Polarizing Political Participation Frames in a Nordic LGBT Community

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Abstract: This article is based on a research project studying political discussions in the Nordic LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Transsexual) community Qruiser. These discussions were very antagonistic and rude. The aim is therefore to understand what motivated participation in these heated discussions. The focus is on threads in the political forum on Qruiser. The research is nethnographic through online interviews, participant observations in, and content analyses of, political discussions threads during the month of November 2012. By using framing theory as an analytical tool, the article seeks to answer which frames attracted and mobilized participation and how this was done. In the article I find that polarizing frames of the left vs the right, the xenophobic vs the political correct, together with a truth and a game frame was used to motivated participation in the Qruiser forum threads.

A**t least 100 million** participate regularly on online communities today (Kozinets, 2011, p. 10). Homosexuals were particularly quick to embrace the Internet and its affordance of time-space compression (Gross, 2007). Queer youth, often feeling geographically and emotionally isolated, turned to the Internet as a somewhat safe space to explore their sexual identities among supportive and like-minded others (ibid.). Indeed, affinity communities where early to blossom online, the Internet allowing for like-minded to socialize over geographic boundaries. The compression of geography and possibility of expanding personal support systems were early hailed as benefits of the Internet. Affinity communities, not the least communities for sexual minorities, have indeed explored these affordances.

The question is if such affinity communities could be considered as loci for the political and the practices there as political participation? Within the field of political communication, arguments have been made that it would be wrong to narrowly focus on realms of institutionalized politics to understand political participation (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 137; Carpentier, 2011, pp. 39-40; Wright, 2012). This article therefore approaches affinity communities as political and as important if aiming at understanding broader political participation. Furthermore, Dahlgren & Alvares' (2013, p. 50) delineation of engagement from participation, while at the same time underlining their mutual interdependence, can be used to argue for the importance of affinity and sexual identity in political participation. According to them, engagement is the *subjective* requirement for participation – a sense of involvement in the questions of political life. In this way they argue that engagement in affinity communities might be linked to the political. Indeed, enthusiasm and passion for an issue (i.e. engagement according to Dahlgren & Alvares) are pivotal for motivating participation and providing it with meaning (see also Hall, 2005). Participation therefore also has a subjective and emotional side to it, something that underlines affinity and sexual identity as important aspects when trying to understand broader political participation. And from a radical democratic perspective

(see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005), exploration of non-normative identities, such as queer identities, could be understood as political since it challenges dominant discourses about what a respectful life entails.

In this article the focus is on the online realm. It is known that participation changes when it migrates to the Internet because of the possibility of anonymity, automatic archiving and easy access to other communities (Kozinets, 2011, p. 100). Some scholars have even claimed that such characteristics democratize participation, making expression of opinions and political mobilization more accessible for a wider range of the population (see for example Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Shirky, 2009). Others have questioned whether the Internet really affords new spaces for political participation, reinforces democratic values, empowers citizen or merely underlines existing power relations (Morozov, 2011). However, these debates have not yet, to the authors best knowledge, been extended to include participation in online affinity communities (see also Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 41; Wright, 2012, p. 6). At the same time there seems to be a general lack of engagement in new media studies with non-normative identities (Karl, 2007, p. 47), even though there are exceptions, see for example Campbell, 2007; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). The argument here is that communicative exploration of sexual identity online very well may constitute the subjective requirement to participate politically, not the least since affective communication helps us to think reflexively about our life situations and how to navigate society (McGuigan, 2005; Dahlgren & Alvares, 2013). It is thus relevant to study online affinity communities as sites of political participation.

From this introduction we can conclude that a) there is a need to include realms of non-institutional politics (such as affinity communities) when studying political participation, b) that affinity communities, and especially queer ones, were early to adopt and use the internet, and c) that participation changes when moving to the online realm. This directs us to the object of study of this article, the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, and Transsexual) community *Qruiser.* Qruiser is the biggest LGBT community in the Nordic region and part of the larger affinity portal *QX* (Queer Extra). The community platform is primarily used for flirting, dating, finding friends and sexual partners. This is underlined by the name Qruiser*,* referring to cruising - an activity undertaken by homosexual men (mostly in the pre-digital era and before general acceptance of homosexuality in the West) strolling around in outdoor areas known among homosexual men as a space to find like-minded (often parks) checking each other out, looking for – as well as having – casual sex.

Qruiser does not only offer an online space for cruising. There are also possibilities for political discussions in so-called forums and clubs. This article is based in a research project studying political discussions in Qruiser forums and clubs during November 2012. The article is delineated to the study to the forum "Politics, Society & the World" (author's translation: Politik, Samhälle & Världen). The research is nethnographic through online interviews, participant observations in, and content analyses of, political discussions. The focus of this research project has been to understand what kinds of participation is taking place on Qruiser and what motivates people to engage in political discussions there. In a previous article the author concluded that the participation was geared towards conflict and dissent rather than towards deliberation, opinion formation and consensus (Svensson, 2013). The participation style was rude and antagonistic and Qruiser was conceived of as a place freed from political correctness, providing an outlet for political frustration. This article intends to go further into these findings with a particular aim to understand what motivated participation in political discussions in an atmosphere this rude and antagonistic. The article will start by attending to some conceptual clarifications and the analytical framework, before attending to the research questions and methods used to discuss these research questions.

1.   Analytical Framework

It has been a common practice among scholars to distinguish between narrow/minimalist and wide/maximalist definitions of participation (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 116; Carpentier, 2011). Narrow definitions sometimes include nothing more than casting a vote every fourth year, whereas wide definitions include all kinds of opinion expressions – from blogging to civil disobedience. Verba & Nie (1972, p. 2) famously delineated participation as attempts to influence public decision-makers. But participation also has come to refer to activities with the purpose of influencing society at large and not only decision-makers (Esaiasson & Westholm, 2006, p. 15). The author has departed from these discussions when differentiating between political participation initiated from within representative democratic institutions and practices (parliamentary participation), participation initiated from outside the Parliament but with an outspoken aim to influence public decision-makers (activist participation), and participation initiated from a more popular culture sphere, not primarily set up for political purposes (cultural participation, see Svensson, 2011). Following this differentiation, the study of Qruiser concerns cultural participation.

Non-institutionalized online arenas, not primarily directed towards decision-makers (such as fan communities, net communities and affinity portals) may become spaces for political participation (Street, 1997; Hermes, 2005, 2006; van Zoonen, 2005). And, as hinted to in the introduction, if aiming at understanding political participation, it would be wrong to exclusively focus on realms of institutionalized politics (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 39-40; Dahlgren & Alvares, 2013, p. 51). Similarly, Wright (2012) – building on Oldenburg's concept of the third place – argues for a notion of "third space" as non-political online spaces where political talk emerges. Hermes' (2006) formulations of a *cultural public sphere* and *cultural citizenship* further attend to this. While drawing on the idea of the sense-making agent, culture in Hermes' terminology is more connected to the blurring of public-private and fiction- non-fiction boundaries, reminding us that citizenship is practiced in many different places. Hence, we should not forget popular cultural communication formats when trying to understand political participation (see also Dahlgren, 2009, pp. 83- 86). Popular culture offers images and symbols that evoke emotion that we use not least when we negotiate civic identities that are of pivotal importance for political participation and opinion formation (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 137). The articulation of politics is also done through aesthetic and emotional modes of communication (McGuigan, 2005, p. 435). As Keane (2000, p. 86) states: music, opera, sport, painting and dancing were among the forms of communication giving rise to public life, and its contemporary counterparts should therefore be understood as legitimate loci for the political.

Focusing on understanding what motivates participation in an online realm of cultural participation the concept of meaning and meaning-making becomes pivotal. Culture, in an anthropological sense, is understood as a way of life and how we attach meanings to this way of life (see Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Also Feenberg (2010, p. 146) discusses society as a realm of meaning engaging/ producing interacting subjects. In these accounts actors are also actively engaged in the production of and maintenance of meaning (see also Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). Meaning-making further resonates in online settings where it has been argued that community, no longer being determined to territory, could be defined around boundaries of interest and meaning-making (Delanty, 2008, 2003; Dobson 2003, p. 72).

When political participation occurs on sites of popular culture, it has often been understood as communications that take a political turn without initially intended to (Wojcieszek & Mutz, 2009). Examples are Graham's (2009) study of discussions on docusoap fan-pages and Svensson's (2010) study of discussions on ice-hockey fan-pages. But cultural participation also concerns specific spaces on larger affinity portals to which politically-minded and interested members are directed. Andersson (2013) studied political discussions in such a space on an online youth community primarily based on music preferences and clothing style. He found that users were exposed to very opposing political views, something that socialized them into what he discusses as

"politically confrontational team players" (Andersson, 2013, p.204). Another example is Campbell's (2007) study of comments to news stories on the affinity portal Gay.com. Similar to Andersson, he found vibrant and politically charged debates from a diversity of political positions. It thus seems that confrontation to diverse political opinions is more likely on spaces on non-outspokenly political communities and affinity portals to where political discussions are confined. The study of Qruiser has similarities with Campbell in that both focus on LGBT sites. However, the Qruiser study focuses on discussion forums in a community instead of news stories in general. The Qruiser study also has similarities with Anderson in that the object of study – here a political discussion forum – is explicitly political but only one small space of a larger affinity community not primarily geared towards politics.

Focusing on participation on a Qruiser forum, it becomes apparent that the article departs from an understanding of communication as participation (see Micheletti, 2006). We know that communication is action from the heydays of discourse and speech act theory. The *polis,* as Arendt (1998/1958, pp. 194, 198) pointed out already in the 50s, is not the city-state in its physical location, but the activity of people acting and speaking together. In this way Arendt theorizes action and communication together, as two sides of the same coin, and relates them to the sphere of the political. That communication is participation is perhaps more true than ever in todays connected societies, permeated by online social networking in which agency is complexly interwoven with the communication platforms we utilize and the communication taking place on them (Urry, 2007, p. 176). Indeed, as Carpentier (2011, p. 67) underlines, discussions on a net community deals with opportunities for mediated participation in a (semi)public debate as well as with self-representation in one of the spaces that characterize the social.

This article attends to political participation in forum discussions online with a particular focus on processes of meaning-making. In highly connected societies, like the Nordic ones, digital technologies and related practices become increasingly fused with existing and new systems of meaning, contributing to the emergence of a net culture (Kozinets, 2011, p. 23). By assuming an anthropological approach to culture, participation and community become dialectically intertwined also with processes of identity negotiation/maintenance and meaning-making. This connects back to the general aim of the research project to understand what motivated participation in the political discussions on the Qruiser. Through different processes of identification the individual become interlinked/interlinks him/herself with the community. Framing is one such process. This leads me to the theoretical tool for analyzing this; *participation frames*.

Building on Goffman, frames are generally referred to when studying meaning-making and how participants interpret their participation (see Carpentier, 2011, p. 72). Discussing frames in relation to news journalism, Entman (1993, p. 52) argues that frames select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text. Indeed, media is important, together with personal experience and interaction with peers, for setting the frames of reference for readers, viewers or users – establishing a version of reality we then build our worldviews on (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105). Apart from news journalism, it is mostly in theories of collective action that ideas of *collective action* frames have been developed and analyzed. Frame analysis has provided a window on how collective actors construct interpretive schemata that underlie mobilization and sustain action (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137; Steinberg, 1998, p. 845). Frames are thus also situationally sensitive as they describe how communication, negotiation, and production of meaning are *framed* by a certain environment or context (Steinberg, 1998, p. 846). Benford & Snow (2000, p. 613) in turn underline framing as a signifying work in which participants engages actively to produce and maintain meaning. They argue that the tasks of framing is *diagnostic* (for identifying problems) 2) *prognostic* (for identify strategies and finding solutions to problems) and *motivational* (here understood as for mobilizing action – see Snow & Benford, 1988, pp. 200-202). Gamson (1992, pp. 7-8) further discusses framing in collective action as handling a sense of injustice, construction of group identities and negotiating of the groups agency to address the injustice.

The history of framing analysis within both news and collective action highlights a duality, focusing both on the environment, such as (mass) media texts, and on (mostly) individual meaning-making practices. Here, Scheufele (1999, p. 106) explicitly distinguishes between individual and media frames. Individual frames refer to information processing schemata and media frames refer to attributes to news, an organizing idea that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events. In this way it could be argued that frames both condense the world out there (media frames) as well as signify it (individual frames). The question is whether we can clearly separate individual and media frames. Steinberg (1998, p. 852) for example argues against what he calls a media-individual frame dichotomy. By understanding frames as meaning-making structures, he argues against individual frames as something that exclusively should reside within us. His take on frames is that they instead take place between us. By focusing on this in-betweeness he also underlines the environment, the discursive fields within which framing takes place. Similarly Gamson (1992, p. 111) argues that frames are the outcome of negotiating shared meanings *between* actors.

In this sense it could be argued that frames are similar to ideologies since both rely upon assumptions about reality that may or may not be true. However, frames are not the same as ideologies (see Oliver & Johnston, 2000). Where ideologies refer to systems of ideas, frames are more localized, not as encompassing and not necessarily as coherent as ideologies. Frames and framing may draw on larger ideologies but they can never replace them (Oliver & Johnston, 2000, p. 38). Frames are more dialogic, more dynamic and more unstable than ideologies are. Furthermore, frames orient and guide interpretation and are thus more context dependent than ideologies (Oliver & Johnston, 2000, p. 41). As such framing points to process while ideology points to content (Oliver & Johnston, 2000, p. 45). Frames are about the situational process of meaning-making while ideologies are systems of meaning making, whole systems of beliefs and ideas and how they refer to each other. And here, this article seeks to understand the processes of meaning-making in very particular situation, political discussions in an LGBT forum. Therefore the concept of frames is used rather than ideology (even though ideologies may be behind certain frames).

In this article frames are used as an analytical tool for discussing what motivates participation, i.e. how actors negotiate meaning around their participation. Indeed, frames help rendering events and occurrences meaningful, organize experience (and communication) and thus also guide participation in particular situations by simplifying and condensing the world in ways that mobilize, motivate and make participation meaningful (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). In this way frames and participation are dialectically intertwined in giving meaning to events as well as to one self and to others through signifying practices of interpretation.

Keeping in mind that frames are dialogic, dynamic and unstable, this article particularly seeks to understand how frames and participation intersect in the Qruiser forum. Hence, what this article seeks to analyze could be labeled *participation frames*, i.e. frames that are used and referred to when participating in political discussion on Qruiser forum threads. The first question the article then wishes to discuss is 1) which frames attracted (mobilized and maintained) participation. To discern such frames common threads in the empirical material have to be looked for (see Ryan et al., 2011, p. 177). The second question deals with 2) how these frames attracted participation. Even though two distinct questions here, these are hard to separate and have to be dealt with in tandem in the following analysis. To address these questions attention have to directed to the role of the online environment on Qruiser, the language and terminology used, principles, norms and values adhered to as well as what practices participants were cherishing. Therefore online postings, i.e. digitally mediated speech acts, have been analyzed, participants have been interviewed and their posting behavior observed and the author has also participated in some discussions. The methodological considerations will be attended to next.

2. Method

The study of Qruiser primarily took place during November 2012. November 1st the community had 109153 active members. According to member statistics 72 percent of these defined themselves as male and 72 percent defined themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The majority of the members are between 20 and 40 years old with an average age of 33. 72 percent of the members are based in Sweden and only 17 percent defined themselves as in a relationship, underlining Qruiser's main function – for LGBTs to find a date.

Given the theoretical focus on participation and meaning-making, condensed to the analytical tool of participation frames, together with the general aim to discern and understand these – a nethnographic method has been chosen. Nethnography is a form of ethnography adapted to the characteristics of online communities (Kozinets, 2011, p. 9). Three important differences between ethnography and nethnography are 1) how a researcher enters into the field, 2) how data is collected and 3) ethical considerations a researcher has to make when conducting the research. The first difference is straightforward; when conducting a nethnography the researcher enters into the culture online, through the Internet and the communication platform(s) the community under study is using. The second difference, how to collect data online, is possible through a combination of many different methods (Kozinets, 2011, p. 65). In this research project, material have been collected through online interviews, online participant observations in, and content analyses of, political discussions threads. These methods will be attended to more in detail next.

Participant observation is of particular importance here as the core of nethnographic understandings and research practices. Kozinets (2011, pp. 89-90, 108) argues that all nethnographic research builds upon field work, i.e. researcher spending a lot of time in an online culture and engaging in its members, trying to understand their reality through an embedded cultural understanding and thick description (see Geertz, 1973, p. 6). Being queer himself, the author grew up with Qruiser and been a member since his 20s. It is thus a familiar environment for him. To discuss politics have however not been his prime motivation for hanging out on Qruiser. Hence, the Qruiser political forum together with the activities going on there, were new to him.

This article focuses on political discussion threads in the sub-forum Politics, Society & the World. It is argued that discussion forums are particularly suitable for nethnographic research (Kozinets, 2011, pp. 120-121). All discussion threads started from November 1st to 20th was observed and saved for analysis. Postings continued to be downloaded in these threads until November 25th. This resulted in a corpus of 76 different threads, started by 31 different nicknames, containing a total of 2853 postings. Kozinets (2011, p. 139) argues that about 1000 pages double spaced with postings is a suitable amount of data from discussion forums. The 76 discussion threads on Qruiser in November 2012 resulted in about 1700 pages of postings, all of which have been analyzed for this article. After having published a conference paper on this material (see Svensson, 2013), the author linked to this paper in a discussion thread (June 2013) in order to share his results with the community and participants. This discussion thread sparked a mild debate that has also been included in this study.

To this material, all thread starters and recurrent posters from November 2012 were invited to participate in online interviews. Not everyone agreed to participate. To date, interviews on the platform have been conducted with 36 different nicknames. The interviews have been different in length (and some are still continuing). In total around 250 pages of interview material has been included for this study. This material includes interviews from a pre-study April 2012. Given the nature of online interviews the author has been able to go back and forth between his observations, theoretical explorations and the interviewees. Hence, a formal interview guide has not been employed in the study. The interviews are unstructured and the questions evolve out of responses from the interviewees themselves, out of research from other academics and out of student comments on the material, not to forget theoretically founded ideas that popped up during the

course of trying to understand the material as it grew. Generally, having cleared issues of informed consent, the first question has been to simply ask why they participate in the discussion threads and then take it from there.

A reflective field diary has also been kept from November 1st – documenting observations, feelings, subtexts, and experiences as the author participated in discussions as well as during the analysis phase. Such reflective field notations help decipher rationales and meanings behind cultural acts, and hence they have been beneficial for in the analysis (see also Kozinets, 2011, p. 15). According to Kozinets (2011, pp. 138-139), there are thus three types of data to be collected in nethnographic research, all of which have been collected in this study: 1) archive data (easily selected through copy and paste on these forums), 2) elicited data (gathered in interaction with participants through online interviews), and 3) field notations (noted in the reflexive diary).

The third difference from offline ethnography concerned ethical issues. Qruiser is neither a public nor a private forum. You need to become a member to access the site, a process that only takes two minutes. Hence, it is easier to access Qruiser than to subscribe to a newspaper. Member profile pictures are also displayed for all visitors on the login page (see https://www.qruiser.com), even to those not yet signed up or become members. Despite this easy access and display of members profile pictures publicly, it is doubtful that participants expect that their participation will appear in a research project (Kozinets, 2011, p. 193). The author has therefore been fully open with his presence and his research aims on Qruiser, not the least on his profile page (as advised by Kozinets, 2011, p. 201). November 4th he also changed his nickname to *forskaren* (the researcher) and as stated earlier the author has also published research results on the forum. In March 2012 the administrators were contacted who gave the permission to conduct research on the forum. However, several attempts to get permission from the publisher have not yielded any results. Terms of use have been checked as well as the different policies on Qruiser and it has been made sure that none of these were violated when conducting the research. All thread starters of the threads included in the study have been asked to participate in interviews. Even if not all of them wanted participate, all of the ones that answered to the request gave the author permission to study the threads they started (as advised by Kozinets, 2011, p. 203). Furthermore, in this article no personal information about any participant will be revealed (such as nickname or age). Only postings from participants in the study will be cited and only interview excerpts from participants having given their permission to do so will be displayed in this text. This does not entail complete anonymity, but something scholars have labeled "middle masking" (Kozinets, 2011, p. 211). Participants have been given a high amount of confidentiality and data have been stored in way that only the author can access (unless the author is subjected to state surveillance, which is unlikely). Furthermore, since this is data collected in forums in which some participants link to their own blogs - with their given name and all kinds of personal information fully visible – and since these are forums in which people confront each other for the opinions they express, it can be argued that the participants themselves did not act as if the communication was private (for a discussion on this see Andersson, 2013, pp. 162-164). In conclusion then, the risk of damage to the participants is minimal, the participants autonomy and integrity is to the author's best knowledge secured, a relevant method for data gathering is used and the contribution of this research is arguably substantial. Following Elgesem (2002) this means that this study is justified from an ethical standpoint.

3.   Polarizing Participation Frames

This leads us to the results and discussion part of the article. The forum attracted a lot of heated discussions between clear-cut and confident opponents with strong pre-established convictions. A previous study concluded that participation on this Qruiser forum was geared towards conflict and dissent between antagonists deliberately seeking to misinterpret each other's postings in order to

attack and use unflattering labels on each other (Svensson, 2013). The question thus arises, what frames motivated participation in such heated, rude and antagonistic discussion threads? From the beginning two polarizing participation frames could be discerned, the left vs. the right and the xenophobes vs. the cultural relativists.

Studying the postings in the 76 threads collected in the forum, the division between the left and the right stands out. In the discussions threads, right-wing posters talked about "the left riffraff's confused world views" or how "the socialist Sweden has decide it is ugly to work, to earn your own living" (all quotes translated from Swedish by author). The left-wing posters showed a similar (lack of) eloquence talking about the "bourgeois pack" and female ministers in the conservative alliance government as "bourgeois bitches" for example. Below is another example from in a discussion thread on youth unemployment;

> "You are not a liberal. You are an authoritarian bully who thinks you are above others and seem to believe you have the right to force other people into the culture you advocate"

 That this left-right frame triggered participation was also evident in the interviews. When asked why participating in the forum discussions a vast majority of the interviewees at least once in the course of the interview made use of this frame to explain their participation, and thus provide it with meaning. Statements such as "the left has done so much harm", "concerning the left, they have nothing to offer" and "we have to combat the right-wing opinions on the forum" were very common. Below is another example from an interviewee answering the question of why he participates in the forum discussions;

> "It is almost exclusively socialists of various colors that participate in the debates here so a different perspective - a voice that believes in freedom - is needed"

Already in the previous article it was observed that the positioning of the opponent was to a surprisingly large extent done using a frame of the left vs. the right (Svensson, 2013). The author has come across this frame also in other studies (see Svensson et al., 2015). Still the dominance of this frame was surprising. Conceiving of the political field in terms of the left vs the right remains hegemonic – sorting all kinds of conflicts under it. The left vs the right functioned as a master frame for attracting participation, understanding posting practices, as well as a discursive map to orient and quickly position yourself and others in the threads. The right-left frame is thus far from obsolete in contemporary political landscapes. Nonetheless it is rather simplistic and its dominance does hide other ways of constructing the political.

The other main frame that triggered participation that stands out in the material is the exchange between xenophobes (or unafraid truth-tellers according to themselves) and the defenders of multiculturalism (or the politically correct mafia/ cultural relativists according to their opponents). There are numerous examples referred to in the 2853 postings of, for example municipalities having to "shut down elderly care units" at the same time as they received refugees who "drained the welfare system without contributing to it". Some of these posters did not shy away from naming their opponents as xenophobes, fascists or even on some occasions, Nazis, as in the posting below;

> "Faceless racists/Nazis are everywhere online, but on an LGBT site? It is an insult to us and to those who fought for our rights"

It was obvious that this frame motivated participation and made it meaningful for participants. In the interviews this frame was prominent. When answering the question in what issues he was engaged in an interviewee answered the following;

> "I engage in discussions that concerns Sweden, its duration as a nation and as a home for the Swedish people and Swedish culture contra multiculturalists"

On the other side their opponents argued that these posters were wrong as "there is no such thing as free immigration" and that "not even refugees can assume to have a safe haven in Sweden". In the interviews opponents of multiculturalism also talked about what they considered a confusion of nationalism for racism. "I stand for being a nationalist, however my opponents love to label me racist, even though these are two different things". At the same time some of these participants welcomed a forum climate "where the political correctness has decreased" and "spread of different opinions are more visible", here anti-immigration opinions. This points at a contradiction in the material, especially among those holding more nationalist opinions. On the one hand they appreciated the Qruiser forum as a locus relatively free for all kinds of opinions, even non-politically correct ones. On the other hand many felt unfairly labeled as racists.

Not surprisingly, the nationalists/xenophobes in this frame considered the religion of Islam as particularly evil and attacked Muslims as unwanted and unfit for Swedish society. You could for example observe statements in the postings like this one:

> "Many Muslims are so shielded from the rest of the world that they are still for the most part believe in, and live by, Muslim traditions, as they did during the time of the prophet Mohammed. Their modernization process has not even begun."

The idea of cultural relativism was an important part of the anti-Islam side of this frame. Frequent arguments were that Christianity (Judaism or any other religion or culture for that matter) and Islam were measured by different yardsticks. For example, some believed that there was a general silencing of women abuse and homophobia in Islam by a politically correct elite who did not dare to criticize Islam, afraid of being labeled islamophobists. Below is one example from a posting;

> "You cannot criticize mosques for spreading hatred against Jews, Christians and homosexuals without being attacked for spreading hatred against Muslims!"

RFSL (the Swedish national LGBT organization) was particularly criticized here for "in the spirit of cultural relativism having different yardsticks for Islamic and Christian gay hostility", or for demonstrating together with what some participants considered homophobic organizations (such as Swedish Young Muslims). There were also frequent references to what was called "Islamophobia-phobia" both in the postings and in the interviews. Below is one example from an interview;

> "The subordination of women has worsened recently by cultural relativism and the sprawl of Islamophobia-phobia, the belief that all cultures are equally good, and that we should not criticize Islam as it would be prejudiced and racist."

At some times the left vs. the right and the xenophobe vs. the cultural relativist frames intersected in interesting ways. It was for example considered that xenophobes were right-wing extremists and that people on the left were defenders of the religion of Islam – that they considered "all Muslims as an oppressed working class" as one interviewed participant phrased it. Or as in the posting below;

> "I am also amazed that some LGBT people, particularly those with left-wing views, excuse Islamic homophobia, or believe it milder than other homophobia. They are cultural relativists, and therefore use a different yardstick when it comes to Islam. Repression they sharply condemn outside Islam becomes acceptable for them when it is Muslims who stands for it."

These postings and interview excerpts also reveal how LGBT rights were used as an argument to justify ones position in relation to the two frames. On the left, posters accused opponents of lacking "self-respect" since they, as ascribed Sweden Democrats (Swedish anti-immigration party), supported family conservative ideas. On the other side, LGBTs on the left were accused of having "insufficient self-respect" since they "defended or played down Muslim homophobia". And

sometimes the supposed left-wing posters and Sweden Democrats were lumped together as in this example;

> *"the people on the left here who cringe to Muslim congregations are not one bit better than sympathizers of the Sweden Democrats".*

Qruiser being a LGBT community thus clearly influenced how the frames were used by the common use of LGBT rights in both ends of these two frames. This being a LGBT environment clearly mattered and shaped the discursive fields within which the framing took place. Now we thus enter more into the discussion of how these frames mobilized and maintained participation. Walther (1997) argues that if you expect future interaction in a net community, users will interact in a friendlier and more cooperative manner, and the tone generally will be more positive than if the users think their interaction will be limited. Following Walther, participants in the Qruiser forum did thus not expect future interaction. In the forum observations it was obvious that the participants did not read each other's postings carefully. Their interchange was rude, fast, and full of spelling mistakes, indicating their quick composition in the heat of the fight. The participants often used caricatures to portray the opponent in a bad light by associating opinions from extreme end positions in these frames to the opponent. For example, if you were perceived of as belonging to the left you had to answer for North Korean politics and like-wise, if you were perceived of as right-wing you had to answer to everything from American foreign policy to decisions from the at the time ruling conservative alliance in Sweden. According to one interview, this antagonistic atmosphere led to parsing and preconceived opinions, which in turn led participants to give in to the general rude tone of the threads and adopt a more ferocious appearance. The quick pace of the interactions on the Qruiser forum and the use of these two simplistic frames could be understood as dialectically intertwined. If the interaction is quick, and you need to keep posting in order to keep pace with the flow of the interaction in the thread, then it seemed that these easy and simplistic participation frames were helpful in quickly orienting yourself and your opponents and thus quickly get into the heat of the verbal fighting.

In conclusion, these polarizing participation frames had a signifying function, used by participants to produce and maintain meaning (see Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613). They were used in a diagnostic way, to identify problems in different issues such as youth unemployment for example were both immigrants and right wing as well as left wing politics were to blame. Thus these frames were also used in a prognostic way as they had solutions to these problems in built in the frames. Fewer immigrants would cure youth unemployment for example or more socialist measures for that matter or making it less attractive to live on unemployment benefits if you belonged to the right end of the frame. These frames were also clearly motivational as they indeed triggered a lot of action in the discussion threads.

4.   The Proclamation of Truth to an Imagined Audience

Now the article has slightly entered into the discussion of how these polarizing frames attracted participation by references to LGBT rights. That these frames were so polarized and the participation so rude and antagonistic can also be discussed out of what is suggested to be labeled a truth frame. This was clearly observable in the postings in the forum threads. "I participate when I find that there is too much injustice, bullying and ignorance – to correct the worldview in the forum" as one interviewee phrased it. There was a tendency among the participants to preach what they were convinced of was the truth. And if you did not get the truth, you were basically ignorant. The examples below are from three different interviews that all illustrate this;

> *"The thread had about 90% inaccurate information, so I started another thread to correct these lies"*

> *"I'm damn tired of ignorance in general. And I become even more tired as a gay man when Qruiser allows faceless trolls to spew their racism and coarse lies"*

> *"You learn fairly quickly that there is no point participating in their (the extreme right) threads, you become blocked if you disclose anything for them objectionable, facts for example"*

In the interviews participants talked about an urge to let people know the truth, that they were motivated to share this truth that they had access to. Carpentier (2014), studying the Cyprus-Greek conflict, discusses participants in online forums (in his case YouTube) as conceiving of themselves as having a privileged access to truth. This was also apparent on Qruiser. In the interviews participants talked about an urge to let people know the truth – to share this truth that they had access to;

> *"I don't know why the Sweden Democrats trigger leftists hateful sentiments here, especially since these are founded in ignorance. Someone has to tell them the truth."*

> *"I stand up for knowledge and justice. That is correct. But also to educate and show facts rather than rumors"*

These interview excerpts clearly show that what was going on in these forum threads was not about opinion formation or some kind of Habermasian deliberation. Participants had formed their opinions already before entering into the discussion. Rather than geared towards forming opinions, the participation in the discussions were motivated by an urge to preach their conviction to others. Internet, through its practice of linking, seems to afford this. Using links was a way to verify standpoints and convictions (source criticism aside). By justifying a post with a link in a sense seemed to confirm the standpoint expressed, a kind if verification that indeed the claim in the post was true, and hence that the poster had access to the truth. This was especially apparent in the clubs (Svensson, 2014), but also clearly visible in the forum (see also Carpentier, 2014). Below is one excerpt from a discussion on the harmfulness of cannabis.

> *"Read these articles, those of you who believe cannabis is the invention of the Devil, and educate yourself a little bit and at the same time understand that criminalization of cannabis is not based in facts; it is just propaganda in order for a number of companies to make money on keeping cannabis illegal. We start easy: http://www.xxx, and then some on the effects on the brain www.xxx, how is it with addiction? www.xxx, Cures Cancer? Oh Yes! www.xxx"*

While the participants believed to have privileged access to truth, they were also mostly aware of that they could not convince their opponents. In the interview excerpts below the participants were asked about their debates with opponents, if they believed they could get their opponents to change their minds. This is how most participants answered;

> *"You don't win over XX in this way, it is about to get more people to discover the major shortcomings in his arguments"*

> *"I will never get the opponent to change his opinion, and that's not the purpose either. The debate is to influence those who are uncertain and that just follow the debate."*

These excerpts hint to one motivation to participate in these forum threads. Participants did not expect to convince or to reason with their opponents, but by engaging in debate with them they were actually addressing someone else, an imagined audience, an audience believed much easier to convince than debate opponents. This is illustrated in the interview below;

> *"To answer your question for whom I want to discover the shortcomings of XXs argumentation, those who still can be influenced. They are not any specific persons. But I want to show alternatives for those undecided"*

A conception of an imagined audience as consisting of individuals who will be convinced by their arguments underlines the participation in the forum threads as a form fantasy (see Carpentier, 2014). "The ones who read without commenting I believe are the ones who try to form an opinion, I respect these people" as one interviewee phrased it. Some participants told the author they referred opponents, who send them personal messages via the message function, to the (semi)public forum. They wanted the discussion to be (semi)public. Participants thus seemed to want the debate to be visible for this imagined audience they believed they could convince. Here a norm/ principle that had formed on the forum could be observed; you do not participate if you do not have a solid opinion already formed, then you are expected to lurk – which in turn underlines the importance of the imagined audience for these participants. A conception of an imagined audience as consisting of individuals who will be convinced by their access to truth, underpinned and verified with various links, underlines their participation as a kind of fantasy (see Carpentier, 2014).

Participants seemed to be aware of the norm not to participate if not representing a solid opinion, having access to the truth. Until you are decided, you should lurk. The author became painfully aware of this norm when he entered into the debate. He was curious about the meaning and use of the term *anti-Semitism* in a thread on Israel and Palestine. Some pro-Palestinian debaters equaled the Holocaust with what happens to Palestians in today's Israel. This comparison was anti-Semitic according to some pro-Israel posters. Hence the author simply asked how to use the term *anti-Semitism* and how to understand it. This call for reasoning and discussion was not accepted by the others in the forum and I was subsequently attacked as the following post illustrates;

> *"This is just ignorance and harshly undifferentiated – you who claim to have a PhD should understand this"*

With this attempt to reason rather than to preach a ready formed opinion, it was made clear that the author violated the norm that you should not participate unless you had made up your mind. Other participants, quick to use the polarizing left vs right frame to make meaning of the posting, thought the author was attacking pro-Israel participants from a left-wing perspective. Furthermore, the antagonistic atmosphere together with not being able to decipher the academic style call for elaboration and discussion in the posting, other participants thought the author sought to attack pro-Israel participants – troll them – as the following post underlines;

> *"I see two reasons for you posing this question here 1) provocation – you want someone who is pro-Isreal to label you an anti-Semite and hence score points – Cheap and Ugly! 2) Ignorance of what genocide is and how it is defined by the UN charter – unlikely"*

5. Trolling as a Pastime

The antagonistic atmosphere in the forum threads complicates Walther's (1997) conclusion that the non-anticipation of future interaction was behind rudeness in forum discussion. On Qruiser it seemed that some participants rejoiced in attacking each other and being attacked in turn, which leads to the final section of the article. Here it is argued that the antagonistic participation was part of pastime, a game in which attacks and rudeness was sometimes even appreciated aspects of the game.

Participants sought conflict on the forum. The perspective of radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005) has underlined the importance of conflict in political participation. Participation will always entail the identification of an *Other* in contrast to an *Us* (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 136). But by outlining a normative concept of *agonism* - in contrast to antagonism - Mouffe (2005) seeks to establish the *Other*, not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary to be acknowledged. In this way the perspective of radical democracy offers a norm to measure the participation on the Qruiser forum against. In contrast to Andersson's (2013) study of a youth

community - who concluded that political discussions were conflictual, yet agonistic and friendly - the discussions on Qruiser were very antagonistic as they numerous examples have shown. The positioning of the *Other* was to a surprisingly large extent done using the polarizing frames and then associating opinions from the extreme versions of the end positions in these frames to the *Other*, so-called guilt by association. Participants used unflattering labels on each other such as being drunkards, pedophiles et cetera. However, participants also seemed to like to fight with each other. It was not that they wanted to destroy their enemy, they were passing time on for this, a clear cut enemy was needed. Hence, neither Habermas (deliberation) nor Mouffe (radical democracy) are able to fully explain the conflictual participation on the Qruiser forum.

The participation in the discussion threads comes very close to what is defined as flaming. According to Wikipedia[1] flaming is used to describe unserious, hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users. In other words some of the participants behaved like Internet trolls – a person who sows discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people. This alludes to how the trolls in the tales could lure people as well as being generally wicked. It also refers to the fishing method trolling[2]. But instead of dragging a shining fishing lure through a fish shoal in the hope that some fish will bite, Internet trolls use flaming expressions in the hope that opponents will bite and thus spark heated and antagonistic discussions.

According to some interviewees the flaming atmosphere did lead to defamation, which in turn led participants to adopt this antagonistic tone in the discussions. But it was also considered a cherished pastime and an entertaining game. This points at a key motivation for the participation on the forum, a play frame. In almost all interviews this was referred to in one way or another, that "to discuss is a way to compete, a hobby" or that "anything that amuses me is a good thing". The most common way interviewees explained their participation in the discussion threads was to refer to it as a pastime. And here it seems that participants preferred passing time fighting between clear cut opponents than to reason with undecided. This was considered more fun and more liberating, not the least because of the lack of political correctness on the Qruiser forum as highlighted in the excepts below:

> "There is no-one that censors you here, there is no wait before your post gets published, you also generally get an immediate response, which is usually pretty fun"

> "On this type of site, people unleash in a completely different way with there thoughts and opinions, it's liberating"

> "I participate mainly when I am bored, etc., a pastime, but also because it's fun to tease all the "left" people here on (when you're bored)."

This entertainment was appreciated not the least because of what was described as a lack of political correctness on the forum. It seemed that many welcomed the Qruiser forum because of a debate climate were "political correctness has diminished" and "a greater spread of opinions can be noted". It became clear that the open and allowing atmosphere attracted many participants, because it was fun. The antagonistic tone was part of the game, and to keep the game going, participants turned to trolling and flaming. It even seemed that some participants rejoiced in attacking each other and being attacked in turn. In the interviews participants talked about how they appreciated negative comments, that these were a sign that they had been successful in their provocations.

To win was secondary, or not even thought about. It was more about keeping the game ongoing. This suggests that the metaphor of play, instead of game, to better describe the participation in the discussion threads. Participants had their favorite opponents and could express joy when they

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_(Internet), accessed 2013-11-14

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troll_(Internet), accessed 2013-11-14).

entered into the thread as in this posting: "XX has awakened from his coma :) bring on the leftist propaganda". In the interviews, participants talked about how they appreciated also negative reactions, that negative reactions was a sign that they had been successful in their provocations as in the excerpt below;

> *"I see strong negative reactions as a sign that the one who has expressed such reactions has been emotionally affected (upset) over what I have written. And as an ideological opponent (or something like that), I wish him all evil, and thus become satisfied thinking of their political agitation."*

From a play perspective rudeness/provocation is part of the rules, to make it interesting and keep the playing ongoing. In this sense to be attacked at least was a sign of acknowledgement as a player, a much better fate than being ignored as illustrated in the interviews below;

> *"I often say that if I have not provoked anyone I have not affected anything. If you don't get any comments it seemed nobody bothered"*

> *"I will probably not write more in debate forums here. It's not worth the time I spend, to talk if nobody listens"*

This was about skillfully using the polarizing participation frames, caricaturing your opponents in light of these frames in order to trigger the play and make the pastime, here debate, ongoing. Participants in the forum threads did not expect to cooperate, not to form opinions, but rather to entertain themselves. It seemed that the medium afforded this because of its directness, being fast, anonymous as well as the platform, Qruiser, being conceived of as liberated from politically correctness. This is participation as play and this could explain the tendency to attack each other rather than to reason.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to study political participation on Qruiser in order to broaden the understanding of political participation in contemporary western, liberal and connected societies. The particular aim was to understand what motivated participation on Qruiser political forums through the analytical tool of participation frames. Attending to political discussion threads in the Forum: *Politics Society and the World,* four different frames could be discerned. Most apparent were the two polarizing participation frames; the left vs. right and the xenophobes vs. politically correct. By further discussing a truth frame and a play frame the question of how the two polarizing participation frames attracted participation was attended to. This study thus shows how polarizing frames of the left vs. right and the xenophobes vs. politically correct were dialectically intertwined in the political participation in the forum, providing participants meaning to their discussion practices, together with a general belief that they had access to the truth and that they were having fun attacking each other in the discussion threads.

Practices of identity negotiation and maintenance were also conducted within these polarizing participation frames. They provided the participants a subjective anchoring point for their participation as well as a temperature at the society in which they lived (here Nordic countries, Sweden in particular). While being an outlet for passions and "refreshingly freed from politically correctness", these frames were also highly limiting as they carried with them ideological dimensions and preconceived ways of constructing the political. It is thus clear that using these frames was homogenizing, reducing complexities and nuances (see also Carpentier, 2014). It seems that participants in the fast and fragmented forum discussions on Qruiser needed these simplifying frames in order to quickly orient themselves and other participants in the exchange and to keep up with the fast proceeding discussion threads.

So what does the political participation on Qruiser say about our society and our co-existence in it? It hints at participation as confrontation rather than opinion formation and the play as an increasing important form for conceiving of politics today. If you are deliberative democrat this might be more worrying than if adhering radical democracy. However, these participants were generally politically interested individuals whose overall participation ranged from letting off steam in Qruiser forums threads to more deliberative style participation in other settings. Hence, we cannot judge the sophistication of their overall participatory practices by only attending to their participation on Qruiser.

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