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Pirates on the Liquid Shores of Liberal Democracy: Movement Frames of European Pirate Parties

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Abstract:

In this article, the movement frames of European Pirate Parties are analysed through a thematic analysis of texts relating to the Pirate Parties and transcripts of semi-structured interviews with representatives of Pirate Parties across three European countries – Germany, UK and Belgium. At the level of the diagnostic and prognostic frames the Pirate Parties address contentious issues and discourses about civic liberties, privacy and access to knowledge in a digital era, but they also critique liberal representative democracy as such, which they argue needs to incorporate delegative models of democracy. In addition to this, a pro-social frame is presented emphasizing free education and a basic income. In order to achieve these aims the Pirate Parties develop a distinct collective identity and foster political agency through activism and by participating in electoral politics. Lack of electoral appeal and low levels of membership in some countries, inability to deal with conflicts and an unwillingness to clarify its ideological position and the precise relationship between a libertarian freedom-related agenda and a social justice agenda represent challenges for the Pirate Parties.

Keywords:

Pirate Parties, Social Movement Frames, (Liquid) Democracy, Conflict

Wordcount:

8,100 (incl. references, acknowledgements and notes)

Pirates on the Liquid Shores of Liberal Democracy: Movement Frames of European Pirate Parties

With a strong sense of freedom, bottom-up democracy and the knowledge that the information society has yet to be shaped for the benefit of all, the European Pirates are ready to take on the European challenge.

(European Pirate Party, 2014: <https://europeanpirates.eu/>)

Introduction

Low levels of trust in politicians and in democracy as it is organized today have been with us for quite a while (Norris 2011). In addition to this, calls for a rethink of the democratic system towards a more participatory democratic system date back to the 1970s and 1980s (Pateman 1970; MacPherson 1973; Barber 1984). However, the 2008 bailout of the financial sector by European taxpayers, the ensuing economic crisis in the EU as well as the discourse of austerity and the subsequent attacks on the rights of workers, on public services and on the provision of the welfare state, has arguably deepened the distrust in politicians and in the representative democratic system of governing even further. While in 2003, an average of 35% of EU citizens trusted their national parliament and 31% trusted their national government, 10 years later in 2013 the number of citizens trusting their parliament and government plummeted even further to 26% and 25%, respectively¹.

Despite all this, it seems that the hegemony of capitalism and neo-liberalism has been strengthened rather than weakened as a result of the bailout of the financial system by taxpayers and the ensuing economic crisis. This does not mean, however, that there is no resistance and struggles waged against the neoliberal hegemony. This is especially the case at a discursive level and in a variety of public spaces, online as well as offline. In Gramscian terms, an ideological war of position is taking place whereby a whole range of social movements are articulating stringent critiques on the capitalist regime and on the liberal representative democratic system which protects capitalist interests. A recent example of this is the Indignados movement in Spain calling for 'Democracia Real Ya!', i.e. juxtaposing a 'real' democracy with the system we have now, whereby the latter is deemed to be democratic in name only.

Besides critiques, activism as a form of political agency also produces alternatives, attempts to salvage or re-invent democracy, new practices, which situate themselves both at a discursive/symbolic level and a material level. An example of the latter is how the Indignados and the Occupy movement adopted a general assembly model with rules and a whole set of hand signals to show agreement/disagreement or add a point (Schwartz 2011). Others increasingly develop and use online platforms and software to facilitate more open and transparent decision making processes based on a combination of deliberative and direct models of democracy (Hartleb 2013).

Parallel to, but clearly inter-linked with this crisis of representative democracy thesis, are ongoing struggles to advocate for the transparency of government and to promote the right of individual privacy online and for an open uncensored internet. The contentious nature of the former could be witnessed in the many debates around Freedom of Information legislation, the rights of whistleblowers and WikiLeaks, all highlighting the uneasy contradictions and tensions between the democratic ideals of

open government and the traditional veil of secrecy hanging over governmental policy-making (Beckett 2012; Cammaerts 2013; Beyer 2014). Examples of the latter are the current debates about file-sharing and internet privacy culminating in the recent mobilization by a wide variety of actors against the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) – giving more powers to copyright holders and forcing ISPs to police the internet – and the subsequent no-vote by the EU parliament (cf. Borelli et al. 2012).

The sudden emergence of the Pirate Parties in many countries throughout the world has to be seen against this backdrop. Pirate Parties, which could be seen as a form of “subterranean politics” (Kaldor and Selchow 2013), have been particularly successful in Europe. In 2012, Pirate Parties candidates in Austria, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Iceland and the Czech Republic were elected to municipal councils and/or regional parliaments and in Sweden two Pirate MEPs were elected to the European Parliament in 2009.

Case study and analytical framework

In this article a social movement frame analysis of the Pirate Parties is conducted through a thematic analysis of the transcripts of four semi-structured interviews² with core-representatives of the Pirate Party in Germany, UK and Belgium and five key texts³ (blog-posts, party declarations, book and media texts). In many ways, the Pirate Parties can be considered to bridge the two inter-related fields of contention discussed above, democracy on the one hand and digital rights and freedoms on the other. In fact, the Pirate Parties articulate attacks on digital rights and freedoms as one of the symptoms of the lack of accountable democratic institutions and proper democratic control in the interest of citizens. While the focus in this article is very much on the Pirate Party, they can be situated in a much broader emergent social movement – 1) in opposition to “clearly identified opponents”, 2) connected through “dense informal networks” and 3) sharing a “distinct collective identity” (della Porta and Diani 2006: 20). The movement frames of this burgeoning movement not only critique and resist corporate control, they also voice concerns about access to information, the quality of democracy and increasingly posit the need for better protection mechanisms in terms of our civic, liberal and social freedoms (Beyer 2014).

Through a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (Guest et al. 2012) various core-frames emerged and were analyzed following Snow and Benford’s (1988) model of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. Besides identifying and analyzing the core-frames of the Pirate movement, a number of tensions and contradictions exposed by the frame-analysis will be discussed as well.

Broadly speaking, frames can be understood as ‘schemata of interpretation’ (Goffman 1974). They provide justifications and rationales for struggles and for the ways in which these struggles need to be waged, a prism through which to make sense of the world. In relation to protest movements, Goodwin and Jasper (2003, 52) point out that

[i]n order to attract people to join and remain committed to a movement, its issues must be presented or ‘framed’ so that they fit or resonate with the beliefs, feelings and desires of potential recruits [...] Frames are simplifying devices that help us understand and organizing the complexities of the world.

Movement frames are very diverse and fulfill a wide range of discursive functions to the benefit of movements. They are discursive devices that raise boundaries between what is deemed just and unjust, between (ideological) friends and enemies (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). At a discursive level, frames are constitutive of collective identities for social movements as they tend to operate in juxtaposition with hegemonic positions. Besides this, movement frames are also deployed to build discursive chains of equivalence between various actors, again in juxtaposition with the hegemony. Besides this, some movement frames also aim to mobilize sympathizers for political action and enact agency. Discourse through framing has thus relevance for symbolic as well as material struggles.

To put it in the words of Snow and Benford (1988, 198), movement frames “assign meaning to and mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists”. They propose a model of three distinct but inter-related collective action frames which are applied here to analyse the Pirate Party movement:

- (1) **Diagnostic frames** articulate the problem that needs fixing and aims to weaken the frames of opponents
 - a. What are the main frames of the movement?
 - b. How does the movement position itself ideologically?
- (2) **Prognostic frames** convince recruits of the goals, provides possible solutions to the problem that is articulated by the diagnostic frames and proposes a certain strategy and tactics to achieve the identified goals
 - a. What are the alternatives proposed by the movement?
 - b. Which strategies are being pursued by the movement?
- (3) **Motivational frames**, finally, are aimed at mobilising recruits for actions. They are what is called the agency component of collective action frames
 - a. How is the collective identity of the movement framed?
 - b. What role do networks and actions play for the movement?

(see Benford and Snow 2000)

These three types of frames not only constituted the guiding questions for the interviews but also provided the analytical structure for the frame-analysis of the Pirate Parties which is followed through in the subsequent sections.

Movement Frames of ‘the Pirates’

Diagnostic Frames of the Pirates. As briefly outlined above, diagnostic frames are important discursive devices to denote what the movement is about, with what does it take issue, on what problems in society does the movement focus. In terms of the Pirate movement, four main diagnostic frames emerged out of the iterative thematic analysis: 1) copyright and the commodification of culture/knowledge impedes creativity 2) the right to privacy and opacity 3) the lack of genuine participation in liberal democracy and 4) pressures on social and educational services.

The first two diagnostic frames (copyright and privacy) are very much seen as being interlinked. They relate to the over-commodification of cultural content and to the erosion of civic liberties in the struggle to defend the current copyright regime. The main ideological enemies that have been identified at this level are the entertainment industries, their political supporters and the capitalist regime of

commodity exchange they protect. Rasmus Fleischer (2008, np), one of the co-founders of The Pirate Bay, wrote on his blog CopyRiot that the “vision of copyright utopia is triggering an escalation of technology regulations running out of control and ruining civil liberties”. He and others pointed to the hefty price we are paying as a democratic society for “upholding the phantasm of universal copyright” (ibid).

Along the same lines, the Pirate Parties challenge the current copyright paradigm on the grounds that it “is well out of touch with today’s cultural landscape. It has evolved into an obstacle to creativity, particularly grassroots creativity” (Uppsala Declaration 2008, np). Copyright access to information and knowledge, as well as issues concerning the right to privacy and civic liberties, evidently all came up in the interviews with the Pirate Party (PP) UK, Germany and Belgium.

copyright has been at the top of our agenda and what we talk most about, but equally [...] civil liberties, particularly the right to freedom of speech and, increasingly, the right to protest and also the right to a personal private life (PP UK 2012).

The “classic” Pirate Party is associated mostly with copyright reform (PP Belgium 2014).

The government should not observe their people [...] we want to feel secure in our country of course, but we want to be free as well (PP Germany 2012).

The second set of diagnostic frames (democratic participation and pressures on social and educational services) has to do with the political system and the policy choices made by political elites. When asked about what the main problem is that needs fixing, the Pirate Party representatives from the UK and Belgium refer unequivocally to the first set of frames ‘copyright’ and ‘privacy’. The German representatives on the contrary foreground ‘democratic participation’ referring to the crisis of representative democracy, whereas the copyright issue is positioned as peripheral – “a very important part of the system [...] and big business”, but not at the heart of what the Pirate Party Germany is about (PP Germany 2012). This is in line with a survey done amongst members of the Pirate Party Germany which showed that the most important motive for becoming a member of the Pirate Party Germany was discontent with the traditional democratic system and parties whereas internet policy was only ranked as 5th most important reason for joining the Pirate Party Germany (Neumann 2011, 101).

The Pirate Party in the UK acknowledges “we go further than the Germans in terms of what we’re asking for with copyright, but the direction of travel is clear.” (PP UK 2012). It is clear that the German Pirate Party diagnostic movement frames have shifted and are more focused on the crisis of representative democracy than on copyright and IP; as can also be deduced from these quotes:

[...] politics is too far removed from the people, they are a kind of satellite, separated from everyday life

[...] the current system is based on fear, fear is used as a tool to oppress the people

(PP Germany 2012).

It has to be noted here that as a result of its sudden electoral successes⁴, overall the Pirate Party Germany has developed positions on a much broader range of issues compared to the Pirate Party UK and Belgium. In the UK and Belgium, the Pirate Parties have a more activist identity, focusing on “info-politics” (Pirate Party Belgium 2014). Despite this, the Pirate Parties in the UK and in Belgium are also gradually moving away from being single-issue parties:

[...] we are also in the process of broadening out our manifesto, and one of the things we are highlighting currently is democratic participation. [...] because certainly seen on the European plane, democratic participation is at a woeful low in the UK (PP UK 2012).

[...] it is my impression that there has been a shift in attention towards wholesale political reform. Mostly, this centers around the idea that the way we practice politics should be replaced with a truly democratic alternative (PP Belgium 2014).

Combining the two diagnostic frames, the main political fault line identified by the Pirate Parties is the one between an open participatory democratic society and a dystopian top-down big brother-like society based on fear.

In terms of thinking about the political compass, the real difference, coming into the 21st Century, is whether we’ve got a closed or an open society (PP UK 2012).

The ideological positioning of the Pirate Parties is, however, slightly confusing and at times contradictory. Both the UK and the German representatives denote the left-right dichotomy as something from the last millennium – “we reject that terminology” (PP UK 2012); “We have no position, we say we are not left-right, we don’t want to be associated with these old style clusters” (PP Germany 2012). Despite the initial rejection of the old ideological fault lines, when probed deeper, the Pirate Parties do acknowledge being progressive, combining a libertarian with a social agenda:

Liberal means open society and social means to take responsibility for the society (PP Germany 2012).

[...] it is quite clear that we are highly in favour of social equality, which makes us left-wing (PP Belgium 2014).

While this social agenda of the Pirate Party is definitely more pronounced in Germany and Belgium than it is in the UK, overall we can assert that the need for a more social society can be identified as a fourth diagnostic frame of the Pirate Party.

Prognostic Frames of the Pirates. Prognostic frames – i.e. what is to be done, to paraphrase Lenin – point to a vision of how the ills diagnosed by the movement can be cured, articulating alternatives and advocating an agenda of agency: “Change in the heads of people will lead to change in society” (Pirate Party Germany 2012). The level of prognostic frames map onto the diagnostic frames with solutions to issues around 1) digital rights, which encapsulates concerns of both copyright and privacy, 2) a more participatory ‘real’ democratic system and 3) a more social society.

The main prognostic frame that relates to the first two diagnostic frames – copyright and privacy, have been collapsed into the safeguarding of digital rights. “We see our core areas as to do with what we would term digital rights, that is, essentially, the free and distributed use of the internet in the context of reform of intellectual property”. (PP UK 2012). The main components of the digital rights prognostic frame are: (1) open access to information and knowledge or put simply “free information for everyone” (PP Germany 2012) and (2) the protection of privacy in a digital age – the expansion of “the right to anonymity in communication” and “the secrecy of correspondence should encompass all digital communication” (Uppsala Declaration 2008, np).

As already pointed out in the section on diagnostic frames, Pirate Parties increasingly aim to be more than a single-issue party focusing on copyright and internet-related issues. The way our societies are being governed and ruled by political elites has also become the object of a stringent critique as witnessed in the previous section and this is also apparent in terms of prognostic frames calling for a transparent and open government, “Politics should be more open, and every step of a decision communicated to the people” (PP Germany 2012). This represents the overlap between the digital rights frame and the real democracy prognostic frame.

A clear-cut distinction is introduced in this regard between the “public sphere ruled by transparency and the personal private sphere protected by privacy”. The Pirate Parties do not see this as a contradiction; “[s]ometimes those two things are set up in opposition to each other, we don’t see it that way” (PP UK 2012). This is in line with the Uppsala-Declaration (2008), which stated that a “democratic society needs a transparent state and non-transparent citizens”.

However, as pointed out already, Pirate Parties increasingly argue that democracy itself needs to be reformed by incorporating more participatory forms of democracy; “we are looking for more possibilities to participate” (PP Germany 2012) and “more fundamental work needs to be done to reach out” (PP UK 2012). At the level of the prognostic the pirate party movement operationalises the real democracy frame by adopting the concept of Liquid Democracy (LD).

The concept of LD is based on changes in military strategies, replacing very rigid chains of command with a more flexible and agile decision-making process. Some also speak of adhococracy in this regard (see Jenkins 2006; Global Freedom Movement 2011). However, it can also be seen as a form of delegative democracy, which was discussed by Marx and Engels (1971) when they wrote about the Paris uprising in 1871 and the subsequent establishment of the Paris Commune (see also Carpentier 2011, 28-9). As such, it is not entirely unsurprising to observe that liquid democracy as a form of delegative democracy is being foregrounded today as an alternative way of decision-making by current political and protest movements (including the Indignados in Spain and the Occupy Movement).

LD is defined by the pirate parties as means for a demos to debate and subsequently vote on concrete ideas and/or policy proposals formulated by one or several of their peers. Individual members of the demos can furthermore delegate their vote to others whom they trust and who have particular expertise on the issues being discussed – “you can choose to delegate your vote to a person for a single idea, but for another theme you choose somebody else” (PP Germany 2012). For the Pirate Parties, LD is also about “seeing the collaborative, the distributed and the non-hierarchical advantages of the internet in relation to policy” (PP UK 2012).

The way this is operationalized is through a set of practices and a technology that facilitates LD as a process. This is what is being called the Liquid Feedback tool (cf. Figure 1):

[Liquid Feedback] is an opinion-finding tool [...] It is liquid because maybe the idea comes from one person, other people connect to it and start thinking about the idea and create other alternatives, and this is how politics should be developed (PP Germany 2012).

[Figure 1 about here]

All Pirate Parties under consideration in this article use online ‘Liquid Feedback’-type platforms and collaborative text editors (Pirate Pads) to discuss and shape policy ideas and in doing so they adopt a strong discourse of horizontal democracy in which participation and public discussion and debate plays an important role:

People can comment and vote things up and down. Certain things will be top of the pile and certain things we felt were not good or serious or well-articulated, or against the spirit of the party, they didn't get anywhere (PP UK 2012).

[Liquid Democracy] means that it is a process, it is never finished (PP Germany 2012).

[...] you get to choose which political topics you wish to actively participate in, you may also delegate your vote to other members (PP Belgium 2014).

The final prognostic frame has to do not with how society should be run (decision-making processes), but concerns the question as to what kind of society and what kind of decisions the Pirate Parties want. It seems that society should not only be a free and participatory, but also a social society. This speaks to the Pirate Parties’ efforts to widen their policies beyond the digital rights agenda. “We have a wide programme and economics and social politics are a very important point” (PP Germany 2012). Core policies that the Pirate Parties defend in this regard are amongst others free education for all and strong public services:

there's economics, and business wants to make money from the educational system, but it is clear for us that education should not be part of the economic law (PP Germany, 2012).

Furthermore, in Germany and Belgium the Pirate Parties endorse Gorz’s (2002) idea of an “unconditional basic income for all to have a safe existence [and] be able to live your life as you want” (PP Germany 2012); “we support the concept of a universal basic income” (PP Belgium 2014). It is envisaged that this will lead to a new kind of society less driven by fear and anxiety. When a universal basic income is introduced, it is argued,

the economy will change because people don't have the pressure to survive so they can choose their jobs. As a result, the jobs that need to be created should be attractive jobs (PP Germany 2012).

Motivational Frames of the Pirates. Motivational frames point to action and political agency, they are essential in order to underpin efforts to mobilise people to rally for the movement's cause, to support the movement, to maybe even become a member or an activist. Motivational frames call upon us to act with urgency, taking the symbolic to the material. In the analysis three main motivational frames emerged: 1) a collective identity frame, 2) a network frame, and 3) an efficacy frame.

In order to motivate people to become part of a political movement, to participate in it, the development of a distinct collective identity is deemed of crucial importance (della Porta and Diani 2006, 20; Flesher-Fominaya 2010). A strong collective identity is “seen as both a necessary precursor and product of movement collective action” (Hunt and Benford 2004: 433); it has cognitive, moral as well as emotional characteristics and has a symbolic element, with references to ideology, as well as a practical one, relating to agency. Motivational frames in the context of collective identity “suggest not merely that something can be done but that ‘we’ can do something” (Gamson 1992, 7); they thus instill a sense of urgency to act together as a collective. First the symbolic element will be addressed, after which the political agency component will be highlighted.

What that collective identity consists of in terms of the Pirate Party movement is rather fuzzy and vague at the moment. At the same time this might be a deliberate strategy to ensure the mobilization of a wide diversity of people from a variety of backgrounds (see below). Steering clear of the old ideological divides and entrenched political fault lines could also be seen to be part of this.

We avoid saying that we have one identity, this is not our way of thinking, on the contrary. We have multiple identities, but we work together on one idea. The idea puts us together (PP Germany 2012 - emphasis added by author).

With statements like the one above or ‘we are still finding the right path when it comes to a shared political identity’ (PP UK 2012 - emphasis added by author) the Pirate Party could be seen as a typical movement of these times, accommodating difference and negotiating a position between distinct identities and agenda's through focusing on particular diagnosed problems and concrete proposals for solutions to these problems.

The lack of a clear-cut political identity precisely becomes the very core of the collective identity of the Pirates – that what ‘puts us together’. Especially in the interview with the German and the Belgian Pirate Parties, members were consistently called ‘pirates’. For example, “**We as Pirates** have the feeling that we are more and more under control [from business and the state]” (PP Germany 2012 - emphasis added by author) and “**Pirates believe** in an open society, free from corruption, based on truth and sharing, a place for human happiness and curiosity to flourish” (PP Belgium 2014 - emphasis added by author).

Besides articulating a collective identity, the Pirate Parties also establish chains of equivalence (Mouffe 1993, 77) between themselves and other political actors at a given time. While highly relevant to the discursive articulation of alliances, for example aligning with the discourse of WikiLeaks or Occupy, from a social

movement network perspective (della Porta and Diani 2006) these connections and networks with other movements are also constitutive of the political movement itself and its support-base:

We are a political party who see ourselves in relation to activism. I see that as being practical and dealing with what actually needs fixing right now (PP UK 2012).

The German representatives point to a variety of actors whom they aim to build links with: “In global society there are a lot of people with similar feelings, looking at similar problems and of course there are possibilities to work together and build networks” (Pirate Party Germany 2012). In the UK and Belgium, links with other movements and organisations are also very pronounced and articulated, for example with the Occupy Movement:

To a certain extent we've communicated with Occupy [...] We've been very clear in seeing those protest movements as a vital part of articulating a need for real fundamental change, so all of that is valuable (PP UK 2012).

We are quite obviously part of a group of social initiatives that have emerged around the same time: Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados, WikiLeaks, Anonymous, etc. are all children of their time, with the Pirate Party being the expression of the same ideas, shaped and structured to be able to fit within our electoral system (PP Belgium 2014).

In addition to the identity and the networks frames, an efficacy frame could also be identified, both internally and externally. External efficacy refers to having a genuine impact on policy by engaging in electoral politics, but also to focusing on timely contentious issues that divide public opinion and which neatly fit the diagnostic frames of the movement. Examples of this were campaigns to support Julian Assange or the anti-SOPA/ACTA campaigns. Regarding the latter, resistance has shown to be productive and even able to make a difference:

The international/distributed nature of the protest allowed us to gain enough visibility to have a direct impact on legislation procedures. Even though the protests were relatively small, they were everywhere and they were reported on by the media, which in its own turn had a real political impact (PP Belgium 2014).

There are also country-specific issues that are the focus of activism and deemed beneficial in terms of recruitment. In the UK, the Pirate Party focuses for quite some time now on the draconian measures in the UK's Digital Economy Act, which still have not been fully implemented:

we are focusing on certain types of legislation which we see as depressingly threatening to digital rights in the UK, so the Digital Economy act of 2010 and most recently the injunctions leading to cyber-blocking have been at the top of our campaigning agenda as

well as working on the ground in elections. [These concrete issues] brings people to us on the level of people joining the party but also in terms of interest in us (PP UK 2012).

Also in Germany, where the Pirate Party has arguably become slightly less activist and is more institutionalized, (local) campaigns are still very much part of the German Pirate Party's ethos. The Pirate Party in Berlin, for example, stopped schools installing a Trojan horse software tool to monitor online behaviour of students and teachers: "If you install spy software, it is against the education system [...] We stopped this idea" (PP Germany 2012).

At an internal level the efficacy frame is very pronounced too. The Pirate Parties proud themselves on having very open horizontal structures, promoting participation, which in itself represents a motivational frame, providing citizens the opportunity to do something, to be active:

We are totally different [...] we work together, we collaborate, it's not a hierarchy [...] it's a more organic system, without fixed borders (PP Germany, 2012).

Decentralization is really exciting; it's about getting different people involved (PP UK 2012).

[The Pirate Party] places a heavy emphasis on decentralised organisation, with an aversion of power, spokespersons, etc. (PP Belgium 2014).

This is subsequently reflected in the way the Pirate Parties are organized with overall weak national structures and very strong and active branches localized in places where there is a critical mass of people willing to engage and act. As such, the Pirate Parties very much emphasize their bottom-up and non-hierarchical structures:

All members are equal, there is no 'I am an expert, I'm more important' [...] it is what you do yourself that gives you a role in the group (PP Germany 2012).

One thing that probably sets us apart is a strong internal resistance and often aversion to traditional power structures, outside as well as inside the party (PP Belgium, 2014).

Obviously, in terms of the efficacy frame, engaging with the electoral system and thus with representative liberal democracy, can in itself be considered to be part of the efficacy frame.

in terms of getting what you want done, the best way to do it is make the people who are taking those decisions sweat and that they cannot avoid you (PP UK 2012).

the only way to make change happen is to become part of [the system] and change it from the inside, to convince people in the

system [...] It's much harder to change a system from outside (PP Germany 2012).

Contradictions and Tensions for the Pirate Party Movement

A number of issues and problems present themselves for the Pirate Parties as a political movement. They situate themselves primarily at the level of the prognostic as well as motivational frames. The most important ones which we will deal with here concern issues with membership and electoral success, as well as how to deal with internal conflicts.

In the political science tradition great emphasis is placed on the ability of movements to motivate people to become a member of an organisation. Membership is arguably an outdated, but still highly tangible, way to ascertain the degree of popular support a movement has, which also often gets translated into political clout. The formal membership of the Pirate Party Germany grew exponentially from a few hundred members in 2009 to almost 35,000 members in 2012. Especially after the elections for the EU Parliament in 2009 and the regional elections of 2011 a boost can be observed in membership numbers (cf. Figure 2). Inevitably, this has led to a high degree of diversity:

People come to us from all origins, old people, young people, students, managers, every person who has the feeling: 'Yes, I don't feel free any more' (PP Germany 2012).

However, the internal conflicts discussed above did have a clear negative impact on membership. Since 2012 a steady decline in membership in Germany can be observed (cf. Figure 2). Despite this, in 2014 the Pirate Party Germany managed to gain a seat in the EU Parliament, the only one for the Pirate Party Movement.

[Figure 2 about here]

Membership in the UK and Belgium is distinctly smaller with respectively about 700 and 200 members (in 2014). Despite these low figures, the Pirate Party UK boasts a broad diversity of members: "The Pirate Party is a new bunch of people. Putting new bunches of people together is interesting. [...] People have a wide variety of backgrounds. For example, two of the people I work with quite a lot are ex-military" (PP UK 2012). In Belgium, however, a more self-reflexive tone could be heard. In Belgium it is precisely the very lack of genuine diversity, especially in relation to gender and ethnicity, which is lamented and considered to be problematic:

One could also make the observation that [the Pirate Party Belgium] attracts quite few women and minorities (PP Belgium 2014).

However, formal membership of an organisation is not all that counts today and support can be garnered in other ways as well. In 2014, Pirate Party Belgium had about 5,000 likes on Facebook while the Pirate Party UK has over 9,000 and Pirate Party Germany over 30,000. On Twitter the figures are respectively about 3,000 followers in Belgium, 14,000 followers in the UK, and 125,000 followers in Germany.⁵

The discrepancies between the different countries can be explained by a set of factors and the interplay between popular support, electoral success and membership. As the political science literature points out, “success could, in effect, breed success” (Fisher et al. 2006, 506), leading to what Whiteley and Seyd (1998) call a “spiral of mobilization”, the opposite of a spiral of demobilization affecting the traditional parties. From this perspective, the political context for the Pirate Party UK and Belgium is quite different than for the Pirate Party in Germany.

When it comes to the UK, the electoral system does not bode well for small single-issue parties because of its majoritarian constituency-based first-past the post principle. This makes it very difficult indeed for the Pirate Party UK to gain seats in the national Parliament. Even at local level the Pirate Party UK failed to generate public support. During the recent 2012 local elections, the Pirate Party UK received 5% of the votes in one ward of Manchester, but this represented a mere 127 votes⁶. In other places Pirate candidates obtained less than 3% of the vote. Despite this, the Pirate Party UK (2012) insists that elections remain important: “the best way [of getting things done] is to make the people who are making those decisions sweat and that they cannot avoid you [laughs].”.

In Belgium, just as in Germany, the electoral system has a 5% threshold before a party is represented in Parliament. However, unlike in Germany, the Pirate Party in Belgium failed to reach this threshold by a long stretch. In the general elections of 2014 the Pirate Party received a mere 0,6% of the popular vote in North-Belgium, but they are very aware of their weak electoral appeal:

We are quite obviously one of the lesser successful [Pirate Parties], having achieved no electoral successes so far. This has a lot of impact on what can be achieved within the party and the type of membership it attracts (PP Belgium 2014).

Both the Pirate Parties in the UK and Belgium are realistic in terms of the possibilities of getting elected and as a result they articulate their role differently. They position themselves first and foremost as activists rather than as new politicians, and use the leverage of a party to gain access to and intervene in the mainstream public sphere.

We want to set the agenda whether we're elected or not, and we're already beginning to do just that [...] we're punching above our weight media-wise and also politically (PP UK 2012).

As such, competing in elections becomes part of a broader activist strategy and a struggle for visibility (Thompson, 2005), rather than an end in itself. There is also ample evidence from both countries that an activist strategy aiming to punch above their weight can be highly successful (Griggs and Howarth, 2004; Cammaerts, 2007).

Electoral success, the lack thereof and its impact on membership, is not the only issue the Pirate Parties have to cope with. The tension between on the one hand growing as an organisation and the inevitable hierarchies that subsequently tend to develop (Michels 1915) and on the other hand the discourse of openness, transparency and horizontal participation, is very real for the Pirate Parties. For example, the use of LD as a tool of internal decision-making comes with its own set of problems. A common critique is that this type of decision making can lead to a fairly limited number of people garnering a lot of support and having a large impact on the decision making

process. There are also issues in terms of the lack of a critical mass of people actually participating in such liquid democracy experiments:

We've done some experiments with 'true' liquid democracy, but the adoption rate and the enthusiasm for actually using it was quite low. [...] one can easily observe the very low number of active or true participants (PP Belgium 2014).

In the articulations of LD as the operationalization of the real democracy frame there is little mention of how to deal with conflict. A bit reminiscent of the ideals of a Habermasian deliberative public sphere, LD is often presented as conflict-free: ideas are proposed, debate is had, votes are delegated, votes are cast, decision is made.

However, as neo-Gramscian accounts systematically point out, conflict cannot be ignored and is impossible to eradicate from the political (Mouffe 1993). Concurring with this theoretical position which foregrounds the political as inherently conflictual, once the Pirate Party in Germany started to grow and began to win mandates through elections, internal conflicts and disruptive power struggles emerged as well, which led Der Spiegel (2013) to speak of “Liquid Democracy”. The UK representative even commented on this by vehemently stating: “we are less fractious than the Germans” (PP UK 2012), but it is also fair to say that the Pirate Party UK is much smaller and less popular than its German counterpart(y) is. Besides these issues of size, the thematic analysis of the interviews did reveal serious issues in relation to the ways in which the Pirate parties often fail to deal with (internal) conflict:

conflicts and ideological conflicts are simply not being dealt with in an active way at all. Mostly we ignore they are there and I suspect most people just hope for people they disagree with to simply go away, which surprisingly works all too often. Since there is no hierarchy, there is no formalised way to deal with conflict or with gaming the system in any effective manner, mostly because there are no real exclusion mechanisms, which tends to rewards trolling behaviour above all else (PP Belgium 2014).

Conflicts also emerge at the international level within the movement, for example when it comes to the prognostic frame of the need for a strong social agenda. It is clear that not all Pirate Parties share this concern with equality and the redistribution of wealth:

it must be noted that there is quite some controversy regarding a [universal basic income]. For example, in the program of the European Pirate Party you will not find this proposal. [...] There is of course a large component regarding the distribution of wealth, for example 'the 1%' and a universal basic income that is not shared (PP Belgium 2014).

Conclusions

The Pirate Parties advocate for digital rights and civic liberties, but they also critique democracy itself and call for democratic renewal. The Pirate Parties are part of a broader burgeoning movement, aligning themselves with other actors such as

WikiLeaks, Anonymous and the Occupy movement, in critiquing the secrecy of the liberal state and a decline in civic liberties, lamenting a lack of balance between corporate/financial interests and societal interests and developing a digital rights and transparency agenda. The Pirate Parties present themselves as a clear alternative to the mainstream political establishment; both in the way they operate and in terms of the policy ideas they develop.

The Pirate parties combine a set of frames which not only positions them ideologically and politically, but is also geared towards motivating supporters and new recruits to act and be an agent for change. Through a stringent critique of the liberal representative democratic system, the Pirate Parties aim to broaden their appeal beyond their quite narrow legacy of anti-copyright struggles and the digital rights frames. In addition to this, a pro-social frame is being articulated albeit in a more pronounced way by some Pirate Parties than others.

At the level of prognostic frames, besides the political struggle for digital rights, such as freedom of information and privacy, a new form of bottom-up decision-making is foregrounded, embedded in the tradition of delegative democracy, namely Liquid Democracy. Finally, at the social level, free education and the introduction of a basic income for all is proposed by some Pirate Parties.

Finally, there are also a set of motivational frames that specifically focuses on political agency and is geared towards promoting agency and stimulating participation in the movement and in politics. A collective identity is actively constructed: 'we, the Pirates'. Through building networks and aligning with other movements such as WikiLeaks and the Occupy movement, Pirate Parties establish a chain of equivalence in juxtaposition to the current neoliberal representative system. An efficacy frame, finally, points to how participation in the Pirate Parties can make a real difference, either through having your say internally or through activism and political agency.

By engaging with the democratic system and electoral politics, the Pirate Parties clearly aim to appeal beyond civil society and reach the hearts and minds of the broader electorate, but also gain visibility. By focusing on very timely contentious issues Pirate Parties tend to punch above their electoral weight, especially in Belgium and the UK. At the same time, there is evidence that the traditional link between electoral success and the number of members and active participants in the Pirate Parties applies. There are also serious issues of scale in some countries as well as a lack of internal diversity when it comes to gender and ethnicity.

The discourses of horizontal bottom-up structures, spontaneity, non-hierarchy and Liquid Democracy as voiced by the prognostic frames also contradict an increase in internal conflicts and inability to deal with contestation. The real democracy prognostic frame operationalized by a discourse of Liquid Democracy breathes a Habermasian denial of the inherently conflictual nature of the political (Mouffe, 1993).

The rather vague ideological positioning and ideological diversity of the various Pirate Parties and its membership, tends to increase the risk of internal conflict. The diagnostic and prognostic frames disseminated by Pirate Parties attempt to pacify an old political and ideological fault line between freedom and equality. They posit a very strong libertarian agenda of personal freedom and a right to opacity and combine this with a social justice and equality agenda, focusing mainly on free access to knowledge and a basic income.

What Pirate Parties fail to make clear, however, is where the limits of personal freedom lie and collective responsibilities kick in. What should the role of the state be, not only in terms of being transparent, but especially in terms of protecting our

social as well as civic rights and generating the necessary resources to fulfill collective responsibilities? Remaining silent on the precise role of the state, on equality through redistribution and on the nature of capitalism might very well strengthen the very forces which the Pirate Party movement, as well as other likeminded movements, aim to fight.

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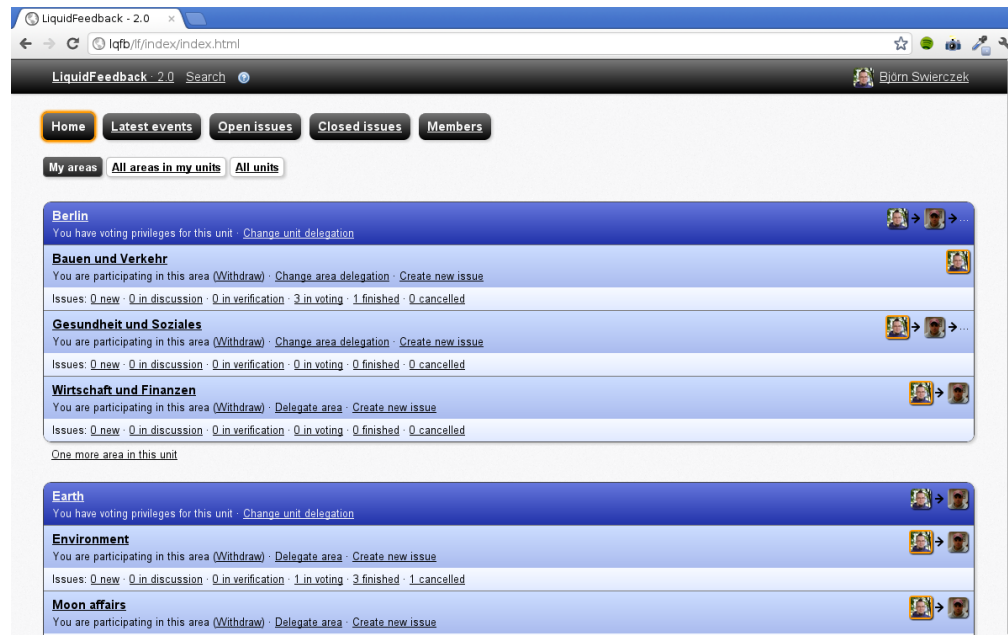
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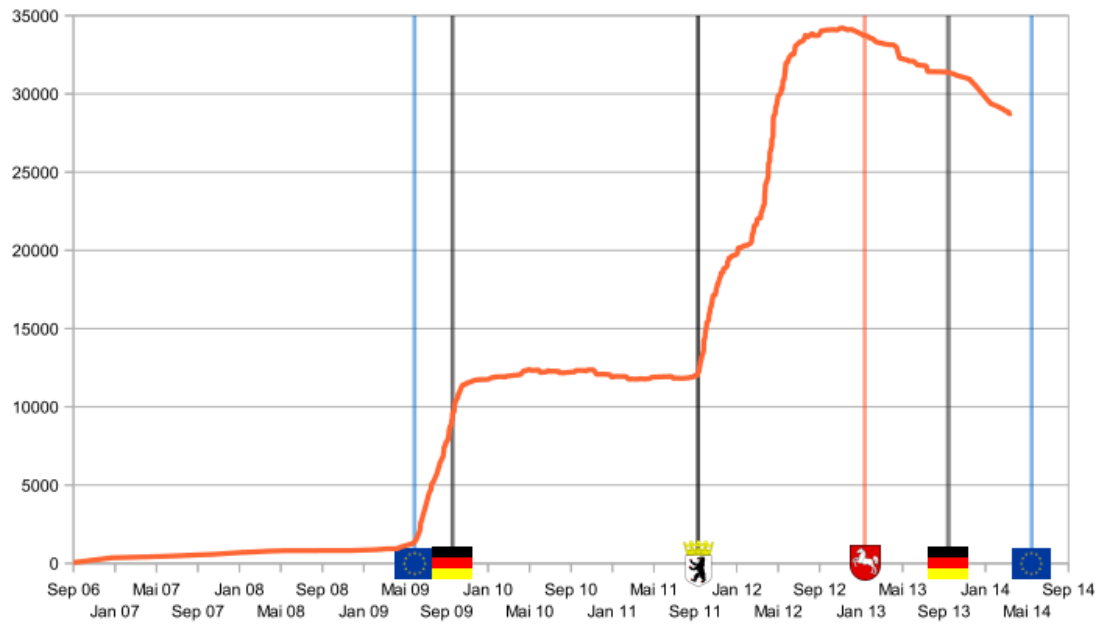
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Figure 1: Open Source Liquid Feedback Platform



Source: <http://liquidfeedback.org>

Figure 2: Evolution of membership of German Pirate Party and dates of European, Federal and regional elections in Germany



Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mitgliederentwicklung_Piratenpartei_Deutschland.png

Endnotes:

¹ Eurobarometer 60: Public Opinion in the European Union. Autumn 2003: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb60/eb60_rapport_standard_en.pdf and Eurobarometer 79: Public Opinion in the European Union. July 2013:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_first_en.pdf.

² Semi-structured interviews were conducted with: Kaye Loz, leader of the Pirate Party UK on 24 May 2012; with Anita Moellering and Christiane Schinkel, respectively press officer and chairwoman of the Pirate Party in Berlin, on 4 June 2012 and with Thomas Goorden, a spokesperson for the Pirate Party Belgium, 15 February 2014. As can be seen, the last interview was added at a later stage, not only to increase the number of perspectives, but also in view of validating and updating some of the claims made in 2012.

³ See: Uppsala Declaration, 2008; Fleisher, 2008; Global Freedom Movement, 2011; Neumann, 2011; Der Spiegel, 2013

⁴ In 2011, The Pirate Party Berlin obtained between 7 and 8% of the popular vote in some local and regional constituencies, followed by victories in Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia in 2012.

⁵ This data was collected on Facebook and Twitter on 19 May 2014.

⁶ See: http://www.manchester.gov.uk/info/362/elections/5594/elections_2012_results.