Does Public Diplomacy Need a Theory of Disruption? The Role of Nonstate Actors in Counter-branding the Swedish COVID-19 Response

James Pamment

Associate Professor, Lund University

ABSTRACT

Public diplomacy (PD) scholars tend to consider two main principals: the country or agent that conducts PD (Actor A), and target groups in the host country in which PD is conducted (Actor B). The field currently lacks theories of how communications between Actors A and B can be disrupted by a third party, such as a group of motivated trolls, an organised advocacy group, or a hostile country and its agents. The purpose of this article is to outline some theoretical considerations for how the PD research field might move away from a two-actor model of PD to one in which disruption is part of the discussion. The case study explores the activities of an interest group called Media Watchdogs of Sweden (MEWAS). MEWAS was a group of around 200 members who met in a hidden Facebook group to coordinate off-platform activities aimed at influencing perceptions of how the Swedish government handled the COVID-19 pandemic in the eyes of foreign governments, researchers, decision-makers, and media. Much critical news coverage in the international press has been linked to this group. Unpacking some of MEWAS' activities, which can be considered a quite typical mixture of legitimate and illegitimate communication techniques used by activist groups, can help to shed light on some difficult questions regarding disruption in PD.

Key words: Information operations, propaganda, disinformation, COVID-19, Sweden, soft power

*Corresponding author: james.pamment@isk.lu.se

Introduction

Public diplomacy (PD) scholars tend to consider two main principals: the country or agent that conducts PD (Actor A), and target groups in the host country in which PD is conducted (Actor B). Theoretical developments have centred upon i) the nongovernmental and private sector actors who facilitate Actor A's overall aim in reaching key target audiences, and ii) on the communicative models by which this takes place, such as transmission methods (strategic communication, international broadcasting) and relational methods (listening, cultural diplomacy, exchanges). Lacking from these general approaches is a theory of how communications between Actors A and B can be disrupted by a third party, such as a group of motivated trolls, an organised advocacy group, or a hostile country and its agents. The first purpose of this article is to outline some theoretical considerations for how the PD research field might move away from a two-actor model of PD to one in which disruption is part of the discussion. A second purpose is to question whether it is prudent or even possible to delineate between the legitimate PD of Actor A and disruptive communications that are similar to PD but differ in intent, modus, and the legitimacy of communication techniques used.

First, it is rather obvious that the information environment is more complex than two actors, and that two-actor models of PD are necessary simplifications. Nobody really believes that there are only two actors in PD. Theories and models simplify, and they must be developed upon when they no longer accurately account for the phenomena being studied. Second, much research on PD is siloed from the analysis of trends in the broader information environment. For example, it is less common for PD scholars to interpret their subject matter in the light of closely related contexts such as advertising, public affairs, hybrid threats, cyber-attacks, and espionage. Third, theoretical and methodological factors have imposed limitations on what PD scholars focus on. Much research emphasises the theoretical development of norms such as engagement and relationship building and attempts to find evidence and best practices in support of further developing those norms. PD research methodologies are traditionally centred on Actor A's goals (production perspective), PD products (e.g., the textual artefacts), or Actor B's perceptions (reception perspective). It is perhaps not until the emergence of digital platforms that datasets and methodologies for analysing disruption have become more readily available. As examples build of PD facing significant challenge in public arenas, the two-actor assumption has become increasingly redundant, and hence further theoretical development is required.

The aim of this study is to develop and test a framework for introducing the concept of disruption to PD scholarship. The research question asks whether it is prudent or even possible to delineate clearly between the legitimate PD of disruptive actors and illegitimate communications that are similar to PD but differ in intent and modus. The article begins with a brief overview of some of the theoretical motivations for considering disruption in PD. Two frameworks are then introduced. The first offers a way of visually mapping disruptive behaviour in relation to PD. The second outlines seven categories of disruptive behaviour.

These frameworks are then used to analyse a case study example in order to demonstrate the relevance of the approach. The final section offers some concluding thoughts.

The case study explores the activities of an interest group called Media Watchdogs of Sweden (MEWAS). A self-styled NGO (it was not at the time of these activities registered as such), MEWAS was a group of around 200 members who met in a private, and later hidden Facebook group to coordinate off-platform activities aimed at influencing perceptions of how the Swedish government handled the COVID-19 pandemic in the eyes of foreign governments, researchers, decision-makers, and media. Much critical news coverage in the international press, including in Science, Foreign Policy, Time Magazine, and the New York Times, has been linked to members of this group. Yet, members of the group also compared Sweden to Nazis, accused the government of bribing national media, and campaigned for State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and other researchers to be tried for crimes against humanity. Unpacking some of MEWAS' activities, which may be considered a quite typical mixture of legitimate and illegitimate communication techniques used by activist groups, can help to shed light on some difficult questions regarding disruption in PD.

Theoretical motivation

Though it is sometimes implied that PD lacks theories, this is not the case. As Gilboa (2008) argued, PD draws its theories from many academic disciplines, which means that there is a rich variety of theoretical standpoints that researchers make use of. Summarising Ayhan's (2019) comprehensive literature review on how actors are theorized in PD, the field has made use – consciously and unconsciously – of a number of IR standpoints in order to justify how nonstate actors are positioned in relation to PD. This gives a good sense more generally of where consensus among PD scholars lays. Ayhan observes a shift from considering PD something that governments project to foreign publics, to activities that include nonstate actors. In assessing a sample of 160 academic studies on PD, 57.5% consider PD as a state-based activity, while 37.5% consider that nonstate actors can conduct PD assuming they have the capability. For the purposes of this study, the disruptive actors are many and range from individuals to groups, to states and state proxies. They typically participate in the disruption of PD because:

- they are representatives or agents of a state (i.e., "foreign policy through other means" (deLisle, 2020); or

- they are a nonstate or private sector organization that possesses the ability to influence diplomatic issues (i.e., "diplomacy of capabilities" Kelley, 2014); or

- they are members of the public or claim to represent the views of a significant public group (i.e., "diplomacy of the public" Castells, 2009).

The MEWAS case study falls between the latter two, leaning to the third: formally the group is simply members of the public engaging in advocacy work to express their experiences and views, yet the group also misleadingly claimed to be an NGO when it required the legitimacy to engage with foreign institutions.

The disruptive efforts of such groups may or may not be considered PD, depending on the reader's standpoint. While some may wish to draw parallels between state-backed actors such as RT/Sputnik (EUvsDisinfo, 2021) and RFE/RL, or the St Petersburg Internet Research Agency (Chen, 2015) and the PD advocacy activities of a foreign ministry, theory has traditionally suggested that a disruptive intent distinguishes them from their public diplomacy counterparts. As Taylor (2009) and others have argued, PD may be considered a form of strategic communication that focuses upon political and cultural engagement with foreign audiences. It fits alongside *public affairs* (aimed at domestic audiences), *information operations* (military staff function which plans and synchronises activities in the information environment in order to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries), and *psychological operations* (military communication activities to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of target audiences in support of military operations; NATO, 2018). In addition, there are domestic actors who wish to strengthen their political influence in their own countries by reaching out to foreign audiences. By behaving within the norms of NGOs and activist groups, civil society actors are empowered with the legitimacy to participate in PD, which would seem to categorise them as PD actors.[1] But what if their behaviour draws on problematic communication techniques, similar to those used e.g., by internet trolls, Sputnik, or the Internet Research Agency? Does their intent, as expressed by the use of questionable or unethical communicative methods, make them the illegitimate relations of "real" PD actors?

Disruption is of course a broad term, and necessarily so. This article can only scratch the surface of the issue in order to support a more thorough-going debate about how PD is theorised. In order to do this, this article will consider two types of disruption that affect PD.

Issues-based disruption can be a single set of activities or part of a larger campaign. Disruption refers to the efforts of an actor to disturb or pollute the information environment such that engagement on specific issues of interest between Actor A and Actor B become more challenging, for example through polarisation. There is no shortage of sensitive topics that are susceptible to polarisation. When for example the EU engaged with its member states regarding its actions during the first phase of the COVID-19, China and Russia actively fermented narratives that benefited their national images at the expense of European solidarity, such as by spreading conspiracies about the pandemics origins (Kinentz, 2021). More generally, issues-based disruption can impact upon relations between communities, public health, national security, and political decision-making among other things.

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1) See e.g. Popkova (2019).

Target-based disruption can go in tandem with issues-based or take place on its own. It refers to reputational attacks aimed at discrediting individuals or organisations. Here, the efforts of the disrupting actor are aimed at undermining confidence and trust in actors who are targeted because they are relevant to the relationship between Actors A and B. Smearing, doxing, and trolling[2] are part of the tactics. For example, public figures such as Bill Gates and George Soros are the subject of wide-ranging conspiracies. Their philanthropy efforts, often in coordination with national public health bodies and international development agencies, are frequently attacked on the basis of outlandish ad hominin claims.

The impact of disruption on PD is something that has not been a focal point of the current literature (see e.g., Sevin et al., 2019). There is a strong tendency to focus on developing PD norms, such as in the flourishing research on relational PD. The relational perspective refers to work that has contributed to the main overall theoretical trend in the PD field in the past two decades. This theoretical shift encompasses efforts to broaden the communication theories underpinning PD, including the actors capable of conducting PD. Studies of the so-called New Public Diplomacy (e.g., Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013) emphasize the adoption of two-way communication models in 21st century PD, while scholars such as R.S. Zaharna (2010) have further considered the prospects for a PD based on mutual understanding and respect. The PD research field has generated more than a dozen taxonomies designed to explain how different PD practices can be more or less dialogical, at least in their idealized form (Pamment, 2014). The idea that an actor can conduct something that looks like PD, but uses communication techniques that break with societal norms, and with goals that do not seek to achieve mutual understanding, is comparatively poorly explicated in this body of work.

The dominance of a relational perspective can hardly be in doubt. It seems scarcely credible to continue suggesting that there can be a uni-directional model of PD in 2021. Digitalisation has opened all PD to dialogue and discussion. For example, much of the traditionally uni-directional international broadcasting has moved to online platforms, where it is supported by online articles, social media links, and comment functions. Activities that do not take place in the virtual world can still be influenced by it; cultural diplomacy efforts can for example be influenced by online efforts to undermine or discredit an exchange programme or the artists whose work is shared. It may therefore be argued that disruption is endemic both to the broadening of PD actors and to the digitalisation of public diplomacy (Manor, 2019), and hence needs to be part of theory-building efforts.

Disruption is equally understated in other theoretical and methodological approaches to PD. A production perspective focuses on the goals of the actor conducting PD, including political and institutional climates, policy, and organisational and operational factors[3] If disruption is mentioned, it refers primarily to the efficacy of the organization in dealing with internal and external obstacles from the perspective of the principal PD organisations. If

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2) This refers to spreading false information designed to discredit, releasing personal information such as contact details and home address, and persistent online harassment respectively.
3) This approach can be seen for example in Cull (2009), Sevin (2017), and Pamment (2016).

disruption is considered from a production perspective, it is as a set of challenges to be overcome by effective PD organisation and practice.

The textual perspective emphasizes the products of PD, such as texts, audio-visual materials, and any other forms of artefact.[4] In the rare cases where disruption is considered, it refers primarily to the context PD texts were framed in, such as matters of narrative and rhetorical contestation. This perspective can therefore account for the messaging, argumentational, and narrative challenges that texts advocating for a particular agenda or set of interests might face, but the concept of illegitimate disruption is under-developed.

Reception studies involve efforts to better understand how target groups perceive and engage with the PD that targets them.[5] If disruption is mentioned, it refers to impact evaluation[6] and efforts to better facilitate engagement, surveys and focus groups, and digital network mapping.

This very brief overview suggests that a concept of disruption is implicit and under-developed in much PD research. The research field draws on approaches that could analyse disruption in greater detail. This article aims to outline some of the ways in which it could be more explicitly considered as a component of PD theories and introduces a framework that can provide a starting point for further reflection on the issue.

## Mapping disruption in PD: a situational awareness approach

To help visualise the ways in which PD disruption takes place, it is relevant to draw on existing research on information influence operations (IIO). Figure 1a is a simplified ideal model of how vulnerabilities in public deliberation are exploited (Pamment et al., 2018; Nothaft et al., 2018). It was designed to help with situational awareness of IIO in liberal democracies and is part of the Swedish Government's training to support resilience toward foreign interference. It has recently been used by the Swedish Defence Research Agency to map out a complex case of IIO (Thunholm, 2020). Application to any given individual context may require tailoring depending on factors such as the structures of national media systems, freedom of expression laws, and internet penetration. However, since both the framework and the case study are Sweden-specific, its use here does not require further tailoring. The suggestion is that the model can be used to pinpoint some of the ways in which disruption takes place in PD.

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4) Examples include Entman (2008), Hartig (2017), Jungblut (2017), and Dolea et al (2020).
5) Examples include Buhmann & Ingenhoff (2015), Kampf et al (2015), and Canel et al (2017).
6) Where the perceptions of target groups, rather than organisations' activities, are the primary focus.
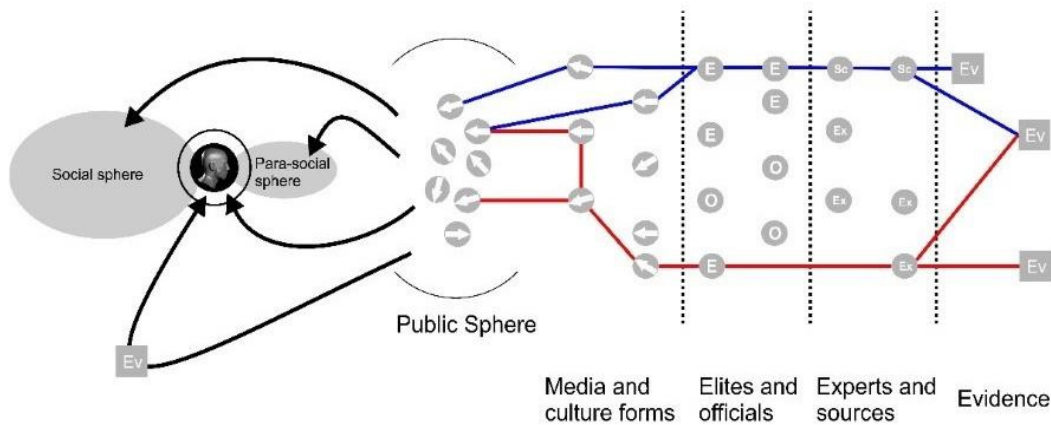
Figure 1a. The Epistemic Chain

Moving right to left, the columns represent the co-dependent systems through which information moves. *Evidence* refers to a factual thing that has happened; for example, a scientific discovery or an accident. The next two columns, *Experts & sources* and *Elites & officials* refer to the witnesses who can corroborate and explain the evidence; for example, scientists who can detail the merits of a discovery, or police who confirm the number of casualties in an accident. *Media & culture* refers to the texts that are created as a consequence of the event, often making use of witness and official statements; e.g., a newspaper article or a blog. The *Public sphere, Social* and *Parasocial spheres* refer to the arenas for debate that societies, communities, and friends participate in; for example at the dinner table or in an online chat group. Finally, the *Individual* develops an interpretation and opinion of the event, drawing on examples from the multiple steps mentioned above to support their view.

IIO analysts work to understand the systemic vulnerabilities that actors exploit to manipulate public opinion. For example, evidence can be fabricated. Experts and witnesses can be imposters or give false testimony. Media platforms may not be genuine news sites following journalistic norms. Online debates can be skewed by bots and trolls. Some of these things happen all the time. It would seem that individual activities aimed at manipulating any one of these stages is unlikely to succeed if all the others function well. For example, a forgery should not earn much attention if officials, experts, and journalists do a good job. However, activities aimed at disruption have the potential to achieve a greater impact if they are well-coordinated. If an actor produces a forgery and then coordinates its own fake experts to speak on affiliated media platforms, and mobilises trolls on social media to give the impression that belief in the forgery is widespread, it can become more difficult for public deliberation to reach a sound conclusion.

Categorizing disruption in PD: a technique-based approach

In conjunction with the above mapping tool, there are different kinds of disruption that could be considered as particularly relevant to PD. For example, PD work that focuses on political advocacy or cultural events may be particularly susceptible to adversarial media coverage on news platforms, in which the intent of the PD activities is skewed to undermine Actor A in the eyes of Actor B. The posts from those news platforms may then be used by trolls on social media to create the impression of widespread public debate based around antagonistic narratives. Table 1 outlines seven categories of disruptive behaviour beginning with malign rhetoric and gradually increasing in severity. Severity increases not just with the illegitimacy of communicative techniques used in disruption, but also in their complexity. Single acts of disruption are considered less significant than coordinated campaigns of action, which in this table culminate with state-backed interference.

Table 1. Examples of disruption techniques relevant to PD

Trolling	Disruption of public debate using rhetorical devices such as misrepresentation, strawman, whataboutism, and ad hominin attacks. E.g. an actor is repeatedly asked to respond to allegations that the trolls have invented
Adversarial media coverage	Headlines, interpretations, quotes, or commentary are misleading, biased or skewed E.g. an independent news site that uses 'clickbait' headlines that do not accurately the content of the story
Malinformation	Accurate information is used in a way that intends to harm an actor or the recipient of the information E.g. genuine statements taken out of context in order to ridicule the speaker, or private correspondence is used to discredit a person
Misinformation	False information is spread without an intent to deceive E.g. somebody spreads conspiracy theories that they genuinely believe to be true
Disinformation	False information is spread with an intent to deceive, often for economic and political gain E.g. Forgeries and other misleading information where the goal is to achieve an effect
Information influence operations (IIO)	Coordinated operations conducted against a target, often with covert components, and often using one or more of the above techniques in combination E.g. efforts to discredit an actor by hacking and leaking private documents, while seeking to influence public debate about them
Foreign interference	Coordinated operations conducted against a target, often with covert components, and with the backing of a foreign state in order to further that state's interests. Often using one or more of the above techniques in combination E.g. election interference

Case study: Media Watchdogs of Sweden

The case study used in this article is derived from an investigative report by Swedish Radio (SR) (Janzon & Björkstén 2021) that took place in February 2021.[7] The reportage refers to a hidden Facebook group of around 200 members where the topic of discussion was the failures of the Swedish Government's COVID-19 strategy. While there is nothing remarkable about this in itself, the founder of the group claimed the following achievements on his LinkedIn page:

- Coordination of 200+ epidemiologists, medical experts, parents, teachers, and human rights defenders to lobby for change to the COVID-19 strategy in Sweden.

- Created and managed several media campaigns that led to our concerns being leveraged on international media channels through interviews with; NRK, BBC, RAI Uno, Deutsche Welle, France 24, TIME Magazine, and others.

- Successfully lobbied Members of the European Parliament with regards to transparency and accountability issues leading to significant changes on national levels

- Publication of several reports, op-eds, and news stories regarding the shortcomings of the Swedish Covid-19 strategy in some of the world`s major media outlets.

- Launched several successful social media campaigns that have been followed and re-published by some of the world`s leading experts in epidemiology and human rights.[8]

On the same day as the reportage was published, the Twitter account connected to Media Watchdogs of Sweden (MEWAS) claimed that it was the group referred to in the report. According to its Twitter biography at the time, MEWAS is an "NGO focused on exposing the failed Swedish COVID-19 strategy and advocating for the prosecution of the architects of the strategy at international courts."[9] However, the SR reportage pointed to a number of unusual aspects of the group's activities. Why would a Facebook chat group for discussion about COVID-19 need to coordinate lobbying? Why was it running media campaigns in some of the most prominent international media outlets? And what do the references to lobbying MEPs to create significant national changes mean?

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7) A note on method: The author participated in the investigative report and had access to the evidence that informed the Swedish Radio article. The evidence consisted of a purposive sample of posts where members of the group behaved in ways that merited further analysis. Members and supporters of the group have since claimed that such examples were taken out of context and reflect the actions of a small number of members; alternatively, they have denied the existence of such posts and activities altogether. The evidence from Swedish Radio is not used here in order to protect the identities of those involved in the group. Most examples and data used in this article have either been published previously or are from open sources such as Twitter. The examples used from open sources are also a purposive sample for the purposes of exemplifying questions related to disruption in PD. The author does not express any criticism toward members of MEWAS for their opinions about the Swedish handling of COVID-19, and the only interest in their activities is with regard to use of disruptive communication techniques and their relevance to understanding contemporary public diplomacy practice.

8) This information was captured on 20 November 2020.

9) https://twitter.com/KeithMEWAS, captured on 18 February 2021

Subsequent to publication of the reportage, a significant national debate stirred about a number of issues, including harassment of scientists, freedom of speech, the role of researchers in public debate, the role of investigative journalism in society, the future of public service broadcasting, and the impact of domestic activists on international perceptions. In this case study, the focus is on the public diplomacy dimensions of the group's activities, in order to exemplify how disruption in PD can be analysed and understood.

Entry to the group

MEWAS was initially a private Facebook group that became hidden by May 2020 due to threats from a former member that it would be exposed. Access to the group required approval from admins. Those wishing to join were requested to answer three questions. First, they must declare that they accept that there is an "incorrect" picture of the Swedish COVID-19 "strategy and reality" in some national and international media outlets. Second, they must accept that they are prepared to actively participate in responding to "impartial, and fabricated news stories." Third, they must agree that the State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell has "gaslighted contradicted, and fabricated the truth."[10]

These three entry questions give a good sense of the group's overall objectives as they matured. The goals appeared to be to criticise (i) Swedish COVID-19 policy and (ii) Swedish media's coverage of COVID-19 policy. In addition, there are examples of efforts to (iii) damage Sweden's image in international press coverage, and at times through direct relations with foreign states. However, as some of the language in these entry questions may suggest, the tone of discussion was not objective, and the closed nature of the community provided the opportunity to express deeply personal frustrations.
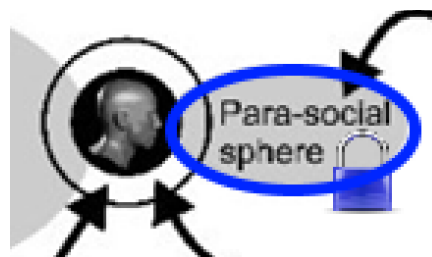
Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2a: A locked para-social sphere

As Figure 2a exemplifies, a private and hidden Facebook group creates the illusion of privacy. The suggestion is of a para-social sphere (mediated encounters with a social group) which is characterised by identical beliefs, a shared willingness to act, and a common enemy. The implication is that all the comments and information shared within the group were for members' eyes only, that is to say, not subject to scrutiny from those who do not agree with

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10) Recorded from an attempt to join the group in November 2020.

the aforementioned three principles. This adds a covert dimension to the group's off-platform activities, since planning and coordination was carried out under the veil of secrecy prior to moving to a new platform to conduct a joint activity.

A tone of frustration

In the SR reportage, the tone of discussion within the group was described as frustrated, worried, and angry, in some cases being directly accusative and aggressive. For example, the official MEWAS Twitter account claimed, "The sheer depravity we are witnessing in #Sweden is similar to Nazi ideology … euthanizing, let's rephrase, murdering the elderly"[11]. This refers to the National Board of Health and Welfare's guidelines for using morphine in palliative treatment, which were updated in March 2020 to include COVID-19-related illness (Socialstyrelsen, 2020).

Many members of the group were ex-pats who expressed frustration with Sweden and aspects of Swedish culture and society. For example, the official MEWAS Twitter account refers to a visit to the Irish embassy as making him "feel like a human again. Sweden is no longer a democracy. It is run by a system based on cronyism, hubris, arrogance and exceptionalism. Many of us have had to leave." Similarly, the group expressed victim narratives: "Members of MEWAS FB Group are being vilified for calling out the questionable decisions of experts, & the adversity to scientific based evidence by the Swedish Health Authority."
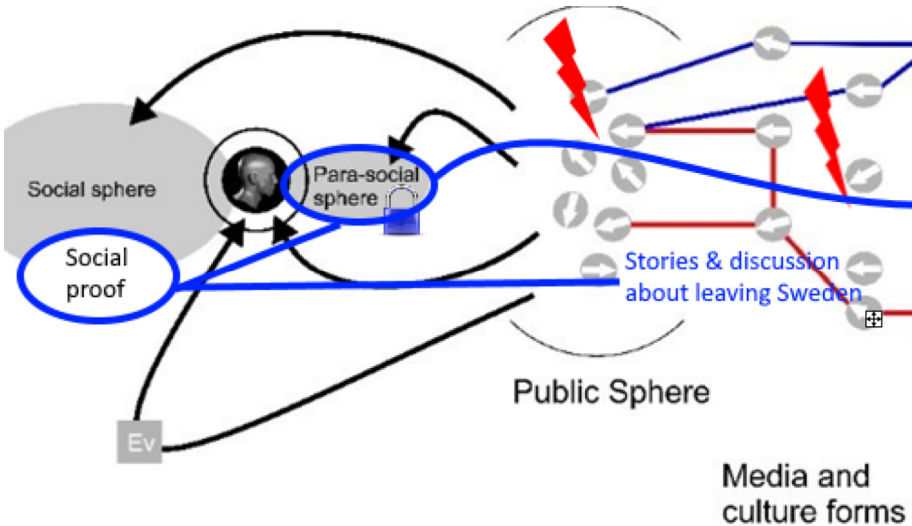
Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2b. Social proof

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11) 6 December 2020

A common narrative promoted by the group was that Swedish COVID-19 policy had forced them to leave the country. Initially deployed in a June 2020 news article (Barry, 2020), this narrative trope was perfected in December 2020's article in Der Spiegel, in which five members of MEWAS were interviewed saying that they had left Sweden or intended to move away because of the handling of COVID-19. This is known as social proof (Figure 2b, above); the idea that human interest stories make abstract principles more convincing and real. MEWAS founder Keith Begg claimed, "I have counted 25 people in my circle who have left C19 #Sweden." In reality, 20% of the country's residents, that is to say, 2 million people, were born abroad, and so this social proof is representative of a negligible fraction of unhappy ex-pats (SCB, 2021). Moving countries is a complex decision that draws upon many factors including family, work and health. However, this social proof was organized in such a way as to frame COVID-19 as the sole or primary reason for moving. It was designed to appear in media in order to give the false impression of a groundswell of public opinion, and to damage the image of Sweden in foreign press.

Claims of harassment

Within the group, journalists were singled out as targets for coordinated engagement. In May, a member shared a PDF list of contact details for foreign correspondents based in Sweden. Other posts refer to individual journalists using derogatory terms and request that members "swarm" them (and at times, their bosses) with emails and tweets. Contact details were often shared. For example, following a Newsweek article in which Tegnell was interviewed, the founder requested a "huge mosquito swarm" with tweets, links, and contacts to the Newsweek journalist. The MEWAS twitter account posted a series of tweets at the journalist calling Tegnell a "pseudo-scientist," accusing the state of murder, telling the journalist how to be better at their job, and demanding a retraction of the article.

In a tweet later deleted by the author, the MEWAS account wrote to a prominent figure in the Swedish debate that she "will be remembered on the wrong side of history and will hopefully be tried for her complicity in supporting a strategy that has led to crimes against humanity." Following the SR reportage, the same prominent figure tweeted that researcher no longer comment in the media about COVID-19 due to harassment, and claimed that "these types of groups are a threat to democracy." The MEWAS account made the reverse claims: "The classic tool of authoritarian states to silence, diffuse, and destroy the reputations of those who criticize. What dark days lie ahead for Sweden. Democracy is so under threat here. Its frightening."

Following publication of the reportage, paediatrician Jonas Ludvigsson announced that he would no longer conduct research on COVID-19 due to harassment. Shortly after, it was reported that a prominent professor at a major Swedish university commented in the group that he had called paediatrician Jonas Ludvigsson "sick in the head … I called him a sick man on twitter and really started a hilarious group of counter comments. As I professor I am not allowed to say someone is sick or that they do not know science, I really think he is a sick

man though" (Svensson, 2021). In a separate comment, a member of the group returned after a particularly aggressive social media post to ask where the line is before the police would get involved.

Subsequently, 42 doctors and researchers published a demand in a leading broadsheet for respectful public debate, asking participants to avoid harassment of researchers and journalists (DN Debatt, 2021a). 17 representatives of MEWAS penned a response in which they claimed that the tone of the aforementioned debate piece was respectless and condescending (DN Debatt, 2021b). Shortly afterward, the founder of MEWAS claimed he had to leave Sweden due to harassment following the reportage. According to his Twitter account some weeks earlier, however, "He will move back to Ireland in the new year to work as a Communications Specialist." Supporters of MEWAS reported receiving dozens of hate letters both before and after the reportage, reinforcing the sense of a toxic online debate.
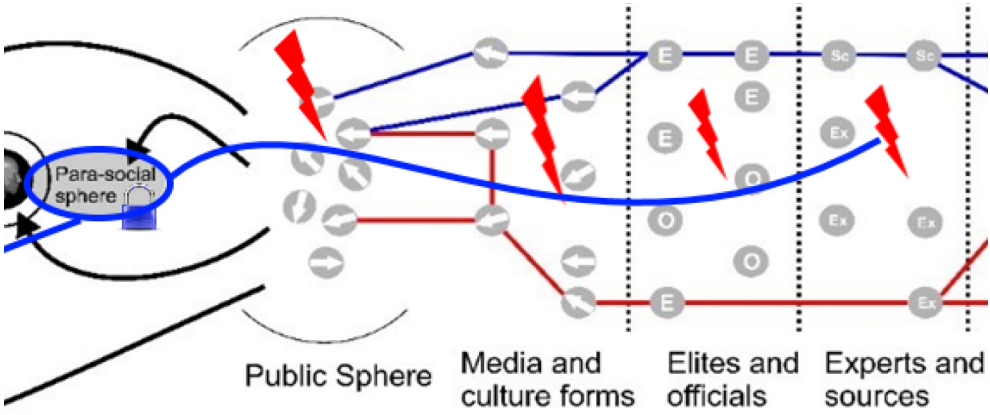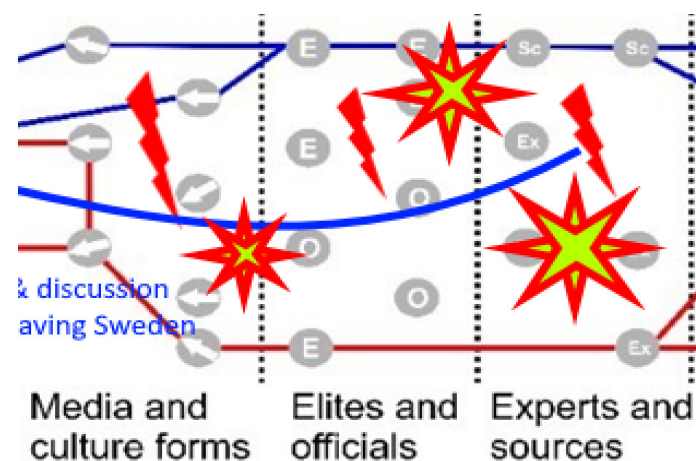

Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2c. Off-platform coordinated contact with journalists, researchers & officials.

The closed Facebook group provided a place to coordinate activities which centred upon organised criticism of journalists, researchers, and officials. Allegedly, in some cases this spilled over into harassment and potentially libel. As Figure 2c demonstrates, the 'lightening bolts' of coordinated responses, personal attacks, and arguably harassment disrupts some of the traditional spaces in which elite opinion (in this case, researcher consensus) develops. These spaces include academic journals (MEWAS penned letters to editors questioning research methods and findings), newspapers (MEWAS penned op-eds questioning research methods and findings), and arenas for public debate such as social media and comment fields. Using the mapping tool, it would be possible to analyse this in greater detail in order to produce a more precise visualisation. For the purposes of this article, however, it is enough to demonstrate the ways in which organised activities can intervene in the public debate on the basis of coordinated activities.

Swarming

The group coordinated collective action on Facebook, for example organising their participation in comment fields, responding on Twitter, or taking contact with individuals and organisations. Other activities were spontaneous and did not require access to the Facebook group. According to one of the members, who claims to be an epidemiologist, swarming is an innocent act similar to how Amnesty conducts advocacy through letter-writing. "Some guy (and in this case, that's literally what it is) calling himself and some other people on social media an NGO (which I'd never seen before) does not suddenly make it so." A common argument is that the group is not really an NGO, and that the activities of individual members and supporters of the group are organic and natural. This switches the status of the group as a PD actor between representing the general public, of being an organization with the capability to intervene in diplomatic issues, and of not being an organized group at all.

In the hidden group, repeated requests call for members to act as a "swarm". The approach mirrors techniques used by actors who seek to "flood" public debate with their perspective in order to drown out public debate (Pamment et al., 2018). Coordination typically takes place on one digital platform, before members move on mass to a pre-agreed target, which is often a Twitter thread, comment field on a news article, or a journalist's inbox. This is known as off-platform coordination. Examples from the hidden group demonstrate that it was used to organise what they call "swarming", or sometimes a "mass swarm" by "MEWAS Mosquitos". More typically, action was requested with a headline like "Urgent assistance required." Post authors frequently encouraged collective action, giving contact details to targets and sometimes details of what to say (Figure 2d).

Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2d. Swarming of an individual or organisation

The day the SR reportage launched, @author answered some questions about the study on Twitter, mainly engaging with a prominent member of MEWAS on Twitter. Within a few hours, it became clear that @author's account was attracting a lot of attention from supporters of MEWAS. Over 72 hours between the evening of 9 February 2021 and the morning of 12

February 2021, the @author Twitter account generated nearly 50k impressions, culminating in 30k in one day before the account was locked. In other words, there was sudden and significant interest in the account (see Figure 2e)[12]. The @author account handle was mentioned several hundred times, often connected to questions or comments.

Figure 2e. Twitter analytics data on @author account following a "swarm"

The example highlights some interesting aspects of swarming. Each individual the @author account engaged with appeared as a genuine person who only wanted to ask a few questions, because they wanted to try to understand the critique levelled at the group. However, the cumulative effect was hundreds of questions, mentions, and comments appearing at all hours of the day. A repeated theme of the questions was why a "small group of private citizens chatting on a FB group" would be the subject of investigation by journalists and researchers. This was an interesting argument because it emphasized that MEWAS was simply individuals with similar interests, not an advocacy group bound by the norms of an actual NGO.

However convenient this argument may be, however, the evidence points to coordination. Entry to the Facebook group is contingent upon agreeing to participate in joint actions. The concept of the "swarm" refers to a well-established media manipulation technique. The individual members of the group are asked, prompted, encouraged, even coordinated to "swarm" people the group did not agree with, in order to hound them out of the discussion. The argumentation used here rather abdicates individual responsibility for the cumulative effect that they collectively seek to attain.

Trolling

Some of the hundreds of questions and comments referred to above drew on techniques of malign rhetoric, or other forms of illegitimate (i.e., fallacious) argumentation. Typical examples are *strawman, whataboutism, ad hominin,* and *claims of being silenced*.

Strawman: "A straw man fallacy occurs when someone takes another person's argument or point, distorts it or exaggerates it in some kind of extreme way, and then attacks the extreme distortion, as if that is really the claim the first person is making" (Excelsior Online Writing Lab, undated).

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12) Note: Clearly the spike in engagement was not solely down to MEWAS. However, this does help to exemplify the pressure an account owner can be placed under during a surge in interest in the account.

For example, the following post sets out a strawman argument by requesting a debate about something that was never said. "I invited @author to have a discussion here on twitter […] about the #osint, #infosec, and #cybersecurity methods and criteria used in his claim that @MediaWatchSwe was a political "influence operation"." The claim that @author had called MEWAS a political influence operation is spurious, as is the claim that OSINT, infosec or cybersecurity methods were used[13].

In a second example, the MEWAS founder repeated a claim that @author had called the group terrorists. "Did he claim that. Holy shit. I am flabbergasted, A "terrorist influence operation" … In Ireland, he would be sued for defamation. This is mind blowing." Such examples generate anger and outrage based on false and misleading claims. Failure to respond, in the face of an overwhelming number of strawman questions, is treated as an admission of guilt, or fear of debate.

Whataboutism: "the practice of answering a criticism or difficult question by attacking someone with a similar criticism or question directed at them, typically starting with the words "What about?"" (Cambridge Dictionary, undated a).

This argument is particularly prevalent and fits with MEWAS' victim narrative. "Why? So far there has been several things where ppl with much more power than a FB-group have acted in a coordinated way without disclosing it. Why do you think THIS is important as compared to other instances?" A second, similar argument asked, "Would you consider doing a detailed study on the communication methods used by @Folkhalsomynd, SR, the Swedish government, Swedish media?" In these and many other examples, the main line of argument is that MEWAS should not be discussed because others may be doing similar or worse things.

Ad hominin: "(of a criticism, etc.) directed against a person, rather than against what that person says." (Cambridge Disctionary, undated b).

Discrediting individuals and organisations is one of the more malign aspects of MEWAS' online engagements. In one prevalent narrative, the MEWAS account attempted to discredit SR by falsely referring to it as "state media" rather than "public service". "In an open and democratic society would it not cause outrage for state media, and experts to infiltrate a private FB group, spy on them, and then fabricate a story against a small group of individuals critical of the Swedish pandemic response? How do you think that looks?" The account then posted the same message seven times, citing the accounts of dozens of prominent international journalists and news outlets.

In a second example, a conspiracy was created within the group's discussions that the SR reportage was an effort by the government to silence critics. A number of discussants sought to discredit the experts cited in the reportage. "Could you please clarify something that's been

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13) OSINT refers to open source intelligence, a form of structured intelligence collection. Infosec refers to information security and cybersecurity to the protection of computers and networks.

speculated? It's clear you've done consulting work for the Swedish Government in the recent past .... Can you confirm you've done no consulting work for any Swedish Government Authority since the pandemic began?" A follow-up post asked for evidence that the @author's participation in the SR reportage was not part of a government campaign to discredit critics of the government's strategy. Clearly, a request for counterfactual evidence can sound logical, but it is ultimately an unreasonable demand that is impossible to satisfy.

Claims of being silenced: claims that MEWAS supporters are unable to express their point of view.

A repeated claim by the official MEWAS account was of MEWAS being silenced. "Scary times in a country once lauded on the international stage. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed a democracy in crisis, where the Swedish image must be protected, and critical voices silenced." "Everything in the authorities tool box is being used to silence and discredit those critical of the Swedish strategy." "This is what is going on in #Sweden. Freedom of speech and the right to privacy are under threat. So is democracy." However, a similar interest group which declares its members and aims, lists over 80 debate pieces in Swedish and foreign press that it has been responsible for (i.e. more than one a week since the pandemic began), which hardly suggests that there has been a lack of debate or criticism about the Swedish strategy (Vetenskapsforum, 2021).

A second example attempted to create virality around the false claim that the group had been called "traitors" by SR (Figure 2f, below). The photograph of a gagged individual was supported by a thread of 22 tweets ending with the statement, "I'm just a 26 yrs old naive portuguese girl. I have no kids to think about, no career prospects in to care about, no financial dependancy to a job. I'll keep talking. But how many will get scared into silence? How many will dare to take such risks? Is that good for democracy?" Although it was liked more than 1,100 times, and mimicked by the official MEWAS account, a viral campaign did not develop around this approach.

Figure 2f. Traitor meme

In fact, the stats for some of the accounts involved in the "swarm" demonstrate how far claims of silence are from the truth. The main MEWAS account tweeted 780 times between February 1 and February 23 2021, peaking at around 60 per day. Data for one of the principal member accounts shows just under 2,000 tweets in the same period, peaking at 250 a day during the "swarm" period discussed above. Likewise, the author of the viral "gagged" tweet managed some 1,200 tweets in the same period. At the same time as claiming to be silenced, and as shall be discussed below in greater detail, the group courted and received considerable exposure, both on social and traditional media.

Whataboutism
Strawman
Ad hominin
Silenced
[Harassment]
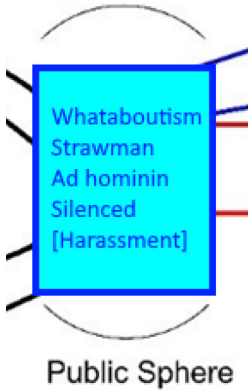
Public Sphere

Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2g. Disruption of the public sphere through illegitimate argumentation

These types of communication techniques are not legitimate argumentation and could be considered trolling. However, they should be placed in the broader context of swarming: of the coordinated effort to create a cumulative effect on social media accounts considered adversarial by the group. Taking together the requirement of participation in collective actions in order to join the group, the coordination of activities that takes place in the group, the patterns of swarming behaviour visible on social media, and the rhetorical strategies used during a "swarm", there is a case to be made that the group encourages trolling behaviour designed to force critics out of the debate. Adding to these claims of harassment, which have currently only been attributed to the hidden group in one significant instance, and a concerning pattern of disruptive, illegitimate communication on social media emerges.

International media

One of the striking aspects of MEWAS is its relatively high level of exposure in prestigious international media. Early in MEWAS' activities, the purpose seemed to be to maintain a clearinghouse for documents about the Swedish strategy obtained through freedom of information requests or leaks. On 1 April 2020, Covidfactcheck.se was launched as a repository of emails with no identification of ownership of the site other than a link to two Medium articles by a MEWAS member. The domain was registered using a web hotel

company that offers anonymity to its customers. Some MEWAS-inspired news articles drew heavily on this information source. It should be noted that the emails are relatively easy to use out of context as a form of malinformation, particularly in complex issues where the details cannot be reduced to simple answers. For example, a March 2021 article in Science prompted by complaints by MEWAS members covered the fallout from data found in emails in a way that seemed to discredit a researcher's findings. However, in the days following publication both the scientific journal and Science made amendments as it emerged that the email had been used out of context (Vogel, 2021).

Early opinion pieces were not so successful and were for example self-published on *Medium*. They established some core narratives on Sweden's handling of COVID-19 that would gain traction. One such narrative was that the government was covering up the fact that the strategy had failed, in order to protect its international reputation. A second was that Swedish mainstream media was failing to sufficiently criticise the government, and a third was the claim that the state was murdering its elderly. Medium was home to a series of opinion pieces authored by the founder of MEWAS, with disclosure of his role in MEWAS. Headlines are included below to give a sense of the tone.

Keith Begg, Medium	11 May 2020	SWEDEN: A tale of how a government, a scientist, and a health authority gaslighted the world to hide the truth behind a disastrous COVID-19 strategy.
Keith Begg, Medium	20 June 2020	Sweden takes a huge reputational hit for its handling of the pandemic: Letter to the Swedish Government raising concerns.
Keith Begg, Medium	11 August 2020	Why it is difficult to trust the Swedish Health Authority`s (FHM) reporting during the pandemic.
Keith Begg, Medium	21 September 2020	How international media and influencers failed to report the scientific, ethical, and moral bankruptcy of Sweden`s handling of the pandemic.
Keith Begg, Medium	30 September 2020	How the elderly in Sweden are being neglected and murdered during pandemic times.

An additional core narrative that developed during this period was that expats no longer felt at home in Sweden and were fleeing the country. US public radio platform The World featured a human-interest story about 3 people who had left or were considering leaving Sweden, including the founder of MEWAS and 2 members. No disclosure of their relationship to MEWAS was given. It becomes apparent at this point that journalists were probably asking for references for others planning on leaving the country using the snowball method – i.e. by asking interviewees if they know anybody else, for which the MEWAS group became a resource. Within the MEWAS Facebook group, a member organising media participation asked for volunteers whose names could be passed to journalists, especially if they have not yet been prominent in the media. Misleading journalists in this way could be considered a form of disruption.

Orla Barry, The World	12 June 2020	Sweden's handling of coronavirus drives some people to relocate.

The group's criticisms reached Australasia, and the narrative that the government had failed was augmented with reference to a 200-strong group of experts who were organising resistance. "Sweden's relaxed approach to living with Covid-19 has been the subject of international scrutiny, but now a group of 200 scientists, medical experts and teachers are turning up the heat on the official version of events." This appears to be a reference to the MEWAS Facebook group, since no further discussion of the group is provided. The articles cite as its main sources a member of MEWAS and the founder of MEWAS, although MEWAS itself was not mentioned. Clearly, this is misrepresentation of the group since members are not just scientists, medical experts and teachers, but rather come from all walks of life.

Rohan Smith, New Zealand Herald	16 September 2020	Covid 19 coronavirus: Doctors, scientists attack Sweden over 'cherry-picked data.'
Rohan, Smith, Daily Mercury (Australia)	17 September 2020	Doctors, scientists attack Sweden 'lies'.
Rohan Smith, News.com.au	17 September 2020	Coronavirus Sweden: 200 doctors, scientists challenge Sweden's official version of events.

Toward the end of 2020, there was increasing international interest in MEWAS' narratives. *Science Magazine* featured an article that represented the views of a more legitimate critical group, Vetenskapsforum COVID-19 (Science Forum COVID-19).[14] This led to two examples in the report of medical staff being fired for wearing masks, both connected to MEWAS (one a group admin).

Gretchen Vogen, Science	6 October 2020	'It's been so, so surreal.' Critics of Sweden's lax pandemic policies face fierce backlash.

In the Facebook group, it was claimed that MEWAS was behind the publication of a major piece in the *New York Times*. Following publication of the NYT story, two Swedish authors commented on Twitter that the NYT coverage of Sweden was misleading. In the Facebook group, the founder requested that members swarm both Swedish authors.

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14) Legitimate in that its existence, purpose, activities and membership are transparently declared on a website: https://vetcov19.se/en/

Peter S. Goodman & Erik Augustin Palm, New York Times	8 October 2020	Pandemic Exposes Holes in Sweden's Generous Social Welfare State.

The narrative of the government and media lying about the failures of the strategy also made it to *Time Magazine* and *Foreign Policy*. A piece for Time authored by two members of MEWAS claims, "The Swedish way has yielded little but death and misery. And, this situation has not been honestly portrayed to the Swedish people or to the rest of the world." It argues that herd immunity was the unstated goal of Swedish policy and was cited in a subsequent *Washington Post* story. One of those authors wrote a similar piece for Foreign Policy.

Kelly Bjorklund & Andrew Ewing, Time Magazine	14 October 2020	The Swedish COVID-19 Response Is a Disaster. It Shouldn't Be a Model for the Rest of the World.
Kelly Bjorklund, Foreign Policy	22 December 2020	The Inside Story of How Sweden Botched Its Coronavirus Response.

Alternative news platform *Byline Times* ran a story in which the founder of MEWAS was interviewed. In it, he reaffirmed the narrative of incompetence: "They let what many of us see as incompetent experts rule the roost." Criticism of media also reappeared, including the narrative that government bailouts to creative and journalistic industries were a bribe to silence criticism. "It is not entirely coincidental that Swedish media organisations have shared in two Government-funded bail-outs worth a combined kr700 million (around USD 80 million) this year to make up for advertising lost because of the virus. Who, he asks, would bite the hand that so generously feeds it?" It should be noted that this form of press support has existed in Sweden since the 1960s and is common in Northern European countries. Furthermore, a MEWAS member repeated the claim that her employment at a hospital was terminated due to wearing a mask. Other interviewees were anonymous, apparently because it is unsafe to criticise the Swedish government ("Like North Korea").

Adrian Goldberg, Byline Times	2 November 2020	'Like North Korea' Sweden's Coronavirus Critics Silenced.

Finally, *Der Spiegel* repeated a human-interest piece about five people moving or planning to move from Sweden due to COVID-19 policy. On Twitter, the official MEWAS account noted that they are all MEWAS group members.

Dietmar Pieper, Der Spiegel	20 December 2020	Die schwedische Enttäuschung (The Swedish Disappointment).

Taken together, MEWAS has quietly shaped international media coverage through a series of narratives. Opinions are generally presented as such, albeit with regular misrepresentation

of the MEWAS group and its members' roles in participating in news stories. In other words, the fact of coordination, particularly when it is disguised, is the most problematic part of the news coverage. This maps onto the situational awareness visualisation in terms of the group identifying its own sources, witnesses, and preferred experts to feed into media coverage, which was facilitated by members of the group through their connections with journalists. In this manner, the group was able to bypass the officials and elites that they considered corrupt and incompetent (Figure 2h). The covert elements of this approach set MEWAS apart from its contemporaries such as Vetenskapsforum COVID-19 (Science Forum COVID-19).
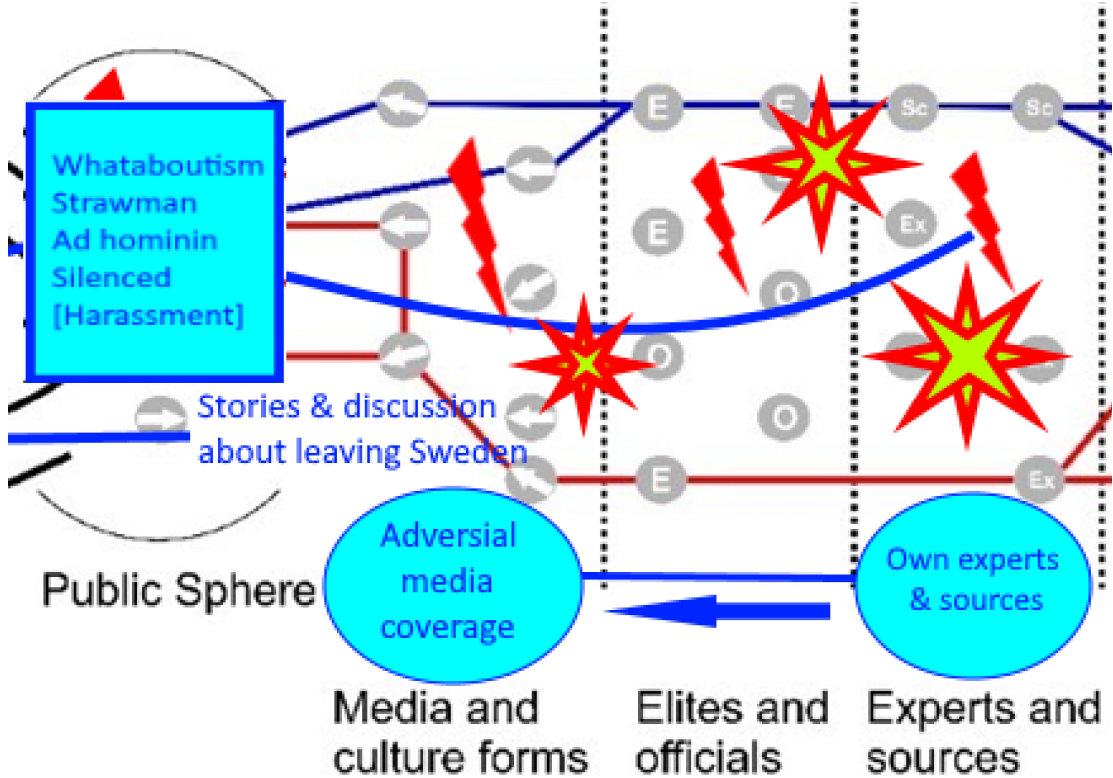
Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2h. Using own sources to disrupt debate & produce adversarial media coverage

These kinds of articles should be categorised as *adversarial media coverage* since they are motivated to undermine perceptions of the Swedish government among international audiences. Furthermore, the international press coverage was often imported back into the domestic debate, contributing to a sense that the rest of the world had a certain view of Sweden. Coordination is also significant when one takes into consideration the illegitimate techniques used by the group to silence experts and officials it disagrees with; in other words, adversarial media coverage sits alongside efforts to promote these narratives on social media platforms through illegitimate argumentation.

International diplomacy

The image of Sweden abroad is a focal point of discussion both in the Facebook group and on Twitter. In comments to a post about a negative news article a member had contributed to, members appeared delighted that the story might hurt Sweden's image. In a Twitter diatribe, the founder of MEWAS claimed: "#SWEDEN: One of the worst crimes being perpetrated in [Sweden flag] is how the media and the @SwedishPM engage in revisionism or the rewriting of history to maintain a glass ceiling image. Whether it is rewriting #Swedish WW2 history, or the sterilization of 63,000 women, and scores of [second Tweet] transexuals to lauding the successes of the #Swedish handling of the pandemic when elderly have been euthanized, thousands denied care in hospital, parent(s) even in risk groups being forced to send their children to school the PRESERVATION of the Swedish image MUST come first." The narrative shifted from criticism of Swedish COVID-19 policy to sweeping criticism of Swedish history and identity.

In terms of international relations, members of the group were encouraged to contact representatives of other countries for the purpose of encouraging them to enforce harsher border regulations against Swedes who travel abroad. The group prepared and translated letters to be sent to embassies, public authorities, politicians, journalists, researchers, and shared contact details to this end. For example, upon announcement of a traffic light system to be adopted by the European Centre of Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), a prominent member of the Facebook group urged members to "make sure" Sweden was added to the red list. The founder organised translation of letters to Members of the European Parliament, media, and European embassies. The letters requested that governments make it harder for Swedish nationals to enter their countries, and specifically targeted EU member states that had lifted quarantine restrictions. In a similar example, MEWAS mobilised to reverse Switzerland's July 2020 decision to lift quarantine restrictions for Swedes.

MEWAS organised trolling of a Tegnell webinar at the Swedish Embassy in South Africa. In a series of 16 Tweets, the MEWAS Twitter account attempted to feed South African journalists, influencers, and politicians with anti-Tegnell memes, data, and news stories with the plea "Ask, ask ask […] Ask the hard questions. Watch him detract, avoid, and blame."

MEWAS also approached Reporters Without Borders (RSF) with the aim of lowering Sweden's position in the Press Freedom Index (Janzon, 2021). In its criticisms of mainstream media and particularly public service, which it continually referred to as state media, MEWAS courted and earned the support of conservative and alt-right news platforms despite them holding different views on COVID-19 restrictions. According to an RSF representative, MEWAS presented itself as a genuine NGO and argued that government support to the media during the pandemic should be equated with a bribe. RSF has however been supportive of state efforts to support media during times of crisis. Rather, in its response, RSF emphasized the risk that threats, harassment and hate toward journalists has on media freedom.

Finally, MEWAS also engaged in a campaign to ensure that the individuals responsible for the Swedish COVID-19 strategy will be tried in an international human rights court for crimes against humanity. "Itis now high time that the architects and promoters of #Sweden`s disastrous herd-immunity strategy are brought to justice for crimes against humanity and/or gross negligence and incompetence. #AndersTegnell #JohanGiesecke #TomBritton @AgnesWold @CarlsonJFoHM @Folkhalsomynd." According to a law professor interviewed by SR, such a case is not possible under current international law (Janzon & Björkstén, 2021).
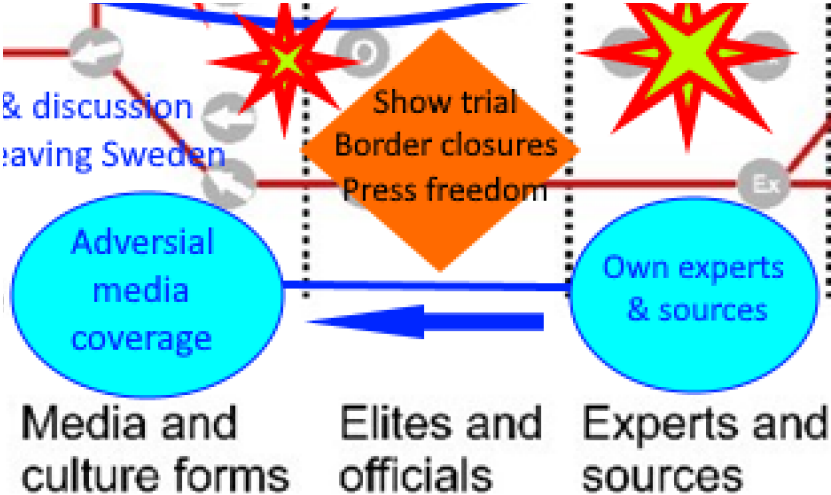
Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2i. Diplomatic efforts to put Sweden on trial

MEWAS has been engaging in multiple ways in a complex information environment. Though it may have been an emergent strategy, placing Sweden – and the architects of the COVID-19 strategy – on trial internationally became a central focal point for the group's work. Though apparently an impossibility under current international human rights frameworks, this goal appears to be more than grandstanding. MEWAS aimed to damage Sweden's international reputation, and as Figure 2i demonstrates, each of the steps taken contributes to an information environment in which opinions the group disagrees with are drowned out.

Discussion

This article aims to outline some theoretical considerations of how the PD research field might move away from a two-actor model of PD to one in which disruption is part of the model. It is important to note that the case study used here is an example of how any group can step up to the international stage and try to influence perceptions of a country. State-based PD is not simply conducted between Actor A and Actor B, but must wrestle with disruption in the information environment, both domestically and in relation to each target group it seeks to

engage. Having a terminology and frameworks to discuss the communicative techniques used in disruption is clearly important if PD research is to accurately represent the realities of PD practitioners.

Legitimate PD conducted by Swedish actors has likely been made more challenging by some of the international press coverage generated by MEWAS. This may particularly be the case in countries where there is a human-interest connection. For example, the Irish Times wrote a story about the MEWAS founder under the headline "Limerick man flees Sweden over criticism of his Covid-19 campaign". This was then syndicated several times in other Irish press. PD practitioners need to be aware of what is happening in the information environment even if they would not directly respond to or confront stories such as this. Theory should account for these kinds of developments. In addition, other groups often piggyback onto these polarised debates. In this case, anti-establishment, alt-right, and anti-public service/mainstream media groups helped to amplify MEWAS' messages despite them not necessarily sharing similar views of how to handle COVID-19. Understanding these kinds of dynamics can offer advantages to PD professionals who want to ensure their messages reach target audiences intact.
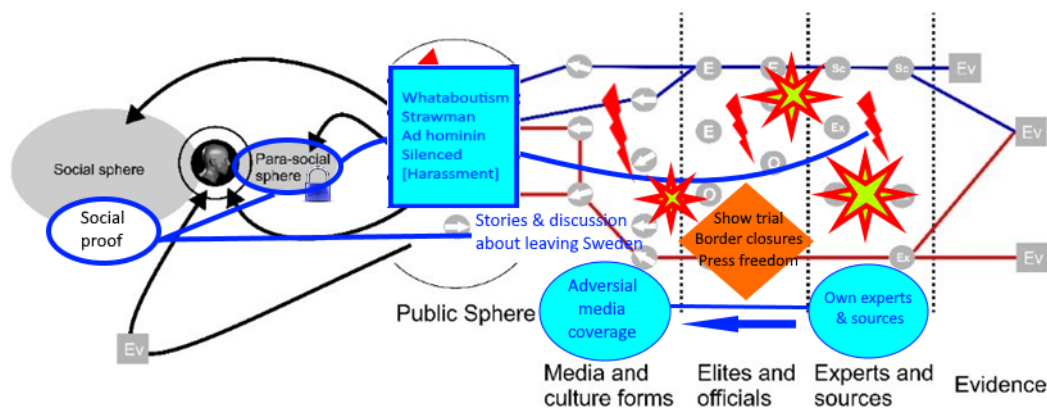
Source: adapted from Pamment et al., (2018), p.19.

Figure 2j. The cumulative map of MEWAS activities

Secondly, it is important to consider whether it is possible to delineate the legitimacy of communication techniques. This case study covers a controversial group and topic, one in which there is considerable polarization. The group could be considered a PD actor with a noble aim, for whom the ends justify the means. However, the case study also details a range of techniques that are questionable, that go too far from time-to-time, or that a credible organization would simply avoid (Figure 2j). Are such techniques acceptable within PD? Here, one could argue that PD researchers have a role to play in continuing to define norms for the field. From this perspective, it could be argued that the cumulative effect of MEWAS' activities reveals a pattern of systematic efforts to manipulate the media and public debate. This moves it out of the realm of PD and potentially into more troublesome territory.

Information Influence Operation (IIO) is suggestive of more advanced coordination than has been seen in these examples from MEWAS; rather these activities are simply borderline illegitimate, reflecting the genuine concern and outrage of a small group of angry people with the basic skills to disproportionately amplify that anger – but lacking the professional communication skills to remain within accepted norms.

Researchers who contribute to developing norms within PD could further consider the role of communicative techniques in defining legitimacy. Are certain techniques illegitimate in their own right, or only if combined with certain other activities? Is coordination problematic? Who should respond to illegitimate communicative activities that do not break laws? In opening the discussion on disruption in PD, it is hoped that the research field will dive deeper into these provocative and challenging questions.

Acknowledgment

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▌ **James Pamment**

James Pamment, PhD, is associate professor of Strategic Communication at Lund University and a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In addition, he is co-editor-in-chief of the Place Branding and Public Diplomacy journal.