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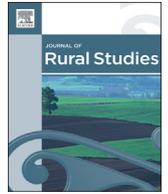
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# Digital rurality: Producing the countryside in online struggles for rural survival



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## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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## 2. Social media activism and online rural social movements

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 3. Aims, methods and materials

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

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

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

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

accessible, it can still be perceived as private by some users (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). For this reason, we refer only to the Facebook groups and pages and not to the names of individual users. Furthermore, we have avoided verbatim quotes of posts considered to be of a sensitive nature, such as those containing explicit racism, sexism or party political sympathies.

### 3.1. Facebook and the conditions to constitute voice/s

Different social media platforms and applications come with different features and, hence, also enable different types of social practices, voices and identities (Galloway, 2012; Kavada, 2012). Facebook, one of the largest social networking services world-wide, is built around the ideologies of *sharing* information (van Dijck, 2013) and *liking* the information provided by others (Fuchs, 2014). It allows users to create personal profiles, to add friends and to communicate with them through private messages and public status updates.

As already mentioned, Facebook also provides users with the opportunity of setting up 'groups' and 'pages' to connect with others around specific topics or interests. Both pages and groups can furnish their own profiles with information and pictures, such as a cover photo placed as a banner on the top of the profile page. However, there are certain differences between groups and pages as to how the Facebook platform conditions communication. Groups can be public, closed or secret, and Facebook users can apply for membership in order to take part in the sharing of information within the group. Pages, on the other hand, are always public and cannot have members; instead, users can follow the updates and shared content on a page by liking it. Both groups and pages can choose to let users post content as well as like, share, or comment on the posts of others, but they also have the power to remove posts and block users. However, one further difference between these two types of Facebook accounts is that pages can (and often do) post content in their own name whereas groups cannot. This means that content in groups is always posted by individual group members and that it is difficult to distinguish the voice of the group owner and/or administrators from that of other members. In this respect, groups may give the impression of being less hierarchical, and their communication may seem more diverse and democratic, than pages which are often predominated by postings in the name of the page itself (cf. Kavada, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2. Presentation of the selected pages and groups

Four of the selected accounts had a broad focus on improving conditions in rural areas:

*Västerbotten county network a part of All Sweden shall live (Länsbyggerådet Västerbotten en del av Hela Sverige ska leva)* is a page with 421 likes. The page presented itself as working for increased growth in the Västerbotten county, including the development of small businesses.

*Youthinthecountryside (Ungapålandsbygden)* is a page with 783 likes. In their mission statement, they pointed to the need for challenging the urban norm and improving conditions for young people in rural areas.

*The rural uprising (Landsbygdsupproret)* is a page with 6 594 likes and the general aim to 'protect the Swedish countryside'.

*The end is near ... Help! Swedish dairy farmers threatened with extinction! (Slutet är nära ... Hjälp! Svenska mjölkbönder utrotning-shotade!)* is a group with 7 042 members. The presentation addressed the harsh conditions for Swedish dairy farmers from the point of view of a single individual farmer who, apparently, runs the group.

Three groups were also included which had a more local character than the pages and groups above:

*Yes to a mine in Jokkmokk (Ja till gruva i jokkmokk)* is a group with 742 members that gathered people who want a mine – and hence, jobs – to be established in Jokkmokk.

*Mine free Jokkmokk (Gruvfritt Jokkmokk)* is a group with 4 169 members. It focused on criticism against the founding of mines in Jokkmokk and it offered a detailed presentation, including information on how to provide financial aid for this cause.

*The occupation of the emergency department in Dorotea (Ockupationen av akutvårdsavdelningen i Dorotea)* is a group with 3 078 members. The aim of the group was to protest against the closing of the emergency unit in a rural municipality. The presentation was detailed and provided links to other social media platforms together with information on how to donate money.

## 4. Theoretical approaches

### 4.1. Discourse

The analytical framework for this article is informed by a discourse theoretical approach, in which discourse is defined as a temporary configuration of meaning within a specific domain. As such, any discourse is structured through the articulation of disparate elements (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In line with the inclusive definition proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, we take discourses to be ways of understanding the world that not only comprise linguistic dimensions but also the material objects, places, subject positions, rules and conventions that affect and are affected by processes of meaning production. In this respect, discourses are both constitutive of and circumscribed by the affordances and features of different communication technologies and media platforms (Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011).

For the purpose of this study, we first focus on identifying prominent discourses that shape the form and content of interaction in the Facebook material, including their platform-specific conditions. While the interactions may very well be deliberate and intentional from the point of view of group members and followers of pages, they are always also an effect of the meaning systems available at any given time. By identifying the communicative style and communicated objects of the main discourses, it is possible to discern how these are performative of specific images of rurality and of specific ways of pursuing rural politics.

Politics, here, is understood in a broad sense as attempts to establish a specific order in a conflictual social world (Mouffe, 2005), wherein a multitude of discourses compete for hegemony. In this sense, political practices can be viewed as 'struggles that seek to challenge and transform the existing norms, institutions and practices – perhaps even the regime itself – in the name of an ideal or principle' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007:105). In the context of this study, we understand Facebook interactions to be potential political practices that may seek to establish a specific configuration of meaning and, hence, a specific social order. Further drawing on Woods (2003) we thus argue that the political practices performed online partake in the ever ongoing constitution of what rurality and rural areas are.

<sup>1</sup> Our focus on Facebook may have resulted in a one-medium bias, defined by Treré (2012: 2361) as 'the tendency in studies on movements and media to privilege analysis of one technology or platform over others'. However, while we concur with scholars who point to the entwinement of digital and physical practices, as well as those who stress how platform-specific affordances shape the empirical material, we believe that Facebook in this case can be used to illustrate some broader tendencies in how politics of the rural is commonly pursued through social media.

#### 4.2. Place and space between the digital and the physical

The broad notion of discourse outlined above implies that place is discursively constituted, at the same time as it emphasizes the materiality and spatiality of discourse. One important effect of this understanding is that spatiality – digital as well as physical or imaginary – can never be analytically defined in terms of a static and fixed entity. Rather, and in the oft-quoted words of Doreen Massey (2004: 2), ‘the spatial is social relations “stretched out”’. Thus bound up in social relations space is dynamic and inherently politicised. In line with such a view, we also concur with those scholars who – contrary to opposite claims – argue that the burgeoning of digital media technologies have not rendered geographical place obsolete (e.g., Berry et al., 2010; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006). The sharp distinction between online and offline in early studies of digital culture has proved untenable as digital and physical modalities are constantly intertwined in contemporary hybrid media culture (Lundgren, 2013). This is not least evident in the context of location-aware media – of which Facebook is one – which suggests that the interfaces of digital media are themselves becoming ‘progressively “spatialized”’ (Leszczynski, 2015:732; Wilken, 2014). Hence, physical-geographical place is mediated and materialized in digital realms through GPS coordinates as well as through interactions in the form of photos and textual descriptions. At the same time, digital services such as Facebook contribute to the production of physical-geographical places by affording certain types of interaction. While the communication and struggles studied in this article occurred online, for example, they were always strongly related to geographical places and also produced rural space in specific ways.

### 5. Three discourses of digital rurality

What was consistently present throughout the material was the reference to and investment in an overarching logic of centre and periphery (Eriksson, 2010; Sjöstedt Landén, 2012). Posts, comments and shared links related to geographical space as immensely important and the published content recognised this logic as charged with power; places and people connected to centres were understood as closer to power/knowledge privileges than places and people connected to various kinds of peripheries.

However, the pages and groups worked towards partly different goals and pursued rural politics in different ways, and geographically invested power relations were addressed somewhat differently depending on the discourses that prevailed in each context. In this section we will map out the three dominant discourses that we identified in the material. It should be noted that in none of the pages and groups, communication was characterized exclusively by one of these discourses; instead, the pages and groups were diverse and comprised posts and comments of very different character. In most of them, however, one or a few discourses were more dominant than others.

#### 5.1. Unite! A discourse of mobilising action

In all the studied pages and groups there was an initial motive that had to do with airing feelings and opinions in relation to rural areas being threatened by the effects of the logic of centre and periphery. The fact that the pages and groups were created at all can be seen as digitally enabling collective identities by connecting people. This linking together of disparate subjects into a chain of equivalence, in turn possibly creating a feeling of unity and likeness, must be understood as a political act (Laclau, 2000) and as an embryonic form of mobilisation.

However, mobilisation sometimes took an even more concrete form, with posts explicitly aiming for joint action also outside of the digital arena – such as occupations of disused infirmaries, demonstrations, and petitions. Hence, these online interactions were not only about bringing people together, delivering discontent and expressing opinions and demands, but also about instigating, coordinating and sharing information about actions outside of the Facebook platform. We call the conversational mode that dominated in such cases a discourse of ‘mobilising action’. It was a discourse that seemed to assume the possibilities of Facebook as a tool for struggles simultaneously taking place elsewhere. The pages and groups that were invested in this discourse tended to position their followers and members as ‘fighters’ united in the pursuit to achieve an explicated goal in the physical world. The focus on off-line political activities constructed readers of the pages and groups as belonging to a clearly articulated We. Criticised political decisions or outrageous behaviour from people in power typically gave rise to indignant exclamations such as ‘Dang it, now we really need to speak up!!!’ (*The rural uprising*, 13 May 2015), unproblematically assuming that all followers and members would agree.

A similar reference to a joint struggle is seen in the following encouraging comment that was posted by the owner of *The rural uprising* the night before a nation-wide demonstration in 2015:

I am moved .... grateful and impressed by the power and the will that exist in the countryside! Amazing commitment on 23! locations in the country, articles in over 15 newspapers, radio interviews and television – this has already gone down in history, my dear fellow fighters !! [...]

Regards from a crazy proud hillbilly (2 April 2015)

The denomination of the demonstrators as ‘fellow fighters’ clearly indicates that it is a question of a common struggle. The focus of this page was mainly on food production and the situation for Swedish farmers. Generally, the address was quite critical, pointing at maladministrations of rural areas in general and the conditions for dairy farmers in particular. The lion part of the activity on the page was however about organising, spreading information and reporting about demonstrations, especially in the form of tractor caravans. When such demonstrations were carried out, the activity on the page was high and filled with photos taken by protesters around the country, which invoked a distinct feeling of presence and participation in something larger than the Facebook page.

Moreover, in a few cases groups had also been created in relation to very specific events, such as the protests against the closing down of a local cottage hospital and the subsequent occupation of its premises. The events had thus preceded the creation of the Facebook group and the online activities were clearly related to practices in a distinct geographical place, such as the sharing of photographs of the occupiers as they had fika or went to bed, and the sharing of emails that had been sent to politicians. Again, this type of posts invoked a feeling that the real action took place outside of the digital arena, but Facebook simultaneously aided in the pursuit to include all group members in the ongoing activities, regardless of whether they were physically present or not.

As is evident from the above, the discourse of mobilising action privileged digital practices of gathering and spreading information which was considered necessary to form informed opinions and demands. One specific aspect of this was the sharing of articles about similar struggles in other parts of the world. This was specifically employed by *Mine free Jokkmokk*, meaning that although their primary struggle concerned the establishment of a mine in a specific region, the page was far from local. Rather, it included

outlooks to the similar struggle for the Ojnare woods on Swedish island Gotland; to a mining disaster in Brazil and its effect on the wildlife, to the situation for the Aborigines in Australia. This implied that the objective of the group was articulated with a wider global net of politics, which, in a sense, tended to strengthen the local argumentation. One effect of this way of thinking and doing politics that was dependent on the use of digital platforms was that the rapid and extensive dissemination of information also managed to attract protesters from geographically remote areas. Not only did such protesters exist online as 'slacktivists' (Christensen, 2011). The quick spread of information about events also meant that people travelled to participate in them, which in turn undeniably gave a sense of the struggle as being collective and global.

Within the discourse of mobilising action, the number of followers or members were often seen as an indicator of the movement's strength: 'NOW we have passed 3800 members, absolutely fantastic! Thank you all!! (*The occupation of the emergency department in Dorotea*, 11 Apr 2012). An increasing number of anonymous members could however give rise to worries within the group, and group activity was sometimes debated. For example, while new members were celebrated and actively sought after in *The occupation of the emergency department in Dorotea*, there were also more or less explicitly expressed demands that the members should be active in the group. This in turn triggered reactions stating that inactivity should not be equalled with disloyalty. 'WE MAY NOT BE VISIBLE, WE MAY NOT BE HEARD, BUT WE STILL CARE' (5 May 2012), one member shouted out, arguing that the demands for active digital participation risked excluding the silent supporters and was insensitive to their reasons for silence.

## 5.2. Pepping up the rural: A discourse of re-representation

As is clear from the above, interactions that were primarily invested in a discourse of mobilising action could be pepping and display positive descriptions of the countryside, even though their focus was directed toward specific and articulated struggles. However, we consider the pepping aspect to be a discourse in its own right, which we call a discourse of 're-representation'. Central to this is the way it explicitly or implicitly thwarted notions of the rural as backward and problematic, as it often appears in media and popular culture (Eriksson, 2010). Such negatively charged representations generally focus on the effects of cutbacks and out-migration, typically illustrating rural areas with images of empty houses, broken windows and lonely older people, and they are often the object of critical concern for local residents since they are perceived to counteract in-migration (cf. Lundgren, 2017). Re-representing the rural can thereby be seen as a partly conscious strategy to counter notions of place and space perceived to be dominant and hence, sometimes, to make visible power-laden urban normativity and privilege.

One practice that worked in this pursuit was the posting of photos representing the beauties and strengths of the countryside; photos posted by members or illustrating shared articles. For example, the page *Västerbotten county network a part of All Sweden shall live* did not post many pictures itself, but shared a large number of articles of which many were symbolised by photographs of landscapes, winding wintery roads, reindeers, freshly caught fish and sunsets. A less common re-representing practice is exemplified with the photos that a member of *Yes to a mine in Jokkmokk* posted. They were photos taken at his job at the mine in Kiruna depicting minercarts running through a Northern snowkissed wintery landscape. The articulation of minercarts and the beautiful landscape managed to produce symbols of a mine as slightly romantic.

Regardless of the reasons for posting re-representing

photographs, the images portrayed the countryside in often quite idyllic ways. As such they did not revolutionise the ways in which the countryside has been represented before. On the contrary; idyllic representations are very common (Short, 1991; Bunce, 2003). However, while these photos were sometimes posted to rejoice in rural charms, it was also done to counter negative views of the countryside. Naming this a discourse of re-representation thus does not imply that completely 'new' imageries were produced, but that they constituted alternatives to what was perceived as dominant and problematic representations. In this sense a discourse of re-representation was present in all pages and groups as they often displayed the countryside through the posting of photographs.

The discourse of re-representation also took seriously the significance of positively charged role models for rural identities. It seemed to suggest that without an agentic subject to identify with – someone who has chosen life in the countryside – people are subjected to the dominant notions of rural inhabitants as *left behind* (Vallström, 2014). Therefore, the discourse of re-representation often privileged posts or links to presentations of what was described as 'strong' persons who had chosen life in the countryside and were happy about it. While certainly contributing to more positively charged representations, such portraits simultaneously articulated positive development together with individuals and their personal strives and efforts.

The one page that most clearly maintained a discourse of pepping re-representation was *Youthinthecountryside*. Overall, this page explicitly expressed a desire to counter negative stereotypes by portraying the countryside as a place where a lot of exciting things happen. There were, for example, calls for page followers to nominate 'the greatest Swedish countryside' (12 March 2015), invitations to take part in the event 'Sweden's fiercest dump' (5–7 Feb 2015), and portraits of individual enthusiasts, typically with photos and a youthful and informal address: 'In #youthinthecountryside there is a whole bunch of awesome and amazing young' (2 July 2014). Overall, the discourse of re-representation worked to resignify 'placeist' expressions. In the above examples, for instance, 'countryside' was articulated with 'great' and 'dump' with 'fierce'. Much of the posted photos referred to offline activities at various places throughout the country, such as a photo from within a car with comments on the destination:

Hitting the road again! The VW bus and #youthinthecountryside roll towards Dalarna and Falun Pride. Are you in the neighbourhood and want to meet up? We're talking from the scene at the cafe in the Arena during the Pride Festival, so be there! (18 Sept 2015)

This particular form of communication gave the impression of *Youthinthecountryside* as being physically present in the Swedish countryside. Most of the content on this page was posted by the page owners, portraying themselves as rural inhabitants who visit other rural areas. The fact that the content was mainly produced by the one agent *Youthinthecountryside*, rather than by their followers, may also explain the almost total investment in one single discourse. The only departure from this pattern with one dominant agent occurred in relation to the different calls to suggest interesting places to visit. These calls were always met with a high degree of activity from the page followers. In this way, even the approach and practices of the followers seemed to be structured by the pepping and positively charged discourse of re-representation.

Perhaps as a consequence of this, there is not much debate on the wall of *Youthinthecountryside*, and no specific groups of people that are evidently othered and positioned as threatening the goals of the page. This may also be because *Youthinthecountryside* took a

clear norm critical perspective rather than criticising particular groups of people. Urban norms were repeatedly mentioned as the main problem affecting young people in the countryside.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.3. No! A discourse of frustration

Some of the accounts were mainly or partly structured by what we have called a discourse of 'frustration', which portrayed the present situation as deeply unfair, its subjects as profoundly misunderstood and mistreated, and its adversaries as incompetent, immoral, blue eyed or plain stupid. This discourse was often structured by populist reasoning where a range of different Others were constituted, criticised and heckled. Posts often seemed to burst with emotion as in the following post by *The rural uprising* (13 May 2015):

Now things have gone too far!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

How the heck can the Arla management have the nerves to withdraw 115 MILLIONS

AS A BONUS for 2014,

when their Swedish 'owners' (read slaves) are brought to their knees, make losses, go bankrupt, kill themselves....

Dang it, now we really need to speak up!!!

In posts like this, frustration is not only present in the affected wording, but also in the excessive use of exclamation and question marks, capital letters and emojis. The frustration is directed towards the Arla management, who is said to make dairy farming impossible through its supposedly incompetent and above all immoral decisions. In the quote, the owners of the cooperatively owned dairy are equalled with slaves. Although it speaks exclusively for dairy farmers and not for a rural or local population generally, the post makes no clear distinction between farmers and other rural residents. Hence, the discourse of frustration did not always work to divide rural communities, although, as we shall see, this could also happen.

Others used irony rather than anger to make their point. Still, they helped constitute a clear Other, as in the below quote directed at a hypothetical urban dweller:

Hey you, yes you. Do you know who paid for your university education? It was Kalle Olsson who worked in the mine for 40 years and paid tax every month. And you over there, yes you. Who paid for the construction of the airport on Gotland that you were flying from? It was tax money from Vattenfall. And you there from Stockholm, who paid so that you could have your leg plastered after you fell in January, it was Anna in the checkout at Konsum in Pajala, she who got a job because the inception of the mine increased the sales (*Yes to a mine in Jokkmokk*, 24 March 2014).

The quote is typical of the type of fantasy that is core to the overarching logic of centre and periphery. The frustration is in this case related to a feeling of being wrongly devalued and, as the quote hints at, being the rightful 'owner' of natural resources that have benefitted the whole country including the privileges that the quote's hypothetical 'you' holds. There is also an aspect of the quote

that points out rural areas as more genuine, visible in the way the writer names fictional individuals. This creates opposites between a supposed urban dweller's privileges and the people suggested to have paid for these; university education is pitted against Kalle Olsson's 40 years in the mine, air travel against tax money, and welfare services against Anna's hard work in the checkout. Furthermore, northern cities Kiruna and Pajala are pitted against southern Gotland and Stockholm, hinting at power imbalances along a North–South axis.

The postings in *Yes to a mine in Jokkmokk*, which were often structured by a discourse of frustration, tended to explicitly and often aggressively criticise a range of different groups. For example, representatives of the resistance against the mine were repeatedly Othered and called names as 'tree huggers' and 'eco-freaks', and were suggested to move away if the shoe did not fit. Othering practices were also directed at representatives of the tourism industry, who see the mine as a direct threat to tourism, and critics of the neoliberal order, who warn against the imminent risk that a mine would neither create as many local jobs as often believed, nor produce other benefits for the local area. Moreover, the othering processes central to the way the discourse of frustration built equivalences also, at times, directed focus towards a group of people whose protests against the mine are based on their culture and ways of life – the Sámi people. Well-known Sámi representatives were sometimes demeaningly referred to and the Sámis' political strive to protect reindeer grazing areas from exploitation was heckled, thereby bringing a racist dimension to the discourse of frustration. On several occasions, individuals also had their Sámi identities questioned by non-Sámis as a way of bereaving them the right, as it were, to speak for the Sámi collective.

It is difficult not to relate many of the manifestations of the discourse of frustration to the position as working class exposed to a withdrawal of recognition in the wake of globalisation (Kalb, 2009; Mischi, 2012). And maybe it is partly this position that drives the discourse of frustration. Although a concern for 'the Swedish' surfaced in most pages and groups, the discourse of frustration is the only discourse in the material that produced explicit racism. This may be best understood as an underprivileged, forgotten and devalued working class struggling not only for survival but for recognition and which uses populist expressions as a kind of resistance (Vallström, 2014). The debate about the mine also actualises historical and unsolved struggles over rights to land between settlers/farmers and the Sámi. In this sense, the discourse of frustration was built on a plethora of different unresolved power imbalances that possibly added to the feeling of being wronged. However, and importantly, the logic of centre and periphery also brings a sense of pride and self esteem to the devalued areas by positioning Northern rural areas as the true but unrecognised providers of raw material and energy that benefit the whole nation. The employment of this aspect of the logic of centre and periphery may explain some of the grip that the ideological fantasy of this logic provides (Sjöstedt Landén, 2012; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015).

In sum, the three discourses identified in the material structured the way the pages and groups pursued rural politics. So far we have focussed on the style and content of what was written, showing that Facebook seemed important for the formation of collective identities that were partly created in opposition to an urban 'outside', and that the pages and groups produced quite different discourses that could possibly draw a wedge between collectives. However, as discourses also produce what is talked about, in the next section we will turn to the ruralities that were constructed in the material. For the sake of variety we will refer to these discursive constructs interchangeably as ruralities, notions of rurality or rural imageries.

<sup>2</sup> This take on rural politics also opened for articulations with other norm critical perspectives, for example queer politics and the question of rural heteronormativity, and more than any other of the studied pages and groups *Youthin-the-countryside* linked to LGBTQ events. Looking more generally at the discourse of re-representation, such articulations were however not necessarily legion.

## 6. Doing digital rurality

That discourses of the rural are productive of and set the limits for how rurality is understood has been repeatedly recognised within studies of the rural (Halfacree, 1995; Jones, 1995; Pratt, 1996; Woods, 1997; Frouws, 1998). The three discourses identified here conjured up two parallel notions of rural space: one that portrayed rural areas as predominantly dying and one depicting them as very much alive. Importantly, the two notions could easily coexist in the same pages and groups, and the three identified discourses each contributed to the construction of both rural imageries. Further, both imageries emerged at the crossroads of physical-geographic and digital space. The co-construction of place was evident in how, as already mentioned, activity peaks in the pages and groups often coincided with offline activities: demonstrations, policy decisions, media reports on current events and so on. The co-construction also comprised the intertwining of other social media platforms through sharing and linking practices.

Dichotomous notions of the rural as either 'abandoned and disadvantaged' or 'idylls', or descriptions of such notions as either 'negative' or 'positive' have been pervasive in the study of rural imageries (Halfacree, 1995; Short, 1991; Woodward, 1996). While the notions of rurality as either dying or living have obvious similarities with such previous dichotomisations, they also display important differences. One thing we want to highlight here is the way that the two ruralities were included in narrative scripts that came to legitimise specific attitudes and politics.

### 6.1. Rural areas as dying

One particular notion of rural space was constantly present in the material, although often lurking in the background: the image of the Swedish countryside as dying. This idea of a moribund countryside was narratively evoked as a symbol of what was to come if adequate measures were not taken (cf. Lundgren, 2013). The dying countryside was never romanticised or sought after, and it was indicative of how rural areas are evoked through the logic of centre and periphery. The three identified discourses contributed to this notion of the dying countryside in different ways.

The discourse of mobilising action used the imagery as a motor for the politics pursued; it was the perceived 'death' of the countryside that formed the rationale for prompting people to mobilise and act together. In the case of the occupation in Dorotea, for instance, it was argued that without the cottage hospital it would be difficult if not impossible to live there since people would feel insecure with the long travel distances to the nearest hospital. In the case of *The end is near ... Help! Swedish dairy farmers endangered!*, the very name suggested the end of a Swedish domestic milk production if nothing is done, and in the longer run, the end of rural landscapes as we know them. In many of these cases farmers and local people came forth as knowledgeable while managers, policy makers and politicians were described as ignorant, incompetent and sometimes greedy.

The discourse of frustration also assisted in producing an image of rural areas as dying. This discourse was basically built on populist reasoning where all opposing groups – irrespective of their relation to each other – were linked together as a unified and threatening Other. In this sense the discourse promoted feelings of being subordinated and unfairly treated, which in turn caused, and supported, expressions of frustration. Epp and Whitson (2001: xv) have suggested that as the traditional rural economy declines, the countryside has come to serve as either 'playgrounds' for tourists or 'dumping grounds' for environmentally 'dubious schemes'. The discourse of frustration positioned rural areas primarily as 'dumping grounds' – communities that feel obliged to search 'for any,

even undesirable, investments to keep their economy viable' (Lawson et al., 2010: 664).

The discourse of re-representation did not immediately contribute to the notion of the dying countryside. But its many attempts to portray the perceived beauty of rural areas produced a large amount of photos of landscapes or smaller communities that contained no people and that potentially signalled an imminent societal collapse *if read within a context of impending depopulation*. It is therefore possible to say that while the deliberate employment of a discourse of re-representation worked to create positive images of rural areas that implicitly countered more negatively charged images, of which the dying countryside was one, it also at times reproduced the countryside as a beautiful, but empty and potentially dying, space.

The narrative structure of the imagery of rural areas as dying consistently brought a sense of urgency to mind (West, 2013) according to which all actions were described as welcome since a situation in which nothing is done would relentlessly lead to the death of the local community. The imagery of rural areas as dying was in this sense a strong rhetorical argument and it legitimated demands and actions of despair. The decision to occupy the hospital in Dorotea – an act which was deemed illegal by the county council during the process – serves as a telling example. In this sense social media seemed to offer local actants the possibility to communicate alternative visions of place (Jansson and Andersson, 2012), but they were also simultaneously an arena on which quite horrific fantasies of the future were circulated. The rapid pace at which information and calls for action are disseminated in social media, and the geographical distances over which they travel, might well serve to foster a heightened sense of urgency in the face of such threats.

What was perceived as dying was – apart from concrete villages and communities – primarily things like the cultural landscape, rural ways of living, local nature and indigenous people's culture. But the threat of 'dying' was also articulated as a threat of becoming an unseen ground (Lawson et al., 2010) in the sense of being forgotten by the nation state. In line with the metaphor of death the struggle against this process was often conceptualised as being about the rights and needs of citizens' bodies. Not being 'seen', as it were, meant not only a loss in the rightful struggle against perceived immoral, ignorant and unjustified political decisions, but also that rural dwellers were, at least symbolically, unseen and excluded from identification with the position of the citizen. The imagery of a dying countryside relied heavily on a politics where rural inhabitants were dependent on decisions made by others. Against this background, the feeling of not being seen influenced how digital practices were viewed primarily as futile attempts to affect politics that was in fact pursued elsewhere.

### 6.2. A living countryside

Another, quite opposite notion of the rural that was evoked in the material was a countryside that was very much alive. This narrative about the rural countered any notions that the countryside was somehow dull or old-fashioned – descriptions indicative of the power-laden logic of centre and periphery. Rather, it told a story about the 'true' capacities of rural inhabitants and what was going on in the Swedish countryside, thereby evoking hope for the future.

The discourse of re-representation was particularly productive of this notion of a living countryside by offering alternative images of the countryside in order to consciously challenge the backward associations that came with the pervading logic of centre and periphery. The most apparent example was perhaps *Youthinthecountryside* that continuously challenged 'the city as a benchmark' by writing about activities that took place in the countryside and the

'cool' young people that live in and work for it. Their pepping tone of voice was constitutive of this attempt to challenge prevailing notions of rurality. The consequence was an image of a countryside which is alive and where interesting things happen all the time.

But a living countryside was not only the product of conscious re-representative practices. The discourse of mobilising action and the discourse of frustration also sometimes produced images of a living countryside. Often, however, they did this not through explicit arguments but implicitly and performatively through the engagement in their respective pursuits. In this sense, even discourses that primarily seemed to produce notions of the immanent death of the countryside paradoxically produced a sense of life. Warnings of what present rural politics would do to rural life constructed an image of dying, but simultaneously raised ideas of what the countryside could become and what it had once been. And while occupations, protests and demonstrations may be brought about by a fear of rural 'death', the posted photos of occupiers, protesters and demonstrators also produced and circulated an image of continuous and lively activity.

In a sense, then, all the pages and groups were in themselves 'living proof' that there was life in Swedish rural areas. Their Facebook presence and activity – posts, photos, comments and links to news media articles – contributed to the impression that there was a vivid interest in issues related to the Swedish countryside. This perceived liveliness was emphasized both by the asynchronous character and archival structure of the Facebook platform, through which older posts and comments are still visible long after they were posted (Garde-Hansen, 2009), a feature quite different from the fleeting character of much social interaction in offline contexts. Also, those followers and members who – according to Facebook algorithms – are defined as closely connected to the respective groups and pages are likely to have older posts and threads reappear at the top of their newsfeeds. In sum, this may have stressed the feeling that there was a lot of ongoing activity related to the Swedish countryside on Facebook, and, in this respect, even digital debates over the imminent death of rural areas could constitute a sense of life. Further, as the imagery of a living countryside relied heavily on a politics that took performativity seriously, the digital practices could be seen as important politics for change in their own right.

The interaction was 'living' also in the sense that it was often emotional in character. Although emotion is a well-known ingredient in social movements (Woods et al., 2012), its meaning has often been neglected in studies of how social movements are organised (Goodwin et al., 2001). In the material, emotional expressions (e.g. strong wordings, uses of exclamation marks, and explicit claims to be angry) were not unusual. It was however clear that the three discourses gave room for articulations of emotion in different ways. This was particularly obvious as similar emotional expressions were signified differently when expressed in different contexts and organised by different discourses. A frustrated and emotionally charged post could work to attract frustrated comments when posted in pages and groups dominated by a discourse of frustration, while it attracted action-oriented, problem-solving, comforting or pepping comments when posted in a page or group dominated by the discourses of mobilising action or re-representation.

However, the emotions could seldom be said to perform any singular function, and they did not precede or compel the protests in any simple causal way. Rather, they seemed to be 'inseparably a part of the politics of protest' (Woods et al., 2012: 585), in the sense that they were not only reactions to a prior situation but were also evoked by aspects of the process of protest itself. In this way, the performance of emotion often, but not always, contributed to a sense of vibrant life in the countryside. The upset character of much

communication evoked images of active rural inhabitants who stood up for themselves and for rural areas as places with strong cohesion and a sense of community unity.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The Facebook pages and groups constituted spaces for a politics of the rural that partly escaped traditional fora for rural politics. These spaces were used to discuss and debate issues to do with the situation for Swedish countryside and for rural living. All of them established equivalences between individual subjects living in perceived peripheries, positioning them in opposition to political and economic forces associated with national or regional centres.

While researchers have drawn attention to the meaning of local place and the way it articulates actively (Woods, 2007) and differently with overarching global trends (cf. Epp and Whitson, 2001; Lawson et al., 2010), one proposal of this article is that not only local physical place but also the digital spaces of Facebook influenced how broader global tendencies came to be understood. In this sense, the digital constructs of rurality resembled Massey's (2004) notion of place and space as relational entities.

Three discourses dominated the material: a discourse of mobilising action, a discourse of re-representation, and a discourse of frustration. The discourses of mobilising action and frustration both pursued a politics where people partly positioned themselves as dependent on decisions made by others – dairy executives, mining companies, politicians. They targeted specific issues and often had a recipient in mind that was positioned outside of the rural area. In this respect, the discourse of re-representation worked differently. It did not raise demands in relation to specified others, but it structured a politics that tried to performatively conjure up the social order desired by its proponents. Struggles against placeist representations of the countryside were thus fought by offering alternatives, or through performative reminders that norms constitute the number one enemy, rather than singular political decisions or decision-makers. This way of rethinking notions of politics and the political has been described as 'a silent rebellion' (Rönblom, 2016) that includes an increased awareness of the urban normativity that conditions how rural areas and people are generally represented, but that also work to performatively change such representations. This involves the creation of (digital) spaces in which such performances can be displayed, identities be made visible and experiences confirmed. In this sense, performative re-representation was based on the interpretation that rural areas (specifically the Norrlandic ones) and their general representations were appropriated by a colonial power. Thus viewing re-representation in terms of *re-appropriation* makes visible a dimension of power, in which rural areas struggled for recognition on their own terms. Taking back control is a rural driving force that has been identified also outside of the Swedish context (Mischi, 2012).

What we have wanted to shed light on, however, is also the way that the respective discourses supported the production of certain rural imageries. Two distinctive but interrelated notions of rural areas were evoked in the material: rural areas as dying and as living. There was a slight tendency that pages and groups created as a response to a concrete threat against local living conditions either used their Facebook presence to mobilise action and/or to let out frustrated steam. Pages and groups created as a response to a general and problematic urban norm were more likely to picture rural areas as living. There was thus a slight difference between the types of ruralities produced, depending on the initial reasons for creating the pages and groups as well as their stated goal and dominant discourses.

While the two notions of rural areas as either dying or living had clear resemblances with how the countryside is generally dichotomously represented in offline contexts, we have argued that the digital technology was of significance. Although there were no signs that the studied politics of the rural was completely driven by social media, as the ‘cyber-utopian’ narrative might have it (Shirky, 2008; Castells, 2012), the Facebook platform obviously affected the way in which ruralities and rural struggles were produced. For example, unlike traditional media representations, the rural imagery in this study was created mainly by grassroots activists and rural residents. Apart from the possibility to attract a large body of followers and members, to call for action, and to reach vast geographic areas only by pressing a button, it is safe to say that social media have generally increased the possibilities for (new forms of) self-presentations (Thumim, 2012). Although not overthrowing previous notions of rural areas, the material opened for more diverse images of the countryside and rural inhabitants (Jansson, 2010).

Our study showed few examples of open dispute within the respective groups and pages. To some extent, this may have to do with the fact that the record of each page and group is the result of curatorial work by page owners and group administrators. But the ostensible difference between pages and groups, through which pages were dominated by one authoritative voice (that of the page itself) while groups seemed to be populated by grassroot individuals (although these could very well be group owners with administrative rights), did not seem to have any consequences as to the discourses and ruralities produced in the different fora. While the rural imagery and the politics associated with it might potentially be the result of many different voices coming together, we want to suggest that the possibility to create niched Facebook spaces for every new issue and opinion, together with the personalized news stream algorithms of the platform, may in fact give rise to social filtering (Willson, 2013) or filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011) so that debate tends to be suppressed and conflicting standpoints kept separate. This may, simultaneously, thwart, or at least counteract the construction of the equivalential chains necessary to form a larger collective movement (cf. Woods, 2003; Larsen, 2008). We saw no tendencies to form party-political alliances that transgressed the specific issues debated on the studied groups and pages, as has sometimes been the case in other European rural discourses (cf. Mischi, 2012).

There was however one thing that could possibly come to constitute a broader uniting factor. It was the targeting of spatialized power-imbalances underlying rural politics and the intent to performatively challenge sweeping, negative representations of the countryside. The focus on urban norms and the practice of performative re-representation together constituted the digital arena as a space where people who identified with rural areas could be linked together, have their experiences and opinions acknowledged and their rural identities not only re-constituted, but recognised and valued. How this unification will be played out in the future – whether or not it may work to transgress dichotomous notions of rurality and whether or not it may seriously challenge urban normativity – remain, however, to be studied.

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