RESEARCH

Contentious framings: Swedish civil society actors' experiences of hate speech, threats, and harassment from multiple perpetrators

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Abstract

This article explores civil society actors' framing of hate speech, threats, and harassment in relation to the type of harasser or perpetrator. The article draws on a qualitative study with elected representatives, paid employees, and volunteers in different Swedish Civil Society Organisations and social movements. The phenomena are analysed from a relational perspective and theories of civil society as a contentious space. The article offers a complex picture of different framings related to multiple perpetrators; from anonymous senders and organised crime members to counter movements. The findings show the sectoral, legal, and moral boundaries that are drawn between victims and perpetrators.

1. Introduction

Civil society actors are victims of repression and violence worldwide and are subjected to different kinds of restrictions (see e.g., Juris 2015; Narang and Stanton 2017; Chaney and Sahoo 2020). Swedish civil society actors are no exception. A survey study on hate speech, threats, and harassment against Swedish civil society leaders shows that 1 in 3 leaders reported that they had been victimised. Female, young,

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and foreign-born civil society leaders (Scaramuzzino and Scaramuzzino 2021) and advocacy-oriented associations such as unions and political associations were more likely to be subjected to hate speech, threats, and harassment than other civil society actors. This patterns also apply to associations working with LGBTQ+ populations (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society 2021) and civil society leaders advocating for issues concerning gender-based violence and sexuality (Scaramuzzino and Scaramuzzino 2021). The Swedish sports movement has faced other types of hate speech, threats, and harassment such as hooliganism and match-fixing, both of which are strongly connected to men's sports and organised crime (Swedish Government 2013; Scaramuzzino 2023; see also Marchetti et al. 2021 for Brazilian sports; and Van Der Hoeven et al. 2020 for Flemish sports).

Hate speech, threats, and harassment against civil society actors is an ongoing phenomenon recognised by scholars. Previous studies have focused on the consequences of hate speech, threats, and harassment for individuals, organisations, and societies (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012; Ploszka 2020; Nilsson 2020; Scaramuzzino 2023). There has been extensive focus on the different kinds of victimisation (Carmichael and Karamouzian 2014; Narang and Stanton 2017; Scaramuzzino and Scaramuzzino 2021). Most studies tend to focus on, for example, either social media "trolls" (e.g., Lundberg and Laitinen 2020), right-wing extremists (e.g., Manthe 2021), anarchists and autonomists within the radical left-libertarian movement (e.g., Jämte and Wennerhag 2019; Jämte et al. 2020) or armed groups (e.g., Narang and Stanton 2017). The Swedish youth movement has mostly been exposed to hate speech and threats by adults on social media (Nilsson 2020). Scholars have also brought attention to the use of political violence as a strategy for initiating political and social change (Juris 2015; Blee 2018; Gøtzsche-Astrup 2019; Frazer and Hutchings 2020; Jämte et al. 2020; Scaramuzzino 2023). Current research, accordingly, most often addresses either hate speech, threats and harassment as a general phenomenon targeting civil society, or it addresses specific forms of harassment carried out by specific perpetrators.

Our article instead departs from the fact that hate speech, threats, and harassment can target Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in different forms, the threats can come from different actors, and there can be multiple perpetrators or harassers (see della Porta 2013; Lundstedt 2021). The aim of the article is to explore society actors' experiences of being targeted by hate speech, threats, and harassment and the way in which they frame different types of perpetrators. The focus is on the meaning given to these experiences by the civil society actors based on their relation to the perpetrator.

We draw on framing theory to address how collective action frames are constructed by elected representatives, paid employees, and volunteers as a shared understanding of the problem and who or what is to blame (cf. Benford & Snow 2000)

concerning the experience of being exposed to hate speech, threats, and harassment. We also adopt a relational perspective (Johansson and Kalm 2017; Santilli and Scaramuzzino 2022) exploring civil society as a multi-relational space where CSOs tend to interact with different actors across organisational and sectoral boundaries. The analysis is qualitative based on semi-structured interviews with 12 elected representatives, paid employees, and volunteers in different Swedish CSOs.

Through its relational perspective, the article contributes to scholarly discussions on the boundaries of civil society and what actors should be included in and excluded from the concept (Wijkström 1999; Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Alexander 2006; Gøtzsche-Astrup 2019; Sombatpoonsiri 2020). There is a tendency both in public debates and within research to only include the *good* actors in civil society; even if there are several examples of civil society actors who actively foster anti-democratic agendas (see e.g., Sombatpoonsiri 2020), or who are involved in illegal activities such as drug dealing, extortion, money laundering, or who engage in violence (Wijkström 1999). In this article, civil society is understood as a contentious civil sphere, consisting of both movements and counter movements; both *good* and *bad*, where hate speech, threats and harassment can be – but are not always – used for political and social change.

In contrast with much previous civil society studies (Juris 2015; Blee 2018; Gøtzsche-Astrup 2019; Frazer and Hutchings 2020; Jämte et al. 2020), this article does not exclude non-politically motivated violence. Instead, it acknowledges that violence and hate speech, threats, and harassment are broad concepts that can encompass everything from derogatory comments to physical violence (Scaramuzzino 2020; 2023) and include, for example, hate crimes, online hate speech, violent extremism, political violence, and work-related violence. There is often an overlap between these categories in the literature (Bladini 2017), which can create several methodological challenges for how the phenomenon can be studied and what conclusions can be drawn (see also Lundstedt 2021). Instead of departing from an a priori definition of the concept, this study is based on the interviewees' own understanding of hate speech, threats, and harassment and its different manifestations for the purpose of exploring different framings across sectoral boundaries and relations.

2. Civil society as a contentious civil sphere

2.1 Civil society, social movements and framing strategies

Many CSOs originate from social movements and could in fact be defined as social movement organisations. While a social movement can be defined as a "set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society" (McCarthy

and Zald 1977: 1217-1218), a social movement organisation is an organisation that identifies its goals with such preferences (ibid).

Social movement theorists have called attention to the ways in which collective actors engage in framing strategies mostly focusing on the issues and problems that they aim to address, in other words "…the processes by which grievances were constructed, contested and disseminated" (Snow et al. 2014: 30). Framing and frames have been studied extensively in social movement studies often as activities aiming at producing and maintaining meaning for constituents, antagonists and bystanders. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that when social movements activists are targeted by hate speech, threats and harassment these experiences need to be framed. Here concepts such as *boundary framing* and *adversarial framing* become relevant as processes of attribution that seek to delineate the boundaries between *good* and *evil* and *protagonists* and *antagonists* (Benford and Snow 2000).

Boundaries are, in fact, central when analysing the framing of perpetrators of hate speech, threats, and harassment and refers to the work civil society actors engage in when they attempt to create, shape, and disrupt different boundaries (Ho et al. 2021) which resonates with how boundary framings are understood in social movement studies (cf. Silver 1997). In particular we are interested in *legal* and *moral boundaries* outlining what strategies are considered legitimate or legal for civil society actors to use. These boundaries also have significance regarding who to include in or exclude from civil society (cf. Wijkström 1999; Juris 2015) as opposed to uncivil society (cf. Alexander 2006).

In the coming analysis we apply the concepts of *framing* for the process of constructing meaning to the experience of being targeted by hate speech, threats and harassment and *frame* for its output.

2.2 Civil society from a relational perspective

This article draws on a relational perspective and, as already discussed, it understands civil society as a contentious civil sphere (Alexander 2006), consisting of movements and countermovements, democratic and non-democratic actors, where hate speech, threats, and harassment can be used for different purposes, including the promotion of political and social change.

Within research on workplace violence, it is common to categorise violence based on the relationship between the perpetrator/harasser and the victim. It is often important to distinguish whether workplace violence has been enacted by someone outside (e.g., consumer violence) or inside (e.g., workplace bullying) the organisation (Waddington et al. 2006). The perpetrator – victim relationship is also crucial to understanding hate speech, threats, and harassment against civil society actors, because there can be different dynamics and consequences depending on the relationship. Furthermore, the relevant boundaries are not only the ones separating the

organisation from its environment. In fact, the relations between a CSO and its environment can be understood as multi-layered, and some boundaries might be less clear-cut. Some CSOs belonging to broader social movements might in fact be quite small and made up of only a few employees and a board, but belong to a larger movement of volunteers, supporters, activists, and constituents (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Figure 1 shows a theoretical model understanding a CSO as part of a movement, a civil society sphere, and a more general social sphere. Such a model allows us to distinguish what kind of locus and consequently relationship the perpetrator has to the CSO.
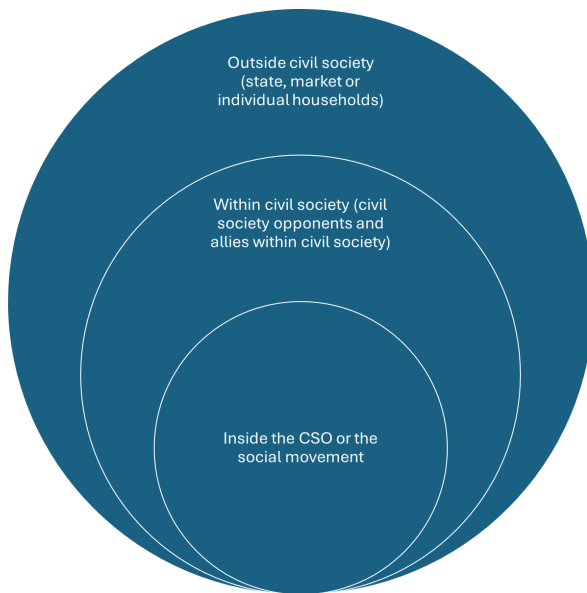
Figure 1. Locus of potential perpetrators

Such a sectoral relation perspective emphasizes the *sectoral boundaries* between societal spheres that determine who to include in and exclude from civil society (cf. Billis 1999; Salamon et al. 2004). Before delving into our own study, we will briefly explore how previous research has discussed perpetrators and harassers from different loci; i.e., outside civil society (outer layer in figure 1), within civil society (middle layer), and inside the CSO/social movement (inner layer).

2.3 Perpetrators outside civil society
There is a growing literature on shrinking civic space for civil society. Shrinking access to civic space for civil society has been mainly associated with authoritarian and

hybrid regimes (Toepler et al. 2020), but in recent years, repressive measures have also been used in some EU Member States, such as Poland and Hungary (Ploszka 2020). The literature focuses on how some governments and public authorities limit access to civic space by restricting some CSOs' possibilities to organise, to make their voice heard, or to act, through censorship, disrupting international funding, and/or setting up legal restrictions (cf. Buyse 2018; Pierson and Thomson 2018; Toepler et al. 2020; Ploszka 2020; Chaney and Sahoo 2020; Berger-Kern et al. 2021). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, new policies and practices were quickly implemented in many countries to prevent financing of terrorism and future terrorist attacks, which also affected non-terror-related CSOs (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012). Physical harassment and intimidation can also be used to restrict access to civic space for some civil society actors by attacking them when they are demonstrating; or by deciding not to protect them from other groups, or from taking action in response to physical attacks on activists or their offices (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012; Ploszka 2020). In recent years, quite a few activists in the Philippines have also been murdered (Dressler 2021). However, there are fewer studies on hate speech, threats, and harassment from market-actors or from individual households. In a Swedish context, it is not expected that there would be much hate speech, threats, and harassment within these relationships.

2.4 Perpetrators in civil society

There is extensive research on perpetrators *within* civil society. In fact, civil society is contentious, and consists of both movements and countermovements (Ayoub and Chetaille 2017; Fillieule and Broqua 2020; Serbulo 2020; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2020; Cullen 2021), and the fact that there tend to be violent attacks within this particular relationship is not a novel observation. Throughout history, different types of political violence have been used within civil society as a strategy for political and social change (cf. Blee 2018; Jämte et al. 2020), which resulted in violent clashes between *pro-* and *anti*-groups and between protesters and the police (Serbulo 2020). Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings (2020: 1) argue that "...violence is intimately related to, but can also be sharply distinguished from, politics." The ways in which politics and violence are understood in relation to each other have implications for these justifications; i.e., in what situations different types of violence are considered legitimate. This means that how these concepts are understood also has implications for whether the actor who uses political violence should be regarded as a perpetrator or as a freedom fighter. Jeffrey Juris (2015: 415) writes about the use of "performative violence" in media coverage of the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. Performative violence is described as the enactment of symbolic rituals and modes of communication by staging confrontation and playacting violence to gain visibility in mass media (Juris 2015) and in social media. However, other scholars highlight how civil society

actors tend to reject the use of violence as a political strategy, because in certain contexts it is considered unwise and thought to undermine the movement and their message (cf. Gøtzsche-Astrup 2019; Scaramuzzino 2023).

Multiple civil society perpetrators have been mentioned in recent studies. Much of the focus has been on right-wing extremists (Colvina and Pisoiu 2020), extremist groups like Islamists (Chaney and Sahoo 2020), and on how to prevent radicalisation to violent Islamist groups (Holdo 2021). Research shows how civil society opponents also sabotage and manipulate other civil society groups. There have been several examples of social media trolling through creating fake profiles to infiltrate closed groups on Facebook and by hijacking social media accounts to create a sense of an "enemy within" or a "Trojan horse" (Johansson and Scaramuzzino 2022; Rone 2022: 31). However, in these cases is often difficult to decide whether the people behind the sabotage are people inside the countermovement or people inside one's own movement who want to extend their power (Rone 2022). Scholars have also discussed how aid workers or volunteers are, in some contexts, more often exposed to violence. There are, for example, several studies on violent attacks against aid workers in conflict zones, and in these cases the perpetrators are often armed groups (Carmichael and Karamouzian 2014; Narang and Stanton 2017). In a Swedish context, most hate speech, threats, and harassment are expected to occur in these relationships, and therefore most of the perpetrators are expected to exist within them.

2.5 Perpetrators within the CSO or social movement

When analysing the different relationships in which hate speech, threats, and harassment can occur, relationships within the CSO or social movement can be of relevance. Studies on workplace violence often focus on different types of violent acts that occur within work organisations, such as workplace bullying (Waddington et al. 2006). However, within civil society research, this perspective is almost non-existent. There are a few exceptions, including a study on sexual workplace harassment in NGOs in Pakistan, but the focus is on the victims and not on the perpetrators (Jalal et al. 2015). Another study focused on workplace violence against Italian volunteers in cardiology and oncology units and explores perpetrators' characteristics. In this instance, it was often a patient or a relative/friend of patient who subjected them to workplace violence; but in some cases, it was a colleague (Acquadro Maran et al. 2018). The general lack of intra-organisation/movement perspectives can perhaps be explained by the strong emphasis on volunteer work, and the fact that CSOs have not been analysed as workplaces. However, according to Statistics Sweden (2019), of all employees in Sweden (5.1 million), 199,280 were employed in civil society. It is difficult to know what to expect regarding hate speech, threats, and harassment in these relationships due to the lack of previous research. When it comes to perpetrators within organisations in general, it is usually either co-workers or managers. As

discussed, this could also be someone from the target group, although it is uncertain whether they can be considered to be inside the organisation or not.

While we find that previous research exploring hate speech, threats, and harassment against CSOs has tended to focus on one of the three loci, we will address the phenomenon and its perpetrators by looking at how the actors frame their experiences of being exposed depending of the locus of the perpetrator.

3. Methods and empirical material

The article is based on a qualitative study that was carried out between March 2020 and June 2021. A qualitative method was chosen to capture interviewees' experiences of hate speech, threats and harassment and how they frame different types of perpetrators. This kind of in-depth analysis required a small sample. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with elected representatives (chairmen and board members), paid employees (i.e., managers, project leaders), and volunteers in Swedish CSOs, as well as a representative of Swedish CSO security training, who had a broader understanding of the hate speech, threats, and harassment levelled against Swedish CSOs.

To contact interviewees from different types of Swedish CSOs, umbrella organisations were approached and asked whether any of their member organisations wanted to participate in the study. In parallel, a snowball sample was used to ensure that different types of CSOs were represented in the sample. Hate speech, threats, and harassment are sensitive topics. To protect interviewees' anonymity, any specific information about the CSOs and the interviewees will not be presented. The people included in the study were mostly women (8 women and 4 men) 20 to 80 years old. A majority had been or were active in several CSOs and had held different positions over the years. Most of the interviewees were active in local branches of larger organisations and movements in different parts of Sweden. The interviewees were active in, for example, religious communities, trade unions, sports associations, and advocacy organisations that worked on issues such as gender equality, violence against women, honour-based violence, sexuality, disabilities, children and youth, mental health, poverty, human rights, refugees' rights, education, and the environment.

Even though we purposefully included different types of CSOs in the sample, the aim of this study is not to provide a representative image of hate speech, threats, and harassment against CSOs. Rather we want to include as large a variety as possible of experiences of perpetrators which we assume is partly dependent on the type of CSO and social movement the interviewees represent, the position they hold, and the issues they address.

The interviews were conducted on the telephone or via video meetings and lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. The interviewees were asked questions

about whether they or their association had been subjected to hate speech, threats, or harassment; and, if so, by whom. A security training representative and two representatives from the sports movement who worked specifically to prevent hate speech, threats, and harassment and to assist associations in doing so, were asked specific questions about their general impressions of who exposes whom to hate speech, threats, and harassment, and how they worked on these issues.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed for themes (cf. Nowell et al. 2017 for a more in-depth description of this study's methodology). We read the transcriptions several times to generate initial codes based on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator/harasser; whether the perpetrator was inside or outside civil society; whether they were inside or outside the CSO; and whether the violence was initiated by individuals or by organisations. We then searched for recurrent themes focusing on the perpetrators and sectoral boundaries and found the following: 1) anonymous perpetrators; 2) civil society opponents/countermovements; 3) civil society allies and inside the CSO/social movement; 4) a political strategy within their own movement; 5) the people they meet and help; 6) organised crime members; and 7) public authorities and municipalities.

Figure 2 summarises the perpetrators described in the interviews in relation to sectoral boundaries:
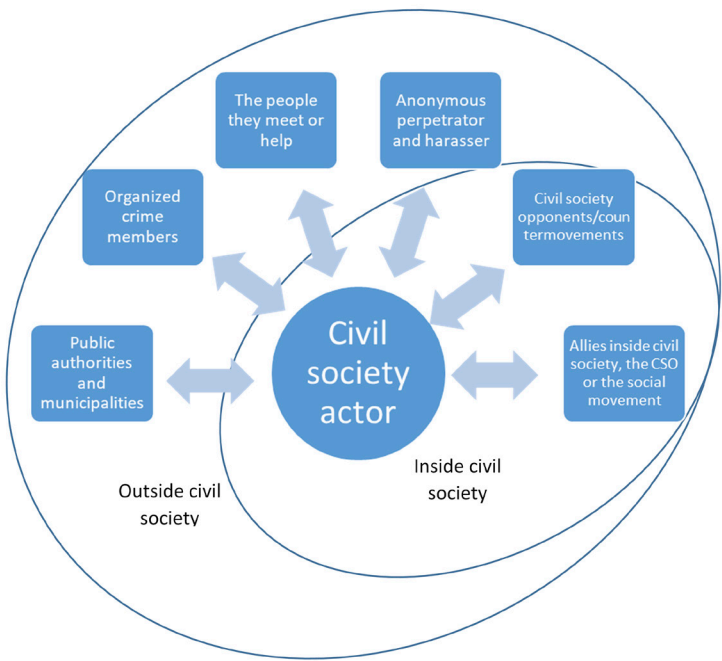
Figure 2   Multiple perpetrators outside and inside the civil sphere

Within each theme, different experiences of hate speech, threats, and harassment were highlighted to gain a multifaceted picture of the framing of the experience and of the perpetrators. In the empirical material, there were accounts about a wide array of different kinds of harassment; from degrading comments, slandering, and spreading rumours, to damaged property, sexual harassment, gun threats, and homicide.

4. Analysis

While our analysis distinguishes between different types of perpetrators, an important frame is that the phenomenon is very common and coming from different directions. For example:

> *Unfortunately, I have been subjected to threats several times. The picture is very complex. There are threats both from the ones we help (refugees), from right-wing extremists, and from Islamists. So, they come from three different directions. It is totally insane to be in this kind of situation. (Interviewee 8)*

The situation of being targeted by multiple perpetrators is framed as *insane* to emphasise the situation as unbearable and possibly unacceptable.

4.1 Anonymous perpetrator: a human coward or an artificial intelligence/bot?

Framing of the experience of being subjected to hate speech, threats, or harassment tends to be affected by the identity of the perpetrator as will be discussed further on. Anonymous threats, however, tend to have their own framing process as the identity of the perpetrator and their relationship to the victim are unknown. For example, an interviewee described how they had been subjected to threats multiple times over the years and "it was anonymous, as always" and "they are cowards who act anonymously in this way" (Interviewee 7). The framing here emphasises on the one hand that it is a common occurrence to receive anonymous threats and on the other hand the moral boundary of cowardness of the perpetrator that does not reveal their identity.

The framing of anonymous perpetrators sometimes involved also an attempt of making sense of it based on other elements than the identity of the perpetrator. Drawing on the modus operandi, one interviewee who had received anonymous letters with the same handwriting presumed them being from the same sender. Sometimes the content was used in the framing to understand the motive of the perpetrator: "I have received anonymous letters and it appears that it is for a single purpose – that is that I should not help new arrivals" (Interviewee 8). The anonymity of the perpetrator was also framed as a consequence of social media: "It is hard to

know when writing a comment online. You might write that you name is Jörgen, and you live in Sörmland, but I do not know if it is true" (Interviewee 1).

In general, the anonymous perpetrator was framed as someone who does not dare to stand up for their opinions publicly. They were also framed as someone who spends a lot of time hating others, tapping into the general idea of social media being filled of haters and trolls. The anonymous perpetrator was not always thought of as human, rather framed as potentially artificial intelligence, or a *bot* that was behind the multiple threats. In this case, the framing involves a dehumanisation of the perpetrator. While sectoral boundaries are not so easily drawn when it comes to anonymous perpetrators and harassers, moral boundaries were drawn more easily; depicting the harassers as cowards, compulsory haters or even non-human.

4.2 Civil society opponents

The framing of opponents as perpetrators of hate speech, threats, or harassment was pointing at right-wing conservative groups and groups with a racist or/and anti-feminist agenda. For example: "the (internal) analysis was that it was right-wing extremists" (Interviewee 2), "...it has often been on this type of internet forum [which] gathers people with some form of Nazi background, if I may say so, and Sweden Democrats supporters[1] and so on" (Interviewee 4) and "I have been threatened at least ten times by right-wing extremists" (Interviewee 8). An interviewee said that a fellow unionist "was murdered by Nazis" (Interviewee 6).

Male perpetrators were also often part of the framing for instance according to an interviewee being exposed to hate messages from men, when they published something about menstruation. This interviewee also specifically mentioned how their organisation had been repeatedly approached by a countermovement who advocates against abortion:

> When we have recognised international safe abortion day, we have received messages from – what are they called – Pro Life – I do not know what they are called in Swedish – with videos about how terrible we are. They send videos of anti-abortion movements and "this is what an abortion looks like" and they write to us that we are horrible, disgusting, and repulsive to be doing "this". (Interviewee 1)

In both cases the framing tend to emphasise the issue of gender (menstruation and abortion) as triggering the perpetrators against them. Another example of issue-related framing was connected to the issue of migration and integration: "some persons and organisations advocate that we should be labelled racists if we highlight

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1   Sweden Democrats is a right-wing populist party.

where these bad customs (e.g., honour violence) come from." (Interviewee 8). The interviewee seems to frame this threat as aiming at limiting their possibility of expressing themselves concerning the issues they work with.

The framings were here often pointing at ideological conflicts (opposing views) rather than moral boundaries. Legal boundaries were brought up in the sense that it was sometimes difficult for civil society actors to decide when messages crossed the legal line and became hate speech, and thus marking the moment when their opponents became perpetrators. All messages could not perhaps be considered hate speech, according to the interviewee, because some of the messages were more along the lines of: "…is this something that you should spend your resources on?" (Interviewee 1).

These examples of framings are related to perpetrators within civil society from actors who hold opposing views. Perhaps because some level of conflict between opposing movements is considered a natural part of democratic debate, framing of moral boundaries were often hidden behind ideological conflicts. Framing of legal boundaries were also seldom used because the expressions mentioned by the interviewees, although clearly confrontative, were seldom framed as hate speech, threats, or harassment.

4.3 Allies inside civil society or inside the own CSO or social movement

Framing of perpetrators within the own CSO or social movement tend to follow a different pattern than those that we have seen so far. An experience of being exposed to a sexual comment from a partner of collaboration for instance was clearly framed as coming from *within*: "That person was also within civil society, and employed in another CSO" (Interviewee 4). Framing of perpetrators within collaborative networks could also involve representative from the public sector:

> There were threats from politicians, who stated that if I continued to be visible, because I was often on TV and on the radio, and if I did not say that they also had contributed money, they would withdraw their (financial) contribution. (Interviewee 3)

As the quote shows, the interviewee framed the perpetrators as (ab)using the leverage given by public funding as a means of wielding power, and as a threat of loss of these grants.

When violence or harassment came from someone within the CSO or the same social movement, it was often framed as extremely difficult to handle. One interviewee, for example, described how there had been intense conflicts within the association where they were employed and that these conflicts had been going on for

years. It all started when the association received a large donation, and there were conflicts over how the money should be managed and spent: "a lady said that it was the money that they were arguing about, and she is probably right. If there had not been any money, no one would have quarrelled" (Interviewee 12). The conflicts resulted in board members and former board members writing *angry letters* to each other. According to the interviewee, some members also tried to get people that were *easy to control* onto the board, and the conflicts became so intense that someone resigned at the annual meeting. The interviewee described a situation rife with accusations, both written and oral, and how "the whole annual meeting was an attack on me – it was very unpleasant" (Interviewee 12). In this case, it is clear that the experience of being exposed to hate is framed as part of an internal democratic process that had derailed.

Framing experiences of hate speech, threats and harassment within the sports movement involved also discussing how to actively work to prevent bullying and conflicts:

> *They (sports associations) want to do their sport and, for example, swim and play ball or whatever it may be. But time after time, it turns out that there are shortcomings when it comes to management. They may run (the sports association) like their leaders did in the 1970s or 1980s and may not really see issues like democracy as the most important, and there may be some people who control and decide for the association. (Interviewee 10)*

As the quote shows, in these situations the issues are framed as problems regarding how the associations are managed. It was heavily discussed that in most sports, kids are split early-on into gender-specific teams and changing rooms. For example, there were conflicts about what team or changing room individuals who are transgender or non-binary should join and use, and whether it is possible and desirable to create gender-neutral spaces or other alternatives for these kids. In Swedish there is a gender-neutral pronoun, *hen* (similar to "hir" or "they" as a singular gender-neutral pronoun), which also created intense conflict:

> *It may not always end up in threats, but harassment, and we have noticed that both children and young adults can be harmed by such conflicts. There have been several such cases recently. It was a football guy/football girl who did not really know where hir (hen) belonged and where this created problems in the association. I mean, should hir (hen) play with the boys or with the girls? (Interviewee 10)*

While some examples here are clearly framed as internal management of organisations and movements (e.g., funding), some are also framed as related to the

norms that should prevail within the organisation (cf. Buyse 2018). In the case of hate speech, threats, and harassment coming from within the organisation or movement, boundary framings are much more difficult. While some framings can be related to moral boundaries associated with accepted norms, legal boundaries might be more difficult to draw on in the framings, especially when it comes to disagreements about management.

4.4 Political violence as a strategy within one's own movement

Framing violence as a political strategy within their own movement or movements with which they sympathised was often related to an increased polarisation between the *extreme left* and the *extreme right* over the years. One interviewee critically reflected on how a small group of anarcho-syndicalists had begun to use violence as a political strategy:

> *The anarcho-syndicalism movement have unfortunately used violence. This is not something I stand behind or sympathise with. It is some kind of self-destructive spiral that emerged in the late 1980s when the AFA (Anti-Fascist Action) was founded, and the Nazis began to take to the streets. (Interviewee 6)*

In this framing the radical extreme left started to organise as a response to the growing number of Nazis. A similar framing of political violence within the own movement involved the radical feminist movement, targeting individuals and subjecting them to online hate speech and different types of hate campaigns. In the aftermath of the #MeToo protests, specific individuals were named and targeted: "The worst side of the #MeToo wave, or tsunami I would rather say" (Interviewee 6). Even if the strategies were framed as *for a good cause*, it was critical of using online hate speech as a political strategy:

> *On social media I see hate campaigns (…) I do not want to take part in hate campaigns. That hate campaign consists of feminists or human rights activists or people who are against human trafficking and all that. I am a little sad that that discussion cannot be kept more objective and neutral. (Interviewee 6)*

As the quote shows, the strategies are not framed as "meaningful violence" (Juris 2015). Using hate campaigns as a strategy was instead described as only leading to increased polarisation. Moral boundaries are clearly drawn in this framing separating what was considered to be the goal of the movement, and the strategies employed to achieve it. To some extent, these moral boundaries tend to also produce organisational ones, as in some framings the issue of political violence was used to create a distance from movements interviewees actually sympathised with.

4.5 The people they meet or help

Another framing of being subjected to hate speech, threats, and harassment involved having the people that the civil society actors meet or try to help as the perpetrator. One interviewee explained that it was much easier to handle threats coming from the target group, compared to threats from other actors:

> *These people are often high and suffer from mental illness. But we have tools [to handle it]. It is a physical person standing in front of you. I have not worked so close[ly] with our participants, not in recent years at least. But it is understandable that there may be a conflict. They want something that we cannot accept, so they have to go for a walk and calm down. These situations are manageable, and we have the resources and tools to handle them, but not for handling the other [types of threats]. (Interviewee 3)*

As the quote shows, the framing of the perpetrator is much more positive than what we have seen before. The conflict is framed as *understandable* and the hate, threats and harassment as *manageable*. Another similar framing involved the association receiving bomb threats when arranging a couple-strengthening activity in collaboration with social services:

> *It has happened that a person (service-user) who did not want to go to these meetings thought it was a very good solution to call and make a bomb threat, because "then they have to close, and I do not have to participate". It has happened on a couple of occasions. Once we figured out who it was who did this, that person was suspended from couple's counselling. (Interviewee 4)*

Here we see a similar framing and the use of the ironic "a very good solution". All in all, also here the framing presents the threats as manageable through suspending the perpetrator.

In the framing of these kind of experiences, the sexual motives were also an element. Another interviewee described how they had received several phone calls with people moaning or making suggestive comments:

> *It was people who called and thought that they could get a date just because you were a little bit nice on the phone. This may not be considered a threat or hatred, but it can be quite unpleasant to be called on your private phone, when working on sexuality issues with filthy suggestions. From the calling person's own perspective, these suggestions may be perceived as nice: "Hello, do you want to go on a date?" But from my perspective it might not be nice. (Interviewee 2)*

Also in this framing the perpetrator is depicted in a less negative way both morally and legally. Morally the assertion that the perpetrator might perceive the comments as *nice* make them less culpable. Also the statement that it "might not be considered a threat or hatred, but..." conveys the perception that it was not so serious.

In the framings presented so far, the motive of the perpetrator was not described as *political*, and arose more often out of different expectations, a vulnerable position, frustration, or because they held different values. However, some of the interviewees suggested that in some situations it was also political: "During election campaigns, some people bark at you, but that you have to put up with (...) It is important to be aware of that there are other people with different opinions. As long as they do not attack you physically" (Interviewee 7). The framing clearly depicts the episodes as something inevitable that the actor should "put up with". The moral boundary is drawn when it comes to physical violence. An interviewee who lectured on disabilities described how they sometimes met pupils who had a bad attitude, but once "... afterwards, this guy came to me and apologised" (Interviewee 11). In this framing we find also an explanation of these episodes as happening out of ignorance. In this way meeting and talking to people could be framed as a way to change their attitudes, best exemplified by the person *apologising* afterwards.

All in all, the framing of hate speech, threats, and harassment coming from target groups seems to be related to very little boundary work. It seems that most actors, although condemning it, see handling these expressions as part of their mission. Boundaries are of course drawn organisationally, placing the perpetrators and harassers outside the organisation but within the target group for which the actors should be working. There are examples of moral boundaries (and possibly legal boundaries) being drawn at physical attacks.

4.6 Organised crime

A particular framing involved organised crime as a perpetrator in the interviewees' accounts. More specifically, it referred to match fixing targeting the sports movement. Match fixing was framed as a clear threat to the Swedish sports movement, driven by economic interests: "criminality has entered sports because there is money to be earned" (Interviewee 10). In another instance:

I do not have any statistics...but it is often those who want to make money on a game, who make the threats (...) They (the police) have discovered that these (settled) matches have had connections with aggravated criminal groups, and also to some of the recent (gang) shootings. They (the police) know that these (gang shootings) have had to do with gambling and betting. (Interviewee 9)

In the framing of these episodes the element of economic gains is coupled with the element of serious violence in terms of shootings. The interviewee further explained that organised gang members get in touch and ask either referees or players to manipulate a match by taking a red card, giving a warning, or missing a goal, etc. If the referees or players refuse, they are threatened:

> *I have a horror story from a guy who worked…and on his way home he was abducted by two guys who first threatened him only by offering him money, and then he refused. A few days later they came back and then they had a gun. (Interviewee 9)*

The framing of this kind of threats and harassment is clearly drawing both moral and legal boundaries emphasizing the gravity of the episodes. *Horror story* is used to reinforce this feeling when describing a situation of abduction, a clear reference to a violent crime. The presence of the gun makes the gravity in the framing as alarming understandable.

Part of the framing is also that the threats and harassment seem to occur at all levels of sports: "the crazy thing is that this does not only happen on the highest elite level (…) and in criminal circles they are not afraid to go far down in the league system" (Interviewee 10). According to the two interviewees, some sports are easier to manipulate without being caught, such as tennis, basketball, and e-sports, and overall, this phenomenon was probably more common in men's sports, where there is more money to be made.

This particular type of perpetrator is not framed as targeting civil society in particular, but its capacity to infiltrate sports and athletics is framed as potentially a threat to Swedish civil society, as sports is one of the largest areas of activity in associational life. Whether the threat comes from inside or outside civil society is difficult to say. Moral boundaries are drawn as the means used by these organised crime members are framed as unacceptable and immoral. Legal boundaries are also drawn, as they are described as criminals. It is also clear that the organised gang members' motives are framed as non-political, but rather financial – i.e., to make money, which would align them more closely with the business sector.

4.7 Public authorities
As we have already seen discussing collaborations, public authorities are also framed as perpetrators by some interviewees. An interviewee explained how they had to be very careful with how they expressed themselves, so that they would not risk losing public funding:

We are completely funded by grants now. We have some participation fees, but they are extremely small, so most is grant-financed. We notice that we have to defend our work in a completely different way today; for example to a municipality. We talk a lot about how it is a harsh debate and that our work is being questioned. How should we present the activities that we think are good, without clashing with a municipality where we, for example, know that there are politicians who are questioning why we work with, for example, multi-religiousness? Do we dare to talk about it then, or should we not include it? (Interviewee 4)

In this framing, politicians in the municipalities had questioned their work, and the threat of losing the grants was considered a threat to the mare existence as a CSO. The interviewee was also framing difficulties in collaborating with a municipality in a project for asylum seekers, as an issue of racism: "we notice a lot of racism, absolutely, and a lot of fears that if I as an official say yes to this – what are the consequences for me? (…) I think that is a big difference today compared to how it was five years ago" (Interviewee 4).

Another interviewee framed their experience as almost the opposite, where people within government agencies had labelled them *racists*, so they would not receive any public grants: "there are people who spread misinformation about what democracy is and what racism is" (Interviewee 8). According to the interviewee, the CSOs that they represented therefore had to be careful not to lose public funding, and as a result, they were caught in a vicious cycle of self-censorship in their efforts to receive funding.

In these framings, difficulties regarding what can be considered hate speech, threats, and harassment were most visible. When the perpetrators were representatives of public authorities, the threats were often subtle, sometimes expressed as more like a *hunch*, making it difficult to draw legal boundaries. Nonetheless, it was clear that the threats could in the framing of the interviewees have considerably negative consequences for the interviewees and the CSO they represented.

5. Discussion

This article shows how civil society actors' framings of being subjected to hate speech, threats, and harassment tend to vary depending on the locus of the perpetrator. Even though based on a small sample of CSOs the experiences tended to involve a large variation of types of perpetrators spanning from within the CSO and the movement, to allies, adversaries, politicians and organised crime.

It is interesting to notice that in the framing of these experiences moral and legal boundaries are drawn differently, depending both on the specific form of hate, threats, and harassment, as well as to the relationship with the perpetrator. The

discussion about *what* can be considered to be hate speech, threats, and harassment was constantly present in the interviewees' framings, i.e., when different opinions and harsh words turned to hate speech or threats, or when overly-friendly gestures crossed the line and became sexual harassment. In these cases, moral and legal boundaries were difficult for civil society actors to draw. Concerning the former example, critical speech is essential in the civil sphere and for democracy, but when it turns into hate speech or violence it becomes problematic, and an opponent becomes a perpetrator.

Even more clear is that *who* performs hate speech, threats, and harassment, i.e. the locus of the perpetrator plays an important role in how the experience of hate speech, threats and harassment are framed. When the perpetrator is anonymous or part of organised crime it seems that moral and legal boundaries are easier to draw. The anonymous hater is a coward or a bot while the criminal is by definition outside of the law and the moral order. Their actions become unacceptable and should not be tolerated. The former violates the idea of an open debate in the civic space while the latter violates the norms and values of civil society.

It is interesting to notice that also when it comes to hate speech, threats, and harassment from representatives of the public sector, clear moral boundaries are drawn. Even a threat to curtail public funding is framed as unacceptable, which can be related to a tradition of cordial state–civil society relations and a culture of advocacy informed by high trust and respect for each other's role and autonomy. In Sweden, many CSOs are dependent on public funding and on project funding, and there is an expectation that the state will be a guarantor of civic space and security for civil society actors, rather a threat to them.

It is interesting that the framing of ideological opponents tends to be less based on moral or legal boundaries. One possible explanation is that there is an intrinsic adversary relation between movements and countermovements that is drawn upon in the framing, making it natural that engagement based on specific ideologies and values might trigger reactions and opposition from other actors. In a sense it is, to a certain extent, part of the game and a contentious space as civil society.

One possible explanation is that the framing of the experience of hate speech, threats and harassment follows the CSOs understanding of its mission, of its position in society and its relation to other actors. For instance, it is clear that, when it comes to target groups, there seems to be a high level of acceptance from civil society actors concerning hate speech, threats, and harassment. This can of course be related to the actors' commitment to their mission, and to having a users' perspective in approaching the people they work for and hence downplaying the gravity of these episodes in their framings.

When hate speech, threats and harassment comes from within the movements or the CSO there seems also to be a common commitment to a cause and a form

of camaraderie which makes workplace bullying and sexual harassment sometimes difficult for interviewees to define and frame based on moral or legal boundaries. The article also highlights critical elements in the framing of hate speech, threats, and harassment used as a political strategy within the own movements. Also here we see reference to civil society as a contentious space where sometimes, in the heat of the confrontation between opposing ideals, the moral or even legal boundaries are difficult to draw when it comes to hate speech, threats, and harassment.

As this study shows, it is important to have a relational approach for understanding the way in which CSOs and social movements experience and frame hate speech, threats, and harassment as the phenomenon is not unambiguous and is interpreted differently depending on one's relation to the perpetrator.

6. Conclusions

Awareness has been raised on hate speech, threats and harassment as a potential threat to mobilization in civil society and democracy. The discussion has often either focused on shrinking civic space due to authoritarian tendencies and increasing state repression of critical voices and movements, or polarisation of political attitudes, and a increasingly harsh public debate. By shifting the focus on the civil society actors' experiences we have been able to address the phenomenon of hate speech, threats and harassment tout court. By adopting a relational perspective however, we have provided a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon depending on the actors' relation to the perpetrator. Furthermore, the concepts provided by framing theory, have allowed us to explore the processes of sense-making and meaning-attribution of the civil society actors when targeted by hate speech, threats and harassment.

Not surprisingly, the experiences of hate speech, threats and harassment are clearly filtered through the lens of the organisations own mission and value base. The contentious nature of the relations that civil society actors entertain outside and within civil society make it often difficult to draw moral and legal boundaries, especially in situation that touch upon core values and the mission of the organisations. Here the relation with the target groups functions as an important example. A certain level of contention seems to be acceptable if the actors want to pursue their goals. The same goes for dynamics internal to the organization where the democratic process of decision-making implies a certain level of conflict. In both cases there is of course a risk of underestimating the hazard coming from unsafe working environments and workplace bullying (including sexual harassment).

There are power dynamics at play when collective framings are created. They are potentially used to emphasise power structure and situations of oppression, but they have at the same time the capacity to hide other situations. Attention and

sensibility to internal power dynamics and to situation of oppression, can be traded for internal cohesion and mobilization towards a common goal.

Looking at more external dynamics we can see a certain acceptance for hate, threats and harassment in relation also to political opponents. In a sense it is part of the game. Some would argue that a social movement that does not upset anyone is not really doing their job. Challenging power structures is a contentious activity and reasonably raises opposition and mobilises coutermovements. However, there is a risk of the cost becoming too high especially for leaders and representatives that can become targeted with smear campaigns with the effect of discouraging mobilization in society.

While the legal perspective is important, our study shows that we need a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of hate speech, threats and harassment. A strict legalistic, zero tolerance approach, can in fact be used to criminalise any social movement or civil society actor that uses contentious strategies for raising awareness on specific issues that go against governments' policies. Capacity building focusing on hate speech, threats and harassment is needed within civil society to be able to tackle both internal and external perpetrators. It should include not only addressing the legal boundaries but also the moral ones and the way in which they intersect the goals and mission of the organisation. At a societal level we need to raise awareness on the risks of on the one hand an increasing polarised and harsh debate and on the other hand a criminalisation of dissent in the name of social peace.

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