From Irony to Solidarity: Affective Practice and Social Media Activism

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Abstract

This article discusses *affective practice* in context of social media activism. Drawing on work by Margaret Wetherell the article explores particular sensibility of political discourse and action, enhanced by the social media environment. The empirical cases involve the social media activism of anti-immigrant movement as well as solidarity activists in the context of the so called refugee crisis in Europe. It is argued that practices and sensibilities of activism enhanced and shaped by the technologies and economics of social media. While the anti-immigrant movement makes use of politics of irony on various levels from discourse to acts of trolling, solidarity movements tend to focus on compassionate, yet increasingly practical and shielded forms of practices. Finally, it introduces solidarity of dissonance as an opportunity for reflexive collective action and as a space to imagine alternatives.

Key words: affective practice, solidarity, social media activism, anti-immigrant movement, refugee crisis.

In this essay, I discuss the role of social media activism in the context of the refugee crisis in Europe. My focus here is on the *affective practice* of social media engagement and activism. The essay is inspired by the quest to understand how people can make a difference through media participation; however, it is also shaped by an understanding of the increased complexity of media participation, its shortcomings and limitations.

Why social media participation matters? A focus on social media addresses the relevance of the ability to take part in political debates and discussions regarding social justice – an ability that the most vulnerable are often deprived of. Stevenson (2014) and Rheindorf and Wodak (2017), among others, have pointed out that in contemporary Europe, the rights of refugees are increasingly being weakened. If we consider that the ability to take part in political debates is fundamental to justice, when these possibilities are taken away, people have no access to the membership of society, and they can be closed off and treated as non-people—as surplus humanity (Ticktin, 2010). This is true not only for refugees – it includes all members of society who are, in some way, marginalised. Therefore, having access to public debates is crucial for human rights. However, gaining access is far from simple. We may think that now, in the era of social media, public debate is available to all. However, this idea is fraught with difficulty. Social media are not free and open to all. Even if people can voice their views in public, there is no guarantee that anyone is listening. Social media are commercialised, contested spaces of participation that have proliferated not only political progressive activism, but also the politics of hostility and racism. Therefore, we need to look more closely at how social media shapes these political engagements as well as the possible ways of building more productive avenues for social change.

The essay draws on research I have conducted on social media participation by solidarity activists and anti-immigrant groups (Nikunen, 2010; 2015) as well as social media campaigns and participation by refugees and migrants (Nikunen, 2018; 2019). The material includes 11 interviews with activists, and analysis of online forums, blogs and journals such as The Migrant Tales, Once I was Refugee -campaign, anti-immigrant sites Hommaforum and Scripta –blog, and Finnish discussion forums

Suomi24 and IRC Gallery. The study adopts a multi-sited approach to investigate the patterns and meanings of social media activism. It combines a wide range of sources of knowledge from analysis of social media sites to interviews and observation to gain understanding of the processes that shape the phenomenon (Hannerz, 2010): the forms and modes of social media engagement, which are shaped by both individual choices and social media affordances, as well as the political debate in Finland. Therefore, the analysis is informed by a contextual understanding of social media activism as a part of a particular historical moment, one shaped by the political, cultural, and media contexts (Hine, 2017).

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, I introduce the theoretical framework and concept of affective practice. I then move on to discuss the rise of the anti-immigrant movement and the politics of irony in a social media context. This is followed by exploration of the possibilities of hospitality and solidarity activism, and finally, I try to highlight the possibilities regarding dissonance for social change and solidarity.

Affective practice

My focus on *affective practice* highlights the particular sensibility of political discourse that is enhanced by the social media environment. I consider affect as practice as being shaped by social formations and digital technologies – the contexts in which particular political groups or communities gather, discuss and act (Wetherell, 2012). Exploring affect as practice is close to other approaches that seek to understand the emotional dimensions of social action and social realities: the structure of feeling proposed by Williams (1961) or intimacy and cruel optimism by Berlant (2011). This means exploring emotions and affect as part of meaning-making processes in particular social and historical contexts.

First, however, I need to define what is meant by affect in this paper. The so called affective turn (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010) in cultural studies includes range of definitions and understandings of affect. While Sara Ahmed (2004), for example, uses affect and emotions interchangeably and sees both as connected with the meaning-making process, Nigel Thrift (2008) and Brian Massumi (2002) among others, discuss affect as emergent, becoming, and unattainable – and ultimately separate from meaning, consciousness and representation (see Wetherell, 2012, pp. 60-61, 74-75). This approach echoes the neuroscientific and behavioral view of affect as automatic, reactive response, considered separate from emotion. Margaret Wetherell, in her book *Affect and Emotion*, argues for a more integrated understanding of affect, emotions and meaning-making process, in a way that is also supported by recent neuroscience research (Wetherell, 2012, pp. 47-50). Following her approach, we can think of immediate affective reactions as part of a larger emotional pool that include emotions of sadness, joy or hope. Such responses are shaped by conscious experience, not separate from them. If we consider affect as completely separate from meaning making processes, it becomes unavailable for analysis and potentially loses connection with the social world. As Wetherell points out "people swim in cultural and discursive milieus like fish in water - we are full of cultural and discursive practices" (2012, p. 65). Her aim is to find ways to make research on emotions and affect accessible for social analysis. She approaches affect as *practice* and examines the ways in which affective practices "sediment in social formations" (Wetherell 2012, p. 103). Therefore, this understanding of affect as practice also departs from the idea of affect as pre-discursive and emergent as in Papacharissi's concept of affective publics (2015, pp. 13-17).

What I am looking at here are particular affective styles that are connected to group boundaries that are marked by emotions of fear, disgust or shame (Wetherell, 2012, p. 110; Skeggs, 2005). Thus, researching affective practice may sketch out these boundaries and the affective canon of a particular social group or community (see also Paasonen, 2015). It shows how emotions are experienced, managed, mobilised and geared in the context of social media and how particular emotions carry particular kinds of moral force. In addition, affective practices are significantly shaped by technologies and economies of social media. Next, I look more closely what this means in the context of anti-immigrant movement and their social media practices.

Politics of irony

As we know, in the past decade, extreme right-wing groups, along with the anti-immigrant movement, have become increasingly powerful in Europe and elsewhere. These groups are also known to use digital media in different ways (Back, 2002). In Finland, the anti-immigrant movement has been organised around a few sites and blogs since early 2000s. This movement has actively and quite successfully entered and influenced national politics, making use of what I refer to as the *politics of irony*—an affective practice of ironic detachment and cold humour in the corresponding political discourse.

I have argued elsewhere that *irony* is the guiding sensibility (affective practice) in anti-immigrant online discussions, manifested as a linguistic style, a practice of communication and a general disposition. The discursive community of the anti-immigrant movement uses irony as an affective practice to further particular political views as well as to solidify the group. As argued by Hutcheon (1994, p. 15), there is an "affective charge to irony that cannot be separated from its politics /…/ Irony irritates because it denies certainties, it can mock, ridicule, exclude, embarrass, humiliate."

The emergence of politics of irony can be connected with (initially) harmless practices of trolling and memes – in the circulation of that which is fun, fake and '*lulz*' (Nagle, 2017). The politics of irony grows in subcultural digital spaces as the driving sensibility of many online groups and forums (Nagle, 2017; Prisk, 2017; Hawley, 2017; Nikunen, 2015). However, irony has also become a central part of populist politics, which targets racialized subjects, feminists and minorities often through networked actors of digital media. Nagle even argues that "it was the image- and humour-based culture of the irreverent meme-factory of 4chan and later 8chan that gave the alt-right its' youthful energy" (Nagle, 2017, p. 13). In a similar way, Hawley (2017) argues that use of humour and irony are essential to alt-right movement that takes up the online jargon of tech-savvy millennials. Irony provides an avenue for not-taking-things-seriously, for evading responsibility, which we have seen in the politics of right-wing extremists and populist politicians such as Donald Trump, Geert Wilders or Jussi Halla-aho.

In the Finnish context the anti-immigrant movement has gained support through active social media presence since early 2000s with their own blogs, forums and video channels. For the leading figure of the movement, for Jussi Halla-aho, use of irony is a trademark, present in his blog writings. Ironic tone gives a witty flavor to the writings that in essence further racist and misogynist views. One of his famous writings entailed a wish that "since more women are being raped (due to multiculturalism) I sincerely hope that these predators that choose their victims at random would catch the right women; those eco-leftist reformers and their voters".[1] The power of irony is in the way it denies certainties: it can mock, ridicule, exclude, embarrass and humiliate while being detached from what is said. This aspect is also used in defense when writings cause controversies. Irony provides an excuse with the outcome that one doesn't really have to stand behind his/her words. Indeed Halla-aho has several times appealed to parody or to his personal style when faced with criticism. In a similar way other members of the Finns party refer to their commentaries as non-intentional, or simply as humor.[2] Similar use of irony is abundant in circulation of racist memes, images and texts on social media adopted among Halla-aho's followers, and across different far right groups and populist leaders (van Schie & Muis, 2017; Holt, 2016; McMillan, 2005). Irony then operates on a level of discourse, as a style, that enables and advances circulation of racist and sexist views.

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1   http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/monikulttuurisuus_ja_nainen.html [accessed 18.8.2009] (See Keskinen, 2011).

2   In 2011, the newly elected member of the parliament, Tevo Hakkarainen used the word '*niggers*' and mockingly imitated the sound of prayer call from the minaret on a news video. In 2013 another member of the Finns party, Kai Haavisto, suggested hormonal medicine treatment to male members of certain cultures to prevent rapes.
Same year, a friend of a member of the parliament from the Finns party, James Hirvisaari, visited the Finnish parliament and made a public Nazi-salute. http://www.iltasanomat.fi/kotimaa/art-1288605489069.html
http://www.hs.fi/videot/1135265668070?kategoria=Uutiset, http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2011042913622085_uu.shtml
http://m.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2013011716570201_uu.shtml

Politics of irony also requires a set of shared codes and values that form the core of the discussions – in other words the community of like-minded. Often this means a use of a special vocabulary in the discussion forums: referring to immigrants and multicultural activists with specific mock words, manifests the inside group of shared political stands. Words such as '*suvakki*' and '*mokuttaja*' are scornful allusions of people who are seen tolerant and supportive of multicultural policies while word such as '*matu*' refer to immigrants as invaders. Through the use of such words the group assigns to shared ideology and understanding of immigration as a threat. Circulation of these words, expressions and narratives frame immigration debate in a particular way, which is also the goal of the anti-immigrant group. Through networked framing (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Siapera et al., 2018) members of the group actively strive to expand these views to the mainstream. Members of the same political group can effectively re-frame, circulate and in this way amplify particular views on refugee or migration debate, such as crime and rape (Berlet & Mason, 2015; Pöyhtäri et al., forthcoming). We can see the affective practice of irony spilling from one forum to another, networking between Suomi24, Ylilauta, Reddit, 4chan and various other online spaces and practices (Daniels, 2009; Farkas & Neumayer, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Vainikka, 2017; Hatakka, 2018). In this way, the use of apparently playful, memic irony has paved way to normalisation of the practices of hate.

Finally, it is important to understand the ways in which internet governance enables the circulation of hostile content. Contents produced, shared and circulated by users form relevant part of the social media business model, based on the immaterial labour of users. Platforms such as Facebook and Google are reluctant to regulate their content, and instead, they rely on self- and peer-regulation and often outsource moderation from local to global contexts. Defining themselves as technology companies that facilitate a space for people to participate, in the libertarian spirit, profit is made from content by collecting and selling user data to advertisers and others. This is what Dean (2003) calls communicative capitalism. Matamoros-Fernandez (2017) also points out that this enables 'platform racism' by 'amplifying and manufacturing racist discourse both by means of users' appropriations of their affordances and through their design and algorithmic shaping of sociability". According to Gillespie (2015), platforms do not simply offer spaces for expression, they intervene, pick and choose. In addition, vague policies, outsourced, decontextualized moderation and, often, the arbitrary enforcement of rules also provide for '*platform racism*' (Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017).[3] The point here is that the distribution of hostile and racist content benefits from the vague policies and the algorithmic clustering of social media content and groups. First of all, hostile and hateful contents are not removed if the group sharing these contents have nothing against them. Second, connections between different groups are created through social media affordances. The assemblage of white power groups is also data driven as platforms recommend groups and users based on similar interests, contents and consumption habits. For example on Finnish forum, IRC gallery, visiting a group of '*White Finland!!!*', the platform algorithm suggests other similar groups with shared users, such as '*White Power*', '*Skinheads of Finland*', and '*Love your race*'. In digital context, these practices of sharing links, images and videos also extend beyond national boundaries and make use of global cultures of hate. It is for this reason that anti-immigrant arguments tend to be the same in, for example, the US, France, Finland, Hungary, the Czech Republic or Spain, regardless of the local situation (Pöyhtäri et al., forthcoming). This is how affective practice is connected with the architecture of the Web—it is shaped and advanced by the technological structures and affordances of platforms.

I argue that the politics of irony and the rise of the anti-immigrant movement are not detached from these technologies and developments: the former makes use of the latter. Thus, the technologies and affordances of the media environment contribute to the sensibility of the present political climate.

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3   Recently (particularly after the US presidential elections), there has been more pressure on platforms, Facebook and Google in particular, to remove and ban, for example, racist content or content that supports the Nazi movement.

Hidden solidarities

At the same time, however, several solidarity campaigns and groups, organised through social media across Europe, have emerged as a response to the refugee crisis as well as to the rise of anti-immigrant and populist movements. During the so-called refugee crisis, various campaigns to provide water, blankets and food to refugees in parks and railway stations in European cities have expressed a sense of solidarity for the plight of refugees arriving from Syria and the Middle East (The Guardian 3.9.2015; Helsingin Sanomat 7.9.2015; Al-Jazeera 16.1.2016; The New York Times 17.5.2017.)

From these sentiments of hospitality, several new European-wide movements, which also operate on social media, such as Refugees Welcome, Refugees Hospitality Club and The Right to Live (against deportations), have emerged. Help has also been mobilised through new media technologies. Examples of mobile maps, technological alarm systems and Facebook sites for topping up mobile phones for refugees and migrants illustrate the variety of humanitarian technologies used to help migrants and refugees (Gillespie et al., 2016; Latonero, 2016; Walsh, 2013).

The Refugees Welcome movement grew rapidly from citizens' initiatives to an organised movement that encourages individual citizens to provide accommodation to refugees and to pressure communities to host refugees. The movement started in Germany in 2014 and now operates in over 20 countries. The Right to Live movement – which was formed in Finland in the face of deportations of Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers who were denied asylum because their countries of origin were suddenly regarded as countries of safe return. The change in policy reflects the ways in which refugee rights are becoming increasingly precarious. The shift towards more restrictive asylum policies across Europe can be seen as an outcome of political pressures to '*manage the refugee crisis*' and '*to protect borders*' with agreements made between the EU and third party (Libya and Turkey), to maintain asylum seekers and refugees outside European in conditions that are highly criticized by international organizations such as UNHCR and Amnesty International (Rheindorf & Wodak, 2017).

Typical actions of solidarity groups involve mobilisation for demonstrations, collecting support for petitions and the circulation of information on the latest news and events. Solidarity movements organised around refugee issues can be seen as '*new social movements*', which Fenton (2008) describes as decentralised, non-hierarchical, often with open structures and communication. They may also be transnational, with alliances and coalitions across different movements and borders. By intersecting the public and private, they exemplify the emergence of intimate, affective or agonistic publics as forms of political action in the digital era. The Refugees Welcome movement is a good example of a transnational movement that is decentralised and open but highly visible and effective in mobilising online participants to offline events. It is the capacity to "speed up and increase the circulation of the struggle" (Fenton, 2008), which gives weight to these movements. For example, in July 2015, a demonstration against the growing anti-immigrant sentiment was organized in Finland through social media. Within few days activists of different groups brought together over 15 000 people. The actual demonstration operated as a conjuncture of "the street and the media" (Butler, 2015) as due to ubiquity of mobile technologies people shared amateur videos and personal experiences from the demonstration. These media images and videos would then amplify the visibility and voices of the demonstration, circulated and shared on social media.

The driving sensibility, the affective practice of these refugee and solidarity movements, can be described as compassionate, however, it is also practical. For these movements, social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, operate primarily as tools for organising and disseminating information concerning demonstrations, help and other public forms of action (Barassi, 2015; Fenton, 2016). They constitute a form of politics that is characterised by direct engagement and rapid response to political events. For these movements, social media operate primarily as a tool for organising action, providing shelter, food, utilities, organising demonstrations (Barassi, 2015; Fenton, 2016).

In the current contested political climate, activist groups, and the people involved, have also increasingly become targets of hateful and racist attacks. As argued by Marwick and Boyd (2011), social media technologies collapse multiple contexts and audiences in ways that complicate possibilities to manage separate profiles or to create the self through recognition by a particular restricted audience. This has led to the strategy of private and closed group, which serve as safe spaces to avoid infiltration, surveillance, trolling and doxing. The threshold for engaging in digital activism is becoming higher. Refugee activists and activists who produce anti-racist activist media talk about shielding strategies and the necessity to operate anonymously. Increasing amounts of digital labour are used to manage attacks, secure spaces, verify sources and reveal fake profiles and information. This also means that learning new digital skills has become a central part of activist efforts. Solidarity groups often have to create new groups, migrate to another forum and use pseudonyms. However, not all activists face direct attacks. For example in a public Facebook campaign, Once I was a Refugee[4], comments have been mainly positive and supportive. Hostility towards the activists and the campaign, was only expressed in separate forums shared by the like-minded, and not expressed directly to the participants. However, members on other solidarity groups recount attacks on their profiles to the extent that they have to use pseudonyms to organize action (personal interviews 25.10. 2017, 29.11. 2016). The continuous contestation also draws activists to disputes and different counter-attacks, that are often counter-productive and may side-line their primary goals, such as anti-racist campaigns (Hatakka, 2017).

Solidarity activism is increasingly hidden, as response to the struggle over the digital public space. In some areas of activism, the politically topical areas of migration and feminism, this struggle has come to preoccupy, dominate and exhaust those who are engaged and may start to direct the movement (when action is being directed to various battles movement towards shielding activism).

In her classic essay on publics, Fraser (1992) defined subaltern counter-publics as marginalised groups that organise through their own discursive arenas. In these arenas, groups can define their interests, needs and identities on their own terms. However, their capacity to widen the public sphere, to engage with society, is dependent on the ways in which they operate to reach dialogue, not only as closed enclaves. With the tendency of activism to operate as closed groups, we may come to lose this attribute.

Values of activism

While many may be tempted to explore these different forms of activism (the anti-immigrant and solidarity movements) as two sides of the same phenomenon, there are significant differences that we need to pay attention to. These are related to the underlining values and sensibilities of action.

The anti-immigrant movement and right-wing populism in Europe and the United States lean on an assumed natural, ethnically- and racially-based national identity, which needs to be protected from outsiders. The call for solidarity in the anti-immigrant, populist movement is built on exclusion and is, therefore, at odds with the kind of solidarity that arises from a cosmopolitan understanding of shared humanity (Wilde, 2013, p. 44). Contrary to nationalist solidarity, refugee and solidarity movements draw on cosmopolitanism and inclusiveness. The solidarity proposed by these groups is based on understanding difference as essential part of globally shaped multicultural societies. The aim is not to exclude difference but rather to minimize marginalization based on difference. Therefore, the moral grounds of these movements are strikingly different (Wilde, 2013).

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4   This Facebook and Twitter campaign included selfies by 'former' refugees holding a plackard starting with the sentence *"Once I was a refugee, Now, I am…"* Each participant fills in the rest of the sentence to the extent that he or she wants to. Some of them may write only one or two words to define their place in society: 'now I am a doctor, student, a worker for the city, or a mechanic etc. '. Others write longer stories depicting their experiences arriving in Finland, completing school, finding a job, or starting a family. The campaign reached wide media publicity, over 180 stories, 27 000 likes and a book based on the stories was published in 2017. See https://www.facebook.com/ennenolinpakolainen/

This is reflected in the sensibilities of action: alt-right and anti-immigrant groups purposefully fabricate and distribute images and news to harm particular, often already vulnerable, groups of people (immigrants, refugees, women), whereas refugee and solidarity activism is often aimed at complementing mainstream media with voices of the marginalised and experiences of injustice (Nagle, 2017; Nikunen, 2015). It is one thing to employ parody to reveal racist or sexist thinking; it is another to use it to strengthen this kind of thinking.

Therefore, it is not enough to look at the mechanisms of deliberation – different networks, nodes and clusters – to make sense of social media activism. We need to examine the values of activism: what kind of solidarity and understanding of society is in the heart of different activist groups. Activism is never only about deliberation or action, vectors and nodal points. It is about values, the underlining ideals and goals of activist groups, and if we do not understand the underlying values of action, we may end up making idiotic maps, parallels and destructive balancing acts between '*extremes*'.

Commercialised compassion

As argued above, there are many challenges regarding the sensibilities that shape political activism, particularly the anti-immigrant movement, within the politics of irony. However, a striving to do good, which is characteristic of many solidarity and hospitality movements, is not always without problems. The sensibilities of doing good, and the way they are shaped by the commercialised arrays of social media, pose challenges for solidarity, which is deserving of attention.

To unpack this, we need to problematize the ways in which emotions and affect drive solidarity, for example, by differentiating between the solidarity of compassion and the solidarity of dissonance. Both of these may be mobilised through digital media, but they operate differently in terms of the notion of '*we*'. Solidarity, and humanitarian movements in particular, may get caught in naïve sentimentality and universalism. We can identify this in campaigns that seek to alleviate suffering and help the poor as a form of feel-good activism. Here, someone like me, a middle-aged white woman, may feel herself a better person by helping others and not recognising at all her own privileged position, assuming a false sense of similarity with asylum seekers, the deported, the poor and the suffering.

The affective practice of feel-good humanitarianism operates through an individualised, networked structure of social media that shifts the focus to oneself. This is where digital media conjoin moralities and technologies of the self. Instead of learning about and listening to others, the orientation is towards performing and improving the self (Chouliaraki, 2013). The critical work on humanitarianism emphasises the ways in which the digital media environment prioritises performativity over contextualisation by focusing on the self rather than on the other. This happens through an individualised, networked structure of social media that propels the entrepreneurial self into the centre of acts of sharing and caring. An example of this would be the way in which social media profiles are used to show support for various causes: recolouring profile pictures to support gay pride or victims of the Paris terrorist attack. The point of the critique is that these forms of technologized solidarity focus on the transformation of the self that shows support and performs acts of good citizenship. I am not saying that being compassionate is bad; what I am saying is that being compassionate is difficult. In the digital media context, solidarity is often driven by mechanisms that harness compassion from individualistic and commercial premises, at the same time exemplifying and collapsing difference (see Nikunen, 2019). This is why expressions of empathy may appear trivial or superficial. Understanding this is important in order to make solidarity meaningful and beyond oneself.

Possibilities of dissonance

Feminist thinkers, Mohanty (2003), Dean (1996) and Hemmings (2012) root their understanding of solidarity in disagreement and dissonance. Dissonance, for them, offers relevant (gendered) freedom from ideas of '*we*' as unity. Dissonance, compared to compassion, is more promising, as it arises from an experience and recognition of difference. It does not seek (sentimental) closure (Gray, 2011), but accepts difference and proposes it as a seed of reflexive knowledge.

This view underlines that differences allow us to more accurately explain and theorise universal concerns. Mohanty (2003) argues that the experiential, anchored in the lives of marginalized communities of women, "allows for a more concrete and expansive vision of universal justice" (p. 510). Her position is not to say that all marginalised positions automatically provide for more authentic knowledge of power and inequality. Quite simply, she argues that if we form our understanding of just society on the basis of the experience of the privileged, we are not likely to recognise those structures that further inequalities, whereas if we think from the space of some of the most marginalised, "we are most likely to envision a just and democratic society capable of treating all its citizens fairly" (2003, p. 511).

The goal here is to understand how people of different identities may be able to build solidarities together and to understand how specificity may speak for humanity as a whole, not against others who live differently or assume a different social position. Instead of thinking of people as separate but equal, feminist solidarity simultaneously points to co-implication, mutuality and common interests, as it requires knowledge and understanding of the specific and different histories and experiences of women. This is something that emerges from the experience of the marginalised and can be expanded to concern society at large, not only as a matter for feminism, with relevant lessons from post-colonial feminist thinking, but to political theory in general. It emerges from lived experience rather than from abstract ideas. In feminist writings, solidarities are formed across differences by making alliances and by listening to others. At the heart of feminist epistemologies is the understanding of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991), but most importantly, the reach for different forms of knowledge through collaboration, participation and dialogue. It is about listening and not rushing to resolve problems before understanding them (Hemmings, 2012).

I draw from these ideas of dissonance to think about affective practice that could be enabling and productive. What would that solidarity look like in the context of social media activism? It refers to collective rather than connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Connective action is encouraged and driven by platforms (such as Facebook, Google and Twitter) for economic reasons, to gain more users and user information, rather than politically motivated collective acts of justice. Collective solidarity may emerge from small collaborative work driven by common goal that acknowledge different forms of knowledge and experience rather than commercial goals, sentimentality and sameness. Collaborative, collective projects, such as The Migrant Tales[5], a multilingual WordPress blog on refugee and migrant issues, serves as an example. The Migrant Tales is written by people of different backgrounds in solidarity with each other. What unites them is not their identity or sense of similarity, but their shared goals and sense of injustice. In 2015-2016, The Migrant Tales investigated several cases of maltreatment of asylum seekers in reception centres in Finland and provided evidence of these cases to the public. Some of the cases have led to new investigations and legal action. Since many of the writers of The Migrant Tales are immigrants or refugees themselves, there is a certain base that draws on the experience and connects with the communities of migrants. This enables access to and trust in communities as well as cooperation on a transnational level, in the countries of origin of deportees, such as Iran and Afghanistan. While The Migrant Tales might not be the perfect example, as it entails many problems of vulnerability, amateur production and lack of sustainability, it captures the possibilities of collaboration at a particular political time and place and the ways in which social media activism may widen the public debate in the striving for social change. It also captures the ways in which recognition of difference (collaboration of citizen journalists of different backgrounds) and experience of

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5   http://www.migranttales.net/

inequality (immigrant and refugee background) may operate as a starting point for solidarity. It points out the power of dissonance in mobilizing action and the need of dialogue, collaboration, mutuality and listening as a way to build solidarity with difference.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have tried to show that political action are produced in diverse online contexts and shaped by different practices and sensibilities, which are enhanced and shaped by the technologies and economics of social media. These *affective practices* carry particular sensibilities that shape public debates, political engagements and relations with the social world. Different groups adopt different affective practices connected to their discursive tones and modes of action. While the anti-immigrant movement makes use of politics of irony on various levels, solidarity movements tend to focus on compassionate, yet increasingly practical and shielded forms of practices.

As discussed above, one of the challenges of social media activism has to do with the commercialised social media environment. It shapes activism in different ways. Social media platforms have adopted vague policies to cater to variety of users and ensure enough traffic to keep them commercially profitable. These commercial goals may enhance and proliferate hostility, racism and the politics of irony. They may also commodify solidarities to superficial performances of self-interest. If everything, our desires to make world better, is subsumed under capitalism, is there any way out? Can we think of activism as a form of ethical work that builds societies by occupying the digital space and hijacking it with issues of justice that would otherwise be ignored? While I am sceptical about the future of commercial social media, I also see these small possibilities in collaborative, dialogical projects of solidarity. Therefore, I suggest more focus on new affective practices that produce space for reflexive collective action and a space in which to imagine alternatives. It is quite clear that these cannot emerge from the techno-utopias of Silicon Valley or in the affective whims of Twitter revolutions. Techno-utopias have fed us with overly optimistic ideas and unrealistic expectations of activism. Visions of hashtag revolutions let us believe that digital participation leads to swift social change (Morozov, 2011).

At the same time, activism has become increasingly shielded, retreating to closed groups, as if under siege. This development is further enhanced through technological design and algorithms, with formations of different sub-groups and divisions as well as echo-chambers. Herein lies one of the painful challenges of the current media environment: it is increasingly difficult to argue how the proliferation of social media participation might enable a vibrant public sphere and sense of social solidarity. Instead, we see more polarisation, contestation and intensified disputes across the digital space, which affects the everyday lives of activists and media workers (Nagle, 2017; Pöyhtäri et al., 2013).

The concern is that this will eventually lead to an inability to find common ground and solidarity across the digital space. To tackle the problems of solidarity, the essay proposes solidarity of dissonance, which arises from experience and recognition of difference, as a seed of reflexive knowledge. In the digital space, this would mean co-operation, dialogue and listening that is not hidden, but visible to others and operates as collective rather than connective action. While this is increasingly difficult in the commercial, contested space of digital media, in the current climate of Trump, populist politics and the growing neo-Nazi movement in Europe, it is also as timely as ever.

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