MEDIA SPACES OF FLUID POLITICS
PARTICIPATORY ASSEMBLAGES AND NETWORKED NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores international coverage of Pussy Riot and related digital network activism around the digital news flows. Theoretically, the essay takes as its starting point the focal position of processes of assembly and the realist social ontology of actor-network structures of digital media ecology. It explores new types of participatory assemblages and how they use material and virtual media spaces as part of their subversive action. In particular, the interest is in the relational space, digital network action and processes of assembly (Jackson, 1989; Shields, 1991; Keith and Pile, 1993; Crang, 1998). Drawing on recent studies on actor-network theory (Latour, 2005; Serres, 1995; Law & Hassard, 1991) and assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996; Hetherington and Law, 2000; DeLanda, 2006), it focuses on how thinking of media as assembling practices provides a basis for conceptualizations of the parameters of the media–politics nexus. Empirically the paper explores actors and processes of media narratives in the online coverage in four newspapers (the Guardian, the New York Times, Novaya Gazeta, and Rossiyskaya Gazeta).

KEYWORDS: Participatory Assemblage, Relational Space, Media Narrative, Pussy Riot, Digital Network Activism.
INTRODUCTION

On 27 February 2015, the President of the United States hosts a dinner for the Russian President in the White House. Among the guests, there are three political activists from the punk band Pussy Riot with their fellow Russian anarchists. The dinner descends into disaster as Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, along with fellow Voina activist Pyotr Verzilov, launch a fierce tirade against the guest of honour. After the diplomatic fiasco, negotiations on a Peace Plan for the Middle East stall between the countries. The next day, the President of the United States holds a press conference supporting Pussy Riot’s freedom fight, and risking a new Cold War between East and West.

The scene is from the Golden Globe-winning US drama series *House of Cards*, where Kevin Spacey’s Frank Underwood and the Putinesque Russian President, Viktor Petrov meet. The Russian president ‘is not afraid of anything but gays’, as the political opposition in his iron-fistedly governed country faces extinction. The dinner party, with Spacey as the President of the United States and Pussy Riot performing as themselves, exemplifies a part of fluid politics where the translations of ideological narratives, genres, digital media ecology, and global news flows create networked, digital spaces within which virtual power geometries of political assemblages appear. The scene ends with Spacey watching Pussy Riot, playing alongside Le Tigre, a US feminist band, perform the song ‘I can't breathe’, which they wrote specifically for the programme.

During recent decades, media studies, technology, and human geography have increasingly aligned. The media–space-technology nexus has emerged not only as a cultural phenomenon, but also as a site of emergent political dynamics. The digital ecosystem and its participatory affordances have changed the theoretical and methodological basis of how we look at the new ephemeral political communication.

The governing metaphor of these interests has been that of the *network*. Networks are complex arrangements of digital and material space with no clear centre points or dependence upon hierarchical relations of difference. The network metaphor is adept in relation to digital media as it stresses a non-hierarchical way of thinking about difference. Yet digital media networks are capable of constituting seemingly fluid, but complex, power geometries' (see Massey, 1993).¹

An understanding of these power geometries builds on Foucauldian theory by showing how power is conducted within networks. According to Foucault

¹ The power geometries according to Massey (1993) refer to more or less systematic and usually uneven ways in which different individuals and groups are positioned within networks of time-space flows and connections. These variable positions derive from the intimate connections that exist between productions of power and productions of space, giving actors different degrees of freedom.
(1991), the network power is conducted within network formations, whereas traditional power is monolithic. Traditional power relies on a visible hierarchy, but network power is localised and invisible (the physical organisation of space shapes the power). Traditional power is often embodied in law, written and negative (based on prohibition), whereas network power is omnipresent and related to the types and locations of effective power. Hence network power uses productive power to connect and assemble entities instead of organising them as separate and controlled units.

The actor-network approach (Callon & Law, 1997; Latour, 2004; Murdoch, 2006) directs our attention to the means whereby spaces are made and materialised inside networks and shows how spatial scales are distinguished from one another in line with the priorities of the networks and network builders. Bruno Latour (2005) has raised awareness of the role of non-human actors and an ‘agency of things’ by focusing on how space and its internal divisions (sites, flows, networks, and nodes) are connected within networked spaces. Latour (1997, 3) depicts social life as not arranged into levels, such as local-global, or micro-macro within actor-network spaces. The mobilization of humans and non-humans is the sole factor that distinguishes, for example, the local from global. Instead of having to choose between the local and the global view, the notion of network allows us to think of a global entity, a highly connected one, which nevertheless remains continuously local (Latour, 1997; Murdoch, 2006).

In the actor-network context, the distinction between human and non-human becomes inconsequential. The agency is, in effect, distributed through a heterogeneous arrangement of materials (Foucault, 1977; Law, 1986) rather than the intentional activity of human subjects. Diversity in terms of agency allows creative play in forming political agencies, in order to change the power geometries. As the social reality is always in process of re-assembling within the actor networks, the theoretical focus is on actors, relations, networks, network builders, and an agency of things, be they signs, things, memes, discourses or ideas.

NEW POLITICAL MOVEMENTS AS SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGE

The natural environment of new, networked political movements, such as Pussy Riot, is within open, adaptive digital media ecosystems. These ecosystems include properties such as self-organisation, scalability, and sustainability both on the local and global levels. Digital media ecosystems, like natural ecosystems, exhibit aspects related to competition and collaboration among diverse entities. They also nurture social assemblages that can be understood as
open-ended, mobile, networked, and actor-centred space or geography (see DeLanda, 2006)

This notion of assemblage is based on DeLanda’s (2006) realist social ontology about objective processes of assembly. DeLanda (2006, 3) defines assemblage as ‘being wholes whose properties emerge from the interaction between parts’. According to DeLanda ‘assemblage’ refers to a wide range of social entities, from persons to nation-states, that can be treated as assemblages constructed through specific historical processes, processes in which language plays an important but not a constitutive role.

As entities ranging from molecules to biological organisms, species and digital ecosystems can be treated as assemblages. As entities, they are also products of historical processes. The assemblage theory can be applied to social entities as it cuts across the nature-culture divide, as well as human-nonhuman dichotomies. (DeLanda, 2006: 3)

Participatory and political movements are par example social assemblages. Social assemblages are not organic and hence do not always form a seamless whole. However, all intermediate, (i.e. non-organic cultural and social) systems can be seen as ‘assemblages’ (DeLanda, 2006: 10).

Political and participatory activism engages intuitively with the act of assembling and gathering people, emotional attachment, digital sites, narratives, and networked communities around a group of issues and performances. Social assemblage can be understood in the sense of arrangement, referring to the ontological diversity of grouping of (human and non-human) agents and the distribution capacities of agency within the involved (Deleuze & Quattari, 1987; De Landa, 2006).

Current political movements such as Pussy Riot, feminist group Femen, Los Indignados, and the Occupy Movement exhibit features of social assemblages connecting with the networks of urban spaces, digital media networks, and multiple organisations creating topological as well as topographical (spatial) networks. Hence the subversive actions combine urban (material) space via demonstrations, protests and performances, and virtual ecosystems via digital platforms, news flows, hashtags, and memes (Salovaara, 2014).

These various assemblages represent complex ecologies of subjectivity in which political agencies emerge as a consequence of the distinct articulation of a number of heterogeneous elements. The political agency cannot be understood in
terms of the engagement of an autonomous individual with a number of goods and services. On the contrary, the agency is a distributed phenomenon that can only be understood by tracing the complex ecologies that are distinctive to the topological structure of digital media ecosystems.

The emergence of political alliances, clusters of organisations, and complex ecologies of political agency exemplifies the distinctive constitutive dynamic of local and global media related mobilisation: namely, the assemblage of heterogeneous entities predicated upon technical infrastructures of networking (or lack thereof). The defining characteristics of contemporary participatory movements are thus the processes of assembly and creating networks with re-assembled social realities within the technical infrastructure.

According to DeLanda (2006, 10-15), (social) assemblages have five roles within their immediate and digital ecosystems. They are a) a material role, b) an expressive role, c&d) de/territorialising role(s), and e) a linguistic/coding role. In the following, the roles of the social assemblages are adapted to participatory movements by combining features from material urban environments as well as their digital environment.

The 1) material role of the political assemblage is played out in the urban space as well as in the digital network space, through their concrete and digital nodes, servers, participants, and platforms; 2) The expressive role is performed by habits, signature features, forms of performance and communication, signs, and memes, such as songs, clothing and events, etc. 3) The territorializing role is played by communication chains, platform sites, space and places of dwelling, immediate cultural environment, and other elements that maintain the components and their relationships, and thus the identity and durability of the assemblage. 4) The de-territorializing role is played by evolutionary mutation within the participatory movements and other elements that recombine or replace various components and roles within the assemblage, leading to its dissipation or reformulation. 5) The linguistic/coding role is fulfilled by freedom of expression, pro-democracy, gender equality, and minority rights discourses, seeking to protect the cultural and democratic ecosystem within a society, and potentially globally.

These five roles act as the methodological base through which the empirical analysis of media narratives depicting the participatory assemblage, such as Pussy Riot are organised. The media narratives are treated as discursive processes and semantic, narrative networks instead of ‘representational’ units. This methodological starting point refers to DeLanda’s materialist position, as
it includes as a secondary task a sustained criticism of the primacy of postmodernist linguistic analysis in social science (the theory of the linguisticality of experience).

DIGITAL NARRATIVES AS ASSEMBLAGES: DATA AND METHODS

Empirically this paper analyses the online coverage in four newspapers (The Guardian, the New York Times, Novaya Gazeta, and Rossiyskaya Gazeta). The sample consists of 194 articles from The Guardian, 127 from the New York Times, 472 from the Novaya Gazeta, and 230 from Rossiyskaya Gazeta. The main actors in the headline, and the news angle were systematically analysed and the text was analysed through looking for the organising principles, main concepts, space/place and actors.2

The sample covers a ten month period (1 January to 22 December 2012) and includes the formative events that track the group expanding its role from a local to a global movement. These events were the ‘Putin Zassal’ (Putin Has Pissed Himself) on 20 January 2012, when the Pussy Riot rock band performed a protest song at the Lobnoye Mesto in Red Square inspired by the events of the anti-Putin protests; The Punk Prayer on 21 February when five masked members of the band entered the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow to play on the altar the five minute performance of ‘Madonna, Drive Putin Away’, after which guards came to escort them away; and the video ‘Punk Prayer: Mother of God Drive Putin Away’ uploaded to YouTube that same day amassing thousands of clicks.

The third event was the criminal case opened on 26 February against those band members who participated in the ‘Punk Prayer’. A week later, on 3 March, two alleged Pussy Riot members, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, were arrested on charges of hooliganism, which is defined as ‘a gross violation of public order, showing disrespect for society’. The fourth event, the trial, started on 30 July in Moscow amidst a high level of global media attention. Finally, on 17 August, the three defendants were found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison camp. The final phase, the ‘Free Pussy Riot’ campaign, drew international activists, artists and human rights organizations, foreign press, and advocacy groups, as the band gained support and collaboration from dozens of international artists and musicians. Supporting actions continued during the two years’ sentence. On 19 December 2013, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were pardoned and released as part of the State Duma’s general amnesty programme.

The immanent digital media ecosystem around these events was the social media ecology: Pussy Riot and Free Pussy Riot Facebook sites, Twitter feeds, multiple hashtags, permanent platforms such as the groups’ Pussy Riot Info and Pussy Riot LiveJournal which archives, posts news, and informs English speaking audiences on the events evolving in real time. YouTube, as a channel, contained all the group’s videos and performances while other crowd-produced material had more than 2,030,000 entries in December 2015. Pussy Riot has also been visible on MySpace, Instagram, Google+ Vimeo, Storify, and Ello, among others. This social media ecology cannot be separated from the media narrative production as it composes discourses with the help of diverse actors, including the organisations, fans, NGOs, supporters, and journalists. The digital social media ecology is the first immediate, virtual environment of social assemblages maintaining their identity and durability as an assemblage.

THE CLASHING CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

The common understanding of media narratives is that they follow the mode of chronological storytelling. However, in the digital ecosystem, human and non-human actors compose the digital narratives in highly heterogeneous networks. Through multiple iterative processes these narratives emerge, and are redefined endlessly in the open-ended circulations of digital narrative flows. Instead of being chronological, they are often composed through opposite nodes that organize the codifying actor-networks culturally, politically, and geographically.

When ‘legacy’ news organisations, such as The Guardian, The New York Times, and the liberal, opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, as well as the government-owned Rossiyskaya Gazeta form their ideological news narratives, they aim to meet the parameters of their primary audience, geographical areas, editorial policy lines and their broader ideological attachment. This translation process is both organisational and cultural as it carries the semantic, coded cultural ecosystem where their users, and audiences nest. As the news organisations have their local and foreign correspondents on the ground they are simultaneously part of immediate social media ecology, i.e. multiple group produced social media sites and platforms.

The (legacy media) narratives, however, can be seen as a fundamental way of organising public experience, i.e. as a tool for constructing frames of political reality. Ricoeur’s (1984) conception of narrative depicts how people come to terms with the temporality of their existence. Media narratives as public narratives are a particular mode of thinking, a mode that relates to the concrete and
particular as opposed to the abstract and general. Narratives create and transmit cultural traditions, and build on the values and beliefs that define cultural identities. Narratives are also a vehicle of dominant ideologies and an instrument of power (Foucault, 1984).

EASTERN CULTURAL DICHOTOMIES OF NARRATIVE NETWORKS

In the sample, the Western and Russian media narratives were analysed through semantic nodes and dichotomies. The most visible dichotomies were the East and West; culture-politics; sacred-profane; morality-immorality; freedom-repression and history-future. The main feature of the semantic coding of the narratives was build around these nodes in all news platforms.

The Russian coverage exemplified the narrative network of internal and external cultural conflicts. The main nodes of the narratives were between the Official Church/the religious community; im/morality, and complex new (nationalistic) Russian identity in relation to Western meddling.

The western coverage exhibited narrative dichotomies between freedom/repression, East/West, power religion/political power, patriarchalism/feminism, progression and regression, backwardness and future.

The very first article of Novaya Gazeta (NG), ‘In the Electric Tights and Orange Fire’, presented the group as part of an overall liberation ‘This is just a bright blotch in the face of the world’. ‘Pussy Riot is not a rock band. It is not music. It is a group of city partisans’. The content of NG illuminated internal factions within the Church as the opposition and the governing coalition including the Orthodox Church, including the government and the main political and Church related actors.

‘The Pharisees and the Holy Fools’ was Orthodox priest Alexei Belochkin’s opinion piece on Pussy Riot’s performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, focusing on the split of Russian society. He criticised the Church and Orthodox people who ‘parade’ Christianity and try to bring dissidents (‘the Others’) to a bonfire. Belochkin compared Pussy Riot with the phenomenon of holy fools, who have been respected in Russia in all times. Despite mental sickness and weird behaviour, the holy fools were trying to show that piety is less important than true faith and love for God and people. The holy fools have never been afraid to say the accusatory truth to monarchs. According to Belochkin, nowadays, while churches are empty, ‘The Pharisees’ enjoy the witch-hunt, imagining it as a proof of their true faith.
The negative editorial from the Russian government owned Rossiyskaya Gazeta (RG), ‘Fever of Evil’ described the Pussy Riot performance as a highly disturbing event, deserving of critique and condemnation. The author brought an example from ‘the others’, asking who are hiding behind the masks? Different versions of the list of people involved in Pussy Riot are presented to try to gauge the networks of opposition.

On the other hand, the liberal Novaya Gazeta’s (NG) article ‘Christians stand up for Pussy Riot’ reported the conflict within the Church as the Orthodox believers were preparing an appeal to the Patriarch Kyriil, asking to protect Pussy Riot members.

Orthodox people for and contra: The Pussy Riot becomes famous worldwide

Novaya Gazeta published an open letter from the Orthodox people to Patriarch Kirill I, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, asking him to give freedom to Pussy Riot. The article mentioned a Professor of the Moscow Theological Academy, Andrey Kuraev, and the priest Yakov Krotov as supporters of the release of the girls from custody. Mention was also made of Putin’s Press-secretary Dmitry Peskov reporting on the President’s negative reaction towards Pussy Riot. The letter highlighted Christian values (mercy) against prison.

The column (NG) of famous music critic Artemy Troitsky, ‘Without Orthodox: A Couple Of Words About The Current Inquisition Process’, looked at contemporary Russia as a Medieval Feudal State with Putin as the ‘Tsar’. He criticised the Russian ‘cultural elite’ which kept silent over the Pussy Riot events. Troitsky reminded his audience that true Christianity does not support inquisition.

In ‘Demons And Dance’, What Motivates Those Who Advocate the Blasphemous Actions Of Pussy Riot?’ the author (RG) sought to present those who stood behind Pussy Riot. According to the journalist, the main figure was the ex-owner of the Foundation for Effective Politics and the former assistant director of Channel One (Russia), Marat Gelman. The author claimed that Gelman is ‘the centre of evil’ and most likely supported by former Russian oligarch, government official, and mathematician Boris Berezovsky, who is currently in political asylum in the UK. According to the story, Pussy Riot’s action was an attempt to exert pressure on the government and the Church. The dichotomy between the East and West was highlighted in the frame of ‘Western meddling’ in Russia’s internal affairs.

Rossiyuskaya Gazeta’s Petersburg’s Palace Square, where Madonna has been singing, will be sprinkled with holy water presented Madonna as a representative
of the Western international cultural elite in support of Pussy Riot, whereas the Orthodox Church served as the public organisation that opposed them. The piece marked the internal sacred spaces from the western cultural industry places.

In *Madonna and emptiness*\(^\text{12}\)*, RG described the pop star Madonna as a representative of western, superficial artists supporting Pussy Riot. According to the author, Madonna’s support of Pussy Riot was nothing more than PR and advertising. The article condemned the performance as a PR stunt as well as the performances of other Western pop stars supporting Pussy Riot as commercial publicity profiteering.

*The Pussy Riot verdict is hard, but a majority supports it*\(^\text{13}\) This is a small note (RG), which provided commentary on the court’s sentencing of three members of Pussy Riot. The head of the Department of Labour, Andrei Isaev, states that the Pussy Riot verdict was hard, and most likely would be received poorly by the liberal intelligentsia, but the majority of the Russian population supported it. The author also claimed this was an example of governmental defence towards all religious unions in the country. The theme of the Dostoyevskian *Crime and Punishment* was very visible in the Russian coverage, as the political opposition throughout the Putin era had criticized the judiciary system.

**THE WESTERN CULTURAL DICHOTOMIES AND NARRATIVE NETWORKS**

The western coverage was coded through narrative network with the opposites between the young/old, feminism/patriarchalism, freedom/repression, East and West, power/politics, history/future, progression and regression. Russian culture is compared to the (global) Western culture. The Pussy Riot case started as a cultural phenomenon, where the style and importance of the youth protest culture are in fore. The narrative was between feminism and patriarchalism, i.e. between ‘the girls’ and Putin.

The New York Times picked up the group first through one of their cultural blogs on 7 March 2012. ‘*Russian Riot Grrrls Jailed for ‘Punk Prayer’.*’ It described five women standing in a line opposite the Kremlin, neon balaclavas hiding their faces, fists pounding the air in rugged defiance. Before police carted them off, the members of Pussy Riot managed to shout their way through a minute-long punk anthem: ‘Revolt in Russia - the charisma of protest / Revolt in Russia, Putin’s got scared!’
The expressive role of the group, including the gender and aesthetics performed through signature features, forms of performances and communication of the group, was emphasised in the Western coverage. The youth culture (punk and feminism) was seen as the sign of the new democratic forces and hope in the midst of the backwardness of Russia.

On 8 August 2012, The Guardian featured ‘The Riot Girls’ Style: Bright Tights, Boots and Those Haunting Balaclavas.’ Here, Pussy Riot is depicted as known for its political performance art - and its flashy aesthetic – and as an all-female punk band. More, they were shown as part of an increasingly vocal young-and-disgruntled generation in Russia, railing against political corruption, the state’s monopoly on the media and the culture of illegal protest (to name but three sizeable gripes) and finding novel ways to display their dissent.

‘Freedom and repression’ were often described through quoting ‘Russian’ expressions. In many cases the political reality was explained through the religious landscape against which the narrative storyline on the power struggle is sketched. The Church was politics with moral power. Hence the Orthodox Church ruled over freedom of expression.

In ‘Amnesty calls on Vladimir Putin to release Pussy Riot immediately’, The Guardian, on 5 April, quoted Patriarch Kirill, ‘the devil laughed at us’ when Pussy Riot performed their song ‘Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Expel Putin!’ in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour less than a fortnight before presidential elections. Patriarch Kirill appeared annoyed by calls for leniency. There were people who sought to ‘justify and downplay this sacrilege’, he said. ‘My heart breaks from bitterness that amongst these people there are those who call themselves Orthodox’.

On 23 April in ‘First Among Estates’, The Guardian continued its focus on the Russian Orthodox Church. Two decades after the fall of Communism, it is more powerful than ever, yet it feels more threatened.

Patriarch Kirill addressed the throngs in a deep, booming voice, ‘Our persecutors would have us believe that the very act of blasphemy, sacrilege, and mockery of the sacred represents lawful free expression that is protected in modern society’. But that approach is ‘dangerous’, he said, and ‘turns even a microscopic event into a phenomenon of enormous proportions and concerns everyone who is a believer’.
Pussy Riot was most often framed through a triangle between Putin, the Church, and the moral nexus. This nexus was mediated through historical and literary metaphors to make the narrative grounded.

There is something oddly Shakespearian about a story on Pussy Riot, published in the *Guardian* on 7 June. In *Thursday Pussy Riot are scapegoats for Russia’s political crisis* the Russian feminist punk-rock collective staged impromptu events with balaclavas. ‘It recalls the narrative of *King Lear’s* Fool - the laughter dying, the farce drawing to a mysterious, possibly violent close. It likewise recalls the story of the Jester in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Rublev*, a shimmering, brutal portrait of 15th century Russia. The Jester is obscene and irreverent, mocking both the state and the church - and suffers an unenviable fate.’

The ‘Crime and Punishment’ theme enjoyed emphasis during the widely reported trial, both in the *Guardian* and *The New York Times*. The repressive and corrupted landscape of the East was the organising node in the narrative networks. ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ became the main metaphor for making sense of the corrupted judiciary system and the State/Church relationship.

In *The Stalin in Putin*, of 13 August, *The New York Times* laid out a depressing continuum between Stalin’s last show trial against thirteen intellectuals and Putin’s latest actions against Pussy Riot. In the former, thirteen members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were killed in Moscow 60 years ago. This tragedy is sometimes referred to as ‘Stalin’s last execution’. Surely other people were put to death before the tyrant died in March 1953, but it was the last of the show trials to have been completed. The date has also often been referred to in the West as ‘The Night of the Murdered Poets, based on the erroneous assumption that all those killed wrote verse. In fact, the men were intellectuals from different fields.

The trial, as well as the judiciary system, were presented as failed, corrupt, and authoritarian. As in the theatre of the Absurd (below), a show trial and an inquisition were the narrative tools to convey the idea of the Russian situation.

It is a theme picked up earlier as in *The New York Times* on 23 July in *A New Age of Show Trials*, Russia was shown as entering a new age of show trials. The ideology behind Stalinist show trials was that they were supposed to demonstrate that no ‘enemy of the people’ would go unpunished. In reality, what they demonstrated was that anyone can end up being an ‘enemy of the people’. As people watched their friends and neighbours go on trial, they found themselves doing circular mental calculations: What - if anything - makes me different? Will I be arrested, too? Can I convince myself that I won’t be?
A *Guardian* piece on 31 July entitled\(^{14}\), *Theatre of the absurd: Pussy Riot trial*, argued that no political leader enjoys being made to look foolish. “Throughout history, authoritarian leaders have vigorously, and often cruelly, defended their dignity. To observers lucky enough to be beyond reach, their actions merely confirm their vulnerability. It may not look quite like that to the three members of the performance art outfit Pussy Riot, whose trial had just started in Moscow. They wanted to use art to undermine the power of Vladimir Putin. Instead, predictably, he had turned it on them. Beyond the border, he looked ridiculous. In Russia, the prosecution of these three young women who had been vilified in the media for months, had become a trial of Mr Putin’s very regime, one that he could not afford to lose. Pussy Riot’s trial was ‘worse than Soviet era.’”

‘Pussy Riot trial like the Inquisition,’ says Mikhail Khodorkovsky in The *New York Times* on 6 August. The jailed oligarch attacked the Russian judiciary for a lack of honesty and said that the prosecution of the punk band is ‘painful to watch.’ The trial of Pussy Riot was reminiscent of the Inquisition, according to the jailed oil tycoon who is Russia’s most famous political prisoner.

As morality/immorality has a different weight in Eastern and Western narrative networks, the English-speaking media reports the reaction on supporting acts of the Western cultural community emphasizing the different understanding of ‘morality’ in relation to religion, between the West/East.

In *Pussy Riot case: Madonna called a moralising ‘slut’* of 9 August, the *Guardian* described an attack on the singer by a senior Russian official using Twitter after she stated support for the jailed feminist punk band during a Moscow concert.

‘With age, every former s. tries to lecture everyone on morality’, Dmitry Rogozin, a deputy prime minister, wrote on Twitter late on Wednesday, using the first letter of the Russian word for ‘slut’ or ‘whore’. ‘Especially during overseas tours.’

On 9 August, The *New York Times* ran *Punk Band’s Moscow Trial Offers Platform for Orthodox Protester*. As the NYT described the situation: ‘With the gold domes of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour glittering just across the Moscow River, members of three Russian Orthodox groups that espouse a fervent blend of nationalism and religiosity, set fire to a poster of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot and also put a match to a poster of the pop star Madonna. ‘We’re going to rip them up and burn them,’ said Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, the white-bearded leader of one group, the Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers, ‘Like in the Middle Ages.’”
The morality has to do with women’s morals, being a saint or a slut, and this dichotomy is strengthened by the religious fervour of the Russian Orthodox groups, and the higher civil servants. The political establishment is the guardian of moral fundamentals against violation and Western influences.

In *Pussy Riot coverage ‘shows western media’s hypocrisy’*, of 26 October, the *Guardian* featured Vladimir Putin accusing the western media of hypocrisy in its coverage of Pussy Riot, saying the women had crossed a red line. The pro-democracy protesters had ‘violated the morals of the people’ and after the Stalin-era purge of Orthodox priests, it was the Russian state’s duty to protect the sanctity. The verdict was widely covered both in the Western and Russian media. However, the *New York Times* spoke as a ‘global voice’, as human rights overtook religious sensibilities and quoted the Moscow judge on ‘grave crimes’ including ‘the insult and humiliation of the Christian faith and inciting religious hatred’.

The *New York Times* piece of 18 August, *Anti-Putin Stunt Earns Punk Band Two Years in Jail* has human rights groups and Western governments, including the United States, immediately criticized the verdict as unjust and the sentence as unduly severe. Because the women acted as a group, they had faced a maximum sentence of seven years in prison. Prosecutors had urged for a three-year sentence. The stiff punishment was handed down by a Moscow judge, Marina Syrova, who described the women as posing a danger to society and said they had committed ‘grave crimes’, including ‘the insult and humiliation of the Christian faith and inciting religious hatred.’

The narrative storyline in the Western media continues with the ‘archipelago of Gulags’ as the prison system of the Russian comes to the fore. This can be seen in both *Jailed Pussy Riot pair to face harsh life in Russian camps: Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of anti-Kremlin punk band Pussy Riot have been sent to remote prison camps*, the *Guardian* piece of 23 October 23 and ‘The Living Death of Solitary Confinement’ two months earlier on 26 August in The *New York Times*. The latter detailed how there are many ways to destroy a person, but the simplest and most devastating might be solitary confinement. ‘Deprived of meaningful human contact, otherwise healthy prisoners often come unhinged. They experience intense anxiety, paranoia, depression, memory loss, hallucinations and other perceptual distortions. Psychiatrists call this cluster of symptoms SHU syndrome, named after the Security Housing Units of many supermax prisons. Prisoners have more direct ways of naming their experience. They call it ‘living death’, the ‘grey box’, or ‘living in a black hole.”
The last articles in the sample wrapped up the narrative storyline with the uneasy, and (too) close relationship between political and religious powers in Russia.

The *New York Times*’ *Russians See Church and State Come Closer* of 1 November has the Russian Orthodox Church continue its ascent as a political force, Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov stands at the centre of a swirling argument about the church’s power and its possible influence on President Vladimir V. Putin. Father Tikhon, a former film student, presides over the 14th century Sretenksy Monastery, near the headquarters of the former KGB, in which Mr. Putin worked in Soviet times. A media-savvy figure, Father Tikhon has written a surprise best seller about monastic life and has been described as ‘Putin’s spiritual father’ -- a label he coyly neither embraces nor denies.

The larger participatory assemblages and related narrative networks seem to circulate clashing cultural values which makes the participatory assemblage itself, Pussy Riot, familiar and attractive to media both in Russia and in the West. The Western media largely share the interpretation of the band’s ‘punk prayer’ as a parody, a prank, a provocation targeting the Russian Orthodox Church and thus belonging to the long and distinguished tradition of the conflict between art and religion.

In the Russian coverage, the role of the Orthodox Church, defining sacred-profane as well as offering moral guidelines, has been in a specific role in post-soviet countries, and hence has a strong emphasis. As all religion activity was forbidden during communist times it was embraced with fierce affection after the collapse of Communism. In addition, the Church adopted a social missionary role and has had a strong social and cohesive role in Russian society. Therefore, the Pussy Riot performances not only accused the Church of subservience to authoritarian government, corruption, suppression of homosexuality and women’s rights, but in the view of its supporters, the performance was particularly offensive as band members had entered an area of the Church, which is usually off-limits to the congregation. This seemingly offended the sensibilities of the population at large, not only the most devout.

This historical context of the post-communist history of Russian is lacking in the Western coverage and hence makes the narrative structures difficult to decipher. As Eastern Europe is routinely portrayed in the Western coverage as a repressive space with patriarchalism, religion and corruption, the coverage also misses, to a great extent, an understanding of the complex, new Russian identity based on the two above mentioned elements; the values of Orthodox Church,
and the Russian nationalism that depicts Russia as a Great Nation. The Russian nationalist stance is very sensitive to ‘Western meddling’ when it comes to their internal affairs. This is also used to create internal solidarity against the West. The Dostoyevskyan theme of ‘Crime and Punishment’ refers to distinct cultural features of this moral landscape, the centrality of religion and the significant nodes between the state, the church, and national identity. Though most of the discussion on crime and punishment revolves around a corrupted judiciary system, it also simplifies the deeper philosophical Russian traditions concerning morality; gauging the order-disorder dichotomy in times of change.

CONCLUSIONS

Pussy Riot is an example of political assemblage that creates its own space of storytelling by combining urban and digital spaces for mobilising affect, media, and action. Many features of this type of popular politics have a longer history, stretching back to the Middle Ages, and ranging from carnivalism to profane practices of the *populus*.

Through iterative processes, the narratives emerge, and are redefined endlessly, in the open-ended circulations within social media ecology and the semantic space that expands through hyperlinks, hypertexts and relations to earlier archives of digital news on the region, political situation, and foreign politics. Hence the digital news ecology has a ‘digital memory’ that forms a node when media narratives are constructed.

In producing new political spaces, the group uses the techniques of connecting digital space and translates that into network spaces and assemblages. These im/material roles of the political assemblage are played out in the urban space as well as in digital network space, through their concrete and digital nodes, servers, participants, and platforms. When the media narratives, messages, statements, and performances are archived digitally to produce archaeological sites, which are simultaneously establishing themselves as part of the digital, political memory of networked communities. The urban space is the stage that connects the geopolitical nodes and territorialises the circulation of networked media narratives. Hence, participatory movements are in a state of being continuously assembled. This process consists of a widening collection of people, pages, memes, digital nodes, web archives, artefacts, documents, performances, sites, and various network logics of topological spaces. It is a composition consisting of an arrangement of miscellaneous digital and material objects, as well as digital networks consisting of topological spaces.
It radicalises the sense of (media) ecology implicit within time-geography by providing what Thrift (1999) calls an ‘irreducible ontology’. Here the world is made up of the intersection or myriad encounters between actants – people and things – and where the conventional separations between culture and nature are called into question. Such an ontology geographer Nigel Thrift has described as ‘sensuous’ due to the characteristics of its physicality and ‘spectral’ by virtue of its entanglements of absence and presence.

The production of new political, relational spaces uses techniques of connecting digital space and translates that into network spaces, and finally into political assemblages. Ephemeral technologies, such as social media, weave new spatial and affective textures to create socially dense assemblages. This also shows how connecting embodied technologies, such as mobile devices and social media, with organisations and groups’ websites can become powerful ideological fabrics. There are ‘turbulent passions’, which Thrift (2007, 26) defines as ‘the realm of political feeling by concentrating the technologies (structures or contexts) through which masses of people become primed to act’. Affective technologies also include the logics of networks and connecting technology that merges material and immaterial contexts into assemblages.

The linguistic/coding role of social assemblages, such as Pussy Riot, enables them to be a node of discourses instead of constructing discourses. As their communication is not fixed or static but a process (networks, nodes, memes, performances, and expressive signifiers), the surrounding media ecology produces the narrative storyline according to the signs and signifiers within the narrative networks. As the participatory political assemblage is both mimetic and memetic, their acts can be imitated and remixed, and acts like memes can stand for many signs, ideas and discourses - democracy, religion, feminism, motherhood, music, youth, etc., transcending borders between gender, generation and genre. Moreover, digital media narratives are not self-sufficient, nor are they fixed entities. They are malleable processes that change with the participatory interaction of readers, users, comments and shares. With the grand narratives becoming more participatory and fluid, the narrative networks also are becoming more powerful. Hence the emergent narrative network structures are always ‘in becoming’ as the hybrid networks of political ecologies will replace the fixed narratives and representational practices of political communication.
REFERENCES


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TAKIOSIOS POLITIKOS MEDIJUOTOS ERDVĖS. DALYVAVIMO PROCESAI IR ĮTINKLINTI NARATYVAI

SANTRAUKA


REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: dalyvavimas, komunikacinė erdvė, medijų naratyvai, Pussy Riot, skaitmeninių tinklų aktyvizmas.