RIGHT-WINGERS ON THE RISE ONLINE – INSIGHTS FROM THE 2018 SWEDISH ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Given the recent rise of hyperpartisan media – often described as purveyors of 'fake news' – and populist right-wing parties across a series of western contexts, the present study details the degree to which these actors succeed in overtaking their more mainstream competitors when it comes to audience engagement on Facebook. Focusing on the one-month period leading up to the 2018 Swedish national elections, the study finds that right-wing actors across the media and the political sector are more successful in engaging their Facebook followers than their competitors, often utilizing sensational rhetoric and hate-mongering as campaign techniques. As audience engagement is a key factor for social media success, the study closes by providing a discussion on the repercussions for professionals within the media and the political sector.

INTRODUCTION

General elections are indeed "unique moments of national political activity and debate" (Gibson et al., 2014: 124). It is difficult to imagine other societal events where actors seeking to yield influence so intensely sharpen their communicative efforts, resulting in massive torrents of information and persuasive attempts being released upon potential voters. Focusing on Facebook use during the 2018 Swedish elections, this study assesses the influence of two comparably novel types of actors during an election campaign. Specifically, we are interested in the rise of of hyperpartisan media actors and the growing popularity of right-wing populist political actors.

While notions of 'alternative media' (Atton, 2001) have been employed to denote journalistic endeavors emanating from outside of established media organizations, the offerings prepared by what is referred to in this study as hyperpartisan actors could be seen as a different animal. The term is used here to identify media outlets who present themselves as truthful substitutes for their supposed *Lügenpresse* mainstream competitors. Hyperpartisan media tend to portray themselves as in almost constant conflict with their competitors and with a select set of political interests (Fletcher et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2017). With the influx of media actors like Breitbart in the US, similar right-wing initiatives have also emerged elsewhere. More often than not, they succeed in reaching their readers by means of social media (Holt and Haller, 2017). For political actors, then, populism is on the rise as made evident in a series of elections across the globe. Regardless of how populism is defined – for example, as a 'thin' ideology (Mudde, 2004), as a style of communication (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) or as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001), it is clear that actors understood along these lines have utilized social media to largely "uncontestedly articulate their ideology and spread their messages" (Engesser et al., 2017a: 1110).

Regardless of societal domain, both hyperpartisan media and populist parties have employed the capabilities of social media to spread their messages. While research into online developments pertaining to journalism (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2016) and political communication (Larsson and Svensson, 2014) alike have previously suggested that online opportunities largely tend to normalize power relations – those enjoying attention offline

will do so also online – the entry of right-wing media and political actors appears to at least partially challenge this assumption (Larsson, 2019). The study at hand, then, provides empirical insights into the popularity enjoyed by such novel actors when compared to their mainstream competitors by focusing on the use of Facebook during the 2018 Swedish elections.

The Swedish context appears as suitable for a study into the spread of hyperpartisan and populist content on social media for several reasons. Featuring high levels of online news readership (Facht, 2016) and high levels of voting attendance (IDEA, 2019), Sweden is an interesting case with which to compare the oft-studied UK and US contexts – especially since the country features a party-centered rather than a candidate-centered political system, and since it historically been understood as a moderate pluralistic party system – featuring multiple parties and limited ideological differences amongst these parties (Sartori, 1990). Our case country also features comparably high levels of trust in the media (Syvertsen et al., 2014) – in sum, a rather different context when compared to the previously mentioned countries. Moreover, as Sweden accepted a comparably large share of immigrants during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, and as the country suffered a supposedly IS-related terrorist attack during 2017 (e.g Nyberg and Masters, 2017), previously largely positive opinions towards immigrants among Swedes appeared to be changing (Mohdin, 2016), but also in the elected social democratic government (Crouch, 2015).

Taken together, these characteristics set the scene for a study of how novel political and media actors make use of social media to convey their messages. While populist parties in other European countries have emanated from varying ideological backgrounds (e.g. Nai, 2018), the Swedish situation leading up to the elections studied here saw little influence from non-right-wing populist actors. Similarly, the major hyperpartisan media outlets in the Swedish context tend to take right-wing perspectives (Holt, 2018). With these characteristics in mind, the terms "right-wing" will be used in the paper at hand to refer to populist political actors and hyperpartisan media outlets alike. Drawing on the suggestions for research into such actors made by de Vreese and co-authors (2018), the study presented here makes a contribution to the broader field of political communication first of all by featuring a comparative approach, detailing the activities by two different types of right-wing actors in

relation to their mainstream competitors. Relatedly, the study engages with "populism by the media" (de Vreese et al, 2018: 429) in that it encompasses activities by media actors. Finally, the methodological design will allow us to assess "the degree to which social media are platforms for sharing disinformation" (de Vreese et al, 2018: 433) in that it details the degree to which populist and hyperpartisan actors succeed in their online endeavors when compared to their mainstream competitors.

RIGHT-WING ACTORS ACROSS SOCIETAL DOMAINS

Recent research in political communication has suggested that right-wing populists have been especially fervent in their utilization of social media such as Facebook (Engesser et al., 2017a, 2017b). Such findings provide food for thought to the ongoing debate regarding the influence of political ideology on online campaigning practices and success. For instance, comparably early research looking into online campaigning in the UK and Australia suggested that right-wingers were "the most visible online" (Gibson et al., 2008: 26) and that similarly ideologically inclined parties in France made "the most of the internet's potential for disseminating information to various audiences" (Vaccari, 2008: 17). However, these and other similar findings from the same time period largely deal with pre-social media uses of the Internet, where candidates and parties would typically use web pages to try and persuade potential voters. Comparably later research efforts have suggested that the introduction of social media has led to a *deideologization* (e.g. Kalsnes, 2016; Lilleker et al., 2011) of such activities. Essentially, such a perspective suggests a spread of online prowess regardless of party placement on the ideological spectrum – perhaps due to the supposed diminished financial burdens that political actors have associated with such services (e.g. Strandberg, 2013) or because of the perception that social media like Facebook would be easier to use than their 'web 1.0' predecessors (e.g. Vergeer and Hermans, 2013).

Relatedly, it would appear that many of the populist parties that have surfaced across European democracies in recent times can be understood as what Margetts (2001) has referred to as *cyber parties*, "characterised by technologically-aided relationships between party and voters rather than formal membership" (Margetts, 2001: 1). These relationships are also seen as fluctuating, as they succeed in engaging voters from varying ideological backgrounds depending on the context of engagement and the themes dealt with. Indeed,

the term "populism 2.0" (Gerbaudo, 2014) has been employed to indicate how such parties are successfully portraying themselves as using services like social media to maintain their supposed close ties to 'the people' – arguably a characteristic that is often associated with populist parties (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Relatedly, populist leaders seem to be more capable than their non-populist competitors to employ online services to create or reinforce bonds with those reached by them (e.g. Mosca et al., 2015). Thus, we might expect such tightened relationships to lead to greater success for populists when it comes to engaging Facebook followers – for instance by urging those reached by the posts to redistribute them by means of the Facebook sharing functionality. Thus, as right-wing populist parties had been rather successful in their online endeavors during recent elections in our case country (Lorentzen, 2014; Larsson, 2017) as well as elsewhere (Larsson, 2014), and as populist parties of other ideological persuasions had not been as successful in gaining traction during the period preceding the studied election, we expect right-wing parties to succeed in attracting the attention of supposedly politically disenfranchised citizens (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga et al, 2010), thereby increasing their online visibility. In sum, we suggest the following two hypotheses in relation to the studied political actors:

H1: Right-wing parties will have larger followings than non-right-wing parties

H2: Facebook engagement will be more pronounced in relation to right-wing
parties when compared with their non-right-wing political competitors.

The definition of Facebook engagement employed in this study is offered in the method section of the paper at hand. Next, we move on to look at the rise of right-wing actors in the media sector.

Within the broader field of journalism studies, social media like Facebook have often been discussed in terms of carrying with them the potential to take on complementary or indeed oppositional roles (e.g. Bruns and Highfield, 2012) in relation to institutionalized, traditional journalistic efforts (e.g. Deuze, 2005). Combining the open-ended architecture of these platforms with the disentanglement from established journalistic practices and codes of conduct often associated with hyperpartisan news, it would seem that the often emotion-

triggered algorithms that guide social media fit with the similarly emotional rhetoric often featured in the contents offered by hyperpartisan outlets (Montells, 2017; Socialbakers, 2013; Zhang et al., 2017; Hermida, 2013; Larsson, 2019). Following Nygaard (2019), the rise of hyperpartisan outlets appears to be coinciding with the previously discussed increased presence of populist political parties (Aalberg et al., 2017) - as well as with the rise of more loosely organized movements geared towards criticism of societal elites and immigration (Sheets et al., 2015). At first glance, we might expect these seemingly related tendencies to contribute to a leading role for hyperpartisan outlets in terms of numbers of Facebook followers – much like for the right-wing parties discussed above. However, given the previously mentioned important role of mainstream media in the context under study, we expect the number of mainstream media followers to be higher than the same statistic for their hyperpartisan counterparts. Our third hypothesis reads accordingly:

H3: Non-right-wing media will have larger followings than hyperpartisan media

As levels of engagement will influence the spread and visibility of Facebook posts, the degree to which followers can be convinced to engage by means of reacting to, commenting on or sharing posts is a key metric related to social media performance (García-Perdomo et al., 2017; Trilling et al., 2017). Indeed, results from the U.K. (Chadwick et al., 2018) as well as from France and Italy (Fletcher et al., 2018) suggest that followers of hyperpartisan media on Facebook are more active in engaging with content found on such pages than are the followers of mainstream media pages. Thus, when formulating our fourth and final hypothesis, we remember the suggestion made by Van Aelst and co-authors (2017) to study the demand for hyperpartisan news in an empirical setting:

H4: Facebook engagement will be more pronounced in relation to hyperpartisan media outlets when compared with mainstream media outlets

METHOD
For data collection, Table One provides an overview of the political and media actors included in the study.

- INSERT TABLE ONE HERE -

Actors were chosen to be included in the study based on two criteria - first, whether or not they had been subject to similar scrutiny in previous work (e.g. Larsson, 2017; Holt, 2018; Newman et al., 2018); second, whether or not the actors had succeeded in gaining attention in the media during the period leading up to the election. This latter criterion was primarily relevant in relation for the right-wing actors across sectors – for instance, while parties like Alternativ för Sverige (Alternative for Sweden, Afs) were not well-known in Swedish society before the 2018 election cycle, the attention enjoyed by their German equivalent Alternative für Deutschland warranted the inclusion of this and other actors like them.

Focusing on the Facebook Pages operated by the actors, CrowdTangle was employed to gather data on the posts made by each actor during a one-month period leading up to the election date, September 9th, 2018. With full historical access to Facebook Page data, CrowdTangle is reminiscent of Netvizz (Rieder, 2013) and was used here to archive Page posts and their corresponding meta-data – such as number of reactions, shares and comments posted to each post at the time of data collection, as well as the number of followers that each page had at the time of each posting (CrowdTangle Team, 2019). The one-month period of data collection was selected based on practices identified in previous, similar studies (e.g. Larsson, 2014; Laaksonen et al., 2017).

For analysis, hypotheses 1 ("Right-wing parties will have larger followings than non-right-wing parties") and 3 ("Non-right-wing media will have larger followings than hyperpartisan media") dealt with the number of followers enjoyed by each page during the studied time period. To examine these hypotheses, we utilized the "Page Likes at Posting" variable reported by CrowdTangle, which as the name implies reports the number of users who liked each page at the time of each post. Conversely, hypotheses 2 ("Facebook engagement will be more pronounced in relation to right-wing parties when compared with their non-right-wing political competitors") and 4 ("Facebook engagement will be more pronounced in relation to hyperpartisan media outlets when compared with mainstream media outlets"), dealt with the levels of Facebook engagement enjoyed by each included page post at the time of data collection. Engagement is understood here as the total of reactions, comments

and shares for each post, and these three varieties will be examined in isolation from each other in order to identify any differing use patterns. The term 'pronounced' is used in hypotheses 2 and 4 to entail a heightened level of activity per follower in relation to posts. We measure this activity by dividing the different types of engagement per post with the number of followers that each page enjoyed at the time that each specific post was posted. Of course, posts can spread beyond such followers (for instance by means of being shared), gaining a greater audience and thus a greater potential for being engaged with. Albeit a somewhat crude metric, this operation nevertheless provides us with a measurement of the degree to which specific posts succeed in gaining engagement as defined here.

The collected material was analyzed by means of a series of statistical techniques. To be precise, a series of ANOVA tests featuring effect sizes (partial eta squared, ηp^2) and planned comparisons corresponding to the hypotheses were executed. While these statistical analyses provided the results necessary to examine our four hypotheses, they did not provide much detail regarding the types of posts that succeed in terms of reaching higher levels of engagement. The second part of the results section thus identifies and provides some detail into the posts that where especially successful in gaining traction across the studied Facebook pages.

RESULTS

The results are presented by means of a series of figures and corresponding statistical measurements. When possible, numbers have been rounded to the second decimal – however, in some instances it was necessary to report up to four decimals in order to properly convey the results.

Figures One through Four employ greyscale to denote the different actors under scrutiny. White bars indicate activity related to non-right-wing parties and party leaders, while the checkered bars represent activity emanating from right-wing parties and their respective leaders. Activities related to mainstream media outlets are shown as light grey bars, while their hyperpartisan competitors are represented by dark grey bars.

- INSERT FIGURE ONE HERE -

An ANOVA indicated significant mean differences ($[F(3, 7557) = 3881.62$, $p = .000$, $\eta p2 = .606]$) between the different groups of actors. Judging by the guidelines for effect size interpretation suggested by Cohen (1988), the reported $\eta p2$ must be considered as large, indicating a substantial influence of actor type on the average number of Facebook followers. As previously mentioned, planned comparison analyses were employed to detail the precise nature of these differences as suggested by the hypotheses guiding the study. Starting with the political actors under scrutiny, the mean number of page likes enjoyed by right-wing political pages ($M = 105\ 747.97$; $SD = 83\ 284.86$) emerged as larger than the mean of page likes of their mainstream political competitors ($M = 80\ 540.89$; $SD = 59\ 514.324$). Results from a planned comparison analysis detailed the mean difference suggested by the ANOVA further, focusing first on the political actors discussed above. This analysis proved to be significant ($t = 6.38$; value of contrast $= 25\ 207.08$; $p < .000$) – a result that confirms H1. As such, during the month-long period preceding the 2018 Swedish elections, right-wing parties succeeded in amassing and maintaining followers on Facebook to a higher degree than their non-right-wing competitors.

For the media actors included in the study, hyperpartisan outlet pages emerged as enjoying a smaller number of followers on average ($M = 45\ 529.97$; $SD = 32\ 360.002$) than their mainstream competitors ($M = 333\ 865.14$; $SD = 145\ 607.688$). Building on the ANOVA reported above, planned comparisons analysis indicated that the reported mean difference was statistically significant ($t = 87.382$; value of contrast $= 288\ 335.17$; $p < .000$). In terms of Facebook followers, then, mainstream media outlets emerge as more popular than their hyperpartisan competitors. This finding confirms H3, which stated that mainstream media outlets would enjoy larger amounts of Facebook followers than their hyperpartisan competitors - a reverse dynamic from the influx of right-wing parties and their leaders as explored previously. Thus, for followers, while mainstream media actors are able to hold their own, the same cannot be said for mainstream political parties who are faced with right-wing incursion.

- INSERT FIGURE TWO HERE -

With regards to H2 and H4, an ANOVA ([$F_{(3, 7557)}$ = 221.483, p = .000, $\eta p2$ = .084]) suggested that for the reactions variety of Facebook engagement, significant differences were found between mainstream and right-wing actors. Utilizing the aforementioned guidelines for effect size interpretation, the $\eta p2$ reported here suggests a medium effect of actor type on the averages. Looking first to the parties and party leaders included in the data, the results show that the mean number of reactions per page follower in relation to right-wing actors emerged as smaller (M = .014; SD = .014) than the same statistic measured for their non-right wing competitors (M = .017; SD = .04). Planned comparisons revealed the uncovered mean difference to be statistically significant (t = 3.79; value of contrast = .003; p < .000) – a finding that is not in line with H2. As such, for the reactions variety of Facebook engagement, followers of mainstream political parties and party leaders emerge as more active when compared to followers of right-wing political actors.

Next, for the media actors included in the study, the mean of reactions per page follower emerged as higher for hyperpartisan publications (M = .009; SD = .012) than for mainstream media outlets (M = .001; SD = .002). A planned comparisons analysis indicated that the observed mean difference was statistically significant (t = 11.552; value of contrast = .008 ; p < .000), thus supporting H4.

- INSERT FIGURE THREE HERE -

Much like for the previously reported ANOVAs, the one reported for the comments variety of Facebook engagement suggested significant differences between the two categories of actors ([$F_{(3, 7557)}$ = 149.013, p = .000, $\eta p2$ = .056]). Following Cohen (1988), the $\eta p2$ reported here suggests a moderate effect of actor type on the degree to which their Facebook followers engage by means of commenting. Conversely from the reactions variety of Facebooks engagement, right-wing parties and party leaders emerge with a larger number of comments per page follower (M = .002; SD = .004) than their more mainstream political counterparts (M = .001; SD = .003). Planned comparisons revealed this uncovered mean difference to be statistically significant (t = 6.837; value of contrast = .001; p < .000), thus supporting H2.

Similar results were found for the media actors under scrutiny. Specifically, the mean number of comments per page follower for hyperpartisan outlets (M = .001; SD = .002) was found to be higher than the corresponding statistic for their mainstream media competitors (M = .0002; SD = .0008). Planned comparisons again revealed the reported mean difference to be statistically significant (t = 1.18; value of contrast = ,0008; p < .05) – a result that supports H4.

- - INSERT FIGURE FOUR HERE -

Finally, for engagement by means of sharing, an ANOVA indicated significant mean differences ([F(3, 7557) = 30.917, p = .000, ηp2 = .012]) with regards to shares per page follower. In contrast to effect sizes reported in relation to the previously discussed varieties of engagement, the ηp2 reported here suggests a rather small effect (Cohen, 1988). For the political actors included in the study, right-wing parties and party leaders come out on top when it comes to the average number of shares per page follower (M = .003; SD = .02) when compared to their non-right-wing competitors (M = .001; SD = .004). Much like for the comments variety of Facebook engagement, the uncovered mean difference emerged as statistically significant (t = 2.512; value of contrast = .002; p < .05) – a result that again supports H2.

Moving on to the media outlets, right-wing actors appear to prevail also here. To be precise, the mean number of shares per page follower was reported as higher for hyperpartisan outlets (M = .003; SD = .02) when compared to their mainstream media counterparts (M = .0001; SD = .0004). The mean difference was shown to be statistically significant (t = 8.255; value of contrast = .003; p < .000), a result that supports H4.

While the results clearly supported H1 and H2, the threefold findings related to engagement (detailing levels of reactions, comments and shares) among those who had liked specific pages demand further attention. Specifically, as levels for all three types of engagement emerged as higher for hyperpartisan media outlets than for mainstream media outlets, H4 can be supported. With regards to H2, while levels of comments and shares per page follower were higher for the right-wing parties included in our sample, an opposing result

was reported in relation to the reactions variety of engagement. Nevertheless, with two out of three varieties of engagement emerging as supporting the specified hypothesis, we can comfortably confirm the second hypothesis as well. In sum, while the mainstream media outlets studied here remain successful in terms of number of followers, these established actors appear to be losing the battle for follower engagement. A similar image appears when we focus our attention on the political actors under scrutiny – here, right-wing actors dominate with regards to larger numbers of followers as well as in terms of more sizeable measures of engagement performed by those followers.

With the confirmation of all four hypotheses in place, we now move on to provide a bit more detail regarding the content of the most engaged with posts included in our sample. Figures Five and Six provide such insights for the political actors (Figure Five) and the media actors (Figure Six) under investigation. Both Figures identify the post made by means of nodes. The size of these nodes corresponds to the number of reactions achieved by each post at the time of data collection. The placement of the nodes on the horizontal axes of the Figures indicate the number of comments received, while placement on the vertical axis indicate the number of shares received. Based on these interpretational guidelines, Figures Five and Six feature a series of text boxes that contain translations and summaries of the content of the most successful posts based on the different types of engagement.

- INSERT FIGURE FIVE HERE -

Much like expected from our now confirmed hypotheses, the highly popular posts identified in Figure Five were mostly authored by right-wing parties – such as the Sweden Democrats (Sd) and Alternative for Sweden (Afs) – but a clear presence of the Social Democrats (S) can also be discerned. As can be seen in the text boxes summarizing the most popular posts, the themes dealt with are largely reminiscent of the themes uncovered by previous studies looking into social media campaigning by political actors – live speeches, reports from the campaign and calls to offline as well as online action (e.g. Larsson, 2015; Filimonov et al., 2016). The tendency for right-wingers to employ "a political style based on provocations, offensive language, aggressiveness, and negative emotionality" (Nai, 2018) is also visible in the posts emanating from the pages of Sd and Afs respectively. We can, for instance, point

to the most shared post (visible in the upper left corner of Figure Five) which features a crudely shot mobile video of supposed rioting. Combined with the textual element, this post arguably tries to instill a sense of urgency and authenticity by means of capital letters and repetition (as suggested by Enli, 2017: 58) – a stylistic choice that indeed can be identified in several of the other right-wing party posts as well.

- INSERT FIGURE SIX HERE -

While Figure Five was dominated by posts provided by right-wing political actors, the situation emerging for media actors appears as more balanced as posts from both mainstream and hyperpartisan media are clearly visible among the content most engaged with. Hyperpartisan actors like Samhällsnytt and Politikfakta appear to be especially successful when it comes to producing highly shared posts, while their mainstream competitors emerge as more adept at producing posts that gain more comments. Many of these latter posts appear to involve urging the reader to comment – more specifically to 'tag' a friend who it is suggested might be interested in viewing the post. In urging their readers to comment rather than to share or react, the MSM actors included here could be seen as adapting their Facebook activity to fit with the skepticism towards sharing among primarily younger users that has been identified by previous research projects (e.g. Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015).

DISCUSSION

While the numerical differences uncovered during the testing of our hypotheses cannot be considered as sizeable, they nevertheless emerged as significant. As such, while they are small, these differences do tell us something about the ways in which online engagement in relation to political elections is developing. Overall, right-wing actors across the two domains studied here – politics and the media – emerged as more adept at engaging their followers by means of reacting to, comment on and sharing their posts than their mainstream competitors. Thus, established actors appear to be losing ground on one of the currently most important platforms for news consumption and political communication.

With regards to followers, the analyses undertaken in relation to hypotheses one and three found that while the mainstream media outlets included in our study succeeded in amassing more followers than their hyperpartisan competitors, mainstream political parties emerged as less successful in this regard when compared to their right-wing opponents. For the media actors, this result is likely related to the aforementioned high readership of daily news that is commonly found in the Swedish population. Similarly, if we also take into account what could be referred to as the path dependencies of audiences (e.g. Webster and Ksiazek, 2012), we can interpret the results found here as part of an established structure of media consumption. As audiences have depended on traditional or indeed mainstream news sources such as the ones identified here for extended periods of time, the resulting write-read relationship becomes cemented in Giddensian structures that guide our everyday lives and actions (Larsson, 2012) and subsequently manifests itself in terms of followership. However, the results also indicate that such path dependencies do not appear to hold true for political actors. Perhaps as a result of the often-discussed disenchantment of western voters in relation to their democratic political systems (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011; Gibson et al., 2014), voters are finding other actors to engage with politically – such as on the Facebook presences of the right-wing political actors studied here.

While the number of followers can serve as a suitable metric with which to gauge popularity on a service like Facebook, followers that do not engage by means of reacting, commenting and sharing are not likely to be very helpful in spreading content to larger audiences. With this in mind, this study opted for an approach that took the actual activity of the page followers into account (as suggested by Bode and Epstein, 2015; Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013). By utilizing this approach as described earlier, we could confirm hypotheses two and four which suggested that right-wing actors across both politics and the media would succeed in engaging their followers to higher degrees than their more mainstream competitors. For the political actors under investigation, we have previously pointed to their success in this regard when attempting to convey urgency and sometimes desperation through their posts (as seen in Figure Five). Thus, these findings indicate that the supposed authenticity of right-wingers emerges as a suitable strategy in order to secure follower engagement (Enli, 2017) – especially, it would seem, in relation to the supposedly sleek, professionalized

communicative efforts offered by their established, non-right-wing competitors (e.g. Lilleker and Koc-Michalska, 2012; Zittel, 2009). Similar tendencies can be observed when it comes to the media actors included in our sample – as the topics and styles of presentation offered by the hyperpartisan outlets largely overlap with those provided by the right-wing political parties, the results in Figures Five (mapping out the most popular posts for political actors) and Six (showing the most popular posts for media actors) emerge as somewhat similar, fueled by urgency in tone and largely related to themes of immigration.

The patterns of engagement uncovered here appear to challenge the aforementioned structure found in relation to followership. Such breaks from tradition have been anticipated for both studied fields previously – albeit in different ways. For political actors, comparably early work was "relentlessly upbeat" (Barnett, 1997: 194) regarding the role of the Internet to empower disillusioned citizens to participate in political processes (e.g. Coleman, 2005; Castells, 2001; Olsson, 2016). For the media sector, while journalists and other media professionals have expressed skepticism towards online audience contributions (Larsson, 2012), and while audience members have been similarly skeptical towards taking on roles as "prosumers" (Toffler, 1980), "pro-ams" (Leadbeater et al., 2004) or "produsers" (Bruns, 2010), rhetorical figures similar to the ones identified within the political sphere can be found also here. Indeed, journalism was to turn from a "from a lecture into a conversation with citizens and encourage citizens to participate in the different stages of the editorial news-making process" (Paulussen et al., 2007: 137) with the Internet supposedly ushering in an era of collaborative journalism (e.g. Gillmor, 2004). The findings reported in the study at hand instead appear to challenge "the utopian rhetoric that surrounds new media technologies" (Papacharissi, 2002: 9). The results show how online media are being used to further perspectives that cannot be said to emphasize or contribute to constructive, egalitarian discussion adhering to the often idealized Habermasian principles of public deliberation. Indeed, while a series of studies have discussed audience engagement in terms of its positive aspects (e.g. Al-Rawi, 2016; Olsson, 2016), the tendencies uncovered here appear to fall in line with the movement found in current popular as well as academic debate to frame online technologies as causes of societal problems (e.g. Gardine, Mansfield, Anderson et al, 206; George, 2016) rather than as offering opportunities for fruitful debate and deliberation. For the 2018 Swedish elections, then, the results presented here indicate

the dominance of such forces wishing to obstruct rather than contribute to discourse. Future studies, detailing the online activities of political and media actors during elections held in other countries, could be a suitable step forward in determining the relative influence of right-wingers during political events in different contexts.

The results presented here are thus reminiscent of what Quandt (2018) has labeled "dark participation", an assemblage of activities that "range from misinformation and hate campaigns to individual trolling and cyberbullying" (2018:40) and that appears to have risen in tandem with the increased popularity of the right-wing and hyperpartisan actors studied here. While the activities of right-wing actors have typically been described along the lines of trolling or by their utilization of memes (e.g. Davey and Ebner, 2017; Hawley, 2017), the present study suggests that these actors are also savvy exploiters of the various algorithms and logics that guide and explain visibility on platforms such as the one under investigation here (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Klinger and Svensson, 2015). Utilizing emotional and sometimes aggressive styles, right-wing actors succeed in gaining user engagement by means of hate speech and the purveying of fake news, which in turn is likely to increase the visibility of these posts even further. As the algorithms guiding social media tend to give us more of the same type of content that we already consumed, and as actors across both studied sectors appear to become more and more focused on the ways in which their content can fit with the algorithmic structures of services like these (e.g. García-Perdomo et al., 2017; Trilling et al., 2017; Kreiss and McGregor, 2017), scholars, professionals, policy makers and others with vested interests in the sectors under scrutiny should monitor these developments closely. This is not to suggest that mainstream media actors would turn hyperpartisan overnight, or that mainstream political actors would undertake similar transformations – but rather a reminder that as socio-technological influences have previously yielded influence over both sectors (e.g. Bird, 1998; Esser, 1999; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999), we would be wise to expect similar repercussions also in our current situation.

This study has limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the types of engagement studied here are not necessarily undertaken in support of specific posts – comments to a post can and are used to express not only encouragement, but also dissidence. Given what

we know about the rather opaque algorithms guiding visibility on Facebook, comments are nevertheless likely to increase the visibility of Page content simply by being posted. As the current study design did not take the contents of comments into account, future research might find it useful to detail the content and sentiment of engagement varieties such as comments to higher degrees. Given recent restrictions in Facebook API access, however, such endeavors might prove to be very difficult if not impossible to undertake. Second, while the visibility and indeed spread of Facebook posts can be expected to be dependent to a substantial part on user engagement, we must also take into account the opaqueness of the processes building up to an individual post being seen or indeed not seen (e.g. Driscoll and Walker, 2014). Page owners can pay in order to make their posts more visible, and the algorithms employed by Facebook make their own decisions about visibility and executes them without information about these processes and in what instances they were employed being available to the general public, let alone to researchers. As paid advertising in social media is growing ever more common within the political sector (Kreiss and McGregor, 2017) as well as elsewhere, future research efforts will hopefully be able to gauge the influence of such factors in relation to the types of engagement that was studied here.

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Typ	Media outlet/Party/Party leader	N of posts
MSM	Aftonbladet	939
	Dagens Nyheter	597
	Expressen	990
	Svenska Dagbladet	530
Hyperpartisan	FriaTider.se	63
	Motgift	140
	Nya Dagbladet	121
	Nya Tider	33
	Nyheter Idag	228
	Politikfakta	585
	Samhällsnytt	78
	Samtiden	194
Party	Centre Party (C)	66
	Feminist Initiative (Fi)	179
	Christian Democrats (Kd)	91
	Liberals (L)	152
	Green Party (Mp)	111
	Conservatives (M)	173
	Social Democrats (S)	318
	Left Party (V)	163
Party Leader	Annie Lööf (C)	86
	Ebba Busch Thor (Kd)	77
	Gudrun Schyman (Fi)	190
	Gustav Fridolin (Mp)	59
	Isabella Lövin (Mp)	53
	Jan Björklund (L)	41
	Jonas Sjöstedt (V)	134
	Stefan Löfven (S)	46
	Ulf Kristersson (M)	95
Right-Wing Party	Alternative for Sweden (Afs)	332
	Citizens' Coalition (Ms)	132
	Sweden Democrats (Sd)	311
Right-Wing Party Leader	Gustav Kasselstrand (Afs)	52
	Ilan Sadé (Ms)	36
	Jimmie Åkesson (Sd)	166

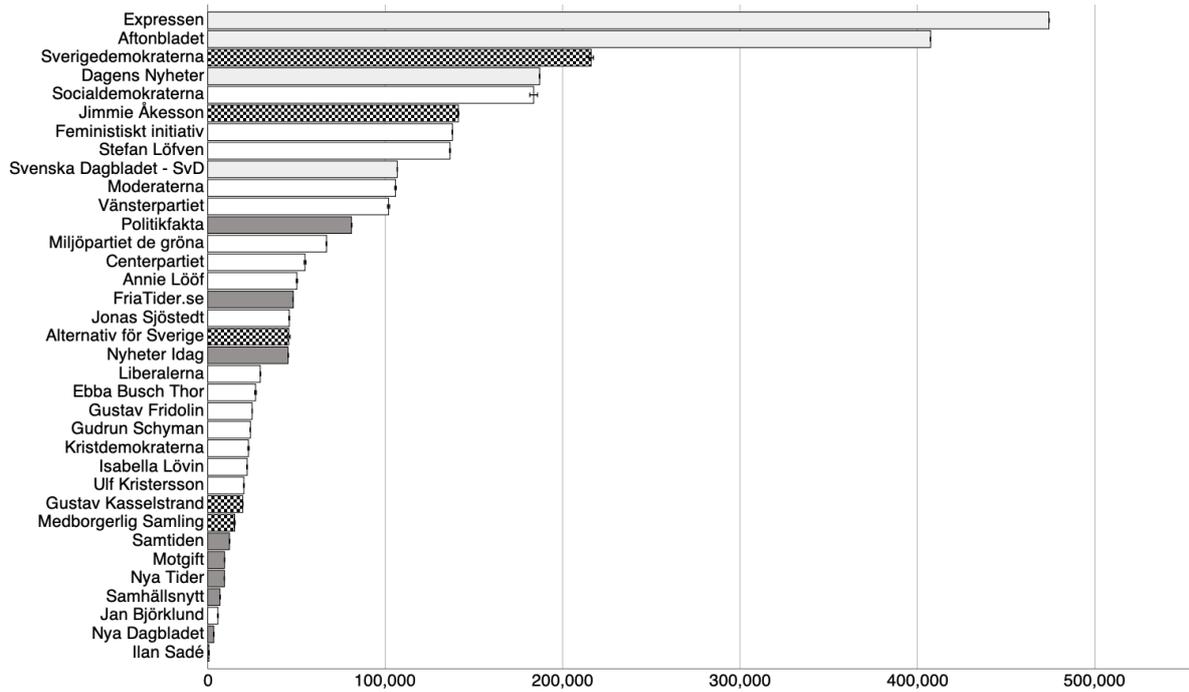Table One. Political and media actors included in the study.

Figure One. Average Facebook page followers per post during the studied period.

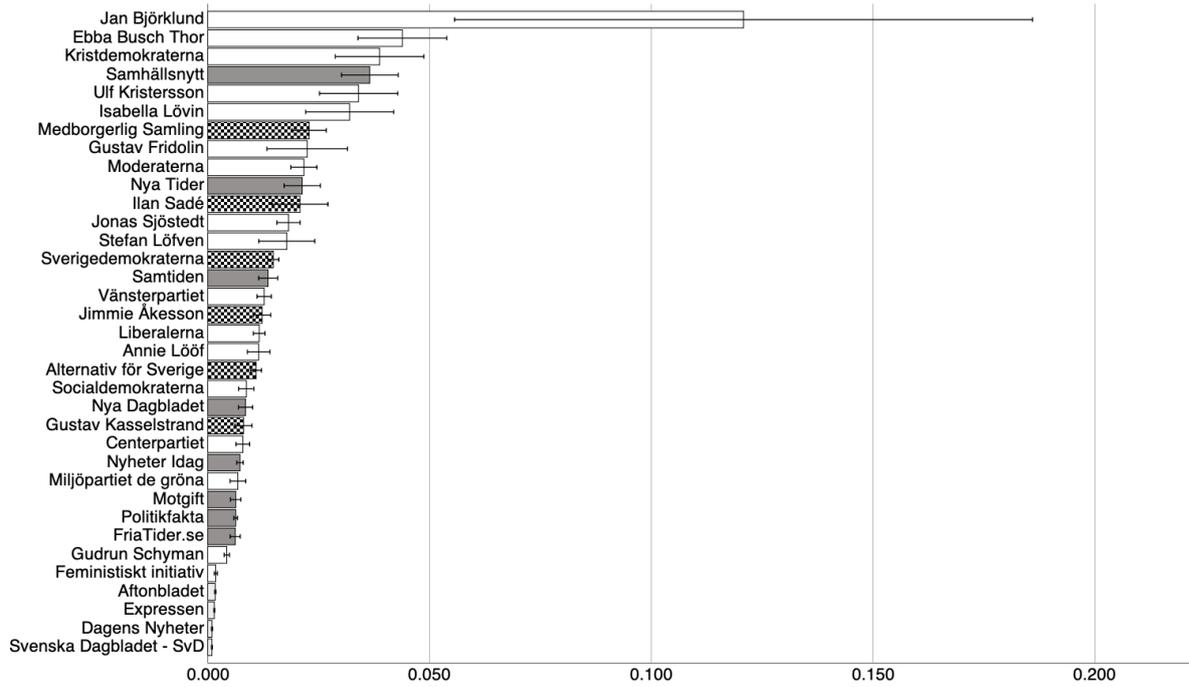Error bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure Two. Average reactions engagement undertaken per follower.

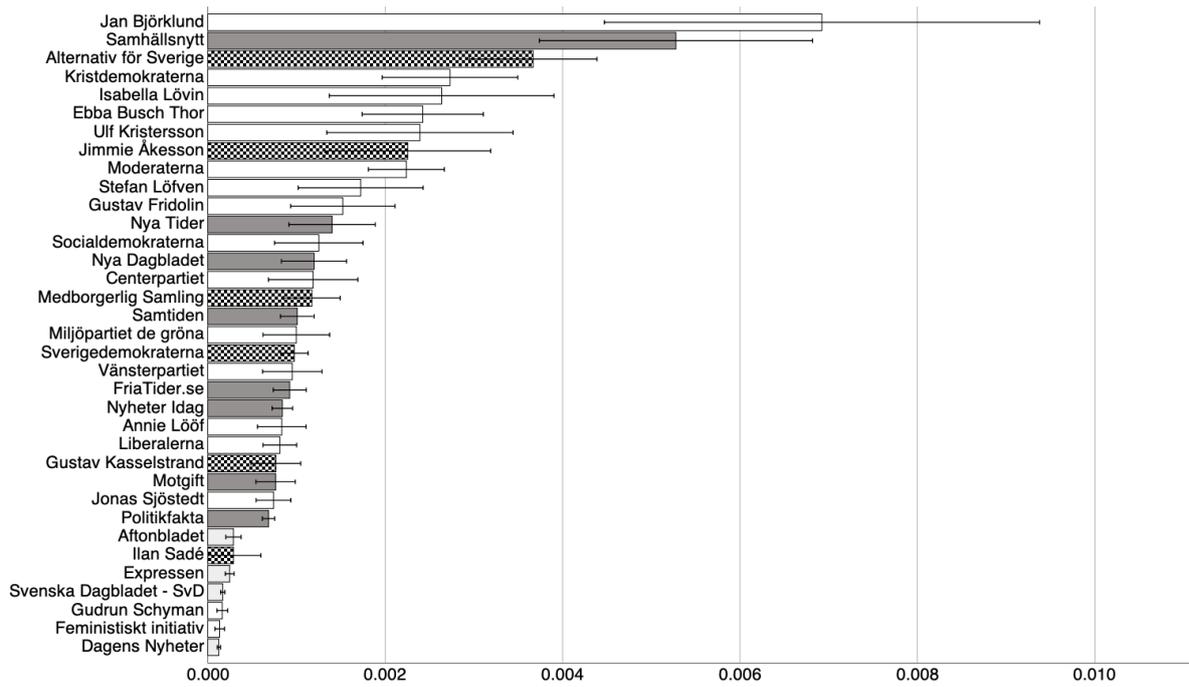Error bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure Three. Average commenting engagment undertaken per follower.
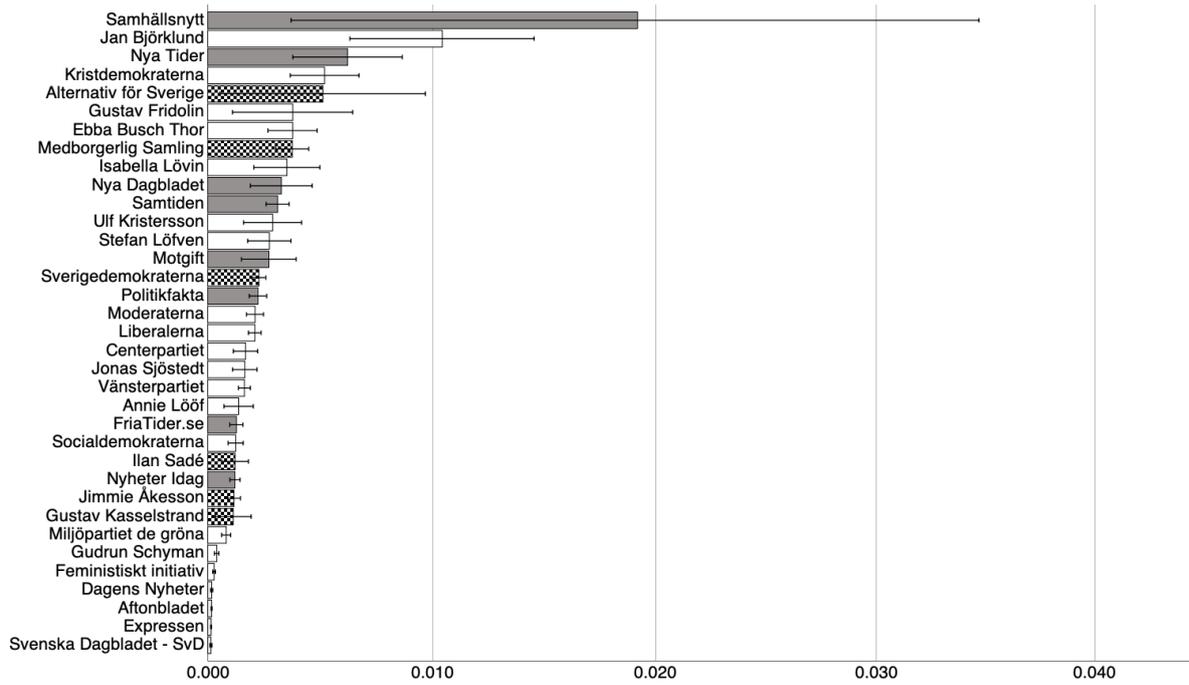
Error bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure Four. Average sharing engagement undertaken per follower.
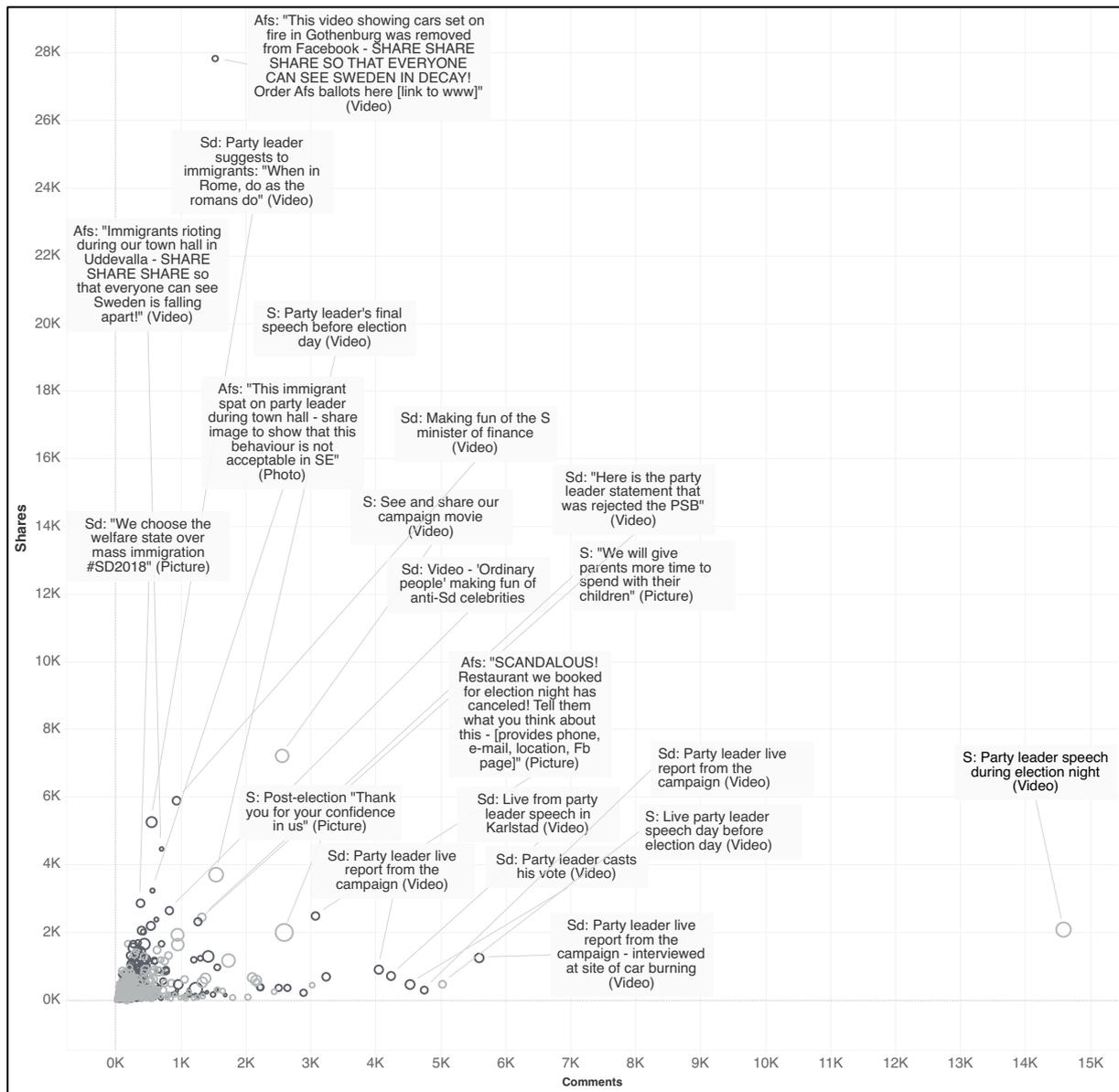
Error bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals.
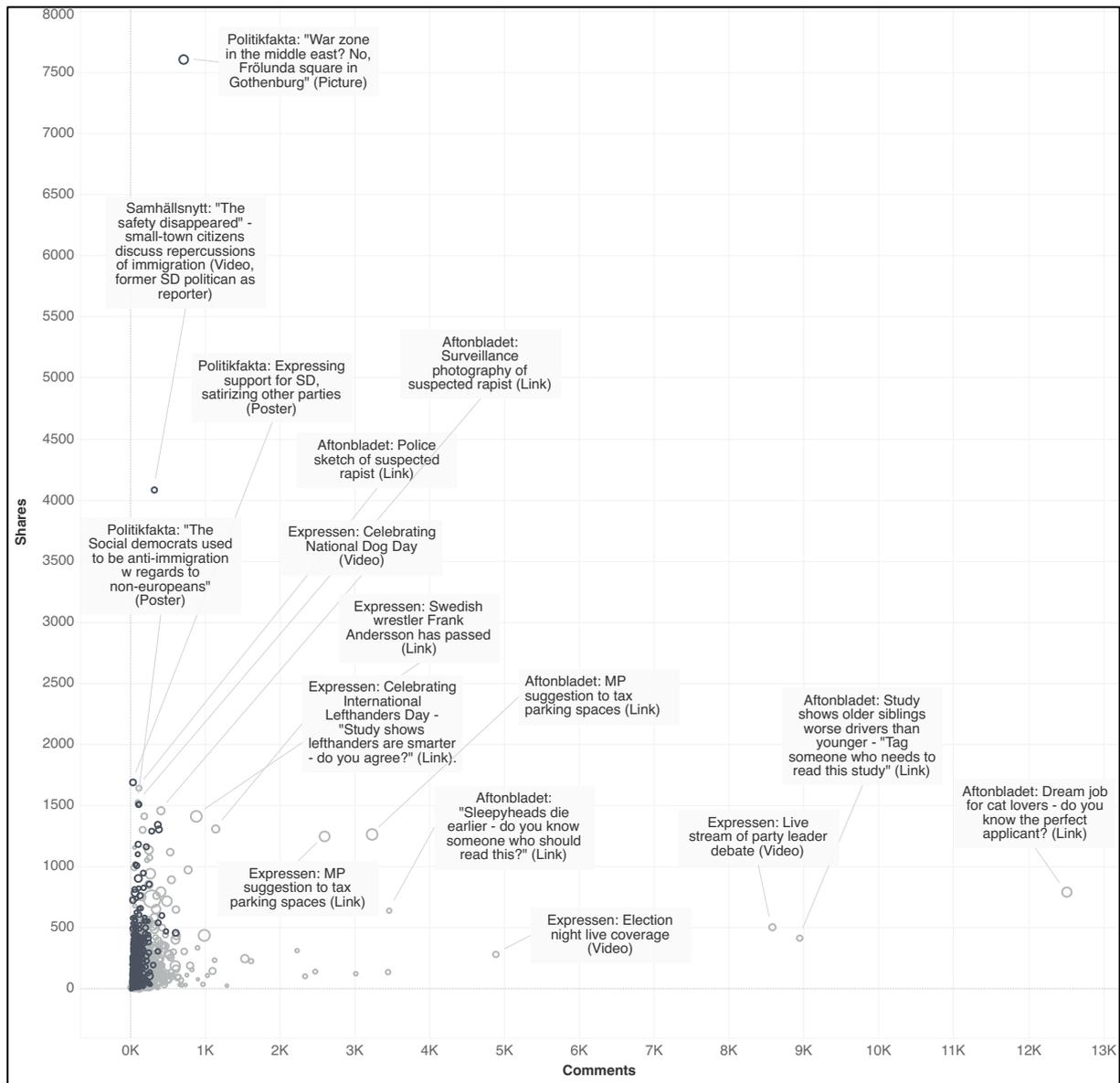
Figure Five. Most engaged with posts for political actors.

Figure Six. Most engaged with posts for media actors.