



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# Collective Identity Framing in a Digital Grassroots Movement

**An Affordance Perspective**

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## Abstract

A fair share of today's activism is taking place on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have made scholars call for a re-conceptualization of the definition and understanding of political struggle. Traditionally, social sciences have viewed collective identity framing alongside political opportunities and mobilizing structures as equally influential factors for engaging in protest. Since many movements have moved online it is important to understand how the digital environment affects these factors. Therefore, we conducted an interpretive case study to explore how social media affects the collective identity of a grassroots movement.

By turning to collective identity frames, we viewed the goals and means of a Swedish political grassroots movement as indicators of a collective identity. We set out to investigate the following research question: *How do social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement?*

The key finding indicates that social media affordances were in favor of diagnostic framing, but hindered prognostic framing. The social media affordance of visibility seemed to overrule the affordance of persistence, which created an overexposure of an emotive frame that hurt the credibility of the grassroots movement. To handle this loss of credibility when facing opponents, the affordances of editability and association sustained a fact-based frame.

**Keywords:** affordances, social media, digital activism, political grassroots movement, collective identity, collective identity frames

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# 1 Introduction

People have long engaged in protests, from the protestant reformation in the 17th century to the suffragette movement in the beginning of the 20th century. Since the turbulence of the 1960s, with revolting left-wing activists, anti-war and anti-nuclear power protests, social movements have emerged as a common feature in the political arena, and are now considered a growth industry in the social sciences (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). Many of the contemporary movements are citizen driven initiatives, which seek to alter or change the community in which the citizens reside. This form of social movement is called *grassroots activism*, and is — in contrast to changes introduced from political parties or established social organizations — initiated by the common people. A grassroots movement arises as a result of some pressing issue that a community feels is in need of change, and is managed by autonomous citizen groups at a local level (Crystal 2012).

In recent years, social movements — and especially political grassroots groups — have made extensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for organizational and communicative purposes (Ackland & O’Neil 2011; Agarwal et al. 2014). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have played a leading role in historical events like the grassroots initiated mass demonstrations in the Arab world year 2010 and the Occupy movement that spread from Wall Street across the U.S. the year after (see for example Agarwal et al. 2014; Choi & Park 2014; Neumayer & Raffl 2008; Youmans & York 2012). Even though none of these platforms were created with activism in mind, social media has been found to be the most common gateway into online activism (Harlow & Guo 2014) since it lowers the barrier for involvement in local decision making, improves social awareness, and connects people with shared agendas to a greater extent compared to previous technologies (Hara & Huang 2011). In addition, the digitalization of communication and organization practices has distributed the influential power that was previously exclusive to established actors such as social movement organizations, political parties and mass media. Previously hard-to-get networking and broadcasting functions are now available to relatively small and unestablished actors (Carty 2010; Earl 2015).

This ICT driven shift of power dynamics has made scholars to call for a re-conceptualization of the definition and understanding of political struggle (see for example Carty 2010; Gustafsson 2012). Established concepts in the social sciences might still be applicable to the relatively new phenomenon of *digital activism* (meaning ICT based activism), but empirical research needs to verify and explore them in a digital context (Gustafsson 2012). For example, when researching *collective identity* (a shared identity that is held by a collective and influences its actions), DeLuca, Lawson and Sun (2012) found that the visibility and accessibility of social media seemed to influence how a digital grassroots movement’s collective identity was portrayed and perceived.

Collective identity is a concept from the social sciences that filled the gap in *resource mobilization theory*, which previously failed to answer how social actors came to recognize themselves as being a part of a collective (Klandermans 2014; Melucci 1995). Sociologist expanded the concept to

include *collective identity framing* (meaning how groups portray themselves and are portrayed by others). Collective identity framing alongside political opportunities and mobilizing structures are often viewed upon as equally influential factors on protest behavior and collective action (Benford & Snow 2000; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996; Polletta & Jasper 2001). Scholars continuously emphasize that the likelihood of engaging in protest is correlated to the level of identification the individuals have towards the group and its frames (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2013).

## 1.1 Research Problem and Purpose

Even though traditional ICTs like email, electronic bulletin boards and SMS have played — and still play — an important role in digital activism, social media is nowadays the most common and used ICT for digital activism (Neumayer & Raffl 2008; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Therefore, we argue that social media is a suitable platform for conducting research on collective identity framing of a digital grassroots movement. This thesis intends to explore the concept of collective identity in a digital community, by investigating how social media affects the collective identity frames of a political grassroots movement. Following Valenzuela, Kim and Gil de Zúñiga (2012), we define a digital grassroots movement as *a citizen driven political group that is primarily using digital technology for communication and as an organizing platform, although their actions may be both online or offline.*

Because social media differs in functionality between platforms and new releases, as well as the users' different needs, insights and goals, scholars have recently begun to study the *affordances* of social media instead of the specific technical functionalities. Faraj and Azad (2012, p. 4) define affordances as “action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology”. This *socio-materialistic perspective* implies that the behaviors and actions of social network actors are treated as results from a combination of technical functionality and human cognition (this is further explained in section 2.2).

A socio-materialistic perspective suggests that the affordances of social media can possibly affect the collective actions and collective identity frames of a community. Today's research on digital grassroots movements tend to look at the effects that social media has on movements rather than the properties *as well as* the usage of social media that generate these effects. This thesis combines an affordance perspective with social movement theory, and seeks to investigate how social media affordances shape and affect collective identity framing in a digital grassroots movement. Through this theoretical perspective, our ambition is to explore how movements are co-created by social media functionality and the users' social interaction. In a larger perspective — even though this is not a normative study — our ambition is also to create a better understanding of how the design of social media can either aid, restrain, alternate or transform the activities of a political grassroots movement.

## 1.2 Research Question

*How do social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement?*

This thesis is built on an interpretive case study, with data collected from observations of a Facebook group through which a Swedish political grassroots movement organizes and communicates. This is combined with semi-structured interviews with members of the group. By turning to *collective identity framing* — which is further explained in section 2.3.2 — we view the framing processes of the online political grassroots movement as possible indicators of collective identity. These actions are affordances of social media through which the movement organizes and communicates. Therefore, we present the concepts of social media affordances and collective identity framing which construct the thesis' theoretical framework in chapter 2.

## 2 Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter starts with presenting related theories on digital grassroots activism. The following sections introduce our thesis' theoretical framework, consisting of social media affordances and collective identity framing. Section 2.2 explains the concept of affordances, which has previously been used mainly in the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) domain but has been re-defined in recent years. This is followed by the presentation of social media affordances, which are attributional affordances of social media. The final section 2.3 introduces the concept of identity, clarifies the meaning of collective identity in social movements and finally presents collective identity framing which we use as an indicator for a possible collective identity.

### 2.1 Related Theory - Digital Grassroots Activism

A fair share of research on digital activism has focused on the effects social media have on protest engagement, rather than focusing on the sources that generate these effects (see for example Carty 2010; Choi & Park 2013). This chapter contains a brief overview on the subject of ICTs and digital activism. Although a majority of the presented research does not explicitly address collective identity framing, it serves as a guide to understand how social media affect activism, media, politics and movements.

ICTs and social media have fundamentally shifted communication, the spreading of information and how grassroots movements mobilize. The content user is also the content creator, the receiver is also the distributor, and content is generally accessible anytime, from anywhere, to anyone (Choi & Park 2014; Hara & Huang 2011). Looking closer at the domain of social media, it represents both the social aspects of networking, communication, and interaction with like-minded people supporting a cause, as well as the media aspects of broadcasting and spreading information about occurrences (Svensson 2014).

It has been suggested that through social media, the gap between civil society and the political sphere has decreased (Carty 2010). Social media enables a bottom-up approach to sharing “first-hand, real-time coverage and non-hegemonic interpretations of offline political events” (Bakardijeva, Svensson & Skoric 2012, p. 1). For example, Facebook and Twitter out conquered traditional media in spreading information regarding the mobilization for the Tahrir Square protests in Egypt in 2011 (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). The Occupy movement spread from an online phenomenon to be discussed by newspapers, bankers and president Obama in a mere month due to the power of social media (DeLuca, Lawson & Sun 2012). This power and communication shift to a grassroots level has left scholars exploring how digital activism might reshape our concept of activism.

Scholars like Marichal (2013) and Svensson (2014) have explored micro-activism, which Marichal (2013, p. 2) defines as “one-to-several forms of politically oriented communication that reflect micro-level expressive political performances”. Digital grassroots activism is often concerned with micro-activism, such as spreading information, enabling discussions, expanding the base of



support and forming public opinion (Choi & Park 2014; Neumayer & Raffl 2008). The content circulating on social media is often expressive and easy to connect with — often in the form of memes<sup>1</sup> — so that others can engage with it and pass it forward. This indicates that digital activism of today is concerned with expressing opinion and self-representation rather than serving as a political instrument for change (Marichal 2013; Svensson 2014). Individuals talk and discuss to form a collective identity and express the story of themselves by showing what groups they belong to (Svensson 2014).

Digital activism has also been described as less concerned with decision-making and action-taking than traditional activism (see for example Marichal 2013; Svensson 2014). Marichal (2013) found that Facebook groups tend to work toward “finding the truth” about a particular issue, but less often had a solution to the identified problem. The author suggests that expressing support to a cause on Facebook could be more important than solving it.

But not everyone is comfortable with blending politics with the personal sphere of Facebook. Gustafsson (2012) found that expressing political opinions on social media can be uncomfortable to some individuals who believe that politics should not be discussed in public, and that political discussions are often harsh and aggressive. Members of political parties and interest organizations however felt that Facebook was an efficient platform for political engagement.

In this thesis we intend to study not only the effects social media has on a grassroots movement’s collective identity framing, but also how social media functionality and users’ social interaction create these effects. By turning to an affordance theory, we particularly wish to explore the underlying causes of the social media effects. Therefore, the next section introduces the concept of affordances as well as collective identity framing.

## 2.2 An Affordance Perspective

Affordances have long been a known concept in the domain of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), serving as the link between environmental properties and human needs, insights and goals. The term originates from Gibson (1977) who meant that an affordance is static and latent in an object, even though not all individuals can afford it. For example, a book always affords reading, but an actor has to know the language and how to read to access it. The concept of affordances was adopted by HCI-scholars in the late 1980s, who defined it as perceived affordances that are relative to the agents (see Norman 1988). By this definition, a book would only afford reading to a person that knows how to read. This concept proved valuable in design studies because it adds cognitive values — such as past experiences, needs and motivations — of the individual in the creation of a socio-materialistic affordance (Faraj & Azad 2012). Materiality thus refers to the features of the technology as is.

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<sup>1</sup>A meme is a digital piece of culture, often a photo or GIF with a humorous caption, that is widely shared on the Internet. For an overview, see Marwick (2013).

The affordance concept has been further elaborated in the recent years. Although Norman (1988) added the cognitive dimension to the concept, he still thought of affordances as strategically created by designers (Leonardi 2010). Users are important to Norman insomuch as they can perceive a technology's affordances, but they are not actively creating affordances in this definition (ibid.). Faraj and Azad (2012, p. 4) define affordances as "action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology". This definition implies that affordances are strategically created by designers as well as created by users in the immediate situation and social context in which the usage occurs (ibid.). By approaching affordances as relational, neither technological determinism nor social determinism is dominant. Instead, technology and social interaction shape each other (Faraj & Azad 2012; Treem & Leonardi 2012). This thesis follows the affordance definition by Faraj and Azad (2012).

### 2.2.1 Social Media Affordances

Scholars have recently given much attention to social media affordances in an organizational setting. Although affordances may have different consequences in the context of a digital grassroots movement, we present the findings from these studies to exemplify some of the social media affordances that have been identified. However, it is important to remember that affordances emerge from actors engaging with technology, and that an organizational context differs from a grassroots movement's context. This means that affordances are not static, but context dependent and could shift in the environment which we study. In this study, we will use these affordances that scholars have found as both unique and consistent in various social media. These affordances include: *visibility*, *persistence*, *editability*, *association*, *metavoicing*, *triggered attending* and *generative role-taking* (Majchrzak et al. 2013; Treem & Leonardi 2012). In the following text we elaborate on these affordances.

*Visibility* "enables people to easily and effortlessly see information about someone else" (Treem & Leonardi 2012, p. 150). Social media makes both the information and the behavior of individuals visible through comments, posts, friends' friends, and opinion expression such as "liking". Visibility thus concerns both individuals and content. This affordance makes work behavior, meta-knowledge and activity streams visible to users of social media in the organization, regardless of hierarchy. Visibility can make users strategize how they present their information, and drafted material is often stored in private repositories before publication (ibid.). Meta-knowledge is produced when people see friends of friends and what discussions people engage in, which make them form perceptions on who knows what and who knows whom (ibid.; Leonardi 2014). Realizing that content sharing can increase one's reputation makes individuals more likely to contribute. Furthermore, activity news feeds strengthen organizational orientation, and a sense of knowing what other members of the group are working on increases the likelihood of individuals making contributions on their own (Treem & Leonardi 2012).

*Persistence* means that a post, comment or other contribution is made visible, searchable and browsable to other users after it is published. In social media, communication "remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her

presentation.” (Treem & Leonardi 2012, p. 155). Organizational studies show that persistence sustains and provides a context to information over time, creates a steady communication flow and allows content accumulation. The information is difficult to demolish or abandon, which means that interactions can be analyzed over time to see patterns and therefore improve communication. Also, information such as tags and documents can be reused by new users leading to a unified view of the information and the organization. Structured content that grows over time can help retrieval of knowledge and information, and allows users to combine new relevant information with stored content. However, unstructured growing content may result in an accumulation of information that is hard to navigate (ibid.).

*Editability* relates to the potential of editing posts and comments before and after they have been published. Treem and Leonardi (2012) suggest that governing personal expressions, targeting content and improving information quality are all opportunities given by the editability affordance. Individuals can over time paint and repaint the picture of themselves as they want to be viewed — for example by editing their personal information or deliberately use tags or post content that reflect the image they want others to perceive. Targeting content refers to contributors deliberately posting content that they believe their imagined audience will approve of. Lastly, editability can improve information quality when users find it easy and rewarding to edit previous posts, and contributors compose information that is easy to find for others.

*Associations* are “established connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation” (Treem & Leonardi 2012, p. 162). Associations between users are known as *social ties*, and social media makes these social ties visible and articulated. Associations between individuals and content come in the form of posts, tags and other media published in the name of the individual. Studies mention support of social connections and access to relevant information as effects of the association affordance. Social connections are enhanced connections of users that are explicitly shown, and viewing other actors’ content enhances emotional ties between individuals. Access to relevant information benefits the users by enabling workers whom occupy expertise knowledge to influence what is being published (ibid.; Majchrzak et al. 2013).

*Metavoicing* is created when users react to other users’ content through liking, commenting or voting. Since all interactions are connected to users’ profiles, meta-knowledge is connected to the reaction made, as a form of metavoicing (Majchrzak et al. 2013).

*Triggered attending* is when an individual remains uninvolved in content production until an “automated alert informs the individual of a change to the specific content of interest” (ibid., p. 42). This is helpful to avoid drowning in an unfiltered flow of information that is not useful for the individual. Since minimal action is required to engage with this information, it may help motivating knowledge contributions.

*Generative role-taking* is created when individuals step in to lift or solve conversations that have stalled because of conflicting issues. Since social media affords visible peer-to-peer conversations

rather than organizing content around a leader, there is no articulated responsibility for how one should solve disputes. This leads to individuals “taking on community-sustaining roles in order to maintain a productive dialogue among participants.” (ibid., p. 45).

Social media affordances is a relatively new term that scholars are still in the process of exploring. Our intention with this presentation of the affordance concept is not to cover all findings in the area. Instead, we hope that the reader understands that it is a lens through which we analyze collective identity framing in grassroots activism. It is important to recognize that the previously presented affordances were identified in an organizational environment, and may vary in other contexts. This includes grassroots activism. Next we present the concept of collective identity and collective identity framing, which — together with social media affordances — construct the theoretical framework for this thesis.

## **2.3 Collective Identity Framing**

This section focuses on the concept of collective identity framing — that is, how collective identity is formed. In order to explain this concept, the section presents a brief introduction of what identity is, how scholars theoretically separate different types of identity, and how collective identity can be defined.

The identity concept is familiar to most individuals, although the definition may vary depending on the person asked. Klandermans (2014) separates *personal*, *social* and *collective identity*, and argues that personal identity is the totality of different roles a person occupies, such as being Swedish, a student, or of a particular political opinion. Polletta and Jasper (2001, p. 298) add to the definition that “personal identity is the bundle of traits that we believe makes us unique”. Klandermans further defines social identity as an identity derived from all the groups a person considers him or herself to be a member of. Group identification can be seen as the link between a personal identity and a social identity, and can be translated into the commitment one feels to a group; orchestrated through the pride, values and symbols the group holds (Klandermans 2014). Collective identity “describes what makes people occupying a category similar” (Polletta & Jasper 2001, p. 298) and must thus consist of several individuals' shared identities to form the identity of the specific group (Klandermans 2014). One individual can be part of several groups and hold multiple identities, whilst a collective identity consists of an identity shared by many individuals.

### **2.3.1 Collective Identity**

Since the 1980s, sociologists have been attracted to collective identity framing to fill the gap in resource mobilization theory which failed to answer how social actors form a collectivity and recognize themselves as being a part of it (Melucci 1995). Mobilization and process theorists focused on the resources that gave collective actors capacity to act on longstanding grievances, but their emphasis on “how” rather than “why” left important issues in the dark (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996; Melucci 1995; Polletta & Jasper 2001). By turning to collective identity theory, behaviors and motives of collective actors in social movements were given an explanation. Scholars have since then found that collective identity causes higher collective

action, and to participate in group actions such as protests can positively influence social actors' group identification (de Weerd & Klandermans 1999; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans 2013).

Melucci (1995) considers collective identity as a process that involves defining the goals and how to get there. It also refers to a network of relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, and make decisions. Finally, some degree of emotional investment — which means the collective actor feels like part of the unity — is required in the definition of collective identity according to the author.

Our thesis follows Polletta and Jasper's (2001) definition of collective identity, and defines it as *an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community. It is a perceived status or relation, which may be imagined or experienced directly, and it is differentiated from personal identities although it may be a part of a personal identity. Collective identities are expressed through cultural materials, such as names, narratives and clothing. Unlike ideology, collective identity involves positive feelings for other social actors of the group.*

Melucci (1995) emphasizes the importance of goals and means as empirical indicators of a possible collective identity, and interchangeably uses this as an analytical tool to deconstruct the manifestations of a social movement. By doing this, scholars can possibly explore the process behind them. However, collective identity is a concept, and it should be remembered that it is merely an instrument or lens through which reality can be seen. It is not equivalent to "reality". Collective identity is an ongoing process in which equilibrium is reestablished in reactions to changes in the internal and external environment (ibid.) By turning to the theory of collective identity frames, our thesis views the framing processes of a social movement as indicators of collective identity. This is further explained in the following section.

### **2.3.2 Collective Identity Framing Activities**

Collective identity framing is a series of attempts to assemble, communicate and challenge the narratives that are used to describe a movement. The purpose is to justify activists' claims and motivate action through culturally shared beliefs and understandings (Garret 2006). Social movement scholars conceptualize this process by employing the verb "framing", which is seen as an active process that implies agency and conflict of reality construction (Benford & Snow 2000; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald 1996). In other words, framing is deployed by agents in dynamic processes, and may involve conflicting interpretations of the framing itself since it involves negotiation of shared meanings. Framing gives events or occurrences a meaning and therefore functions as a guide to the collective actor in the protest movement. Benford and Snow (2000) categorize the results of the framing activities in a number of different frames. So called *diagnostic framing*, *prognostic framing* and *motivational framing* are the three core framing tasks of collective identity framing<sup>2</sup> (ibid.).

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<sup>2</sup> Benford and Snow (2000) refer to these frames as *collective action frames*. This thesis will interchangeably use the term *collective identity frames*, since the consensus regarding the source of the problem, the strategies, and the rationale for action can be treated as frames reflecting a collective identity according to Polletta and Jasper (2001).

*Diagnostic framing* is concerned with problem identification and attributions. Since social movements seek to change or resolve an issue or situation, their deployed actions are shaped from the identification of causality sources or responsible agents. Benford and Snow (2000) view this as an attributional component of the first core framing task, diagnostic framing. However, agreements on the source of the problem are not automatically reached from consensus regarding the nature of the problem.

*Prognostic framing* involves the articulation of strategies and proposed solutions to the problem. But it is not just the movement itself that engages in prognostic framing activities, but also the opponents, media and bystanders in the external environment according to Benford and Snow (2000). This is called *oppositional framing*, and may affect a movement's framings by putting activists on the defensive. On the other hand, it may also force the collective to develop and elaborate strategies more clearly (ibid.).

*Motivational framing*, the final core framing task, provides a rationale for action and justifies engagement in collective action (ibid.). It includes the construction of suitable narratives of motive by entailing the severity, urgency, and efficacy of the situation (see for example Vromen & Coleman 2013).

According to Benford and Snow (2000), frames are conceived through the verbal and written communication of movement members that occur primarily in the context of movement activities. The construction of frames can either be deliberate or not, but they all arise from the alignment of experiences and events. These alignments are called *frame amplifications* or *frame articulations*, and typically involve highlighting issues or beliefs that are more noteworthy than others. They may even function as metaphors, "symbolizing the larger frame or movement of which it is a part" (ibid., p. 623).

By attributing characteristics to relevant actors that suggest a set of relationships and types of actions, Benford and Snow (2000) argue that frames constitute — amongst others — a central mechanism for facilitating a linkage between individual and collective identity. This thesis uses collective identity frames as well as social media affordances as a theoretical framework through which we explore the collective identity framing processes of a digital political grassroots movement.

### 3 Method

This thesis is built on an interpretive case study (Klein & Myers 1999). According to Klein and Myers (1999, p. 69), Information Systems (IS) research can be classified as interpretive if “knowledge of reality is gained through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools and other artifacts”. Following this guidance, we interpreted and analyzed observed action and communication of a group alongside semi-structured interviews with its members to understand how social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement. We chose a qualitative method to understand the underlying processes of individuals’ experiences of social media and collective identity frames (Patel & Davidson 2011). The chapter starts by presenting the case, and is followed by a discussion and presentation of the data collection and data analysis.

#### 3.1 Research Setting and Selection

The case of this thesis is a political grassroots movement based in Gothenburg, which seeks to stop the project called “Västlänken” (English: the West Link). The West Link is currently a planned railway tunnel under central Gothenburg with the purpose to increase capacity and reduce travel times on the Gothenburg train network. This is done by building an underground transit station closely connected to the Gothenburg Central Station terminus. In addition to this, two new underground transit stations in Haga and Korsvägen will be built. The construction phase is planned to be deployed in 2017/2018, and finished by 2026. According to the pre-study done by the Swedish National Rail Administration and the Swedish Transport Administration in 2007, the project was estimated to cost SEK 14.5 billion. However, this cost has grown to SEK 20 billion, which fueled the debate on how suitable the project really is. The West Link is also a part of “Västsvenska paketet” (English: the Western Swedish Package), which is a national infrastructure project that aims to improve public transports in western Sweden and reduce the environmental pollutions related to traffic. One way of financing this is through congestion taxes, which was introduced in the beginning of 2013 in central Gothenburg (Trafikverket 2014). However, many local citizens felt that politicians did not listen to their concerns and protests, and after much debate the politicians decided to consult the citizens in a public vote on whether the project and the congestion tax should continue or not. On the 14th of September 2014, 56.8 percent of the votes were against continuation (Göteborgs Stad 2014). Since the public votes were purely consulting, the local politicians chose to continue with the project. This stirred a lot of controversy, and many local citizens started to engage in protest during the fall of 2014.

The protesting grassroots movement is to a great extent organized through digital technology, and one of the largest protest groups has close to 3000 members on Facebook. This Facebook group (hereafter called *the anti-WL group*) was chosen for this case study since it had the largest number of members of all the various online protest groups sharing the cause. This particular movement was selected since it is concerned with one of the most debated topics in Sweden at the present time. Moreover, the protest activities were ongoing when we conducted this study. This gave us an opportunity to collect more detailed answers from the participants in

comparison to asking individuals to remember their past actions and experiences some months later.

The anti-WL group was founded in 2007. It is public, which means that anyone with a Facebook account can view the content of the group without joining. Although not all members are active on a daily basis, initial research showed that 129 different members posted content during our monthly observation, 1073 unique members liked various content, and 517 different members commented on posts. In total, 1178 unique members commented, liked or posted content. The anti-WL group gains approximately 100 new members per week. The primary activity in the group was to share and find information about the West Link. Other activities have included arranging offline demonstrations. In the initial observation we also found that the group used a wiki. However, since only one member administrated the wiki, we chose not to include this in the observation since it was not used as a collaboration platform but merely a database.

The anti-WL group has a policy stating that posts containing personal attacks, affective statements and party political discussions are prohibited. It states that it is good to give references (like a link) to your claim. The group has five moderators working with protecting the policy. Generally, they attempt to steer the discussions from personal opinions to fact-based discussions. The moderators read all posts and comments and decide if the contributions follow the policy. If not, they either remove the post and contact the author, or write a warning comment to the post.

## **3.2 Data Collection**

This thesis collected data from observations of the anti-WL group as well as semi-structured interviews (Sharp, Rogers & Preece 2011) with some of its participants. By using these techniques we were able to observe how members acted, but also explore the rationale for these actions. All quotes taken from the interviews and the observation have been translated from Swedish.

By analyzing the data set from the observation before conducting the interviews, we were able to find episodes and discussions that the informants could relate to and comment during the interviews. In that way, we had an understanding of the setting of the anti-WL group — the most active members, prominent discussions and often recurring subjects of discussion — and the informants could explain how they perceived various situations rather than explaining what had happened. It has been suggested that a combination of questions based on theory and empirical observation is a suitable arrangement and structure for a study like this (Sharp, Rogers & Preece 2011).

### **3.2.1 Observation**

The initial observation was performed on 550 posts and 5376 comments collected from the anti-WL group between January 19th and February 22nd 2015. We chose to observe this period since



the movement had a demonstration scheduled for the 7th of March, and the group's activity was high during the prior weeks. We collected the data by creating a Python script that used the Facebook Graph API to download the feed of the Facebook group. The JSON-encoded data was imported into an Excel spreadsheet for the analysis. Thus we were able to collect and “download” all activity during this period of time. The data included:

- Posts
- Comments
- Likes (of posts and comments)
- Time-stamps
- User names
- Tagged users (in posts and comments)

An advantage with qualitative observation is that it can provide information that is difficult for informants to describe themselves (Sharp, Rogers & Preece 2011). In addition, social media affordances such as persistence enables social media observers to trace the discourse back in time and see associations over time to understand latter-day and future actions (Trem & Leonardi 2012). However, it is hard to observe what is *not* happening, and reasons why individuals decide to not engage in discussions may be connected to the affordances we wished to study. As often in observations, we chose to be non-participating (Sharp, Rogers & Preece 2011) mainly because the study focuses on the already visible actions of the anti-WL group and our presence could influence the behavior of the group.

### 3.2.2 Interviews

As previously mentioned, observations do not always explain why individuals act like they do. Therefore, we also turned to qualitative semi-structured interviews to understand and explore the behavior of the anti-WL group's members. Interviews are our primary data source.

Scholars have shown that the majority of members of social media groups is not actively creating content, but rather join digital groups out of curiosity or sympathy for the group. It is claimed that 50-90 percent of members are so called “lurkers” that do not contribute (Preece 2001). With that in mind, we identified 1178 anti-WL group participants who had liked, written posts or comments during the initial observation. Aware of what Myers and Newman (1997) speak of as elite bias — where only key members are interviewed — we sought informants of different positions and activity levels (both in the forum and through offline action) to find a representable sample of this population. A sample of four persons was considered suitable given the time frame of the study. The respondents were contacted through Facebook and all agreed to participate in the study. We proposed to meet with all respondents in person when we contacted them, but one respondent did not wish to meet nor to have a video chat on Skype. Therefore, we emailed the respondent a slightly modified interview guide and returned follow-up questions after the first reply.

Respondent alias	Interview type	Description
Founder of the anti-WL group	Face-to-face interview	Founder and active moderator of the anti-WL group.
Respondent A	Email conversation	Active member. Frequently participating in the online discussions. Occasionally engages in micro-activism.
Respondent B	Face-to-face interview	Active member. Contributes to the group both offline and online. A key person in the movement.
Respondent C	Face-to-face interview	Formerly active member. At the time mainly following without much participation.

**Table 1. Respondent descriptions and type of interview**

The purpose of this case study was solely to see how social media affordances affect the framing in a digital grassroots group, not to catalogue the political opinions expressed. This was explained to the participants at first contact. Since identity creation and exploring opinions plays a major role in activism actions, we considered anonymity assurance to be especially important in these interviews. The interview questions were designed from our theoretical framework as well as the initial data analysis from our observations, ranging from how the anti-WL group viewed themselves, what their goals were, what online and offline actions they engaged in, as well as how they were affected by social media (see appendix 2). We did not explicitly ask questions regarding affordances, but rather how the respondents used social media and perceived the socio-technical environment. This is because affordances as well as collective identity frames are theoretical concepts, and would be too complex to discuss with the respondents.

The interviews were performed during a period of one week. The respondents chose the meeting point themselves. We invited the informants to look back and describe how the group had developed as well as their thoughts on what the future held. Therefore, we believe that we have an understanding of how the framing processes developed.

At the beginning of the interviews we explained that the recorded material would be used for analysis only and would be deleted after the thesis was published. All informants signed a consent form (see appendix 1). Since we knew the topic concerned personal grievances for the informants, we anticipated that they would have a lot to say. Because of this, we told the informants that the interview would be less than 60 minutes but allocated half a day for each interview. The average length of the interviews was 86 minutes, with the shortest being 45 minutes and the longest 122 minutes. We let the informants steer most of the topics and asked

follow-up questions to verify the answers, bearing in mind that “an interviewer who talks too much is likely to stifle the interviewee and restrict the amount of data disclosed” (Myers & Newman 2007, p. 12). All interview themes were covered — often without us leading the conversation — which we believe validated our themes as relevant for both the informants and our study (Kvale 1997). As Klein and Myers (1999) suggest, it is important to remember that both respondents and researchers can be seen as interpreters and analysts, and that facts are produced through the social interaction between the two. In this interpretive case study, we believed that our interpretation of the “truth” would be better constructed if we had extensive interpretations of the respondents’ subjective views. This was the main reason why we let the informants take their time and give long and elaborate answers without much interruption.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

We used our theoretical framework consisting of social media affordances in combination with collective identity framing as a tool for analyzing the collected data, but also as a way to view the digital environment in which the anti-WL group organizes and communicates through. Since all the individuals’ actions in the Facebook group is constrained and made possible through affordances, we viewed this digital environment entangled in a socio-technical interplay between content, context and social actors.

As often in qualitative analysis, we analyzed our data through iterations where patterns continuously emerged (Patel & Davidson 2011). In the first iteration we analyzed the observation data manually by reading all 550 posts and their attributed comments. We grouped the observation findings in diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames, and noted which affordances that seemed to impact the conceived frames. In the second iteration, we used these findings to construct interview themes. The pre-analysis was disregarded for the main data analysis, where the observation data was re-analyzed together with the interview data.

For the main analysis, the interviews were audio recorded on site and thereafter transcribed. Because we deliberately allowed the respondents to jump between themes, we decided to transcribe the complete interviews during analysis. We initially grouped and coded the interviews and observation data in eight different themes, including diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, motivational framing, consequences of visibility, consequences of persistence, consequences of association, consequences of editability and context/background. By cutting out printed quotes from the interviews and observation we constructed a physical mind map. Thereafter, we analyzed the different concepts and narrowed the themes down to the three core framing tasks of *diagnostic framing*, *prognostic framing* and *motivational framing*. The observed affordances were then categorized into these three themes. The quotations and ideas from the observation and interviews presented in the results are grouped by core framing processes and discussed through an affordance perspective. This deductive analysis is supported by our theoretical framework of collective identity frames and social media affordances.

## 4 Results

We set out to investigate how social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement. After performing our interviews and reading through one month of Facebook data, a clear pattern emerged: The most prominent frames were diagnostic and focused on gathering knowledge to support why the West Link should be stopped. Prognostic framings mostly occurred in the movement *outside* the public forum. Against this backdrop, it could be argued that the affordances of social media and the perceived legitimacy of the group are in favor of diagnostic framing. In the following text, we further elaborate on this finding.

### 4.1 Diagnostic Frames

The diagnostic framing activity is concerned with problem identification and attributions (Benford & Snow 2000). Two framings were discovered: the *fact-based frame* and the *emotive frame*. The observation showed that the emotive frame sometimes undermined the fact-based frame, and the interviews showed that social media affordances enabled members to avoid certain frames. The development of conflicting frames created a community where members were regarded as more or less legitimate.

The fact-based frame was apparent in both interviews and observation. All respondents described the main actions of anti-WL group as information spreading and fact gathering. The observation showed that members were encouraged in the group's policy, posts and comments to punctuate disinformation and to find hard facts that supported the opposition. The respondents perceived the anti-WL group as an information resource that supported the offline activities of spreading the word about the wrongdoings of the West Link project. Since the group opposed a complex infrastructure project, the need for expertise knowledge was considered relatively high. This is illustrated by the following quote of respondent B:

What you can use this Facebook group for is to find information. As much information you need to actually engage in protest in the “real” world. [...] When you go out and claim this and that, you have to back your statements with facts somehow. I've got a normal life — with three kids — and there isn't much time to do that. Therefore, much time has been spent on retrieving and finding information.

While the ambition was to present fact-based information to diagnose the problem, respondent C stated that this could be hard to uphold in the group:

It [the anti-WL group] is somewhat of an opinion sweatshop. It blooms and explodes in the beginning. It's a speakers' corner where people can express everything that they feel needs to be said. But when they're done with that you'll need a structure to secure that something is created from all this.

The emotive frame was again and again revisited by new members, whom called politicians corrupt and used words like “Muteborg”<sup>3</sup>. When moderators discovered posts or comments striding against the policy, they either wrote a comment as a warning or simply removed the content. This gatekeeping was afforded by the editability of social media. In addition to this, even non-moderators wrote comments urging the debating members to stick to the subject. This was afforded by generative role-taking. However, many of the remaining posts still contained personal frustration. Both the founder of the group and the other respondents saw a tendency for new members to write affective and uninformed posts directed at “corrupt politicians”, and to bring up resolved discussions once again. This can be described as somewhat of an organizational memory loss of established diagnostic frames, erased by the visibility of new members’ discourse. Because of this, respondent B chose to only follow specific authors:

Now I’ve learned... I only choose to read from specific authors, and articles. I’m not interested in getting upset, I’m only there for the hard facts. That is because I’ve got an agenda. I’m not here to get upset, but rather to make a change.

Respondent B claimed to only read notification posts from befriended members in the group. This selective approach created somewhat of a filter bubble that reinforced already existing ties. The affordance of triggered-attending enabled this action. Respondent C also stated that the constant diagnosis of the problem and attacking of politicians were somewhat exhausting to read:

There is a pretty negative... Well... Energy in this. It is a very negative energy because of the situation in Gothenburg. And it is not everyday that you want to be exposed to those things, since it makes you a little irritated and upset.

The previous two quotes indicate intrusion of the respondents’ private online spheres. Since social media was used not only for activism but also for other private matters, the visibility of this emotive frame resulted in an over-exposure of disheartening content on the respondents’ personal feeds.

When discussions regarding party politics and actions of individual politicians recurred in the anti-WL group — despite moderators’ initial attempts to silence them — moderators stopped removing these posts and either constructed a thread for these discussions or changed the policy so that it was temporarily allowed. As the founder posted in the anti-WL group:

There is an enormous interest for the politicians’ opinions and actions. There is a tendency that these post will clutter the feed, and therefore hide other interesting posts. From now on we will collect our posts in this thread. Post your links, opinions and comments. In this way, we will get a clean thread that is easy to follow, and the rest of the feed will be tidier.

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<sup>3</sup> A play on the words “bribe” and “Gothenburg”.

All interviewed respondents were positive to moderators monitoring the content of the group. None of the respondents wished to see personal opinions without backing from facts. As the group was growing, it became more and more moderated. Respondent C thought the moderation was vital for the progress of the group's discourse:

I guess it has been more moderated lately. [...] In the inception [when it wasn't moderated] it was somewhat of a wild west. [...] I mean, we are all united in an opinion so there's really no need to dwell on that again and again. [...] I guess that the posts that I see today [...] have improved since it's not about "I think" and "I would want to", but rather "here we have this, and we can compare this to that" or "this information is new" and "they say this in this interview". It gets more and more complex as the days go on. You collect bits and pieces and compare them to each other. In that way, I think the values have improved. In the beginning it was mainly about John and Jane debating their personal values. And I believe those kinds of discussions have decreased.

Some of the interviewed respondents thought that the main reason to have moderators edit the content was to create credibility. These respondents were all certain that to form an opinion, their arguments had to be based on facts and not emotions. As mentioned, the visible online activity of the group was mostly diagnostic and focused on what was wrong and who to blame. Some respondents said it was crucial for the group and its members to build legitimacy. If all posts were legitimate, the legitimacy could be aggregated to the group as a whole when facing external actors like media and politicians, through the affordances of visibility and persistence. The founder of the anti-WL group stated the following:

When I meet politicians or other actors in this... Then they take us seriously. And what I say, above all things, my task, it is to stop... It is to stop the hate. The Internet hate. To make sure that... Because I don't want a semi-anonymous person that writes bullshit about politicians or journalists and so on, it just thwarts our mission. We don't become credible.

This strive for credibility and a fact-based diagnostic frame built a community where different members gained different levels of legitimacy based on their contributions. Moderators and other members considered members who wrote in affection and expressed their grievances without facts as less legitimate, and the illegitimate members' posts were removed, negatively commented, or ignored. As the founder of the anti-WL group stated, this individual legitimacy derived from the activity in the group:

I know that I have... Authority is not the right word... People respect me. I get respect and legitimacy by two reasons: Number one is that people know that it was me who started the group, and they respect me for that. Number two is that I publish material containing good stories. I guess that I'm the one who contributes the most with material that I find on my own. Not like linking a published article, but instead publish content that I find here and there.

Respondent B shared the founder's view on how legitimacy was gained, and stated that she based her judgment on the quality of other members' posts. The quality was determined by a combination of associated material and how well written the text was:

You can tell by their writing. [...] They have expertise. [The founder] has a good status as well. He is very initiated and knowledgeable [...]. I make up my mind based on what they write. Then you can see... Well, if a person refers to articles, then it's not just personal opinions. A person that puts an effort into their contribution. Those individuals are very valuable.

But it is not easy to write perfectly understandable posts for everyone. Respondent B perceived that the editability of posts had a positive influence on the contributions to the anti-WL group:

Everyone gets a second chance. When you take the time to review your text before sending, you get a chance to reflect on the content. "Whoops, maybe that wasn't so smart". You don't get that opportunity in real life if you are too spontaneous.

This may be an indication of as to why the fact-based diagnostic frame was so salient in the anti-WL group. The social media affordances of editability and association are vital to this frame, since they are attributed with the following consequences: editability raises the bar for a higher standard regarding language use and analytical stringency. User-to-user associations are created between members who consider each other legitimate. By hyperlinking external content to posts, the affordance of association to content enables the fact-based diagnostic frame in its core. This combination of social media affordances is therefore vital for the fact-based diagnostic frame of the anti-WL group. The emotive frame seemed to be enhanced by the affordance of visibility and sustained by the lack of persistence.

## 4.2 Prognostic Frames

Prognostic framing is concerned with suggesting solutions and strategies (Benford & Snow 2000). From the observation, we discovered that the most salient prognostic frame of the anti-WL group was the *micro-activism frame*. Members emailed politicians, wrote debate articles, shared engaging posts from the group on social media and signed petitions, mostly on their own. However, after interviewing some of the key members a *professional lobbying frame* took shape. This was developed and maintained by the seasoned key members of the anti-WL group, and included collaboration on elaborate strategies (for example, how to influence political parties from within). Most members were unaware of the professional lobbying frame, although the individuals involved in the frame's development had met through the anti-WL group and were still very active in it. Respondent A — who was neither apart nor aware of the professional lobbying frame — perceived the group's prognostic activities in alignment with the micro-activism frame we discovered:

I would say that we are working in a democratic and peaceful way, with demonstrations, discussions in media, debates when given the opportunity and courting politicians through email.

The data indicates that the reason that some members are not aware of the professional lobbying frame is closely connected to visibility, legitimacy and strength of members' ties. During the interviews, it was discovered that members contributing to the fact-based diagnostic frame were considered more legitimate than those contributing to the emotive frame. The legitimate individuals were contacted by moderators or other prominent members in private messages, and were added to hidden Facebook groups where prognostic discussions took place. The interviews also revealed that some members of the hidden groups met offline. Respondent B described how she entered a hidden group by posting fact-based material that was recognized by active members and commented:

I guess they like what I write.

Some key members used triggered attending to disregard the prognostic discussions in the public anti-WL group and only used it as an information board. The restricted visibility of the private group and stronger ties created between those members and their legitimacy reduced their need to engage in strategic discussions in the public anti-WL group. We argue that this created a knowledge gap regarding the group's bigger strategies between legitimate key members and non-key members. Respondent B said that she did not share her ongoing plans since they would be open for debate:

Not at all. What we're doing right now... I don't post that kind of content in the group because it would get diluted.

It seemed like the visibility of the content in the anti-WL group affected members' readiness to share material that could contribute to an elaborated prognostic frame. Respondent B described how the visibility of the posts for the public, opponents, and for unfamiliar members lowered her willingness to share her plans. Also, the many comments that would appear after a "prognostic post" could lead to an endless discussion on a solution that the respondent already deemed as an appropriate action. She especially stressed how she did not bother about other members' opinions:

They don't have a saying in that. I do what I want.

During the observation, some less active members that had not been lifted up into secret groups called for action in the anti-WL group. The following post is from a less active member whom expressed frustration as to why the members of the anti-WL group did not collaborate when they had an opportunity to step away from the micro-activism frame:



[...] I have — during my evening snack — thought about strategies for us protesters. [...] I thought to myself: why not stage this project that the politicians have embarked on. [...] Isn't there enough knowledge/competence in this enormous group to use imagination (AND FACTS) to raise awareness everywhere? It shouldn't be spectacular in the sense that it would be perceived as a spectacle. We can't afford that. Come on, there must be people with all kinds of skills. Not 'just' writing on social media, although this is a great resource for us who seek knowledge.

This post received 18 likes and 16 comments from less active members. The comment section stalled with questions and claims regarding childcare, which is an example of how the affordance of generative role-taking can backfire. No one specifically offered to engage in the project and none of the more active members or moderators engaged in the proposal. This illustrates how the knowledge gap grew as the professional lobbying frame was withheld. During the interview, the founder of the anti-WL group commented on similar incidents in the following way:

It's up to people to do what they want to do.

The founder himself was during interviews open with his strategy, saying that:

We believe in stalling the construction until the next election. If they aren't able to break ground before that, well... The politicians will be sitting on very shaky seats then.

When asked why he did not share his strategy and how to achieve this with the group, the founder said he felt that some members, especially newer ones, lacked knowledge. Therefore, he did not feel that new members should be informed of the strategies before their knowledge level had increased:

I get these questions like "what's the plan?" and "what's the strategy?" at least three or four times a week. Often in a personal message. So no, they aren't aware of [the strategy]. Especially new members... It's like, the ones that have been doing this for a while are more aware. But the ones that have joined quite recently, they don't nearly have the same level of expertise. And it's like that we talked about before. We have to raise the knowledge level.

The founder felt that some members lacked legitimacy and knowledge. However, as prognostic discussions were continuously being held in secret groups, a bulk of the public group was locked in an uninformed mode.

The perceived legitimacy of other members seemed to be closely connected to the strength of members' ties. The members seemed to be reluctant towards reaching out to people they did not know in the anti-WL group, both in asking for help and responding to requests. Respondent C described how a befriended member on Facebook asked for help on her private account instead of reaching out in the group:

In the beginning when [member's name] started to ask around... Because we added each other on Facebook... She asked around in her personal network, and wrote "is there someone who knows someone whom knows something". Maybe in the forum as well, but mostly on her personal page. Perhaps it felt more safe, I don't know? In this way, she knew that it was her friends and friends' friends that replied.

Respondent B stated that she tried to use the anti-WL group to find resources without success:

I wish to find an art director for example. I could use that. I've posted a request for someone with these types of skills in the group, but no one has replied to this. I actually made a friend request to a member in the group who looked like an art director on his profile picture. But when I visited his profile he seemed a little bit tricky, so we'll see about that.

This respondent had a plan to visualize maps of the area affected by the West Link project, and thereafter spread this information to the inhabitants. Social media did not seem to afford generative role-taking in this environment. The respondent described that it was difficult to find the collaboratory resources necessary for the project without having knowledge about other people in the group.

In the instances where members did engage in collaboratory activities connected to stopping the West Link, some individuals started to work together in secret Facebook groups, private messages and met offline. Respondent C described how he approached another member in a private message. When asked why he contacted her in a private message instead of commenting on her post in the anti-WL group, the respondent replied:

I just thought that this was more of a private conversation.

These private discussions through private messages, private Facebook groups and offline meetings seemed to increase members' knowledge of each other. For new projects, they continued to contact each other directly, and not through the public anti-WL group.

Over all, the respondents seemed to believe that diagnosing the problem was easier to achieve in the anti-WL group than collaborating on strategies and actual deployment. The reasons for this seemed to be connected to the large group size as well as the absence of social ties to other members. When they asked for help to develop strategies or searched for resources in the group, they received no answers. The latter was also confirmed in the observations. Respondent C stated:

Facebook isn't the same thing as the real world. The activities on Facebook go hand in hand with expressing opinions. But it's very far from "action". But I would love to be more active in the movement.

In sum, our data revealed a prominent micro-activism prognostic frame in the anti-WL group, but not a widely spread collaboration on the bigger strategies held by the moderators and senior key members. The micro-activism frame was amplified by encouragement of actions such as emailing, writing editorial comments or putting up posters. Since we did not have access to the secret Facebook groups, the elaborated strategies of the professional lobbying frame were somewhat unclear. But the interviews showed that key members and moderators collaborated on plans that were more time-consuming and demanded a higher financial funding compared to the widespread micro-activism activities. The affordance of visibility affected both frames — one was amplified and the other was secluded due to its delicate nature.

### 4.3 Motivational Frames

The final core framing activity — motivational framing — is concerned with providing a justification and rationale for action (Benford & Snow 2000). During the observation, a frame that we hereafter call the *Not In My Backyard frame (the NIMBY frame)* was discovered. This frame amplified the fact that the West Link project is on a local level, and therefore affects the daily life of the anti-WL group's members whom live in the city of Gothenburg. The respondents frequently mentioned this frame by calling it NIMBY, and discussed its good and bad features. The founder of the anti-WL group was aware of the contradictions of having a prominent motivational frame of NIMBY, yet claiming that an alternative infrastructural change was needed. He said that he did not want to propose another solution, because the affected people living in that area of the city would object and potentially leave the group. According to him, it was a delicate balance to frame the group as pro-Gothenburg while being aware of the fact that a solution *was* needed, and that *any* solution would negatively affect some of the group's supporters. Still, the NIMBY frame articulated environmental changes due to construction, house demolitions and limited transportation in order to raise awareness and attract members.

The following quote is an example of the NIMBY frame found during the observation:

There is no GOTHENBURGER that wants to or will ride the DEATH SKULL CAVE (the West Link) since it will NEVER be built. The FEW individuals that support the DEATH SKULL CAVE live outside the city in fancy houses in the suburbs like LERUM, FLODA, ALINGSÅS and so on. It is easy for them to claim that the West Link will do good, but they don't have to live in a dugged up city as we GOTHENBURGERS will for the next 10 to 15 years. By the PEOPLE'S knowledge, commitment, will-power and true GOTHENBURGIAN SPIRIT we will fight as a unified voice, and in the long run the PEOPLE will be victorious. The CONGESTION TAX will disappear, and therefore no more money will be spent on idiot projects such as the West Link. Hultén and her peers will be removed. This will be an enormous improvement for GOTHENBURG! Democracy has returned and the PEOPLE have WON!

This colorful post illustrates how the emotive diagnostic frame is amplified by the NIMBY motivational frame, which in turn could have a counteractive effect on the fact-based diagnostic

frame. Members articulated frustration rather than contributing to the purpose of the group which was to present fact-based information.

The group amplified the NIMBY frame by frequently using phrases and words like “we who <3 Gothenburg” and “us gothenburgers”. These comments often received many likes and seemed to be supported by the community majority. Even though these contributions may be in conflict with the anti WL-groups policy — since they are seldom fact-based — they are still allowed and are supported by the visibility affordance and by the meta-voicing affordance. The latter is enabled by the liking-function of Facebook.

## 5 Discussion

This thesis set out to investigate how social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement. Following Faraj and Azad (2012, p. 4), we defined affordances as “action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology”. Social media affordances is a theoretical concept where the individual’s actions on social media are constrained and made possible through affordances. By exploring the findings by Leonardi (2014), Majchrzak et al. (2013) and Treem and Leonardi (2012) attributed to affordances in an organizational context, we used the concept as a lens to view the online activity of a political grassroots movement. In addition to this, we turned to collective identity frames (Benford & Snow 2000) and viewed the framing activities of an online political grassroots movement as possible indicators of collective identity. In the following section we discuss our results and findings.

### 5.1 Collective Identity Frames of the Anti-WL Group

We identified five different frames that we perceived as indicators of the anti-WL group’s collective identity. The findings showed that a majority of the discussions in the anti-WL group were diagnostic in their nature, which resulted in a fact-based frame and an emotive frame. This partly verifies Marichal (2013) who proposed that Facebook groups often engage in “finding the truth” rather than actually proposing solutions. Even though most discussions were diagnostic, many anti-WL group members expressed a desire to engage in more elaborate tactics. The results indicated that more seasoned members of the group engaged in activities attributed to the fact-based diagnostic frame, and newcomers in the emotive frame. Our data suggested that the group had to be moderated to aggregate the credibility created from individual fact-based posts. This aggregated credibility was used as an indication of power when contacting media, opponents or politicians.

Since the threshold of engaging in activism on social media is relatively low (Choi & Park 2014), the constant flow of contributions by new members resulted in an overexposure of the emotive frame on the seasoned members’ personal feeds. This could partly explain why some respondents chose to only follow other members that they deemed worthy, and whose opinions they shared. Furthermore, the overexposure of the emotive frame could be seen as an organizational memory loss of established diagnostic frames, brought back by the visibility of new members’ discourse. Thus, it could be argued that the visibility affordance of social media was in conflict with the persistence affordance in this environment. If persistence of resolved discussions would be better afforded in this context, newly joined members would not have revisited these themes over and over. In some sense, it seemed as if that the lack of persistence fueled the emotive frame.

Although a majority of the discussions in the anti-WL group were diagnostic, we also found prognostic frames. The most salient frame was the micro-activism frame. Micro-activism is defined by Marichal (2013, p. 2) as “one-to-several forms of politically oriented communication

that reflect micro-level expressive political performances”. We argue that this prognostic frame was widespread in the anti-WL group since micro-activism is concerned with relatively costless and accessible actions, and that more elaborate strategies and actions are more time-consuming and often require coordination.

After interviewing senior key members of the anti-WL group, a less visible frame also appeared. This “professional lobbying frame” was concerned with more complex strategies of political change. It could be argued that the visibility of social media hindered this frame to spread through the group. This could partly be explained by the members’ unwillingness to share strategies with strangers in the group as they would be “diluted”, as one respondent expressed it. Also, members were not seen as “worthy” by key members if they had not been contributing to the fact-based diagnostic frame and gained legitimacy in the group. Lastly, making these strategies-in-progress visible made the group vulnerable to outsiders, since the discussions could be seen by anyone on Facebook.

Even though much of the prognostic framings were attributed to the micro-activism frame, many anti-WL group members expressed a desire to engage in “real” activism but were not heard by the senior key members who withheld their relatively elaborate strategies. This indicates that some individuals of the grassroots movement did not prefer to engage in micro-activism, but had no other ways to engage in action. Therefore, we argue that the visibility affordance of social media is perhaps responsible as to why digital activism is not mainly associated by action-taking as suggested by Marichal (2013) and Svensson (2014). The visibility hinders more elaborate strategies — in this instance the professional lobbying frame — to spread in public Facebook groups.

Benford and Snow (2000) theoretically separate motivational framing from diagnostic. Through our case study, we discovered that the diagnostic emotive frame and the NIMBY (meaning Not In My Backyard) frame were closely entangled in the observation as well as in the interviews. In our analysis, it appeared to be easier to separate prognostic framings from the other two core framing activities, but less clear on how to differentiate the diagnostic emotive frame from the motivational NIMBY frame since both seemed to provide a rationale for action. Furthermore, it is important to remember that we, as well as Benford and Snow (2000), do not engage in discussions regarding which of the three core framing activities that reflects a collective identity the most. In the anti-WL group case study, we found that the motivational and diagnostic frames were the most salient. Prognostic frames were less visible, but still palpable.

## **5.2 The Role of Social Media Affordances in Collective Identity Framing**

Returning to our thesis’ research question; how do social media affordances affect the collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement, we followed Melucci (1995) and viewed the political grassroots movement’s online discussions and activities regarding goals and means as empirical indicators for a possible collective identity.

We found that some affordances of social media affected the collective identity frames more than others. Visibility was the most powerful affordance which in many ways overruled other affordances like persistence. Treem and Leonardi (2012, p. 154) show that visibility and activity streams help users “keeping a pulse on what is going on”, and that persistence creates a robust form of communication. Even though the persistence affordance meant that established facts and discussions about not posting emotive content did exist in the group, the visibility of new posts hid these posts and made it harder for members to easily steer through content and explore the fact-based frame. Visibility thus affected the affordance of generative role-taking, where the arrival of new members raised disputes that were already solved. This enabled growing content that was hard to navigate, which in turn caused an organizational memory loss when members were afforded generative roles. These findings are in line with Majchrzak et al. (2013) and Treem and Leonardi (2012). As a consequence, the emotive frame was perpetually revisited and staggered the fact-based frame.

Visibility was also the affordance which made the group vulnerable to oppositional framing by opponents and media. The group wanted to be perceived as legitimate, but was afraid of being seen as incompetent because of the emotive frame. The visibility also made some members withhold the professional lobbying frame from both other members and opponents. On the other hand, the micro-activism frame was partially upheld by the visibility affordance of social media, since protesters could post pictures or write comments of micro-activism they engaged in. In accordance with Treem and Leonardi (2012), this increased other members’ willingness to contribute.

Several affordances were used to conquer the problems related to visibility. The affordance of editability was used by moderators to regain power of the discourse, and strategically develop the fact-based frame by removing counterproductive posts. This confirms Treem and Leonardi’s (2012) findings that editability makes users regulate personal expressions and write posts with an audience in mind, and that users strategically hide work-in-progress. In accordance with Treem and Leonardi (2012, p. 45) the affordance of generative role-taking was apparent in the case of members telling each other to stick to the subject “in order to maintain a productive dialogue”. The affordance of triggered attending was used by some members to avoid the emotive frame by only following members they deemed “worthy”. The association affordance strengthened the fact-based frame as individuals’ hyperlinked content, which contributed to its development and credibility. Association was also prominent between members whom contributed to the fact-based frame. They befriended each other and mobilized privately through messages and hidden Facebook groups, which is in line with Treem and Leonardi’s (2012) idea that associations make users strategically connect with like-minded.

Some findings were not completely complementing previous studies. For example, the persistence of social media did not create a robust form of communication where styles and tags were reused and popularized (Treem & Leonardi 2012). The anti-WL group was public and available for anyone with a Facebook account, which made it more vulnerable to opponents getting insight to the work process. Also, new members joined each day, and many did not adapt

to the set form of communication. Because they held grievances toward the West Link project, their urge to post emotive messages was likely higher compared to an organizational setting. However, other studies on digital grassroots movements did find that reusing tags and sharing posts held the group together and formed solidarity (Choi & Park 2014). In our study, intricate fact-based posts were rarely shared and tags were not used. In the few instances where pictures were added to engaging messages — following the expressive style that previous studies have found significant for social media (Marichal 2013; Svensson 2014) — several members chose to share it on their own walls. This suggests that to form opinion — which is often the purpose of digital grassroots activism — it is important to consider that social media content should be both fact-based and engaging to become spreadable.



## 6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to study how social media affordances affect collective identity framing in a digital political grassroots movement. The collected data indicated that social media affordances support diagnostic framing as the visibility of communication enables individuals to partake in established facts, which in turn is afforded by association as individuals can hyperlink content with their arguments. It is thus easier to reach a consensus of what, why, and who to blame for the grievances held by the collective when arguments can be audited by members through fact based sources. However, since social media is relatively accessible by anyone anywhere at any time, this can cause an overload of emotive diagnostic frames containing personal opinions rather than facts when feelings are running high. These framing activities are perhaps not intentional by the — often new — members engaging in them, but they are as visible as other frames. In our case study, this undermined the legitimacy of the group as a whole. Because of the editability affordance, moderators could step in and either edit or remove content which they deemed inappropriate.

The case study also showed that social media affords prognostic framings as long as they are non-debatable and “harmless”. Micro-activism activities such as emailing politicians or putting up posters were activities that members shared openly since their actions remained uncontested. But when it came to more elaborate strategies of change, the visibility of an open Facebook group seemed to make the initiators unwilling to share their ideas with the collective. Only a few group members were seen as worthy to partake in these strategic efforts. This individual legitimacy derived from the fact-based diagnostic contributions afforded by association. Members who contributed to the diagnostic fact-based frame were also invited to collaborate on prognostic strategies in private Facebook groups. In sum, the data analysis indicated that social media affordances were in favor of diagnostic framing more than prognostic framing. The affordance of visibility seemed to affect the framings more than the other affordances. In turn, the affordances of editability, association, and triggered attending enabled attempts to overcome the problems attributed to visibility.

The fact-based frame gave the movement legitimacy when facing politicians, opponents and media. This frame was developed during a relatively short period of time, since the movement in its current form is less than a year old. Compared to grassroots movements of the 60’s, it could be argued that social media affordances have decreased the time it takes to gain legitimacy for a political grassroots movement; frames can be deliberately controlled through the editability of social media in a way that was not previously possible. Social media also makes it easy for anyone to become an activist, or at least a supporter, in various online movements. The flow of new members is positive in the sense that additional followers increase the negotiating power of a grassroots movement. Therefore, we argue that social media is not just another activism tool. It is also a relatively new landscape accelerating political change.

However, in combination with the affordances of social media, contributions of new members can create unstructured content that is hard to navigate, where discussions easily stall and hinder

the development of powerful frames. As in our case study, this led to somewhat of an organizational memory loss, and an emotive frame dominated the discourse from time to time during our observation. Without editing from moderators, the gained legitimacy of the group would have been almost impossible to sustain. Political grassroots groups need to understand this complexity and the role of social media affordances in order to navigate these implications.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the anti-WL group used the fact-based diagnostic frame as a strategy for change. If the group could back their claims, politicians would listen according to some of the respondents. In theory, the fact-based diagnostic frame as we call it would then be both diagnostic as well as prognostic. If we expand the scope and look beyond the Facebook group, it could also mean that online frames are used differently in an offline context. Online diagnostic frames could be prognostic offline frames. We invite scholars to explore this theory, and study how online frames are strategically being used in an offline context. In our case study, however, this does not affect the collective identity since the majority of individuals did not know about this tactic.

## **6.2 Limitations and Transferability**

Although we conducted a case study of a Swedish political grassroots movement, we believe that the findings are representable for political grassroots' usage of social media in most democratic countries. The cultural differences of regions could be affecting the discourse, but since the data analysis showed that hyperlinked material is in favor of diagnostic framing, we believe that case studies of a movement in another democratic region would correspond to our findings. However, it is important to keep in mind that the fact-based framing was resting on an open and democratic society where information is widely available, especially from the public sector. In other areas where information is not available, the implications would perhaps be that the social media affordances would not favor diagnostic framing as much as it did in our case study.

We only managed to observe one month of the ongoing social movement. Therefore, it could be argued that the results are only representable for this period of time. Still, by triangulating our short observation with interviews where the respondents reflected on the development of frames, we gained deeper insight in how frames had been negotiated over time.

## **6.3 Further Research**

Since scholars recently started to explore the concept of social media affordances, there is a need for further research on the subject. We investigated how social media affordances affect collective identity framing, but this is merely one of several possible fields to explore. To extend our case study, we would also like to see how — and if — social media affordances differ in public and closed online communities. We also see potential for normative research on how social media design can afford prognostic discourse beyond micro-activism. Finally, since the case study we conducted involved an ongoing grassroots movement, it would be interesting to perform longitudinal research on how the collective identity frames evolve.

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# Appendix 1

## Consent Form

This interview is going to be audio recorded for post-analysis, and relevant quotes will be used in our study. The analysis of the recorded material will be executed by Lisa Engkvist and Björn Winnergård. You will be anonymous in the thesis, and the name of the Facebook group discussed during the interview will not be published. The audio recording will be deleted when the thesis is published. Thank you for participating.

Please read the following paragraph and sign the consent form.

-----

I understand that my interview will be audio recorded.

I give Lisa Engkvist and Björn Winnergård my permission to use this recording for their thesis at the University of Gothenburg, spring semester 2015. I realize that my quotes and opinions expressed could be published in the thesis, as well as in an electronic publication archive.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Clarification of signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2

### Interview Guide

#### Thesis presentation

We are conducting a case study where we explore how socially committed citizens use Facebook to exchange ideas, coordinate activities and create a kinship and meaning in a digital world. The questions are created especially for the movement [the anti-WL group], which is being called “the group” in the following questions.

#### Background questions

- Please describe why you joined this specific Facebook group.
- How long have you been a member of the group?
- Please describe your online activities in the group. Example: commenting, liking , sharing content and so forth.

#### Goals and means

- Describe how you perceive the group’s values/ideals. Are there any?
- Describe how you perceive the goals of the group.
  - Do you believe that the majority of the group share these goals?
  - How does the group work to achieve the goals?
  - Would you say that the average member contribute to the group?
  - Do you believe the group is affected by what is ‘liked’ by its members?
  - *Moderator question:* Has the group created new goals without your interference?
- Would you say there is an ongoing discussion regarding the goals of the group?
  - If so, could you describe this process? Who is participating?
- Would you say that you share set of values with other members of the group?
- Do you feel a connection to other members? If so, in what way?
- Have you noticed changes in the group during your membership? If so, please exemplify.
- Would you say that the group has tried to find sympathizers for your cause or expand the movement in any way? If so, please exemplify.
- How would you say bystanders perceive the group?

[Show the respondent the printed version of the policy]



- How do you feel about the group's policy?
  - Do you feel limited in any way?
  - Would you say that the policy is being followed?
- Does the policy affect the progress of the group?

### **Social Media**

- What difficulties have you noticed that are connected to the movement's existence on Facebook?
  - Is there something you would not publish in the forum? If so, please explain why.
- What opportunities have you noticed that are connected to the movement's existence on Facebook?
- Do you actively read in the forum? Or do you mainly see the posts on your personal newsfeed?
- Could you describe how you follow the activities of the group?
- Do you have private conversations with members of the group? [In chats or offline]
  - If so, what discussion topic is the most frequent?
  - If so, do you share what these conversation results in with the group?
- Do you publish text or pictures of your activism in the forum?
  - Do you feel motivated to engage in action when others share their activism?
  - Would you say that members encourage each other to engage in action?
- Would you say that you have some knowledge of what resources/knowledge other members have?
  - If yes, would you say that this knowledge is being used by the movement?
  - How did you gather this knowledge?
- Do you feel that some members are more legitimate than others?
- Is there anything more you would like to add before we finish the interview?

**Thank you!**