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**How to do Feminism? Blogging and New Media Activism
as Contemporary Feminist Strategies¹**

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Reflections

¹ The text is based to a large extent on a paper delivered 14.09.2012 at the Girls and Digital Culture Conference held by King's College London, Department of Digital Humanities and Department for Culture, Media and Creative Industries where I presented case study analyzed within my diploma thesis (Černožorská 2012).

I. Introduction: Researching social movements and digital technologies

On June 29 1998, *Time Magazine's* cover pictured black-and-white portraits of feminists Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and television star Ally McBeal. The last mentioned - portrayed in colours - was asking: "Is Feminism Dead?" (Bellafante 1998). This caption presumes that the feminist movement is somehow stale or dated and since all the great battles against gender inequality have been conquered, to call oneself a "feminist" is not in vogue anymore. Nevertheless, such negative media backlash is nothing new; rather, it is a recurring phenomenon (Faludi 2006) which shapes perceptions of the movement in mainstream discourses. But alongside of this dominant discourse, there might be other sphere that provides a possibility for those willing to disturb such perception of the movement, the sphere of digital information and communication technologies. Therefore, in following paper, I would like to talk about the possibly beneficial alliance between contemporary feminism and cyber landscape which could serve as a counter public space for the often stigmatized type of activism.

The issue of digital technologies and online activism has attracted the attention of many theorists from various fields, including sociology. Regardless of the fact they all share an eager effort to theoretically conceptualize and critically evaluate the nature, significance and the impact of the phenomenon; they vary considerably in their chosen theoretical perspectives, methods, and outcomes. While some express their concerns that digital tools and new media in general increase levels of social isolation or weaken existing communities (Putnam 2001), others highlight their potential to re-vitalize social relations and the civic sphere (Rheingold 1993, Castells 1996). Those authors, who approach internet and

related technologies from a rather positive perspective, talk about promotion of democratic involvement among citizens and easier establishing of interest groups and alliances of activist. Additionally, this is often put in contrast with declining party membership and electoral turnouts (Webster 2001). As Van De Donk sums up, "[t]oday, a good deal of civic discussion takes place on the internet, not only in explicit public forums and within varieties of online journalism, but also within the vast networking of activist organizations and social movements" (Van De Donk et al 2004: xi). New technologies equip activists and organizations with such tools that make organization and communication faster, more flexible, and less dependent on (sometimes lacking) material resources. In other words, social movements and activist groups that use information and communication technologies are more likely to - as some suggest - reach a new level of organization (Van De Donk et al 2004).

But the influence of digital technologies is far from being limited at the organizational issues only. The debates about its potential also bring up the question of production and re-distribution of knowledge (and power) which is highly influenced by the global and horizontal nature of cyberspace. While in mainstream media, activists might face many obstacles when trying to influence the "trending topics" and raise awareness about relevant issues. On the other hand, online sphere does not limit its participant in such a restrictive manner. Therefore, such space might serve as an arena for producing new communities which would raise public consciousness about the significant issues and challenge the top-down flow of information.

The consciousness raising metaphor is especially relevant for the example of feminist movement which is discussed in this paper. Consciousness raising groups and communities

(maintained in a "real" world) formed traditional backbone of second-wave feminism.² In a nutshell, they served as an area where women (and sometimes men) could meet and intensively discuss their personal problems, reveal their political dimension, and suggest subversive solutions. Undoubtedly, its main positive lies in recruiting a huge number of new members and supporters of the feminist movement that increased its political power. Since contemporary feminism has been pronounced "dead" or "dated" at some point, to form new pro-feminist communities within cyberspace could be a successful strategy for utilizing the potential of new technologies in the revitalization of the consciousness raising tradition. As Gillis points out:

The communication technologies of cyberspace are regarded as the opportunity needed to bring about the global feminist movements of the new millennium, the 'third wave' of feminism. The Internet is thus vaunted as the global consciousness-raising tool which the first and second waves lacked. (Gillis in Gillis, Howie, Munford eds. 2004: 185)

The research agenda focusing on the juxtaposition of social movements, transnational agencies, group of activists and the digital technologies is rich and diverse. Regarding the limited space, I won't be providing exhaustive overview but rather highlight the diversified ways one can approach the issue from unique perspectives. Van De Donk et al (2004) present in the publication *Cyberprotest. New Media, Citizenship and Social Movements* several researches and case studies exploring the above mentioned topics. Interestingly, some of them focus explicitly on women's movement and groups while choosing different perspective, theoretical and

² Historically, consciousness raising could be identified as a specific mode of activism that occurred within second-wave feminism (being situated from the early nineteen sixties to the late nineteen eighties within the American and Western European region) which signalled the ushering in of a new kind of political organization (Pilcher, Whelehan 2004: 17).

methodological lenses. For example Edwards explore the Dutch women's movement and tries to finds out, how does the use of internet form the organizational infrastructure of the group and how does it affect its capacity to affect the mainstream political agenda. Concluding that there are significant changes in the inner structure of the movement, Edward is far from seeing internet as a tool for radical shift in established power nexus in which the movement and political actors operate (Edward in Van De Donk 2004: 161 - 180). In her research, Nip also focuses on the women's organization (Queer Sisters based in Hong Kong) but contrary to Edwards, she analyses the impact of internet on the "offline" mobilization. Leaving out the formal side mobilization such as communication and information dissemination, she explores how do digital technologies help to build a collective identity among potential participants (Nip in Van De Donk: 203 - 224). So despite the fact that these two case studies seem to focus on an identical topic (women's movement and the digital technologies) they both come up with highly different approaches and conclusions. Where Edwards highlights new findings about the effects of internet on inner organization and external effectiveness of the movement, Nip talks about identity building, creation of counter culture, and the role of virtual community.

II. The Case Study: "Anti-Facebook-rape-page Campaign"

Moving from introductory overview which stressed the diversity among the digital technologies researches, I would like to present my case study. I focused my research attention on a sample of thirty feminist blogs which were assessed as the most influential - using the semantic criteria and scoring

methodology - at the 2009 "Fem 2.0 Conference".³ Between June and November 2011, I analyzed one of the most resonating campaigns that occurred within this so called femisphere, the "Anti-Facebook-rape-page Campaign". Using a four dimensional scheme originally developed by Margaret Keck and Kathrin Sikkink (1998) for measuring the effectiveness of transnational advocacy networks, I explored the specific strategies of feminist consciousness-raising within digital age. The scheme focuses on the levels of information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics. And through answering the question whether and to what extent a particular network is addressing those politics, one can find out how effective, i.e. how successful in raising of the awareness about the chosen issue and achieving of the set objectives, the network is. Transnational advocacy networks are defined as communicative structures based on the voluntary and mutual exchange of information enabled by the existence of shared discourse and values and driven by the force of political goals (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Although the feminist blogosphere is not the equivalent of transnational advocacy networks, they share some formal and strategic characteristics. Therefore, its effect, i.e. the consciousness-raising potential of the blogosphere's sample, could be measured by a similar analytical framework.

"Riding your Girlfriend softly, Cause you don't want to wake her up", "What's 10 inches and gets girls to have sex

³ First of all, *Linkfluence* took a site of blogs associated with the conference itself and using a specific program that is able to identify other blogs occurring in the direct connection/immediate proximity, the company created a basic network. The second method was based on semantic criteria in order to detect the sites that are covering issues pre-defined as feminist, i.e. those expressions being used were for example women in politics, reproductive rights, sexual violence and so on. Thirdly, the web analyst corrected the gathered data - validating if each of the chosen blogs is actually covering feminist issues. The "top list" was then compiled based on a scoring methodology. Accessed 15/09/2011 at [<http://us.linkfluence.net/2009/02/03/mapping-the-feminist-web-presentation-at-fem2pt0/>].

with me? My knife", or "You know she's playing hard to get when your chasing her down an alleyway". These are the names of just few pages that were founded and administrated by Facebook users. Their content consists of jokes with rape as a main feature. Feminist theorists and activists have devoted a lot of attention to the critical analysis of rape (Brownmiller 1976), the presentation of sexual violence within the media (Haskell 1973), and stereotypical myths surrounding this form of violence (Russell 1979). Therefore, the (unquestioned) existence of pages and groups promoting ("making fun" of) rape on such proliferated web crossroad and its wide support among average network's users (measured by rising number of so called "likes") were the main reasons the Facebook "rape pages" attracted the attention of feminist blogosphere. The following chapters are devoted to the summarization and analysis of the succeeding events.

II.1. Information politics

The examination of those four levels - information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics - leads me to four main points. Firstly, when it comes to the information politics, feminist bloggers did not simply brought to light an issue that would otherwise stay unnoticed. Since the pro-rape pages define themselves primarily as making "fun", the feminist blogosphere had to re-define the debate and transform its terms so as to attract wider public attention. The shift is more than evident here. One of the feminist bloggers from *The SAFER Blog* captures the essence of this specific debate in her article "Dear Facebook, Rape Jokes Are Absolutely Not Okay". As she states:

According to Facebook, we all need to lighten up about rape jokes (...). Naturally, some folks are wondering whether Facebook supports rape culture. Since rape culture permeates

pretty much every layer of our society, I think the answer to this question is easy. The [F]eminist community continues to call for the page's removal but (...) Facebook claims that this page is little more than 'local pub' humour.⁴

While labelling the rape "jokes" as hate speech which promotes violence against women, the activists are using similar strategy as second-wave feminists. Be it pornography (Dworkin 1981) or sexist language (Spender 1980), feminist theories argued that such images (and words) picturing women's exploitation, objectification, and marginalization are not simply expressions of people's imaginary or sense of humour. Therefore, it was no longer seen as an isolated and sporadic initiative of couple Facebook users but a more complex and deep problem. As *Ms. Magazine's* blogger states:

[B]ecause we live in a culture that accepts, condones and makes light of sexual violence, those conclusions [banning the pages] are – for many people – not so obvious. And that's why we have to keep asking the larger question: What does it mean to live in a society where it is this difficult to convince people that jokes about rape are simply not okay?⁵

Using this argument, feminist bloggers refer to the second-wave feminist concept which accentuates rape as not only socially produced but also socially legitimated (Edwards 1987). Those pages and its content – activists insist – promote and support rape but since they do so without being criticized and banned, they (strengthened by wider consensus) also trivialize and subsequently approve this type of sexual violence.

4 Accessed 15/12/2011 at [http://www.safercampus.org/blog/2011/08/dear-facebook-rape-jokes-are-absolutely-not-okay/].

5 Accessed 15/11/2011 at [http://msmagazine.com/blog/blog/2011/11/07/].

II.2. Symbolic politics

Secondly - along with more traditional actions such as petition launching, engaging with NGOs and mainstream media, the femisphere approached the symbolic level. Using the "cultural jamming" strategy, activists started to congest the pro-rape pages by subversive posts and other visual materials.⁶ These were meant to disrupt the pages' perception of rape and sexual violence as being "funny". Be it pro-feminist slogans, stories of rape victims, or sexual violence statistics the activists were trying to discredit the pages with their own tools and "weapons". Meanwhile, the feminist blogosphere decided to use the rival social networking site, Twitter. The supporters were asked to send repeated Twitter messages at Facebook including both the names of offending pages and a link to the petition, along with the tag #notfunnyfacebook.⁷ The strategic use of a rival company was an advantageous move for at least two reasons. It attracted wider attention outside the average scope of feminist blogosphere. Plus, the initiative affects Facebook's symbolic status and prestige since its integrity and moral standards are questioned within its competitor's network.

II.3. Leverage politics

Thanks to the twitter action which raised the campaign's symbolic status, the bloggers could call upon more powerful actors, the major Facebook advertisers. Transnational advocacy networks usually do not have large material resources, nor the

⁶ "Culture Jamming is a strategy that turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking, and re-contextualizing meanings" (Peretti in Benett 2003: 29).

⁷ While relying on its already informed audience, the blogosphere called its supporters to take part in the "day of action": "Friends, bloggers, organizers, I wanted to drop you a note to ask for your help with a day of action, 11/2 [2011], to pressure Facebook to take down pages that promote rape, sexual violence, and violence against women". Accessed 15/11/2011 at [<http://www.paradigmshiftnyc.com/2011/11/call-to-action-today-facebook-rape-pages/>].

necessary political influence. Therefore, they have to gain support of someone with such capital and influence.

To make the issue negotiable, NGOs had to raise its profile or salience, using information and symbolic politics. Then more powerful members of the network had to link cooperation to something else of value: money, trade, or prestige. (Keck, Sikkink 1998: 230).

Those whose commercials appeared within the rape pages were contacted by email. Furthermore, when activists created the screenshots which offered the juxtaposition of posts such as "Which is better to rape four month old boys or four month old girls?" with the corporations' labels, the shame started to slowly move towards the concerned brands. And that is something most of the businesses would like to stay out of. Still, Facebook, with its wide base of users who supply the company with enormous range of (marketing exploitable) information, is a crucial partner when it comes to product promotion and advertising. Therefore, companies such as Sony, BlackBerry, or American Express did not boycott Facebook itself (in order to express their disagreement with its policy) but rather made sure they would not be associated with the rape-page issue.

II.4. Accountability politics

Last but not least, activists were trying to convince the target actor - i.e. Facebook - to respect the principles and standards they had previously adopted.⁸ Thus, one of the loudest arguments was that while refusing to take down the pages, Facebook violated its own terms and conditions. Also, the femisphere campaign continued demanding Facebook to make a public statement that promoting rape and sexual violence will

⁸ In the company's own *Statement of Rights and Responsibilities*, it says: "You will not post content that: is hateful, threatening, or pornographic; incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence". Accessed 30/11/2001 at [<https://www.facebook.com/terms.php?ref=pf>].

not be accepted within the network and that the company made a mistake by defending the pages as harmless "pub jokes". On November 4, 2011, 77 days since the first petition was launched, after a grand total of 200 000 signatures, a Twitter campaign, removal of several major advertisers' commercials, and constant pressure from feminist blogosphere, Facebook removed some of the rape-supportive pages. The truth is, the results of the campaign are rather ambiguous. Not only has Facebook remained silent about its delayed decision to take down several hateful pages but there has been no suggestion it would adopt new attitude toward such issues. While many other rape supportive pages remained untouched, new similarly like-minded ones arose. But more importantly, the company issued a statement saying the rape (and others alike) pages may remain within the network if the administrators add a tag "humorous" or "satirical" which would indicate that the content is meant as a joke.

II.5. Conclusion of the case study

Naturally, concluding on how successful in raising of the awareness about the chosen issue and achieving of the set objectives, the analysed campaign was, is not an unproblematic task. I would suggest that labelling those efforts of feminist activists as plain failure because they did not "defeated" Facebook would be misleading.

My analysis of the feminist activists' strategies suggests the following interpretation. Even within the so called "digital age" when most of the communication and campaign realization (in terms of raising of awareness, launching and signing petitions, or persuading more powerful actors such as advertisers) happens online and through new media, the movement still heavily relies on traditional ways of mobilization. What I'm saying is that since pro-feminist activists are scattered across the Internet, certain energy

has to be exerted in order to mobilize the femisphere in the first place. At this stage, the leading role is played by those blogs with a strong base of activists or contributors and covers a wide range of issues. It does not mean that some case cannot be uncovered and publicized by a sole blogger or activist but it takes a more respected and read or visited blog in order to turn some event into *the issue*. The powerful blogs such as those maintained under *Feministing.com*, *Ms. Magazine*, *F-Word.uk* have the capacity to mobilize pro-feminist supporters because of their extensive human, informational, symbolic and economic resources. That means, they have various contributors, broader access to information, the status of a respected publication platform, and more money from donors, product sales, or advertisers attracted by high attendance at the sites.

Feminist activism in the digital age still relies on a wide material base, emphasizes a sense of "community", and claims allegiance to the tradition of the feminist movement. Therefore, such "powerful" blogs resemble to a large degree the feminist organizations, groups, and publication platforms founded during the second wave of feminism. But rather than being a movement in traditional terms (only equipped with new tools), the bloggers/activists form consciousness-raising-like groups around particular issues and campaigns. Their alliances have therefore a temporal character and a fluid structure. They unite under one "flag" while keeping their diverse and unique voices. When it comes to the influence of digital technologies over the feminist mastery of argumentation I conclude the following. The ways of argumentation which appeared during the case were obviously inspired by theories and campaigns that have been invented and waged long before Facebook ever appeared on the scene. But what we have seen is not literal repetition but sophisticated arguments, creative use of theory, overlapping examples from global and local

context, and the right balance between guerrilla resistance and engagement with more powerful actors. To what extent are these characteristics the sole result of alliance between feminist activists and digital technologies is a question worth answering in further research.

III. Afterword

While reflecting the analysed case study and talking about further research, I shall briefly discuss the ways of approaching the digital technologies and cyberspace in general. In researches shortly mentioned within the introduction part and in my analysis, I approached the phenomenon from a "non-representational" point of view. I do not see - together with other scholars (Bell, Kennedy 2000) - the cyberspace as a mirror that would reflect the "offline" world. Quite the contrary, I believe that it can help its users transcend and deconstruct rooted boundaries. But what I found a bit problematic (and what show itself within the case study) that one shall be very careful when conceptualizing the digital technologies as a tool that is *being used* by those entering the online territory in order to achieve some changes within the external world. One must not forget that today's fast evolving technologies are increasingly interactive and present (in constitutive manners) in our everyday life. The cyberspace is not a parallel polis or place to enter; it is "materiality of contemporary cultural practices" (Hand in Hall, Grindstaff, Lo 2010: 364).

The cultural theory comes up with fresh perspective on the relation between social movements/groups of activist and digital technologies while unleashing the cyberspace metaphor from the place analogy and disrupting the understandings of digital technologies as a somewhat mechanical tool. Moreover,

it blurs the boundaries between culture production and consumption and opens the concepts of (virtual vs. real) community and identity to further revision. As Hine suggests in a chapter of her publication called "Internet as Culture and Cultural Artefact"

It is a short move from observing that people play with identity in online settings, to suggesting that the technologies themselves are causing a change in conceptions of identity. It is worth reviewing the status of the technology in depictions of online community and identity. From an experimental mode in which the technology acquired the inherent quality of impoverished communication, we appear to have moved to an opposing but equally determined view of the technology as leading to rich social formations and fragmented identities. (Hine 2000: 20)

Such cultural perspective might be seen as more precise and finer way of approaching the phenomenon and the theoretical discussion in general. When Putnam writes sceptically,

[t]here is reason to believe that deep-seated technological trends are radically 'privatizing' or 'individualizing' our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation (...). The new 'virtual reality' helmets that we will soon don to be entertained in total isolation are merely the latest extension of this trend. (Putnam 2001: 75)

,the course of the counter-argumentation seems more than evident here. He also poses a question "Is technology thus driving a wedge between our individual interests and our collective interests? (Putnam 2001: 75) to which I would answer: no, the technology is not driving its users to the land of self-centeredness. Additionally, the very idea of technology driving "us" somewhere is false. There is not unidirectional relation between these two. Rather, it is a

dialectical maelstrom that is - from a perspective of cultural sociology as I suggest - open for further research.

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