Young Women's (political) activism online? reflections from Russia

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My research

• Past 10 years researching women’s perceptions of the role that human rights play in their everyday lives in Russia

• Informed development of concepts ‘everyday rights’ and ‘everyday violations’ (Turbine, 2007)
  - a focus on the importance of social and economic rights issues for citizens
  - Childcare/care (related to issues of health, education, welfare)
  - Legal entitlements/status esp. in event of family breakdown

• An exploration of the different pathways to accessing human rights that women use in their daily lives
  - Family/networks
  - Legal advice, claims
  - Appeals to authorities
  - Campaigning/grassroots organising
  - Online variations of above e.g. social networking forums, online forms, legal advice
Women online

• Empowerment potential of the internet for women
  • in contexts where public role curtailed/constrained e.g. women bloggers in Iran, Arab Spring
  • anonymity, community, freedom in quasi-public sphere

• women’s use of blogs, social networking communities well documented on range of issues e.g. health, childcare, lifestyle

• especially young women ‘girl power/empowerment’ & representation online (e.g. Gill)

• BUT what about women’s use of internet for rights activism (for information, for complaining, for advocating, for campaigning, for organising?)
  • ‘digital divides’ and lack of women’s voice politically online - why?
  • age, education, class, location

• Key issue around the safety of the online sphere for women - as a quasi public sphere, women subjected to similar censure as in traditional public sphere
  • e.g. well-documented cases in UK over trolling, threats of sexual violence and intimidation for female journalists and campaigners
Women online in Russia

- Online sphere in Russia fastest growth area in Europe
  - but geographically, infrastructure, economically limited for many
- A quasi-pubic sphere in an authoritarian context?
  - The protests 2011/12 - role of social media/networking sites to mobilise, organise
  - Pussy Riot and use of internet (e.g. You Tube) and reaching an external audience; their current use of twitter feeds/smart phones to document incarceration/treatment
- High visibility of women as protesters, but how much of a role does online have in everyday life for women, beyond the protest movement?
Researching citizens’ rights activism online in Russia

• Case study as part of larger ESRC funded project (RES-000-22-4159) with Prof Sarah Oates (Maryland), running October 2010- end March 2013

• Critically assess the democratising potential of the internet in Russia
• (initial) focus on ‘everyday rights’ (social and economic)

• an exploration of citizens use of the internet as a tool & resource for campaigning for their rights
  - Using conceptual framework of ‘everyday rights’
  - Feminist analysis
  - Mixed methods project
Project methodology 1 - online content

- New approach - focus on broad issue-based case studies and related online content generated across platforms
  - Why - manage content; see spread across the internet (International, domestic, Russia domains);
- Identified ‘firestorms’ i.e. case studies that related to contentious social and economic rights issues (health, welfare, education, housing, childcare etc.)
- Coded online content (e.g. webpages, comments sections, media reports, forums, links, blogposts, social networking sites)
  - and then ‘map’ linkages i.e. where else online did viewers go?
Overview of findings from online content

• What did this tell us?
  - Firestorms do generate interest and in some cases offline action e.g. kidney dialysis or parents with children with Hunters Syndrome (see Oates, 2012)
  - Individual basis/small community basis rather than widespread
  - Fleeting/passing
• identified ‘hidden users’ & ‘hidden issues’
• Analysis taking place as 2011/12 protests occurring - picking up on more overtly political activism
• and need to take seriously political content involving young women noted in 2010
Young women’s political activism online in Russia?

- stereotyping of young women, and young women in Russia particularly, as apolitical/apathetic
- Using a case study to explore how women engaging online and
  - Analyse responses to women’s activism
  - Political/feminist? Both/Neither?
  - Protests of 2011/12 & Pussy Riot - a gamechanger, or same old gender politics?
- 4 examples to capture a range of women’s political activism
  1. Calendar Girls (pro and anti regime)
  2. Putin’s Army (pro regime)
     - Pussy Riot (anti-regime, radical feminist)
     - Femen (wider post-soviet, feminist, controversial, transnational?)
Example 1: Calendar Girls
ЯНВАРЬ

Свобodu собраний всегда и везде?
Мария Цицуровская, 3 курс
Response to Calendars

- Responses to both focused on:
  - appearance of women as un/attractive;
  - amusing;
  - good PR for women/career path
- Derogatory comments about the women vs. women performing appropriate ‘professional femininity’
  - ‘whores’; ‘the first profession’; university a brothel’ vs. ‘classy’
- Doubting the intelligence of the women - PR; not thought of this themselves
- Questioning professionalism of journalism
- Very little consideration of ‘politics’ of either - either viewed as a PR and self-promotion stunt or comment on how to be a good journalist
- Use of body not seen as issue ‘bored of boobs’; ‘like any girl on the metro’ (2 mentions to FEMEN - negative)
- Failure to see ‘embodied’ protest against objectification in second calendar?
What does this case us?

- Women are engaged in a range of political activism
- Women may be making a comment on wider gender politics
- HOWEVER:
  - May not be viewed as such (by selves or by audience)
  - Not linked to critical discussion of gendered politics
  - Lack of linkage with wider movements e.g. Sperling (2012) - young women marginalised within both pro and anti-regime youth movements
  - 'tropes of dismissal' common in other contexts clear (Turbine, 2013b)
  - What about young women not represented here - class, location, education, employment?
Project methodology 2 - in-depth interviews

• 20 qualitative open-ended, in-depth interviews (lasting from 1 hour to over 2 hours)
• Asking about general internet use - access, what used for, perceptions of internet as a tool in daily life, any use of internet for resolving rights issues?
• awareness of political use of the internet (opposition movement)
• I’ll talk today about what initial analysis of some of the interviews with women (ages 23-30) might reveal about the role of the internet for women (politically)
Overview of findings

• More women than men online in sample
  • men, particularly over 40s and in less skilled occur skeptical and suspicious about online sphere
• What do people use the internet for?
  - As part of their work
  - Personal - socialising, lifestyle, dating, but mainly maintaining existing offline relationships
  - Daily bureaucracy e.g. passport renewals, banking, dr appointments
  - Some local civic engagement e.g. animal rights, environmental campaigns, some discussion of politics
  - entrepreneurship ‘mumtrepreneurs’
  - Rights activism e.g. petitions, setting up campaigns, sourcing information, contacting authorities
Overview of findings

• Perceptions mixed:
  • useful and most respondents that were online regular users (some ‘constantly online)  
  • ‘daily bureaucracy’ (drs, passposts)  
  • information - not necessarily news, but community based information, e.g. Mumsnet (SimMama), daily life e.g. recipes, shopping  
  • a relatively ‘safe space’?  
• Political/civic use also mixed:
  • ‘donate and forget’ (clicktivism)  
  • ‘read blogs and move on to next’ (social memory & protest)  
  • not always viewing action as such e.g. petition to ombudsman, organising/taking part in parental ‘flashmob’ to highlight education/childcare access
Young women and online political dis/engagement in provincial Russia?

Let’s talk a bit about the political role of the internet in Russia. Do you think you have unfettered access to any information on the internet?

Ir: Well, there are websites which are blocked or access to them is impossible through the main tags, possible only through additional links. For me that does not matter as much, I am far from politics and am adamantly not interested in it. My students programmers have told me, there is a website about people who I shall not name, that tells all about their palaces, about how much money they have, what they’re building, lots of photos. So if you search it through Yandex, Rambler, it will not come up in results, you only need to type in the URL in the address bar and go there. And I’m sure there’s information that is blocked, we can’t do without this. The state is running their own politics, as well it should be. Whatever our state is like, they shouldn’t lose their face before the outside world.

In: So this website, which you can access only if you know the address, can you tell me more about it? What have you heard? And why?

Ir: Students told me on a break, they’re programmers, so they get around. This was 3-4 years ago, don’t remember why we were talking about this. It had all the expenses of the State Duma, the real ones, not the official ones: how much caviar they bought for banquets, who built summer houses, with photos of said luxurious houses and names of owners, purchasing cars for officials, that kind of thing, an anti-corruption site.

In: Do you know who created the site?

Ir: No idea, I never even went there.

In: Do you think there are any areas of the web to which the government is limiting access?

Ir: I guess there might be, but I don’t know what those are and I’ve never tried to get there, I just don’t find this necessary.

In: If you try to remember decent discussions about introducing censorship, connected to political events.

Ir: Can you be more specific, I missed that completely, I guess I turned off most of the national channels and only watch cable – because watching national channels and news is bad for your health, I say.
Young women and online political dis/engagement in provincial Russia?

If we go back to the political internet and the protests, and the role of the internet in them in Russia, I understand you followed the protests during the elections last year – both online and on TV, you mentioned?

N: I remember there were demonstrations, even huge ones, but I won’t be able to name the exact places of slogans or what they protested against. I know they’re connected to politics, a lot of people. Also when they wanted to pass this law against big groups gathering. I remember this happened, but I don’t memorize that, since I’m not very interested in that, so I don’t keep them in my memory.

I: Do you find out more of this kind of information through the internet or on TV?

N: On TV, I think. Online, it’s more that I might find a piece of news and see, oh, this happened, but not remember it for long.
Young women and political dis/engagement online?

I: What latest political events or news, the biggest ones, can you think of?

A: I can’t really say. I’m not that interested in politics, I don’t like it much, what is happening in Russia.

I: What is happening in Russia?

A: Chaos, disorder (laughs). I mean, I’m not at an age where I need to feed a family, pay my rent – I live with my parents, so all the money I spend, I spend on myself. But I see how other people live, I see what the minimum wage is in our town, what the prices are, it’s not like that anywhere. Even in other countries, like in America, yes, they have a crisis too, but they live on a much better level. What ignorance there is in Russia, how angry people are, such indifference, poverty. Stupid laws, completely not the ones that are necessary. Like this law about the insulting the feelings of the religious believers, I think it’s totally unnecessary. Things like that. Not much order in Russia. So this news I don’t like to see, how awful our government is, it’s better not to see or hear it until you absolutely have to face it.

I: So you mentioned this new law about insulting the feelings of religious believers, what sorts of problems do you think the laws should address?

A: Well, the tax on luxury, for instance, because people who have so much more - I think it should be introduced. Because the man who makes billions and pays the 13%, he doesn’t notice the loss, whereas people who make meager salaries, for them these 13% are a necessity. And with us, all laws are aimed at protecting the rich. If you’re rich, you can find a loophole in any law.

I: What else do you think should be attended to?

A: Well, education. It’s becoming more and more expensive. And also, adoption laws for orphans, it’s such a stupid law. I think regardless of what country they go to, they will never have it worse than in an orphanage in Russia. And when from 100,000 several kids die, they point this out, but not the fact that here in Russian there are hundreds of orphans dying every day. Also, I love animals, so I’m very worried about the fact we have no animal shelters. In the US and in normal European countries, there are hardly any animals running around on the streets, and in Russia there are no laws about animals, so people can do what they want. Someone can torture and poison them if they wish. No money is provided from the budget to address this. So I care about this issue a lot.
Young women and online political dis/engagement in provincial Russia?

Y: I don’t like Twitter at all, I think it’s such nonsense.

I: Why don’t you like them – Twitter, Facebook? Skype you have?

Y: Skype I do have.

I: So everything, but Twitter and Facebook?

Y: I am registered on Facebook, but I will not register on Twitter. There’s this joke, I signed up to Twitter, then my Dad followed me, and that was it for me and Twitter. I am not really interested in people talking about their life every hour. I have tried to follow some people, like Morozov (the governor of Ulyanovsk region), who just write: I was there, I went there. Well, I’ve been to all those places you mention, and your visit had no sense at all. So most of Twitter seems like an imitation of activity, of an active life, and I see no sense in that. I don’t want to know who you talked to, I want to know what you did. People can say a lot online, but whether or not they will be true to their words later remains to be seen. Yes, you visited our company, yes, you took a photo of yourself climbing the diving tower and almost falling into the pool. Yes, you had a reception. I know all that, I know the guy knows the owners of the place, so they networked, and he left. He just put a check in his PR calendar, there was a crowd of people following him when he was here, his milieu, some of them also important regional officials. And they just went around and pointed at things.

I: So do you think the governor blogs in his Twitter himself?

Y: Of course not! I’m pretty sure. He’s also in my friends list on VKontakte and I see news from him.

I: Friends with the governor online?

Y: Of course! If he wasn’t there, I’d delete my page at once.

I: Why did you add him?

Y: I was curious, interested to see. I remember there was a heated discussion, likely after the elections. Either about education, or about housing. And the youth was asking questions online, and he responded, allegedly.

I: Ah, he commented on that on his page.

Y: Likely his press-service, I’m not even sure he is aware of these answers.
Young women and political dis/engagement online?

So, in general, what would you say you like about using the internet? What are the advantages for you?

Ir: I can communicate with a large number of people without leaving the house, which prevents me from complete moral degradation, only occupying my self with the child, cooking and cleaning and toys. I mean, your vocabulary changes even, if you just spend all your time with the kid and teach them new words. The chance to buy stuff, to chat. In SimMama, it turned out that I know many of those people offline - some I met after I registered, some I knew before – and it just turned out accidentally that they were also on the site. We did not seek each other out. And in terms of going offline, SimMama is probably the most indicative site in the city – they organize offline meetups, activities for users. Just recently on Monday the girls came together and went to a children’s art studio with the children – to talk, for the kids to play and for moms to rest. SimMama also organizes tours – it’s a bit too early for us, but those with older children, they went to a toy factory to see how things are made. They also go to museums, nature reserves together, those in the area, during the summer. For Children’s Day they organized a flashmob with blowing bubbles in a park, where everyone had to come and blow lots of bubbles. I think they also cooperate with the local Education Ministry to organize some interesting things. Some of the activists may work in the Ministry, I think – they help provide music equipment, stages for events, to make sure people have a good time. They had a Christmas Tree party for Sim Moms, etc – so lots of going offline. Last year, the Pram Parade didn’t happen for some reason, but this year it was pretty massive.

In: What is Pram Parade?

Ir: Pram Parade is people with prams – moms, dads, children – all marching.
Conclusions

• Young women are actively engaged online

• women view the internet as highly useful in everyday life

• some young women are engaging politically, but may not be viewed by others as such (or themselves)

• implicit comment on or through ‘embodied’ gender politics, but not always named as such - why?

• safety of online sphere? an alternative public sphere for women?
  • trolling, dismissal and derogatory abuse evident, but not threats of sexual violence as seen in UK context
    - interesting question to consider further

• importance of place, class, education, opportunities - impacting on
  • relevance given to wider political issues - and why distinct from economic - universal concern with corruption which sits across
  • distinctions drawn between ‘mothers’ and ‘citizens’
  • perceptions of control of the online sphere - when limits to ‘free speech’ may seem acceptable