. But this creative and content-producing public also imposes certain requirements on each participant's individual behaviour. As a participant, you sense this pressure as you experience the need to communicate and navigate in the community in certain ways. You have to be able to communicate and navigate in the community and contribute in the production of content in the conversations. Hence, this creative event is far from unconditioned; the co-production of 'the public' imposes certain requirements on each participant's individual communicative behaviour. This 'fact' points back to the net community Black Heart itself, which is assumed to be built on basic democratic values (freedom of speech, equality, gender equality, openness, influence, conflict, conversations and engagement). This digital institution comprises certain hierarchies, divisions of roles and shifting decision-making processes and possibilities for the participants to have influence. When it comes to the participants, it could be said that they not only contribute to the construction of a creative public, but they also define themselves – and are being defined by each other and also by the very institutional 'arrangement' itself—as being part of a creative public through their political communicative actions and meaning-making processes. It is in this mutual process, we argue, that the participants, as well as the communicative conditions and actions that take place, jointly give rise to a truly political event—that of *becoming public*.

The educational process in the creative public in Black Heart, we argue, consists in the creation of something new. Adopting our theoretical approach, the actual educational character of this process is, more precisely, defined by the simultaneous joint and personal advancement of new forms of public spaces in the public sphere

(cf. Andersson, 2013; Olson, 2013). It is in and through the experience of participation in such (semi-) public spaces that the educational situation is created (although this by no mean implies that the situation necessarily becomes educational, cf. Wojcieszak, 2010). This means that the educational potential is far from given in advance, but it has a continuous and ever-present opportunity to emerge in the net community – as well as in other digitally driven, interactive social media that focus on conversation on various topics. This potential is actualised in that these (semi-) public, digital spaces centre on political communication in which the participants' expression/opinion-voicing, argumentation and debating skills can be performed and qualified through this shared communication. But the potential is also actualised in that these spaces provide opportunities for the participants to become political public beings in and through this communication, since the question of self-identification arises in communication.

All in all, we suggest that the educative impetus offered to the participants in the net community, as well as in other social media can be depicted as a practice of public pedagogy—pedagogy in which conversations about various kinds of political issues, controversial or not – offer opportunities to teach about and for and to learn from and through democracy. These potential learning processes for the participants involved are far from solely positive. They may equally well offer teaching about and learning from the less beautiful parts of (what is presumed to be) democracy. However, education and its pedagogical practices have never been unambiguous or clear-cut about democracy or any other issue for that matter. Education is rather characterised – and can only be characterised—by risk, unpredictability and insecurity (Biesta, 2014). Consequently, it is important to ask: What can be learned from being a person who acts politically? This in itself is nothing new but rather un-problematised in an educational situation that has become increasingly digitally driven. The importance of social media in the development of informal democracy learning and socialisation means that it deserves deeper empirical insights. The theoretically underpinned concept of public pedagogy may offer a productive framework for future research in the field.

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Endnote

¹ Generally, there is a need for theoretical development and clearness when taking on different aspects of the citizens' political involvement in society. A range of concepts abound the field. We have chosen political participation even if it is a contested and complex concept that has been given different meanings (Ekman and Amnå 2012). In the article political participation denotes; participation and influence in the processes and situations that are characterised by a struggle between people and groups of people about how life and public resources in the community should be arranged.

