

Strategies of Visibility

Growth, Media and Social Movements

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper answers the workshop call [8] to trouble dominant models of scaling merely framed by concerns to attract an ever growing number of users. We introduce two grassroots, community-led initiatives operating in Sweden and their respective concerns of growth, and of also managing and controlling their expansion through the adoption of different media strategies.

Patron.ur is one of the many groups connected to the Swedish chapter of the #MeToo movement, with a core aim to denounce a culture of sexual harassment in a leisure setting, more precisely hunting (Patron.ur is Swedish for “bullet out”). The group uses an Instagram account to collect experiences of sexual harassment and share them with broad audiences. Food Sharing Stockholm (FS-STHLM) is concerned with organising the collection of surplus food from the distribution chain and redistribute it freely during sharing events. Similarly to other food sharing initiatives (e.g. [1][3]), here the organisation of collective action is also instrumental to raising awareness about food waste and more sustainable food practices. The community currently uses a Facebook group to advertise sharing events and Karrot, a dedicated open source tool, to organise the volunteers’ work – e.g internal communication, organising donor pickups, keeping record of the amount of food saved. At the moment of writing this paper, the two initiatives are at different stages of organising. Patron.ur has entered a phase of apparent activity stagnation, meaning that little action has been observable on the digital platform over the last months. FS-STHLM current efforts relate, instead, to what has been defined as the work of sustaining initiatives [2] that is the definitions of key practices and strategies to mobilise action and attract members and resources.

The relationships between media and social movements have been characterised [6] as discursive opportunities to gain: *i*) visibility (the extent to which a message is covered by mass media), *ii*) resonance (the extent of reaction to a message by multiple actors), and *iii*) legitimacy (the degree of support of such reaction). Communication, both through traditional and social media, is central to collectives aspiring to social change: it can scaffold mobilisation, the work of organising and of making visible competing views of the world to be acted upon [5].

This paper addresses the relationships between Patron.ur and FS-STKLM and traditional media to outline the different concerns of growth that such initiatives might have. For Patron.ur gaining media visibility means broadening the range of potential audiences, including organisations and institutions to partner with to achieve impact. This is, however, in tension with the initiative’s concern for anonymity and, in some cases, legitimacy of their action. To temporarily avoid media attention is for FS-STHLM a strategy to stay small while focusing on organising.

2 PATRON.UR

Patron.ur was started by four women from the Swedish hunting community. Replicating the socio-technical practices of another Swedish #MeToo initiative, the group has adopted Instagram as a platform to collect and share stories of sexual harassment and discrimination within the hunting community. Its main objectives can be summarised in breaking the community’s prevailing culture

of silence around the topic, and the mobilisation of competent authorities and institutions to address the problem. Stories are anonymously collected through a Google Form, the link to which is available in the Instagram account; a highlight of the story is then published as a still picture, while the full story is made available in the image description (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. A story from the Patron.ur Instagram page. The full story is contained in the image description, on the right. Each story is given a number, in this case 47 (“Berättelse nr 47”). The left part of the image shows a teaser text with a phrase from the story: “You shouldn’t hunt, little girl.” (“*Du ska inte jaga flicka lilla*”)

The Instagram page was launched on October 4th 2019, with the first story being shared on October 14th, the first day of the Swedish moose hunting season. At the moment of writing 100 stories have been shared, with the last one asking followers to share personal reflections on the experiences collected.

2.1 Data Collection

To understand motivations behind Patron.ur and the collective’s work of organising, we have interviewed three women from the founding group and one of Patron.ur’s Instagram followers. We are currently doing a survey-based data collection. To follow the evolution and outreach of Patron.ur, we have kept a diary of events on the Instagram page (e.g. new posts, online discussions) and traced media coverage of the group. This allowed us to discover that the initiative was quickly noticed by local radio stations and newspapers and that, over time, it gained attention in hunting-related media – from privately run podcasts to specialised magazines.

2.2 Enabling growth through the creation of publics

The Patron.ur case illustrates the initiative’s concern to provide an arena for as many stories as possible and enable the creation of broad publics (see [10] for a definition of this concept) around them. This means expanding by attracting increasing numbers of followers on the Instagram page, along with the interest of different organisations and institutions that have more structural power to act upon issues of sexual harassment.

As Ida and Chiara have learnt from interviews with the co-founders of the group, media attention is paramount to Patron.ur and attracting both the press and the radio was a strategy they decided upon from the very beginning. In preparation for the day in which the initiative would be launched,

emails were sent to roughly seventy different newspapers and radio channels across the country. The main objective was to inform as many cohorts of people as possible about the collective, rather than being invited to participate in public events.

But while the initiative grew in popularity within the hunting community, the relationship with the media has been challenging. While the media is essential for spreading awareness about the initiative, and thus experiences of sexual harassment among female hunters, anonymity is core. Many women do not want to be recognised in their stories, and Patron.ur stands for the collective cause and not just the individuals behind them. This means that drawing attention to the stories is more important than knowing who has shared them. Most newspapers, on the other hand, require named sources for their pieces to be accountable. We have learned that radio interviews have been declined for this reason, and that an online magazine eventually agreed to publish a piece on Patron.ur without revealing any names (in this case, the identity of one of the founding group's members was disclosed at the condition that the magazine would not mention it). We have documented episodes, in online fora, in which readers were annoyed at the anonymity of the source, and questioned whether the piece of news (and Patron.ur with it) could be trusted at all.

This tension in the relationship can of course become problematic when the mobilisation of publics around a shared matter of concern is paramount, and spreading awareness about key beliefs and meanings can be seen as an indication of the growth and impact of an initiative.

3 FOOD SHARING STOCKHOLM

Foodsharing Stockholm (FS-STHLM) started in September 2019, when a group of university students in Stockholm circulated a poster that invited interested people to attend a meeting about starting a food saving group in Stockholm. Twenty-two people showed up and squished into a tiny reserved room in the Greenpeace Office. At the moment of writing, the community is no longer solely a student endeavour and counts approx. eight core volunteers who have spent the first 3 months engaged mostly in planning the workings of the community at bi-weekly meeting, along with approx. ten new volunteers eager to get involved with the more practical aspects of surplus food redistribution. This has involved setting up internal communication channels, aligning values into a mission statement, and brainstorming the processes through which food would be sourced, stored, and shared. In early 2020, FS-STHLM secured their first partnerships with food donors. Small sharing events, attracting between 10 and 20 attendees, are now being organised regularly twice a week. Similarly to other food-sharing initiatives (e.g. [1][3]), key volunteers feel strongly that the group's actions are not meant to promote access to free food, but rather fight "a food system that systematically wastes food". FS-STHLM seeks to rescue and redistribute the food collected from retail donors, while making visible the problems related to food waste.

3.1 Data Collection

The engagement with this community is framed by a Participatory Action Research approach with one of the authors being involved since day one. While this study is still ongoing, data have been collected by means of participatory observations at meetings and sharing events and during the processes of enrolling new food donors. As the community is still in the phase of establishing main practices and collaborations with third parties, the research engagement with it has been valuable for understanding aspects such as socio-technical practices of infrastructuring the community's efforts to make them sustainable over time, along with the volunteers' attitudes towards growth.

3.2 Avoiding media to stay small

The FS-STHLM case illustrates a deliberate strategy for the community to postpone media attention with the intention to remain small. Expanding slowly and coping with the available resources is

seen by key volunteers as instrumental to sustaining the community's ongoing activities and plan for future action. In August 2020, FS-STHLM received a message on their Facebook page from a radio presenter who had read about the initiative on Facebook and offered the opportunity to talk about it on a local radio station. The radio presenter proposed that a representative from the group would speak about the initiative in a three-minute time slot. Katie read the message on Facebook and communicated the request to the other volunteers on Karrot. Given the short time frame between the invitation to participate in the radio program and the next volunteer meeting, only three members joined the discussion and came to the final decision to decline the invitation.

One reason for this was the short notice of the invitation and the lack of time to plan what to say to such a broad audience. However, another important reason to decline the invitation was the concern to not attract too many people in a moment when the community is still defining core mission statements, practices and routines for food collection and distribution, and the terms of collaborations with food donors – so far only one supermarket and a buffet restaurant have steady relationships with the organisation. While discussing the options, the three volunteers were conflicted in terms of thinking it could be *"good to spread the word"* while also cautious to *"keep things on the down low until we sort out some of the kinks in the system"*. The concern *"with keeping a low profile, while we figure out things"* led to the decision that Katie would call the presenter and explain that we are *"still pretty new and figuring stuff out for ourselves, and that we are basically trying to bring food sharing, something that already exists in other cities, to Stockholm as well"*.

When later on, the issue was discussed at the volunteer meeting, the group was happy with the decision that was made. However, they all agreed that this would be a great opportunity in the future, once the community is more organised and develops a clear consensus on what FS-STHLM, as a collective, is trying to achieve.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The two cases presented are relevant both analytically and practically for the organising of community-led initiatives. On the one hand, they highlight different rhythms at which their expansion can unfold over time. On the other hand, they provide practical examples of the ways long-term goals and strategies to achieve impact intertwine with short-term tactics to manage visibility.

For Patron.ur growing entails collecting as many stories as possible and spreading awareness about the culture of sexual harassment within hunting communities. Their proactive approach towards traditional media is, thus, instrumental to circulating frames – that is, the set of beliefs and meanings that underlie the actions of the movement [9] – and to mobilise actors, such as hunting organisations, that have the power to address concerns of sexual harassment more structurally. As stories are only shared online, and through asynchronous interactions, we can assume that an increase in the number of stories collected would maybe require more time – or human resources – to manage the account, but would probably not change the quality of interactions observable online.

Avoiding problems of managing an unexpected growth (see, for instance, [4][7]), FS-STHLM is indicative of a "staying small while mobilising" approach to its own development. The volunteers fear that early media attention could jeopardise their long-term impact as issues concerned with food regulation, or partnership with donors are still being sorted out. Furthermore, modifying shared, societal understanding of what constitutes food waste can be challenging, and maybe more easily achieved through face-to-face participation in food-sharing events. Spreading gradually, through direct encounters, is here a more desirable approach to reconfigure people's practices around surplus food.

At the workshop we would like to further discuss the relationships between media and social movements with respect to scaling practices. Questions regarding long-term strategies to growth and achieve impact while dealing with everyday contingencies, along with the pros and cons of engaging with media under situated circumstances are key here.

We would also like to explore possible ways to make empirical understanding of such relationships relevant to the organising of community-driven initiatives. Questions regarding the form such knowledge could take, along with a consideration of the socio-cultural aspects, reasons and ways of organising that underlie different grassroots initiatives are central to this point.

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