

Individual Reflection GRU2: How do we create a system that cares?

The Project Background

Our project focused on social exclusion and urban segregation in a area called Nyfors, wich is situated in Eskilstuna municipality. We wanted to identify how historical policies, economic change and stigmatizing narratives shape inequality in how the area is portraited and also how we can create a more inclusive co-creating concept for the citizens of Nyfors.

We used a metadesign approach, proposing designing new conditions for participation and trustbuilding, emphasizing the four spheres of sustainability and inclusive communication and local participation. We came to create a vision for Nyfors that is to be built on inclusion, shared agency and belonging, supported by local collaborations between the municipality, SFI, Samhällskontraktet and community organizations and the local citizens.

I drew from my professional and academic background as a information architect (content manager and communication strategist) a focus on the communicative dimension of the challenge, specifically on how narratives and representation can change the view of the area and its inhabitants as well as be a starting point of new representation and engagement.

Exploring the communicative dimension

Within our collaborative project, I specifically focused on the issue of communication, or rather the lack of inclusive and co-created communication. *"Communication isn't just about publishing, it's about shaping meaning. Each post, image, and headline influences how people understand their place in the community as well as how the community is conveyed elsewhere."* This statement is particularly true in the case of so-called "Swedish Problem Areas". Positive, uplifting, and hopeful narratives are rarely conveyed via the lens of the actual citizens, or from the media in general. Not only does this harm the overall perception of such areas, but it also actively contributes to their decline.

Selective perception and meaning-making

Bergström (2017) introduces a key concept stating that people filter out information they receive, just to be able to handle everyday life. He mentions selective exposure and selective perception as two fronts of our psyche to handle information. When applied to the communication about Nyfors, this implies that the same information can function as either a negative or a positive amplifier depending on the receiver. Does the reader want to hear about what is happening? And how can the information portrayed be adjusted so that it is more uplifting and hopeful, making sure it is not getting bypassed by the selective exponation due to being overly negative.

Social media as a democratic amplifier

Stakston (2011) suggests that, social media, the new forms of digital tools speed up the democratization process and specifically the speed of this process is not to be underestimated. It has a great impact for both the individual person and to the masses of people. Digital communication tools distribute human hope and collective dreams of change in a very powerful way.

Viewing communication, social media and beyond, as a transformative tool we can draw understanding that it has a tremendous potential of changing the way we perceive news and information. It has power to convey, as previously stated, both negative and positive values and views about areas (such as Nyfors), its situation, citizens and current state.

Positive, inclusive & affirmative communication

Considering the historical and current communication patterns, as well as the emerging possibilities and challenges, we can see a red thread starting to take shape. Shifting focus from a negative "outside-in" perspective in how news, organizations and people report about Nyfors to a positive one, highlighting hopeful aspects and more everyday positive aspects, from a more "inside-out" perspective, we can attempt to create a paradigm shift. This is vital in the steps of moving away from the concept of "Problem Areas" to a more metadesign view of tackling the challenges as well as uplifting the positives in areas such as Nyfors.

Theory of representation and inclusive narratives

Based on the reflections so far, an important key to creating a paradigm shift is the representation theory. It is a theoretical framework for understanding how meaning and perception are constructed through communication. It is produced by language, images and the narrative. In this we can see how media and its communication actively constructs how places are perceived, as for example Nyfors. This can then reinforce stereotypes, often in a negative way, albeit depending on how the information is portrayed. By using the theory of representation and reframing how the communication are used and how its narrated it we can create a more uplifting, inclusive and strengthening narrative instead of a negative one.

As Hall (1997) argues, representation does not merely reflect reality, it also constructs it. In this way we can enable the local citizens to share their own stories and everyday experiences as a tool to create another narrative, one that takes the "inside-out" perspective. This way citizens are able to reshape the public perception and build a more balanced and foremost humanized image of the area.

Summary and personal reflection

By partaking in this project my view on communication efforts has grown to a more critical and not so linear one. That which have especially broaden my horizon has been the concept of representation theory as well as constructing inclusive narratives. I have previously viewed these concepts more of a "good-to-have" aspect rather than something that is critical to create a nuanced and balanced way of creating information. I now have a much more broad understanding on how information actually affects the paradigm and can shape peoples biases, opinions and perception.

Also, the concept of co-creation and the metadesign perspective have been very interesting to read more about and to try and see how these can be used to create participatory storytelling that can build spaces where local participation can grow in places like Nyfors. This in turn can empower the local population and letting them partake in creating the overall narrative, that they no longer are talked about, but together with.

Source References

Bergström, B. (2017). *Effektiv visuell kommunikation: om grafisk form och bildspråk* (4th ed.). Liber.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage.

Stakston, K. (2011). *Gilla! En handbok i sociala medier*. Bonnier Fakta.