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**High time for change: counter-discourse and
grassroot mobilization in Swedish Facebook groups
for drug decriminalization**

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Abstract

Future drug policy can benefit from understanding why the dominant Swedish discourse of drug prohibition as morally superior is being challenged by an online counterpublic, making use of Facebook groups to form counter-discourse and mobilize in favour of Swedish drug decriminalization. This netnography employs theory of framing and discursive opportunity structures (DOS) and find Swedish activists using frames of **(1) Harm reduction** - decriminalize all drugs to shift from a moral punitive to an evidence based public-health approach to save the lives of problematic drug users, **(2) Medical cannabis** - decriminalize cannabis to introduce an effective natural medicine and stop the harassment of medical cannabis users, **(3) Legalize cannabis** - to provide a less harmful alternative to alcohol, stop the harassment of recreational cannabis users and promote economic growth, **(4) Legalize all drugs** - to make better use of drugs that are currently banned, stop the harassment of all drug users and contribute to economic growth. Mobilization for the frames is affected by perceptions of DOS, which stems from interpretations of both international and domestic media drug discourse. International media is found to help Swedish activists perceive opportunities for mobilization in spite of the restrictive national context, suggesting that information and communication technology (ICT) can be used to transcend DOS in the national context. More research is needed to understand how social media affects mobilization, as well as to nuance the Swedish drug debate and make use of experiences communicated by the counterpublic.

Keywords: Drug policy, mobilization, counter-discourse, Sweden, Facebook

Introduction

For over 50 years Sweden has tried, and failed, to eliminate narcotics through legislative and penal means. In 1988, the ‘zero-vision’ drug policy was implemented and the law was tightened further, making it easier to target and arrest individual drug users. This approach to drug use did not emerge from research, but rather grew out of a moral and political discourse of drugs and drug users as a threat to the good Swedish society, to be handled with force (Eriksson & Edman 2017; Tham 2005; Törnqvist 2009). To this day, there are still no studies to back up the dominating belief that repressive approaches will lead to a drug free society, and drug policy scholars are pointing out that the ‘zero-vision’ in itself is causing drug users unnecessary harm (Eriksson & Edman 2017; Goldberg 2005,2010; Tham 2009,2005). An illustration of this can be seen in how Sweden, in spite of having one of the most controlling policies, now has a drug mortality rate that is second highest in the EU, and more than four times the EU average (EMCDDA 2018). Such unforeseen consequences of repressive drug policies have come to be acknowledged by national and supranational agencies alike, why current official recommendations is to decriminalize personal use of drugs and base the approach to drugs on scientific evidence instead of morals (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020; UNODC 2018; UNCEB 2014; WHO 2014). However, in Sweden, where both civil society and politicians have a long history of perpetuating the dominant discourse of prohibition as morally superior, discrediting all other standpoints, the idea of changing the current policy is met with great resistance (Eriksson & Edman 2017; Goldberg 2005; Tham 2005). Furthermore, since dominant discourse has a tendency to get cemented in social institutions, like the judicial system (Foucault 2012[1975]) and the media (Fairclough 1995), hegemonic constructions also enforce their own power to define reality by presenting themselves as objective and unquestionable ‘truths’ (cf. Wodak & Meyer 2015:12ff). When it is announced that the Swedish ‘zero-vision’ drug policy will soon be investigated this persistence is clear, as the minister for health and social affairs, backed by her colleagues in the Swedish majority party, opposes the new guidelines from the public health authority (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020) and declares drug decriminalization to be both undesirable and out of the question for Sweden, no matter what the investigation shows (Bergstedt 2020).

Dominant Swedish discourse of drugs as a threat to eliminate forcefully, hence, seems to be obstructing new approaches from gaining support, and is therefore also upholding a system which is harming people who use drugs (cf Eriksson & Edman 2017; Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020; Goldberg 2005,2010; Tham 2009). Furthermore, media discourse portraying drugs as immoral, strange and “evil” (Blomqvist 2009; Lindgren 1993; Törnqvist 2009; Snitzman 2008) have made drug users afraid to ‘come out’, why contention to these ideas so far have been expressed individually and covertly (Snitzman 2008). This, however, is starting to change, as information and communication technology (ICT) now offers previously isolated individuals the opportunity to find like minded peers online, and together renegotiate traditional Swedish

constructions of drugs. In the field of drug policy research, where scholars have struggled to provide policy makers with accounts of lived experience resulting from their policies, such unsolicited online discussions is identified as a crucial source of data, opening for unique and otherwise hard to reach perspectives on drug policy, which can serve to improve future approaches (Enghof & Aldridge 2019). Taking inspiration from the way in which critical discourse studies are used to unveil the marginalizing aspects of dominant discourse (Wodak & Meyer 2015), this study focuses on how Swedes for drug decriminalization make use of ICT to formulate alternative meaning, or counter-discourse (Terdiman 1985), to purposely negate dominant ‘truth’, hoping to re-write and re-present the meaning of drugs and challenge structures which have previously kept them silent. Starting with acknowledging the need for a new drug policy more in line with human rights (cf Folkhälsomyndigheten 2020; UNODC 2018; UNCEB 2014), I also argue that it is important to diversify the Swedish drug decriminalization debate with inside perspectives of the meaning of decriminalization, communicated from those most affected by the current policies.

Accordingly, the aim of the study is to (1) explore digital spaces where Swedes are mobilizing support for drug decriminalization to identify competing alternative ways of constructing drugs, drug users and Swedish drug policy, and (2) understand the mobilizing potential of these constructions by locating them in a societal context of drug discourses. The following questions are guiding the study:

- Which counter-discourses on drugs, drug use and Swedish drug policy is formulated by the participants in Facebook groups for Swedish drug decriminalization?
- How are these discourses framed in order to mobilize support for changed drug policy?
- How do the frames relate to dominant drug discourses in society?

Previous Research

Before presenting previous studies on drug discourse I would like to clarify two distinctions specific to the topic at hand. One is that between decriminalization and legalization, where *decriminalization* entails removal of criminal sanctions against drug users, while still prosecuting drug sellers, and *legalization* means removing all legal prohibitions so that the substance can be openly sold on a controlled market, similar to how tobacco or alcohol is today (de Andrade & Carapinha 2010). The other distinction is that between (1) drug *use*, where drugs are used recreationally without causing problems, in a similar way to how the average alcohol drinker can have a drink without becoming an alcoholic, and (2) *problematic* drug use (PDU), where multiple hardships such as mental health issues and being in a marginalized position in society makes an individual vulnerable to using drugs in a problematic way, which in turn causes even more negative life effects (Goldberg 2010).

In a first ever study of Swedish print media drug discourse, Lindgren (1993) identifies the late 1800's as the onset of constructing drugs as a moral threat to the 'good Swedish society' - showing how drug users have been alternatively portrayed as dangerous criminals to exclude and punish, or chemically enslaved victims in need of imperative state governance. Later studies find that Swedish media during the last 30 years have switched from placing blame for drug addiction on faulty political systems, to instead construct drug liberalization attitudes as the root of the issue - why also prescribed political strategies to handle drug use have shown a steady development into the direction of repressiveness and tougher attitudes, aimed at extinguishing liberal attitudes believed to cause harm (Törnqvist 2009). Contemporary Swedish media discourse on drugs is furthermore characterized by the tendency to dramatise the dangers of habits that are perceived as "strange" or uncommon, i.e. drug use, while downplaying risks and addictive properties of substances that are commonly used in the Swedish mainstream culture, like alcohol and tobacco (Blomqvist 2009). Through these constructions, drug users have been falsely perceived as causing more societal problems than users of legal substances, and are therefore continually understood both as "sinners" who should repent, and as powerless victims to the illicit substance (ibid.). Such an understanding is reflected in Swedish political discourse, which typically constructs drug use as a precursor to other popular concerns, instead of the other way around, to justify pushing even harder for costly restrictive measures in spite there being no scientific evidence that these will help those struggling with addiction, or lead to the desired drug-free society (Eriksson & Edman 2017; Tham 2009; Törnqvist 2009).

Challenging this restrictive drug discourse is the international, more liberal, discourse of 'harm reduction', which accepts that problematic drug users (PDU's) can not be abolished from society, and therefore constructs a need to switch from a moralistic to a scientific view of drug use - prioritizing decriminalization of drugs and technical evidence-based solutions, like opioid substitution and needle exchange programs, for lowering the harms following problematic drug use (Keane 2003). The international harm reduction movement, which since 1990 have been engaged in pushing a discourse of harm reduction as the modern and morally superior approach (Tammi & Hurme 2007), is now reaping the rewards as this approach is proving effective in practice (de Andrade & Carapinha 2010), and influential agencies like the UN and WHO is joining the cause, recommending drug decriminalization as a way to protect the human rights of PUD's (UNODC 2018; UNCEB 2014; WHO 2014). These changes at a supranational level are predicted to create opportunities for harm reduction movements also in traditionally prohibitionist societies, by providing activists with highly legitimized allies and arguments for their cause (Mostyn and Gibbon 2018). However, it has been noted that harm reduction discourse shares with prohibition discourse a preoccupation with risks and harms associated with substance use, and therefore tends to fall back into the old moralistic territory

of stripping drug users of their rationality, agency and decency, thus upholding the stigma that is hurting them (Keane 2003; O'Malley & Valverde 2004).

Another form of drug liberalization can be seen in the ever increasing number of nations decriminalizing and/or legalizing cannabis (McIver 2017). Starting in the US, long running negative and racially charged cannabis discourse¹ was transformed into a discourse of cannabis as a means of health, recreation and economic growth (Dioun 2018). This change was initiated by a cannabis social movement, which started in 1970 by framing cannabis as a medicine only for the very ill. When this construction became accepted, the frame was extended to construct cannabis also as a means of bringing wellness to those pained by lesser afflictions, and finally, in recent years, as a legitimate alternative for recreational use in the public (Dioun 2018). It has been noted that the Swedish population's consumption of American media is leading to an 'Americanization' of everyday life in Sweden (Björk 2014; O'Dell 1997), which can explain why Swedish media now also feature some positive constructions of international implementations of medical cannabis (Abalo 2019). The American cannabis activist's strategy of downplaying recreational effects in order to legitimize use (Dioun 2018) is also spreading around the world, and have been noted among illicit cannabis users in places like Norway (Pedersen & Sandberg 2013), and the UK (Morris 2019) - where even growers of cannabis are beginning to reinterpret their illegal activity as a form of emancipating activism aimed at challenging a repressive system (Klein and Potter 2018). Lately, a new wave of drug liberalization discourse is spreading from the US, this time constructing psychedelics, like LSD, as a means of improving mental health and performance (Andersson & Kjellgren 2019; Lea, Amada & Jungaberle 2019; Sessa 2018), causing some to argue that "both scientifically and culturally, we are experiencing a Psychedelic Renaissance that has eclipsed the 1960s" (Sessa 2018:551).

So far, only a few Swedish studies have identified drug liberalization and normalization attitudes among individual drug users in the offline world (Snitzman 2008; Rødner 2005), while research on online drug discussions have focused primarily on drug users' reports of adverse drug effects (Andersson & Kjellgren 2017; Soussan & Kjellgren 2014), or found that online discussions among drug users still tend to be torn between normalization efforts and traditional stigmatizing constructions (Ekendahl 2014). In this context, Månsson (2014) and Månsson & Ekendahl (2013) stands out, as they illustrate how a Swedish anonymous online discussion forum is used by a counterpublic trying to collectively re-construct the meaning of cannabis and argue for legalization, focusing primarily on contrasting the harmful effects of alcohol to the lack of the same in cannabis in order to oppose traditional Swedish

¹ Cannabis was rebranded as 'marijuana' in the early 1900's in order to connect it to stigmatized racial stereotypes of the mexican civil war refugee (Dioun 2018), and the 'war on drugs' have been used to justify decades of demonization, harassment and incarceration of a primarily black population of cannabis users (Cooper 2015).

constructions, and make the point about drug prohibition being based on old morals rather than facts.

Theory

To understand the collective using Facebook groups to mobilize support for drug decriminalization I conceptualize them as a counterpublic on their way to becoming a social movement. I here employ Nancy Fraser's (1990) definition of counterpublics, stressing the fact that what is commonly viewed as the public is nothing more than dominant privileged groups' take on 'common sense' - which by being conceptualized as 'public' is working to normalize and naturalize the existing order, relegating those outside of the hegemony to the margins and blocking them from exercising collective influence. Consequently, counterpublics are a collection of people who are not members of privileged groups, why their alternative interpretation of reality gets surpassed to the sidelines (ibid.). Counterpublics are similar to social movements in the way that they arise where there are pre-existing conditions of grievances experienced collectively by a social group (Fraser 1990; Snow & Benford 1988), but differ in how they lack the unified articulation of grievances and claims which enables social movements to be engaged in planning, coordinating and performing collective action aimed at achieving change (Benford & Snow 2000). Therefore, a counterpublic is not the same as a social movement, but has the possibility to develop into one given the right framing and organization. Traditionally, counterpublics are assumed to meet in a safe physical space away from the public to form opposing interpretations of their situation. However, in the technological world of today, physical spaces are being substituted with digital ones at an ever increasing speed. This development has given rise to a new type of counterpublic, making use of social networking platforms which enable previously marginalized individuals to connect to each other and share their narratives (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Because of the interactive communication that is allowed by ICT, participation in these networks can function to transform individual anxiety and fear stemming from perceived injustices into collective mobilizational feelings of enthusiasm and hope for change - laying the ground to new, highly impactful types of digital social movements (Castells 2012).

Framing theory

Still, digital platforms such as Facebook do not automatically transform marginalized publics into action-oriented counterpublics or social movements. For this to be possible the actors need to engage in articulating a unified conception of the situation they wish to change. Building on Goffman's (1974) theory of 'frames' as a way for people to organize their impressions and experiences into meaningful and comprehensive constructs of reality, social movement scholars developed the concept of 'collective action frames' to deal specifically with this active processes of meaning articulation in social movements which promotes mobilization (Snow & Benford 1988). Snow and Benford (1988) divides the different aspects of the framing

processes into (1) *diagnostic framing*, dealing with attributions and identifications, (2) *prognostic framing* defining solutions and (3) *motivational framing* for inciting action. Movements who advocate for political change usually start with constructing and diagnosing an injustice, using adversarial framing of opposites like good/evil and victim/enemy to define the situation in a way which can be attached to and furthered by an overarching ‘master frame’ of fighting for morally superior causes like social justice and equal rights (Benford & Snow 2000; Gamson 1995). The prognostic aspect of the frame then propose a plan of action suitable for solving the problem as it has been constructed, while motivational framing, constructs a ‘call to action’, motivating participants to collectively improve on the issue at hand, while also engaging in counter framing to refute logics and solutions suggested by opponents and uphold their own frame as the one to act on (Snow & Benford 1988; Benford & Snow 2000).

Discursive Opportunity Structures

In an effort to explain why particular frames are successful while others are not, Koopmans & Olzak (2004) bridge theories of framing with the structural-political theory of how openings or closings in ‘political opportunity structures’ (POS) makes for facilitating or inhibiting contexts for social movements to form and take action. Coining the term ‘discursive opportunity structures’ (DOS) they suggest we understand a movement’s perception of opportunity as fundamental for mobilization, and substitute the POS-assumption of how contention follows automatically from openings in the political structure with a social constructivist understanding of how national public media discourse needs to allow individuals to perceive an opportunity for contention in order for this to be a possible choice of action. Koopmans and Olzak (2004) therefore identifies a message’s media visibility, resonance and legitimacy as central for mobilization, and understand political opportunities which are not reported on as such by the media as ‘non-opportunities’, “*which for all practical intents and purposes might as well not exist at all*” (ibid.:201). Accordingly, actors such as journalists and TV-channels which enable certain issues to seize the public spotlight, while precluding others, can be understood as ‘gatekeepers’ to opportunities for mobilization (Koopmans & Olzak 2004). Yet, not all issues reported on by the media produce mobilization, which Koopmans & Olzak (2004) suggest we understand in the light of different types of messages having different chances to resonate and become legitimized. Here, an issue being reported on as on average supported by influential actors in the public sphere has the advantage of being perceived as a legitimate cause to mobilize for, while a phenomenon which is portrayed as unwanted instead justifies mobilization against. However, legitimacy also functions in a curvilinear way, where a ‘too legitimate’ message risks being perceived as so unsensational that it is deemed not worth reporting on, hence failing to gain further visibility and resonance, and therefore also failing to spark mobilization. A highly controversial message, on the other hand, which is given negative publicity, instead risks being undermined by its inability to gain any legitimacy at all, hence is not justified as something to mobilize for. In this way, chances for mobilization generally

increases if a message is presented with some, but not too much, ‘controversial legitimacy’ in the national media (Koopmans & Olzak 2004).

Even so, in an age of new technology, the assumption that perception of opportunity relies on traditional media and what the gatekeepers let through here is in need of an update. This is the argument of Wahlström & Törnberg (2019), who goes on to show that social media platforms can be used to mobilize people for a cause in opposition with what is visible and legitimized in mainstream media - which is possible because of how social media have transformed the consumer from a passive recipient of what is presented to her, to an active agent with the ability to co-produce a media environment which allows more specific perceptions of opportunity for mobilization to take place. Social movement scholars are therefore arguing for understanding ICT and social media as important for mobilization, drawing attention to the way in which ICT changes the very infrastructure of social movements, leading to new formats of protests, new ways to perceive opportunity, new models of power, and allowing for collective action to take in spite of participants being geographically dispersed and lacking ties to formal social movement organizations (SMOs) (Castells 2012; Earl, Hunt & Garrett 2014; Wahlström & Törnberg 2019).

Method

To begin, I would like to note that since qualitative research is always filtered through the researcher’s experiences and interpretations, a qualitative study can argue for being credible, trustworthy and analytically generalizable only when conducted in a transparent, reflexive and rigorous way (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2017:371; Tracy 2010; Marshall & Rossman 2011:252f). This study combines such efforts with a an abductive approach, i.e. allowing for an oscillating movement between theory and empirical material, rather than using deduction to test a theoretical hypothesis, or induction to derive a raw ‘truth’ entirely from the empirical material (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2017:348; Marshall & Rossman 2015:220). I here start with describing the overarching design of the study, as well as the material and procedure, and then conclude the chapter with a discussion about ethics.

Scholars on drug policy research have pointed out that unsolicited online drug discussions should be used to improve future drug policies (Enghof & Aldridge 2019). To fulfill the study’s aim of bringing such discussions in the Swedish context to light, I employ the method of online ethnography, or *netnography* - in which activity on social networking sites is understood as continuous and legitimate extensions of identity, everyday life and society, and therefore important to incorporate in social science (Berg 2015:32ff; Kozinets et al. 2014). Since grassroots mobilization for Swedish drug decriminalization as of now is inseparable from the digital tools allowing the collective to exist in the first place, netnography is also the most appropriate method for studying this phenomenon. An alternative approach could have been to

use netnography to identify overarching meaning formulations, and then further explore these through semi structured interviews. However, since participants did spontaneously provide rich descriptions online, I decided to heed the recommendations of Enghof & Aldridge (2019) and make use of these, aiming to collect unsolicited material without disturbing the natural goings-on (cf. Enghof & Aldridge 2019; Kozinets et al. 2014). I say ‘natural’, but it is important remember that digital social data, or ‘Big Data’, is not naturalistic in essence, as what we encounter in the digital field is the result of meticulously designed algorithms aimed at bringing forth and amplifying certain behaviors in the users, hence being entwined in complex structures of power (Törnberg & Törnberg 2018). This is not an argument against using Big Data in social research, but rather a way of situating netnographies in the larger context of a digitized modernity, being aware of such forces.

Material and procedure

Out of ten identified Facebook groups opposing Swedish drug policy, a strategic sample was made to arrive at three groups to include in the study. Grounded in the ambition to make visible inside perspectives and grassroots mobilization without ties to organizations I first excluded four groups that were acting as information pages, rather than discussion forums, for NGO’s (2), a legal firm (1) and a researcher (1). One discussion group was excluded due to being started by a company, and gathering members from all of Scandinavia. The remaining five groups all featured a description of their explicit intent to mobilize grassroots support for Swedish drug decriminalization, where one focus on *decriminalization of all drugs*, one on *decriminalization of cannabis* and three focus specifically on *medical cannabis*. From these I selected one from each category, choosing the largest of the medical cannabis-groups, which also was a public group. The three selected groups have a combined member count of 34 585 and a mean activity level of 15.5 posts/day and group. Two groups have chosen to display all content publicly, arguing that this increases their chances of reaching a larger audience with their message. The last group has made the choice to employ an 18-year age limit for membership, showing content only to members. Since this was the largest (~29.000) and most established group of the counterpublic, it was not excluded from the study due to using this function. A further discussion about the ethics of this will follow in the last section of this chapter.

Taking inspiration from the method of grounded theory, comments from these groups were gathered in waves, so that initial analysis of the first batch could be used to improve further collection of data. The first wave identified 13 posts across the groups about the upcoming investigation of Swedish drug policy. From these, 435 comments were gathered and coded using the software Nvivo. Initial coding was done with previous research in mind, locating initially harm reduction and cannabis-legalization perspectives, while also finding some more unusual perspectives which did not fit into these categories - such as the opinion that all drugs

can be used in a non-problematic manner. Furthermore, since I found the cannabis discourse to be divided in two sides, it was separated into the categories of ‘medical cannabis’, and ‘recreational cannabis’. The comments were coded by applying several labels for each comment, resulting in over 100 different labels, which were further explored through the tools in Nvivo to visualize connections. Here, I could see that some labels often coincided, such as ‘drug addiction’ - ‘death’ - ‘harm reduction’, while others were never connected, such as ‘medical cannabis’ - ‘drug addiction’. Through this procedure I outlined four main frames that used distinctly different logics to argue for drug decriminalization. Further material collection was then made with framing theory and DOS in mind, focusing on posts where the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational aspect of each of these frames appeared, as well as perceptions of opportunity. Since the type of material made it unrealistic to aim for for the traditional qualitative goal of collecting material until this yields no new information, i.e. theoretical saturation (Marshall & Rossman 2011:220), my design instead aimed for theoretical sufficiency by employing the technique of ‘theoretical sampling’ to reach a stage where the categories are well described by and fitting the material (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2017:5). I therefore interchangeably collected material, coded, and made analytical interpretations, reaching a material of 1396 comments (~45 500 words) before finding that the theoretical aspects of each frame were thoroughly represented in the data. After this point, I switched to a daily reading of the top posts in these groups and continued to note that participants in all three groups made use of one or a combination of these four frames when expressing themselves. Worth mentioning is that such ‘top-posts’ is a perfect example of how algorithms and user actions converge to create a sort of internal hegemony in these spaces. Thus, I will not argue that my results reflect the actual diversity in the counterpublic, but rather that it is a representation of more commonly occurring views.

Ethical considerations

Conducting social media research entails working with new and messy definitions of the private and the public, forcing the researcher, among other things, to “rethink concepts of informed consent and confidentiality (including anonymity)” (British Sociological Association [BSA] 2017a:3). Method and ethics in internet research is therefore inseparable, and ethics is ‘situated’ by being tailored specifically to the study at hand (BSA 2017a, 2017b; Franzke et al. & AoIR 2020; McKee & Porter 2009). Because there are no rules about collecting consent when studying unsolicited social media postings (BSA 2017a), nor is it possible when studying groups with thousands of members, important aspects to consider in order to gather material from social media in an ethical way is how sensitive the data is, how accessible the space is to the public and if those acting in this space are aware of its public status (BSA 2017a; McKee & Porter 2009; Townsend & Wallace 2016). While two of the groups in the study are explicitly public, the one group employing a member-function could be perceived as more private. However, since the this function serves to keep out minors, and members often reflect upon the

large invisible audience of their forum (~29.000 members), I argue that participants indeed perceive also this group as a public space, why I decided to include this group - naturally taking measures to ensure posters anonymity and protect their interest in accordance with guidelines for social media research (BSA 2017a; Franzke et al. & AoIR 2020; McKee & Porter 2009; Townsend & Wallace 2016). I did consider both contacting the admin of each group about my study and making a post to inform at least those who happened to see it, but realized that this would not suffice to inform more than a fraction of the participants. Yet, if I were to do a similar study again I would however take these precautions, if not to actually succeed in informing most participants, then at least to be able to portray my efforts to do so as an argument for an ethical conduct.

That being said, to mitigate the risk against digital research subjects on a level equivalent to that of informed consent, it is argued that internet researchers must take measures to use the data responsibly by anonymizing data, making data untraceable and being reflexive about how data is used (BSA 2017a, 2017b; Franzke et al. & AoIR 2020; McKee & Porter 2009; Townsend & Wallace 2016). For guidance in eliminating risks with my method I used Markham's (2020) 'Impact Model' where possible consequences of an internet study are considered on four levels. **(1) Treatment of People:** All personal information about the commenters, as well as other identifiable characteristics such as names of places or other people, was excluded from the data already in the collection phase, so that no sensitive information was stored. **(2) Side effects:** The participants' interests were protected by not using the material for a purpose in conflict with their beliefs (cf. Franzke et al. & AoIR 2020) and the risk of quotes being searchable was handled by translating quotes from Swedish to English on a content level rather than word for word, as well as making sure not to include quotes which are easily recognized by the content itself. **(3) Use of Data After or Beyond Initial Analysis:** As discourses are the building blocks of reality, also academic constructions of drug users affect the future reality of this group. On this note, I want to make clear that my interest in drug decriminalization grew from personal and professional encounters with adverse effects of current approach, why I take great care to formulate this text in a way that will not contribute to further marginalization or stigmatization of drug users, or lend itself to policy making in conflict with the participants cause. **(4) Future-making/long term impact of doing the study:** On the subject of how this study might impact the future, I can only hope that diversifying the constructions of drug users will contribute to a more nuanced debate in the future. Finally, I also hope that choosing this method for a master thesis will make explicit the need of complementing teaching on traditional research methods and ethics with counterparts for studying also digital contexts and Big Data - as this is something I have found missing during the course of my education.

Result and analysis

While all members of the digital counterpublic want to see some form of a drug decriminalization in Sweden, this solution is understood differently, and support for the cause is therefore mobilized using different frames. These separate frames also relate differently to dominant drug discourse, which is affecting how the activists perceive discursive opportunity, and hence also their mobilizing potential. Each of the Facebook groups have their own ‘primary’ frame, but all four frames can be found in all groups. Although it is also common for activists to employ at least two frames at the same time, the four frames will first be presented separately, focusing on the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational aspect, and situating them in a discursive context to assess if DOS are facilitating or inhibiting mobilization with this framing. I will then illustrate how frames are combined or contrasted against each other to formulate even more specific meaning, and conclude with a summarizing discussion aimed at answering the research questions of the study.

1. Harm reduction

The goal is to have a policy based on research and evidence, focusing on treatment and a zero vision of drug mortality instead of prosecuting drug users.

Drawing on international harm reduction discourse (cf. Keane 2003; Tammi & Hurme 2007), activists using this frame construct decriminalization as a way to save the lives of problematic drug users (PDU), which are believed to be put in harmful situations because of the current repressive approach.

Unjust laws in opposition with the UN convention of human rights is probably the biggest gateway to needles and misery.

No amount of resources put into treatment of people with problematic drug use will help as long as the police are trying to arrest anyone who calls the ambulance when a friend is overdosing.

Here, drug use is conflated with addiction to intravenous use of ‘hard’ drugs, which in turn is understood both as an illness in itself and a symptom of other underlying issues. Trying to cure this condition by using punishment is therefore diagnosed as a problem.

The war against drugs can NEVER be won, punishing drug addicts is not the way to go. Addiction is classified as a disease in modern societies and a decriminalization can be the difference between life and death if you are deep in the shit. You don’t deserve to get punished for your disease, or do you think it’s fair to be punished for depression, PTSD and various psychiatric and physical diseases?

Decriminalization is in this frame understood as a way to save the lives of PDU’s, with the added benefit of also freeing up police to “solve real crime”, and eliminate the illegal drug market by offering all PDU’s state financed substitution treatment.

We need to decriminalize to stop financing organized crime.

Those using only this frame do however not identify themselves as PDU's, but rather as empathic people who wish to stand up and fight for the 'weakest' victims of Swedish drug policy, hence attaching this frame to an overarching injustice masterframe (cf Benford & Snow 2000). For this construction to work, a line is drawn between decriminalization and legalization, and those using drugs for pleasure and/or wish these to be legal for recreation are excluded from the victimized group.

Legalizing is not the same as decriminalizing... I want to help the weak, not those who think it's fun to do drugs.

Activists with this perspective also rely heavily on adversarial framing, constructing harm reduction approaches as good, modern and with support in science, while prohibition is made out to be evil, retrogressive and based solely on outdated morals.

In our corner - science. In their corner - moral-panic stemming from some kind of blind faith in the old way.

They should be convicted for assistance to murder. Many more will die because of this attitude.

This construction also helps create motivation for activism for decriminalization, seen in how the members use phrases such as "stop the genocide!" or "base drug policy on science!". Such a strategy can be recognized from international harm reduction movements, which tend to construct their cause as morally superior and more in line with contemporary scientific thinking (Tammi & Hurme 2007). International reports of successful harm reduction efforts, often related to how Portugal decriminalized all drugs and dramatically lowered both drug mortality and HIV prevalence (de Andrade & Carapinha 2010), are worked into the comments to help with the perception of this being the right solution also for Sweden.

The Swedish parliament should really learn from how Portugal lowered their drug mortality by decriminalizing.

In line with Mostyn and Gibbon's (2018) assumption that the switch to a harm reduction perspective at supranational levels can encourage social movement activity also in restrictive contexts, the activists in the Swedish Facebook groups are presenting UN and WHO as influential allies in order to mobilize support and increase their chances of becoming legitimized and resonate in the public.

We claim that Sweden should choose the least harmful solution to the drug problem and implement decriminalization focused on effective care for drug addicts which is recommended by the UN and WHO.

The activist's perception of globalization processes as producing a power transfer from a national to a supranational level helps them construct these changes as proof that Sweden eventually will see a decriminalization.

It will probably be the UN who forces Sweden to decriminalize in the end.

Frame resonance and discursive opportunity

Harm reduction discourse is well established in international contexts (Keane 2003; Mostyn and Gibbon 2018; O'Malley & Valverde 2004; Tammi & Hurme 2007), and is also starting to resonate in the Swedish public. Shortly after the minister for health and social affairs declared that decriminalization was out of the question, several media reports showed other politicians making use of harm reduction logics to critique this stance (e.g. Paarup-Petersen 2020). These articles were shared in the Facebook groups and, in line with the theory of DOS, the activists interpreted them as an opportunity for continuing to use this frame when arguing for decriminalization.

It will take time before the change is completed. But that the political stalemate suddenly is broken is an amazing step forward for our cause 👍

This frame's success in gaining visibility, resonance and legitimacy can be understood as stemming from how it shares with traditional drug discourse a complete focus on risks and harms of drugs (cf. Keane 2003; O'Malley & Valverde 2004), why it easily can be aligned with the Swedish discourse of drugs as a threat and problem (Törnqvist 2009; Blomqvist 2009). Consequently, harm reduction can be argued for by connecting the 'moral superiority' of progressive evidence based efforts (Tammi & Hurme 2007) to established constructions of Swedish drug policy as essential for upholding the good moral of the nation (cf. Eriksson & Edman 2017). These conditions hence work together to make the message of harm reduction resonate in the Swedish public sphere, which in turn helps the activist perceive opportunity for mobilization, in line with what the theory of DOS would suggest.

2. Medical cannabis

I lived heavily medicated on opiates for over a decade, and the pain only got worse. It turned out that all I needed for my inflammation was some cannabis at night. I don't even use non-prescription painkillers anymore, it's magic!

The Swedish medical cannabis frame is communicated from the perspective of people suffering from illnesses causing pain, that they are treating, or wish to treat, by using cannabis, instead of their prescribed opioid-based painkillers. Since medical cannabis can only be attained in Sweden if a doctor goes through an arduous licence application, most of those using cannabis as a medicine in Sweden does this illegally. The diagnostic aspect of this frame therefore identifies a problem in how current drug policy is restricting their freedom, making them into victims.

We are medical refugees in our own country. The police confiscated the medicine I grew for myself and now they want to put me in prison for it. I can no longer stand being a criminal just to be healthy, I'm leaving this country.

They say that we have freedom over our bodies, but I am not allowed to grow flowers that ease my pain!

In this frame, medical cannabis users are separated from the category of criminals by making the identity as sick salient, hence constructing prohibition as being in conflict with solidarity for those with debilitating diseases.

I am not a criminal - I am only sick! Us sick people smoke cannabis because we need it! My dealers are not criminals. They are helping a friend in need. I would do the same, because I am an empathic human being!

By removing cannabis users from the category of ‘criminals’, it is also possible to attach the frame to a injustice-masterframe, as well as to align the frame with the aspect of dominant discourse holding that criminal activities should be eliminated - pointing out that prohibition is causing ‘real’ criminals to profit from selling medicine to Swedish citizens.

Cannabis is the largest source of income for criminal gangs with a revenue of half a billion SEK a year, money that could be better spent on welfare if the state took over.

This frame also uses adversarial framing, but the ‘enemy’ that is somewhat diffuse, as the Swedish public is understood to be victims of moralistic brainwashing, while ‘Sweden’ itself is understood as an active opponent to new knowledge.

The Swedish population have been completely fucking brainwashed. While the world outside is using facts we base our facts on morals.

People all around the world are recognizing the positive effects of Cannabis Sativa L for treating pain and curing cancer, but Sweden is not willing to learn from others. Have an open mind and don’t judge. Knowledge is power. The stigma will be erased.

To motivate mobilization the activists share both articles and motivational pictures which stress the medicinal properties of cannabis to normalizing use. Such media is often linked from places that already have legal medical cannabis, like the US or Canada, and fills the function of legitimizing the cause to the counterpublic while at the same time providing motivational illustrations of what can be achieved if the struggle is continued. Encouraging calls and emojis are frequently used when sharing such content.

Together we are strong 🍌
We shall prevail 😊
Spread the word! 🗣️ .

Activists also share personal pictures of how they use or cultivate cannabis in their everyday life, with motivational calls like:

Activism for cannabis!
Normalize cannabis!
Rather criminally healthy than legally sick!

The Facebook group for medical cannabis also functions as a tool for organizing new types of physical protests, like the civil disobedience action where members are spreading cannabis seeds to grow around their cities. This type of activism is a good example of how ICT is transforming the very structure of social movements (cf. Castells 2012; Earl et al 2014),

illustrating how collective action can be organized in the online spaces to then be performed individually in the offline world.

Member 1: Where is this action taking place? 😊

Member 2: Wherever you spread your seeds. NN has seeds, if there are any left.

Member 1: NN could you mail me a bunch of seeds? I would love to spread them around my little town!

NN: Sure!

Other times, the Facebook groups are used as spaces where medical cannabis users vent their frustration and receive support from like minded. However, even then, members are encouraging each other to use these stories as a tool to make visible the victimized position of medical cannabis users.

If you have the strength, take this to the media!

Report this and contact news papers.

Since fear and anger that is shared and validated in a network can function to mobilize previously isolated individuals (Castells 2012), these personal stories about being victimized due to cannabis use is also a way in which participation in these groups creates motivation for grassroots mobilization.

Frame resonance and DOS

This frame draws heavily on the American medical cannabis frame, which has gained increased media exposure the last 30 years and transformed the general US public's attitude to now be positive towards cannabis legalization (Dioun 2018). If we acknowledge that Sweden is prone to 'Americanization' through media consumption (Björk 2014; O'Dell 1997), it is not surprising to find that this framing of cannabis is emerging also in Sweden. Since drug liberalization is commonly constructed as a threat to the Swedish society (Eriksson & Edman 2017), this frame can be assumed to be controversial to the Swedish public, while at the same time being easily aligned with other ideals held by the public, such as being based in science and focusing on solidarity for sick people. As proposed by Koopmans and Olzak (2004) in the theory of DOS, such a combination of 'controversial legitimacy' should increase the message's chance of gaining attention in the public sphere, and therefore increase the mobilizing potential of the frame. Legitimized constructions of cannabis as a medicine are indeed appearing in Swedish media, but greater authority is still given to discourses that are in line with the nation's hegemonic view on drugs (Abalo 2019). Therefore, the participants of the Facebook groups are actively sharing media from outside the nation border to help normalize and legitimize their construction of cannabis among themselves. By doing this they are in fact using ICT to override the gatekeeping function that the theory of DOS ascribes to traditional media - creating a digital environment filled with liberal cannabis discourse to help perceive opportunity and motivate mobilization also in the more restrictive Swedish climate. I therefore join Wahlström & Törnberg (2019) in their argument that the theory of DOS must be expanded to understand the role of social media for creating perception of opportunity, adding the notion

that such a perception is not only created by incorporating domestic media featuring counter-discourse, but also by using media from other nations where the frame already is highly established and legitimized.

3. Legalize cannabis

This frame constructs cannabis as a harmless drug that should be legalized so that it can be available to the Swedish public for recreational use. Such a construction relies on a conceptual split of drugs into the two categories of (1) *soft drugs*, that are understood natural and safe substances which can be used directly from nature - most importantly cannabis, and (2) *hard drugs* of a more chemical character, which have to be put through refinement processes before reaching intoxicating properties - such as pills and chemical powders, as well as alcohol.

I think there is a difference between using cannabis and other drugs, because cannabis is the most gentle drug among them all (especially alcohol).

In over 60 years of smoking cannabis I've never met an aggressive stoner. People who are under the influence of alcohol or other synthetic drugs on the other hand, don't even start!

In line with previous research (Månsson & Ekendahl 2013), comparisons to alcohol function as a tool used to draw attention to the logical gap in criminalizing that which causes less harm.

It's weird that the safest substances are being hunted down while a more dangerous drug like alcohol, which is addictive and kills so many, is allowed!

The diagnostic framing therefore focuses on constructing prohibition as more harmful to cannabis users than the drug itself.

When someone gets arrested for smoking cannabis they can kiss a normal life goodbye. Forget about employment, or a driver's licence, excluded from society their mental health deteriorates, and they will have to numb themselves with harder and harder stuff, cause that's how we teach someone that drugs are dangerous.

Like in the other frames, prohibition is also seen as wasting state resources and financing criminal activity, which in this frame is portrayed as forcing Swedish citizens to act against their financial interest.

Contrary to what we've been made to believe, legalizing cannabis does not mean giving up as a society, but instead that we reclaim a today 100% criminalized market which caters to needs that does not go away simply because we made laws against it.

The state should not discriminate Swedish citizens by not allowing them to start companies and compete on the global cannabis market.

As a solution, the prognostic aspect of the frame suggests that recreational cannabis must first and foremost be decriminalized, and then completely legalized.

Decriminalization of own use would make it much harder for the police to harass the citizens, and that would be a huge improvement.

It would be paradoxical to decriminalize use and then let the criminals keep the cannabis market completely to themselves.

One way that the participants create motivation for this solution is by sharing international media exemplifying the large financial success of legal cannabis markets in countries that have made this change. Another way is by sharing Swedish news articles that portray cannabis or cannabis users in a negative way, and use the comment section to vent a 'righteous outrage' at such constructions.

We are all free human beings with the inherent right to managing nature's gifts and our own bodies in the way we see fit, and those opposing this are nothing more than oppressors!

As proposed by Castells (2012), this is a way in which ICT gives those who previously had no way of transforming their individual grievances into motivational feelings and opportunity to find a common enemy and mobilize to change their situation. ICT is also used as a tool for activism aimed at bringing the message of recreational cannabis as something normal and harmless into the public sphere.

Normalize! Post a video to Youtube where you smoke, post on facebook, make a tweet! Those who can ofcourse, i.e. if your life is not turned completely upside down if you get arrested.

Comment on this post made by the police! [...] And like each other's comments so we hack the algorithms and put these at the top as most relevant... [...] Also comment under each other's comments to push them up. Teach these political police a lesson!!

Frame resonance and DOS

This frame ultimately wants to see a total cannabis legalization, but at the same time, this option is understood by some as too controversial, why decriminalization, which is understood as having higher chances of gaining legitimacy in the Swedish discursive climate, is proposed as a strategic stepping stone.

Let's start with arguing for decriminalization. When moralizers calm down and the people see that it's not so bad (so they hopefully let their guards down) then we can push for legalization.

A decriminalization will take us closer to a legalization. People will not be as scared of being punished, and they will admit to their cannabis use, maybe start doing it more out in the open. Simply speaking, everyday activism will get easier :)

This shows that the activists are acting in accordance with what the theory of DOS would predict, perceiving the lack of legitimacy and resonance of the recreational cannabis discourse (Abalo 2019) as a sign that mobilization better focus on decriminalization first. Yet, there are also those so motivated to push for a legal recreational market right away that they are starting businesses to illustrate what this would look like in Sweden - an attitude which seems to be

connected to a perception of Sweden as a ‘lagging reflection’ of the US, soon to catch up with changes made overseas.

This cannabis café is meant to be a contribution to the Swedish cannabis debate. A kick in the butt of those opposing legalization. A guerilla tactic for destigmatizing the social climate around cannabis. [...] Join is in writing history.

Just give it some time after the US implements the nationwide cannabis legalization and the Swedish people will begin to wonder why they used to be so scared of it

Therefore, like in the medical cannabis frame, also here it can be assumed that online media reports of international cannabis legalization contributes to a perception of this as an issue to mobilize for, although the Swedish media climate is not giving the activists this impression - why social media once again proves crucial for this type of grassroots mobilization.

4. Legalize all drugs

Human beings voluntarily jump out of airplanes, drive motorcycles... we do a lot of things for fun that can be dangerous, so arguing that drugs should be illegal because they can be dangerous does not hold up!

Based on the belief that people should be free to use pleasurable substances how they see fit, the most unusual frame among the counterpublic is calling for all drugs to be completely legalized and made available on a market.

Full grown human beings should have the right to decide which substances they want to use as medicine or for recreation.

The best solution to stop the suffering is to decriminalize all drugs and use a state regulated system like Systembolaget to remove them from criminals and make it harder for young people to use drugs.

This frame shares some diagnostic aspects with other frames - such as understanding prohibition as harming drug users, wasting state resources, financing ‘real’ criminals and obstructing a lucrative market, but differs in that all drugs are likened to any other means of pleasure. Although the frame does recognize that some individuals are not able to use drugs responsibly, this unfortunate fact is likened to how almost anything in life can be used in a destructive manner.

We can't ban everything that can be abused. Anyone who is handling something in a morally reckless way is an abuser of that substance. You can be a drug abuser, an emotion abuser, a work abuser, a trust abuser. The politicians who try to stop a decriminalization is abusers of trust. All in all, they are substance abusers.

Following this logic, problematic drug use is understood as caused by contextual factors, rather than the drug in itself, why another issue that this frame identifies is the stigmatizing nature of dominant conceptions of all drug users simply being ‘slaves’ under a chemical (cf. Blomqvist 2009; Lindgren 1993; Törnqvist 2009).

People who use hard drugs destructively use the substance as an escape, often because of mental health issues, social exclusion and a broken childhood.

“Drug abuser” is stigma... it’s a word adjusted to our current drug policy where all illegal use automatically is drug abuse. Drug use is not abuse.

Furthermore, prohibition is understood to uphold stigmatizing ideas of ‘junkies’ by forcing well functioning drug users to conceal their belonging to this group to keep their autonomy in society, why representations of drug users also continue to be based solely on individuals with such a problematic drug use that they can no longer hide it, keeping drug use stigmatized.

[If all drugs were legal] I could live freely without feeling that the state is an enemy that wants to hurt me and throw me out of the system and ruin my functioning everyday life.

Drug abuser, junkie or addict are words invented to take away all decency and honor in a person using drugs, similar to racial slurs.

Beyond this, some illicit drugs, like LSD and other psychedelics, are also believed to have immense psychological and spiritual benefits, why the current drug policy is seen as making Swedish healthcare backwards and irrational, as well as obstructing ceremonial use of psychedelics.

LSD have helped me more than any antidepressant I’ve ever been prescribed, it makes me sad that I cannot even tell people about this.

As long as Swedish doctors won’t educate themselves on the positive effects we are left to fend for ourselves and self medicate. Problem is if we need other care, cause they won’t give us that if we self medicate. When will they understand, drugs and medicine are the same!

Release us shamans from the invisible cage and allow us to work without risking punishment. How else will we be able to help?

The prognostic aspect of this frame thus constructs a total legalization of all drugs as an improvement over only a decriminalization. However, like in the legalize cannabis frame, also here such a legalization is believed to be unthinkable for the Swedish public today, why decriminalization once again is understood as the first step towards such a reality.

Let’s first decriminalize being under the influence of drugs and then possession of drugs for own use to then finally legalize every useful medicinal and recreational drug. It has to happen sooner or later!

Since this frame is the most uncommon, and opposed by many in the counterpublic, motivational strategies are discrete, and focus mainly on arguing for understanding all humans as free subjects, hence attaching the frame to a masterframe of rights.

We all have the ultimate right to our own body. No one can infringe on that right we were given by nature at birth. [...] When someone punishes you for poisoning your body (worst case scenario) - they are in fact raping your body.

Frame resonance and DOS

Although the idea of legalizing every drug has gained some legitimacy internationally, e.g. when the director of policy for the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition declared his goal of legalizing and regulating every drug before he hits retirement (Krishnan 2019), it is primarily the aspect of the frame that deals with positive constructions of psychedelics which have started to resonate internationally (Andersson & Kjellgren 2019; Lea, Amada & Jungaberle 2019; Sessa 2018). This idea of psychedelics as a tool for human betterment has also been introduced to the Swedish public through mainstream TV news (TV4 Nyhetsmorgon 2019) and articles (Ahlström 2018). Interestingly, the discursive opportunities of this message is not what creates a perception of opportunity to mobilize for psychedelic drugs. Instead, it is the harm reduction frame’s resonance and legitimacy which is perceived as an opportunity also for using psychedelics to improve the nation.

Psilocybin, ayahuasca and DMT are our tools for our minds and magic, used by shamans and other spiritual entheogenic practitioners. [...] Thanks to the formidable engagement for decriminalization by public health the stigma is now looser than ever. [...] Let us make right, right away. Let us decriminalize and finally progress as a nation again.

This draws attention to yet another aspect to consider for DOS - the fact that the media message is filtered through each individual’s interpretation of both the message, the collective action frame they prescribe to, and the context they find themselves in. As illustrated, this might cause a message which is actually reporting an opportunity for decriminalization so that drug users can receive better health care to be perceived as an opportunity for accepting spiritual use of psychedelic drugs. Such individual differences in interpretations is also causing other effects within the counterpublic, which will be the focus of the last section of this chapter.

Table 1.1. Collective action frames in counterpublic

	Harm reduction	Medical cannabis	Legalize cannabis	Legalize all drugs
Fundamental assumptions	Problematic drug use is a disease.	Cannabis is a natural medicine.	Soft drugs, like cannabis, are safe and pleasurable. Alcohol and synthetic drugs are harmful and addictive.	All pleasures are bad in excess, and drugs can also be used for good.
Problems (diagnostic)	Trying to punish away a disease is killing drug users.	Medicine is illegal and sick people treated like criminals	People are being punished for choosing safer recreational substances	Prohibition causes oppression, and drugs are not being used to their potential.
Solutions (prognostic)	Decriminalize drug use and prioritize harm reduction.	Decriminalize medical cannabis	Legalize recreational cannabis and make it available on a market	Legalize all drugs to use as medicine or recreation.
Motivation	“Stop the genocide!” “Trust science over morals!”	“Activism for cannabis!” “Rather criminally healthy than legally sick!”	“Normalize!” “Reclaim the cannabis market from criminals ”	“End the stigma!” “My body - my choice”
Discursive Opportunity Structure	Resonance in Swedish media perceived as opportunity.	Using international media to perceive opportunity also in Swedish context.	Using international media to perceive opportunity. Decriminalization as a stepping stone.	Resonance for harm reduction is perceived as opportunity. Decriminalization as stepping stone.

Frame interactions

I began the analysis by saying that the activists often use at least two of these frames simultaneously. This last part serves to illustrate how even more specific meanings are reached through such combinations, and also how members of the counterpublic engage in counterframing to uphold their solution as the one to act on.

When it comes to combining frames, the ‘harm reduction’ frame acts as somewhat of a default to the counterpublic, onto which other frames are added. Complementing the ‘harm reduction’ frame with the ‘medical cannabis’ frame allows activists to argue for both saving the lives of PDU’s, as well as allowing sick people, including addicts, to use cannabis as a natural medicine.

Cannabis helps for lots of things - insomnia, pain, ADHD, but also alcoholism and hard drug abuse. Drug abusers need help, not punishment.

Adding instead the ‘legalize cannabis’ frame to the baseline of harm reduction allows for arguments more geared towards solving also criminal and economical problems, as well as preventing people from becoming PDU’s in the first place.

Many say that the best solution is to decriminalize other narcotics and legalize cannabis, because the largest income for criminals is from cannabis, and then more resources can be put towards catching the dealers rather than users, and at the same time approaching those with a problematic use to offer help.

When police confiscate cannabis they increase the risk of people turning to harder drugs and get addicted. If smoking weed was allowed many would be content just puffing, sooo legalize cannabis, it will save lives.

Also the ‘legalize all drugs’ frame can be applied at the same time as the ‘harm reduction’ frame, arguing for separating PDU’s from other drug users, giving care to those in need and leaving others to be.

In my world abusing something is turning something pleasurable into something problematic, i.e. call in sick from school or work, isolating from close ones, putting off important chores, forgetting.... only then you need help.

However, with the harm reduction frame starting to resonate in the Swedish public sphere, also individuals without personal experience of drug use have joined the counterpublic to fight for ‘the weak’ PDU’s. This type of activist tends to adhere strictly to the harm reduction frame, opposing especially other frames calling for recreational drug use to be normalized.

There’s a reason that this group is for a decriminalization, not a legalization. Decriminalization is about giving addicts help instead of treating them like criminals, so simply saying, like you do, that more people might try cannabis after this happens, and that that is fine, probably minimizes the chances of a decriminalization even happening...

This reaction illustrates a fear that less legitimized frames could possibly sabotage the cause by associating decriminalization with increased recreational drug use - which the harm reduction frame, in line with dominant Swedish discourse, constructs as unwanted (cf Keane 2003; O'Malley & Valverde 2004; Törnqvist 2009). Here, the harm reduction activists show their sensitivity to the DOS in Sweden, making the assessment that their frame have better chances to resonate and be legitimized in the public sphere only if discourses that might be too controversial are eliminated.

Another common frame combination is that of the 'legalize cannabis' frame and the 'medical cannabis' frame. Indeed, the two were initially one category in coding, and are still inseparable in some statements.

[I want to legalize cannabis] So that criminals will lose their income. So that sick people can have the right medicine. To create more jobs and increase tax revenue. Because it is a healthier option than alcohol. Because it should never have been made illegal to begin with.

What prompted the split into one medical and one recreational frame is how some tend to use strictly a medicinal frame, in conflict with the recreational frame. Here, arguing for medical cannabis means distancing the medical use of the drug from recreational drug use, or 'getting high', which in Swedish dominant discourse is portrayed as strange and threatening (Blomqvist 2009).

I want to decriminalize so I can smoke and be stoned and enjoy it without single fucker being able to bother me about it! (Legalize cannabis)

Not everyone wants to get high, some people just want to get better. (Medical cannabis)

The dose makes the poison. If a medicine is perhaps a bit too enjoyable the dose is probably not right. (Medical cannabis)

The same tendency to downplay recreational effects of cannabis have previously been used both by the american cannabis movement (Dioun 2018) and illicit users of medical cannabis in other countries (Morris 2019; Pedersen & Sandberg 2013). Such a tactic can be understood as appealing to the sympathy that exists among the public for chronically ill and/or disabled people who use cannabis, over those who use it simply for pleasure (Morris 2019), which is also more in line with DOS in Swedish media, where medicinal use of cannabis is more legitimized than recreational (Abalo 2019).

Conclusion

This study has served to illustrate how the Swedish hegemonic understanding of drug use as something to legislate away is being challenged by a counterpublic, using Facebook groups to acknowledge the victimization of drug users under current policy and mobilize support for drug decriminalization. While previous research on Swedish online drug counterpublics have

identified a counter-discourse favouring cannabis legalization (Månsson 2014), this study identifies strong support also for a total drug decriminalization and/or legalization. In line with arguments of social movement scholars (Castells 2012; Earl et al. 2014), the access to ICT has indeed given this previously silent counterpublic opportunity to mobilize, find motivation through networking and develop new formats of protests, even without ties to SMOs. The lack of top-organization in the movement has also enabled grassroots activists to understand and construct the need for drug decriminalization in different ways, using one or a combination of the following frames: **(1) Harm reduction** - decriminalize all drugs to shift from a moral punitive to an evidence based public-health approach to save the lives of problematic drug users, **(2) Medical cannabis** - decriminalize cannabis to introduce an effective natural medicine and stop the harassment of medical cannabis users, **(3) Legalize cannabis** - to provide a less harmful alternative to alcohol, stop the harassment of recreational cannabis users and promote economic growth, **(4) Legalize all drugs** - to make better use of drugs that are currently banned, stop the harassment of all drug users and contribute to economic growth.

In line with the theory of DOS (Koopmans & Olzak 2004), differences in the frames' mobilizational power is affected by activists perceptions of opportunity, where the harm reduction frame's ability to resonate in Sweden creates a perception of this issue being most favourable to mobilize for before introducing more controversial frames. However, the fact that international media is worked into the digital environment to create a perception of opportunity also for frames that are yet not resonating in Swedish media, like the 'legalize cannabis' frame, also suggests that ICT can be used to transcend the national DOS and allow activists to perceive opportunity from outside nation borders. I therefore align myself with Wahlström & Törnberg's (2019) argument that the theory of DOS needs an update to also incorporate the role of social media for perceptions of opportunity, and suggest this as something to study further. Moreover, while the budding support for a Swedish drug decriminalization in itself points to a nearing shift in social and moral views, the meaning of decriminalization is far from settled, even among supporters. In this regard, I suggest sociologists turn their attention to both cause and effect of shifting attitudes - aiming to add diversity to the understanding of drugs by making use of experiences communicated by the counterpublic, in order to further a more nuanced debate and improve future drug policy.

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