

Legitimising a Feminist Agenda

The #metoo petitions in Sweden 2017–2018

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Abstract

During 2017 and 2018, the #metoo hashtag united a global movement against sexual abuse and harassment. In Sweden, a large portion of the attention was given to the voices of working women, who organised and wrote petitions that were published in news media. Previous research has found that media reports of sexual abuse often focus on singular stories, rather than describing the underlying structural problems, and that the problem is often framed as an individual rather than structural problem. This article accounts for a qualitative content analysis of the first 28 published #metoo petitions in Sweden, with the goal of understanding how these framed the issue. In contrast to previous research, this study shows how the petitions established a coherent feminist explanatory framework that placed the problems on a structural level by focusing on work environments and framing demands in terms of general and perfectly reasonable human rights.

Keywords: #metoo, framing, news media, hashtag activism, feminist activism

Introduction

The media plays a central role in shaping public consciousness. For social movements, especially news media are important as they can raise awareness of the issues at stake and contribute to the legitimisation of the movement (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Nicolini & Hansen, 2018). The way a movement is presented in the news media thus affects its chances at influencing and creating social change (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009).

One influential theory addressing how the news presents issues is framing theory. Frames can be described as “interpretative packages” that give meaning

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to an issue (Gamson & Modigliani 1989: 2); they describe problems and offer explanations and solutions. By emphasising some elements of a topic above others, the frames that are used affect how the audience understands the issue. Therefore, by framing events and issues in particular ways, media texts contribute to shaping public opinion (de Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993).

A number of studies have investigated news media's framing of so-called "women's issues". Typically, these issues have been portrayed as belonging in the private sphere, thus being seen as non-political, unlike the affairs of working men (Fraser, 1990). As for feminist movements, the news media's framing has often worked to delegitimise them in various ways – by depicting the movements as weak, fragmented and conflict-ridden, and by underestimating the size of the movements (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Bronstein, 2005; Mendes, 2011). In a similar vein, sexual harassment and abuse has generally not been recognised as a broad political concern, but has rather been framed as the occasional problem of individuals. News media's framing of sexual abuse has often focused on singular episodes, focusing on victims and their actions rather than the underlying structural problems (Goehring et al., 2017; Nettleton, 2011).

Public recognition can be seen as important democratic justice (Fraser, 2005). Here, the development of public spheres on the Internet can be regarded as an opportunity to create spaces for alternative sources of information, which may complement or challenge the dominant public sphere maintained by print media and broadcast news. This is a way of breaking information monopolies, by creating what Fraser (1990: 67) calls "subaltern counter publics" that in the long term can influence the dominant public sphere with their framing of the issue. One such issue for feminist activists is the fight against sexual harassment and abuse, an important part of which is to reframe sexual violence in the public discourse, where social media, mass media, and protests all play a part (Serisier, 2018). In recent years, a number of various social media campaigns – such as #ЯНеБоюсьСказать [#IAmNotAfraidToSayIt], #prataomdet [#talkaboutit], #fatta [#getit], #mörkertalet [#theunreported], #BoardtheBus, #StopStreetHarassment, #IamJada, #Sayhername, and #EverydaySexism – have worked towards creating counter narratives, making it possible to speak about sexual violence in new ways (Karlsson, 2019; Lokot, 2018; Peuchaud, 2014; Powell, 2015). However, few campaigns have reached the global impact of the #metoo hashtag (Mendes et al., 2018).

The #metoo movement was originally an online phenomenon, an example of so-called hashtag activism. However, the attention paid by legacy media probably had a large impact on the movement's development. Thus, a growing research area concerns the role of news media and its framing of #metoo activism. For example, De Benedictis and colleagues (2019) showed how British newspaper coverage was slightly positive towards the movement while they simultaneously reinforced familiar patterns of news coverage of sexual violence and feminism. Australian news media, on the other hand, was found to continue the reproduction of stereotypes and tropes of victim-blaming (Fileborn et al., 2019). Two studies of German news

media concluded that sexual harassment was still not acknowledged in terms of gender inequality, but rather described as a matter of individual responsibility (Eilermann, 2018); however, there were large differences between news media depending on their ideological standpoints (Leifermann, 2018).

A number of studies have compared how the movement was described in different countries. With a global perspective, Starkey and colleagues (2019) show the variation in how victims were portrayed in the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Another study compared the framing of women in #metoo news reports in France and the US, pointing out the importance of differences in editorial freedom and legal frameworks (Erickson, 2019).

Comparisons have also been made between the Nordic countries. Although all of them are fairly concerned about gender equality, there were large differences in how the #metoo movement was framed in the different countries. To start with, the amount of coverage varied; the Swedish news media published considerably more stories about #metoo than, for example, their Danish equivalents (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2018). The Swedish news media largely framed the movement in a positive light, whereas in both Denmark and Finland, the movement was met with stronger opposition (Skare Orgeret, 2019). Norway is described as being situated between the extremes of Sweden and Denmark; here, sexual harassment was framed as a working-life problem, which resonated with existing legislation and a political consensus (Sletteland, 2018). The Norwegian media discourse on sexual violence did not really change as a consequence of #metoo, except for a slight decrease in the use of rape myths in news reporting (Storøy Elnan, 2019). Another aspect that varied was the focus of the stories; reports of scandals regarding sexual behaviour were more common in Sweden and Norway than in Denmark and Finland, where the culture of silence in matters related to the personal and sexual seemed to be stronger (Pollack et al., 2018). However, Norwegian news media was more careful than its Swedish equivalents with publishing information that could lead to the identification of alleged perpetrators.

In Norway, at least in the first phase, the problem was framed as being on a societal level, pointing out problematic norms and a need for structural change, rather than highlighting individual victims or perpetrators (Skare Orgeret, 2019). In Sweden, on the other hand, sexual harassment was mainly framed as an individual's problem (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019; Sveningsson et al., 2019; Svård, 2017). The Danish news media showed even more individualisation and delegitimation than the Swedish coverage (Askanius & Møller Hartley, 2019).

One distinguishing fact about the #metoo movement in Sweden was how numerous petitions were published in news media to raise awareness of the situation in different sectors. The petitions followed a traditional form: they were addressed to policy makers and those in power and included a description of the problem, a request to do something, and signatures from numerous participants. A large number of individuals participated in these #metoo petitions. Between November 2017 and July 2018, 76 Swedish petition groups were initiated, engaging more

than 100,000 individuals who shared and discussed experiences of sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence in working life and education. Each group was organised by one or a few individuals who gathered testimonies, often via closed groups in social media. In a previous study, we investigated how the organisers of the Swedish #metoo petitions used different strategies and tools in their work with these online groups (Hansson et al., 2019). With the article at hand, we move our attention to how the petition groups used news media to reach out and influence opinion. By doing so, we contribute to the knowledge on the importance of news media for social movements.

Our overarching aim is to understand how the problem of sexual harassment is framed in the Swedish #metoo petition texts published in news media, focusing specifically on three aspects:

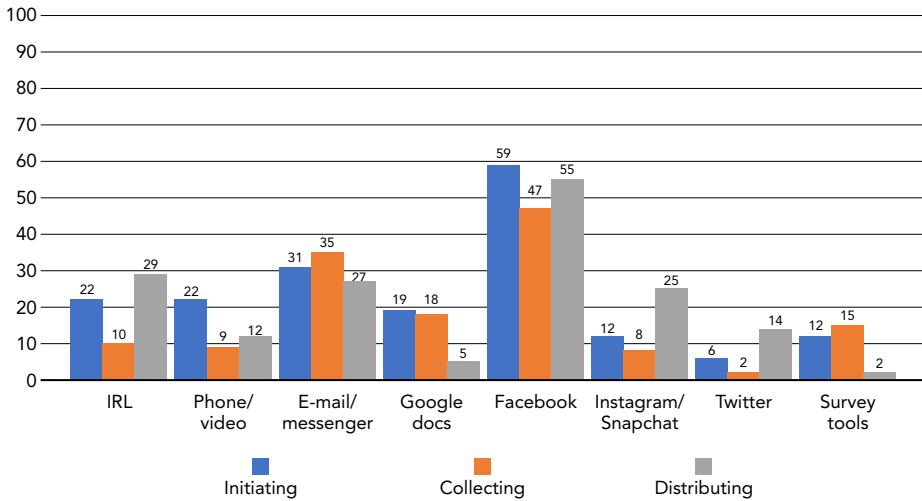
- How is the problem described?
- What explanations are offered?
- What solutions are suggested?

Data and method

Our data consists of the petitions that were published in Swedish news media during the fall of 2017. These follow the traditional genre of a petition, where the problem at hand is described in a brief text of one to two pages, addressed to someone in power, and signed by a list of individuals. As a way of describing the problem, testimonies of sexual harassments were often used either as quotes or referred to with numbers (e.g., X testimonies were collected in X hours). The groups behind the petitions also created clever names for themselves – such as the lawyers' #medvilkenrätt [#withwhatright] and the politicians' #imaktenskorridoror [#inthecorridorsofpower] – that were used to communicate the petition.

The petitions were typically developed by small organising groups who coordinated and summarised testimonies, wrote the petition texts, collected signatures, and contacted the media for publication. This was done mostly online, using a diversity of tools for initiating petitions, collecting testimonies, and distributing petitions (see Figure 1).

The petition texts were the result of collective negotiations, sometimes involving as much as thousands of participants. All phrasings were scrutinised and discussed in the groups, often using discussion forums, foremost on Facebook, as a means of communication, and then negotiated with the newspapers' editors (Hansson et al., 2019). In total, 57 of the 76 initiatives resulted in publications in printed news media or trade press (Hansson et al., 2019). The petitions were placed in prominent sections in the newspapers, most often in the news section or the debate page. Sometimes they were published in sections related to the sector, such as culture workers' petitions in the culture section and sports-related petitions in the sports section.

Figure 1. The number of organisers that used different tools in different parts of the process

Source: Hansson et al., 2019.

For our analysis, we chose to focus on the initial phase in November 2017, which we saw as particularly important for the movement’s setting of the agenda.¹ Thus, the material we gathered consists of the first 28 petitions (for a list, see Appendix 1). The petition texts were subjected to a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where we focused on the framing of the problems, explanations, and solutions. Some codes were incorporated deductively from previous research such as individual/systematic, political/personal, work/leisure, and collective/ individual. In addition to this, an open coding on one fourth of the 28 petitions directed us to salient expressions and themes in the material.

Results

The problem: A threat to democracy

Altogether, the petitions share a similar framing of the problem, as they describe discrimination, bullying, and violence against women as a collective. Although the primary focus of the petitions is the issue of sexual harassment, the petitions typically do not frame the problem as a feminist one, but rather describe it as a violation of basic human rights. Several of the petitions place the problems and solutions in relation to the values of different occupations, notably those that reflect basic democratic ideals such as human worth and equal rights:

The doctor should never abandon the principle of humans’ equal value. This means treating other people with respect, including showing respect for others’ bodies. (#utantystnadsplikt [#withoutprofessionalsecrecy])²

Quite a few petitions emphasise their profession’s importance for society, such as the construction workers who “create our environment”, the journalists, who

“scrutinise those in power”, the trade unions who create “order and justice on the labour market”, or teachers who “raise democratic citizens”. Alluding to those values makes the prevalence of sexual harassment stand out as even more serious, as it threatens the democratic values of society at large.

The actions described as examples of the problem range from unwanted comments and discrimination to groping and sexual violence. Expressions of these transgressions vary with the circumstances and type of work done in the various contexts. For example, testimonies of paedophilia are more common in contexts that engage young people, such as dance and sports, and the harassments in typical white-collar professions are described as more subtle than those in, for example, the forest or construction industry. As a whole, however, the petitions describe a wide variety of abusive actions, and they explicitly emphasise that everything – from sexism to violence – is part of the same problem.

The victims for sexual harassments, whose testimonies are quoted, are, with a few exceptions, described as female. However, in the general petition texts, more than half of the petitions also mention people with other gender identities as victims; the category most often mentioned is “non-binary”, but sometimes males are also included. In the petitions from the arts sectors, both men and women are described as victims of the idea of “the artistic male genius”, an idea that has contributed to normalising abuse and boundlessness in the name of art. The ethnicity of victims is not mentioned, although racism is addressed as a problem in the dancers’ petition. The victims are also generally depicted as young, and thereby even more vulnerable.

The perpetrators, on the other hand, may sometimes be peers – colleagues, patients, or study mates – but the majority are described as holding some form of power position relative to the victim – teachers, coaches, parents, managers, professors, senior physicians, professors, and so forth.

In the politicians’ petition #imaktenskorridorer [#inthecorridorsofpower], it is not only parliamentarians, ministers, and European Union parliamentarians who are referred to as perpetrators, but one of the testimonies also point out male journalists. As a whole, a common denominator is the depiction of victims as vulnerable in relation to the perpetrators; thus, the problem is basically framed as being about powerful people’s abuse of those with less power – rather than abuse of women by men.

Explanations: Tradition, power structure, and behaviour

The petitions have a similar setup in that they frame the problem of sexual harassment on a systematic level, the symptoms of which can be observed in a variety of abusive behaviours such as exclusion, sexism, sexual harassment, and violence. We identified three explanatory frameworks in the material. The frameworks are not mutually exclusive and can occur in the same petition.

The first framework seeks explanations for bullying and abuse in tradition, due to male dominance, male culture, genius cult, or any combination of these (mentioned in 16 of the 28 petitions):

Still today, the tech industry is heavily male dominated. The stories we received show that part of the explanation can be found in a sexist culture. (#teknisktfel [#technicalproblem])

This kind of explanation is found in petitions from traditionally male working environments, or male-dominated cultures, such as the technology industry. Here, the exclusion of women and sexist jargon are described as expressions of a working environment historically dominated by men, and where masculinity is constructed partly by expressing misogyny, objectifying women, or both. Testimonies from the tech industry's petition #teknisktfel [#technicalproblem], for example, describe how women are bullied and how the male culture and community, which is held together by sexist jargon, is built on the exclusion of "the other".

The second type of explanation focuses on power structures (mentioned in 19 of the 28 petitions), where gendered power struggles are seen as symptoms of conflicts. Here, insecure employment conditions, especially for younger women, cause unhealthy dependencies and vulnerability, which reproduce and strengthen existing power structures. In this explanatory framework, power demonstrations of a sexual nature are not primarily about expressing male identity (as in the first explanatory framework described above) but are rather a means of exercising power, as in the quote below:

In the music industry, we work around the clock, often with insecure and temporary employment. Being accommodating and not quibbling becomes extra important in order to not be replaced. This makes women in the music industry targets for power demonstrations that are often of a sexual nature. We live in a context where the law of consent is still far away, where we are objectified and where sexual abuse and harassment is a rule rather than exception. If we report the offenses, investigations are usually closed down without pre-examinations even being initiated, because it is always a matter of "he said–she said". If we speak out, we lose our jobs or get threats. We clench our fists in our pockets and rarely mention it, even to each other. The silence culture prevails. (#tystdansa [#silentdancing])

This quote also exemplifies the third explanatory framework, namely general behaviours that reproduce and contribute to the neglect of the problems (mentioned in 20 of the 28 petitions). This type of explanation points out behaviours on the collective level such as lack of responsibility, silence culture, normalisation processes, and victim blaming. Several of the petitions express familiarity with feminist theory in their argumentation. However, they avoid academic concepts that are relatively mainstream in feminist contexts, such as intersectionality or

post-colonialism, even though the types of explanations entailed in these concepts are expressed with other words.

To summarise, the explanatory frameworks are situating the problem on a higher level, as a systematic expression of norms found in larger structures as part of the culture, forming a domination system that suppresses women. However, despite employing this feminist frame, a more complex feminist reasoning and jargon is avoided.

Solutions: Transparency, recognition, and a fair justice system

As discussed above, the analysed petition texts describe the problem as belonging at the societal level, tied to larger structures. The solution that all the petitions propose is to discover and point out these structures – to make the problem visible and acknowledge the victims' experiences. The main actions pointed out as possible solutions to address the problems are visibility (mentioned in 12 of the 28 petitions), recognition (15), and upholding laws and regulations (12). Also, education (4) and collective action (5) are mentioned.

The structures lying behind sexual harassment are described as being largely upheld by cultures of silence that allow offenses to continue. The solution to this is transparency: to acknowledge and create visibility for the problem and to gain a wide political recognition in the public sphere, acknowledging sexual harassment as an important structural problem. This framing is a classic feminist one: to “make the personal political” by lifting up individual stories and showing how they are part of a structural phenomenon. Neither victims nor perpetrators are highlighted. Instead, it is society at large and its institutions that are held responsible: authorities, companies, associations, and educations, but also anyone contributing to a discriminatory culture by not acknowledging it.

Other solutions pointed out in the petitions are fighting against structures and ensuring that already existing laws and regulations against discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence are followed. Some petitions also suggest stronger sanctions:

The Armed Force's values and code of conduct is clear. Offensive, degrading, and harassing behaviours do not belong in the Armed Forces. Failure to follow these values must have consequences. Anyone who does not stand behind or follow the Armed Forces' ethical guidelines should neither be allowed to keep their positions, be promoted, nor admitted to higher education. (#givaktochbitihop [#atattentionandsuckitup])

A couple of petitions point out the importance of education in addressing the problem at workplaces, as well as clarifying laws and rules and the procedures through which reports of abuse are handled.

Five petitions emphasise the collective power of #metoo, where solidarity and collective action are described as a long-term solution. The collective power

of #metoo activism in itself is also framed as an example of how social change is possible. For example, several petitions end with the subtle threat “We know who you are”. This single sentence demonstrates the power that lies in a collective’s sharing of stories.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to understand how the #metoo petitions frame sexual harassment, focusing on three aspects: how the petitions present and define problems, and what explanations and solutions they suggest.

Previous research has found that news reports on the Swedish #metoo movement in general portray the problem of sexual harassment as an individual rather than societal problem (Sveningsson et al., 2019). In contrast, the analysed #metoo petitions place the problem on a higher societal level, framing it as a threat to democracy. A wide variety of abusive behaviours is here seen as a symptom of an underlying, systematic problem, a domination system expressed through tradition and reproduced through norms and behaviours.

The solutions suggested by the petitions are framed as basic democratic justice: transparency, recognition, and a fair justice system. The vast majority of the texts ascribe responsibility not to individual perpetrators, but to organisations. Managers of schools, institutions, associations, and companies are held accountable for not having worked enough with norms and values in their organisations and for failing to acknowledge transgressions when they occur.

The petition texts and their definition of the problem, along with explanations and solutions, were strategically published in newspapers with a leading position in the dominant public sphere, which together with prominent placement within the newspapers, contributed to giving the message a wide distribution and strong legitimacy. By aligning with established larger collectives based on professional identities, the petitions dodged the risk of being framed as an individual problem, a specific women’s issue, or as belonging in the private sphere. Instead of representing “women”, the petitions are framed as being representative for various sectors of society. Judging from previous research on how feminist movements are represented in the media, this was likely a smart choice. Previous research shows how feminists are often delegitimised by being portrayed as deviant and different from other women (Mendes, 2011; van Zoonen, 1992). Fraser (1990) points out how the definition of what has been seen as political and public has been strongly connected to paid labour. By framing the victims as representing various professions rather than “women” as a collective, the petitions clearly position the issue in the public domain, connecting it to a more general discussion on workers’ rights. We believe that this framing worked very well in Sweden specifically, being a country with a long tradition of social democratic politics, where ideas of equal rights and social justice are firmly rooted in the national self-identity.

By emphasising professional identity over gender, pointing out the diversity within the movement, and framing demands in terms of general and perfectly reasonable human rights that anyone could agree on, the #metoo movement's goals could be pursued, while avoiding the risk of being associated with the stereotypical image of "feminists". The petitions are also carefully worked out so as not to repel people (participants as well as readers) by the use of estranging, excluding, or provocative terms or phrasings. The petitions do not stop at describing the collective discrimination against women, but their rhetoric establishes a "we" that includes everyone. In this manner, the texts depart from a strong national self-image, in that they emphasise values like equality, democracy, and justice for all. Thus, a democracy framing is used where the petition demands the upholding of democratic rights. It is from this agreement that arguments for further action are taken.

To conclude, the petition groups framed the issue as one of basic democratic rights and labour rights rather than a "women's issue". By avoiding the framing of their agenda as "feminist", the petition groups simultaneously avoided the negative stereotyping that women's movements have often been subjected to in the past. In other words, somewhat paradoxically, the movement's success at establishing a feminist agenda was achieved by avoiding the appearance of feminism.

In the short term, this was a successful move. After all, the Swedish #metoo movement gave rise to increased awareness and legislative changes. However, the question is what happens in the long run if the pursuit of women's rights must be done by rendering oneself harmless. The choice to avoid the "feminist" position and to never publish any information that could lead to the identification of victims or perpetrators can be seen as such strategies. On the other hand, the finishing words, "we know who you are", can be seen as a latent threat. Alongside the petition texts, news reports about #metoo to a large extent focused on the "naming and shaming" of public persons (Sveningsson et al., forthcoming), that may have contributed to the backlash that was to follow. Although the initial news reports were positive to the movement, ideas were eventually spread that the #metoo movement had gone too far and that innocent men risked being accused. Further research will show how such discursive struggles were carried out in various media, which arguments were used, and how various actors positioned themselves in order to achieve their goals.

Notes

1. The petitions are all similar and new petitions borrow rhetoric from previous petitions, which is why the first 28 are representative of following petitions.
2. All quotes were originally in Swedish and have been translated by the author.

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