#IAMNOTAFRAIDTOSAYIT: STORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS EVERYDAY POLITICAL SPEECH ON FACEBOOK

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The debate about the power and influence of networked publics often focuses on large-scale political events, activist campaigns and protest activity – the more visible forms of political engagement. On the other hand, digitally mediated activism is often questioned and sometimes derided as a lesser form of dissent, as it is easier to engage in, highly affective, and offers few assurances of sustainability of the change it calls for. But what about everyday political speech online, where social media platforms can contribute to a personalisation of politics (Highfield 2016)? Can social media users express their views online and make a difference? This paper argues that networked conversations about everyday rights and affective stories about shared experiences of injustice, underpinned by the affordances of social media platforms for sharing and discussing information and participating in everyday politics, can emerge as viable forms of networked activism and can have real impact on the status quo of an issue, both in the digital sphere and beyond it.

In early July of 2016, Nastya Melnychenko, a Ukrainian activist and journalist, published a post on her Facebook page where she called on women to share stories of sexual harassment and sexual violence without shame. She also shared a few of her own stories, and added a hashtag, #ЯНеБоюсьСказати (Ukrainian for #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt). In the post, Melnychenko wrote:

> I want us, women, to talk today. To talk about the violence that most of us have lived through. I want us to stop making excuses and saying "I was wearing gym clothes during the day, and still got pawed." We don't need to make excuses. We're not to blame, those who violate us are ALWAYS to blame. I am not afraid to speak out. And I do not feel guilty. (Melnychenko 2016)

Melnychenko's original post garnered 385 shares, over 1,700 likes and over 300 comments (as of February 2017). The hashtag itself also gained traction, emerging as an example of a discursive social media ritual (Highfield 2016), with hundreds of women

and men in the Ukrainian and Russian-speaking segments of Facebook using it to share their own stories of sexual assault and domestic violence (Lokot 2016). The online "flashmob" also saw wide coverage in mainstream media outlets, and attracted a number of comments from public figures, experts, local and international civil society organizations, and human rights defenders, further revealing that such discursive rituals take place in hybrid media systems (Couldry 2012, Chadwick 2013).

In this paper, I analyze the over 3,500 public Facebook posts with the #ЯНеБоюсьСказати hashtag and its variations in Ukrainian and Russian (as the two dominant languages in the Ukrainian Internet space) collected between 4 July 2016 and 31 December 2016 using DiscoverText software. The analysis seeks to evaluate the affective qualities of networked storytelling (Papacharissi 2016), to gauge the role of these online expressions as political acts as they create a mediated feeling of connectedness, and to reveal the affordances and limitations of Facebook as a networked publics platform for impactful everyday political speech.

A close reading of the discourses present within the collection of Facebook texts, coupled with elements of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, reveals that the topic of sexual violence, which still remains a kind of taboo for the Ukrainian public, was thrust onto the front stage through frank, personal, lived stories shared freely by Facebook users, the majority of them women. These Facebook-based network publics afforded the issue – and the ritual discourse around it – to be persistent, highly scalable and replicable (boyd 2010), leading to a higher awareness of the context and the stories shared within it. The use of a focused set of hashtags in a ritualistic pattern also afforded users more opportunities for metavoicing (Majchrzak et al. 2013) in reacting to personal stories through commenting and sharing.

As Papacharissi notes, while technologies help network publics, "it is our stories that connect us" (Papacharissi 2016, p. 307). Although the hashtag campaign did not directly generate any legislative or regulatory reforms, it shifted the tone of public debate about sexual harassment from abstract and shameful to personal and commonplace, while at the same time underscoring that such acts and the society's tolerance for them is not a valid status quo. The cumulative collection of the affective narratives shared on the hashtag also promoted a more personal and a more political view of gender activism and women's rights - areas that still meet with a lot of skepticism in Ukrainian society. The lived stories of the flashmob participants directly connected the issues of women's rights and gender justice with everyday embodied experiences familiar to many in the country, leading Facebook users to feel a closer affective connection with the lived stories and to rethink their views on gender roles, justice, domestic and sexual violence, and human rights in the everyday context as issues that are acutely political. These networked stories and experiences shared on Facebook became an expression of the political "within the personal", which Highfield (2016) notes is a key characteristic of mundane political exchanges on social media as they are not always explicitly political.

The discourse generated by the status updates on the Facebook hashtag and by other texts in the hybrid media system also confirms Oates' (2013) claim that in societies with weak state support for basic human rights, citizens often turn to the internet and social

media to debate and campaign for their "everyday rights", which encompass not only fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression or gender equality, but also more routine things such as healthcare, social security and access to justice. Networked publics in this regard emerge as discursive spaces that through affective storytelling offer a reframing of personal issues as political and human right-related ones.

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