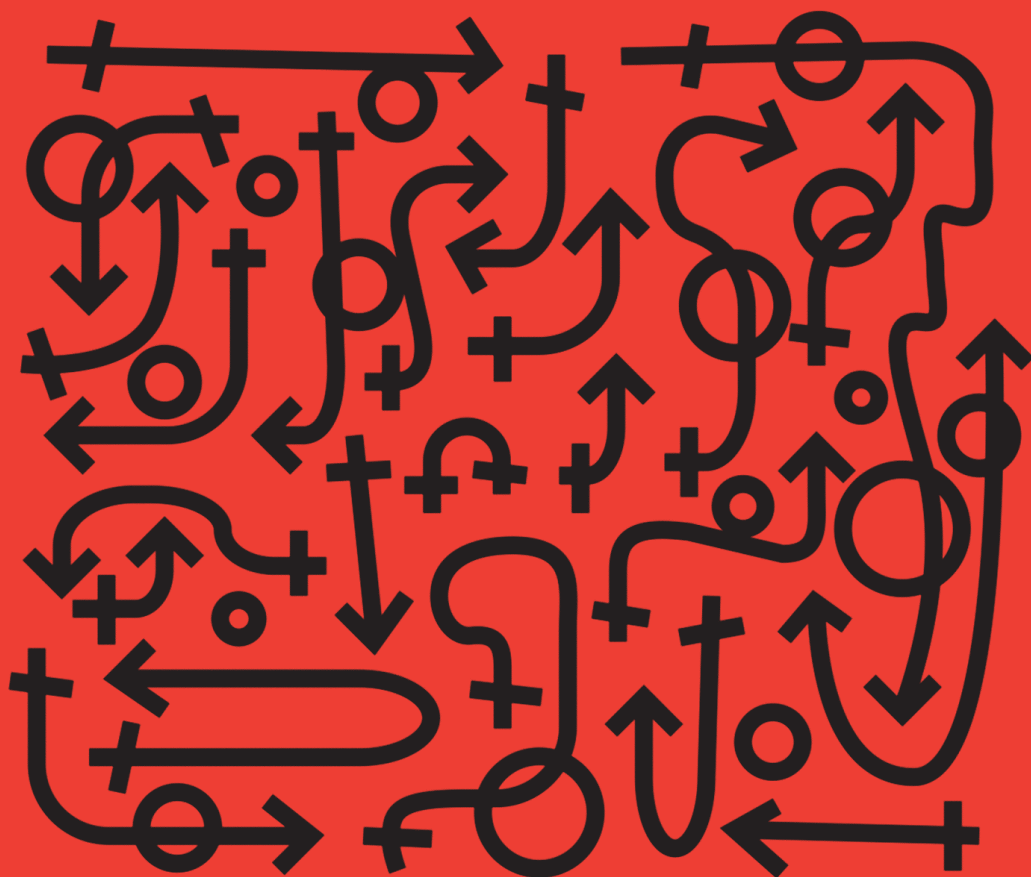


GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2015

Sexual rights and the internet



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2015

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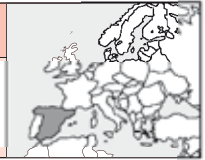


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Introduction

A campaign for sex workers' rights called "Prostitutas Indignadas" ("indignados" means indignant or outraged) was launched in April 2012 in Spain. It announced itself as the gathering of "voices against the prohibition of sexual rights in the street."¹ The social and political context in the country at the time was unsettled, with strong social movements, such as the 15-M Movement, also known as Los Indignados,² calling the legitimacy of politicians into question. This movement, similar to the Occupy movement in the United States (US), led to a change in the strategy of civil movements in Spain, revolutionising politics, and the use of social networks.

"Technopolitics" is defined as "the tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organisation, communication, and collective action. It is the ability of connected communities... to create and change social movements."³ In Spain, technopolitical thinkers from the 15-M Movement who were linked to the organisations Xnet⁴ and Free Culture Forum⁵ organised a workshop in 2012 called "Radical Community Manager". They expressed the need for this intervention in the following way: "We live at a crossroads, where defending net neutrality and enhancing our collective ability to use the power of intervention – on and through the internet – is a necessary condition in order to extend and coordinate the emergence of a connected global civil society and to improve the impact of social struggles in all areas of society. The internet is a battlefield for everyone."⁶

It was based on this philosophy that Prostitutas Indignadas was born: a campaign that goes from

the street to the net and from the net to the street. It allows the connection between sex workers' demands for their right to the city and the visibility of dissenting sexualities to be made.

Institutional context

Achieving sexual rights is a long process, and can be related to several axes of struggle. In this case, the demand for the sexual rights of sex workers and the feminist solidarity it generated make the campaign special. It became clear that the right to the city and the right to sexual self-determination have much to do with each other, and the virtual space made this intersection and encounter possible.

Feminism talks about how public space is a patriarchal field where women are excluded and heteronormative dissidence should not take place. Street sex workers are political subjects who break this framework. Partly because of this they are at the receiving end of gender and institutional violence, and are harassed, fined and prosecuted by the authorities. For example, it was common practice in the streets of Barcelona for the police to search through women's handbags to find those who carry condoms as evidence of being prostitutes. Because of their extremely marginalised status, a campaign that pushes for the sexual rights of sex workers is a guarantee of rights for all.⁷

The virtual space is still an area in dispute. Feminism is engaging in technopolitics through the tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organising, communicating and calling for collective action. Prostitutas Indignadas achieved its aims by understanding the logic of online networks and the change they can generate in the distribution of power offline.

Cyber feminism has spent years gaining ground in social spaces online – the internet has the potential to support an ethic of freedom, what some call the "hacker ethic".⁸ Social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, although being corporate monopolies, are still based on this idea of openness.

1 <https://prostitutasindignadas.wordpress.com/about>

2 BBC. (2012, 15 May). Spain's Indignados protest here to stay. *BBC*. www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18070246

3 www.feminicidio.net/articulo/curso-online-internet-m%C3%A1s-all%C3%A1-lo-obvio-viaje-al-centro-la-tecnopol%C3%ADtica

4 fforum.net/ca

5 fforum.net/ca

6 <https://xnet-x.net/radical-community-manager-reloaded-16-y-17-de-marzo>

7 Heim, D. (2011). Prostitución y derechos humanos. *Cuadernos electrónicos de filosofía del derecho*, n^o23.

8 Padilla, M. (2012). *Kit de la Lucha en Internet*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.

The radical nature of *Prostitutas Indignadas* is not only that it recognises social networks as way to distribute power, but also as a way to introduce and make links between struggles in the public sphere. It means recognising that the rights of sex workers is not just their problem, but a broader social issue.

From theory to practice

The *Prostitutas Indignadas* campaign began as a theoretical application of technopolitical knowledge to support the demands of sex workers in the neighbourhood of Raval, in Barcelona.

In March 2012 the city council of Barcelona passed an amendment to a municipal law regulating the use of public space. The new law seriously harms sex workers, increasing the cost of fines and intensifying the police persecution of sex workers in the streets.

The amendment coincided with a city rejuvenation strategy, and the gentrification of Raval. The area is one of the few remaining places in Barcelona where the neighbourhood still lives a street life, making Raval popular, with its own character.

The heavy pressure put on the sex workers by the police made the sex workers seek help. They decided to publicly expose the police harassment. Networks were formed in solidarity, and grew in strength. Together activists decided to start a campaign that would raise public awareness of what it meant to “clean up” the neighbourhood from the sex workers’ perspective. In this way, the link between human rights, sex workers’ rights and the right to the city could be shown.

We then set up online platforms for sex workers, organisations and other activist allies, opening a Twitter⁹ and Facebook¹⁰ account, and also starting a blog.¹¹ We decided to carry out a campaign on the internet in parallel to the campaign in the streets. We used the 15-M Movement as a point of reference for the campaign.

On social networks and blogs we created a collective identity, using the name *Prostitutas Indignadas*. The online snippets and memes were reproduced with the same anonymous type of action in the streets, by going out at night to spray paint stencils and put up posters.

We then decided to hold a demonstration in the street, to create further visibility for the online campaign. In less than two weeks we created very positive interactions on social networks: 2,000 Twitter followers, hundreds of “likes” on our Facebook page, and

dozens of signatures to a manifesto we had developed. The support came mainly from organisations dedicated to sexual and reproductive rights.

Thousands of people, many of whom self-identified as “sluts” and were connected to sex worker struggles, interacted on our social media platforms. On 26 April we took to the streets, with more than a thousand people. In the following months the group of sex workers had meetings with Barcelona’s Ombudswoman, the Councillor for Women and Civil Rights, the Mayor of Barcelona and the Interior Councillor of the government. All of this was thanks to the impact of the online campaign.

Prostitutas Indignadas is still running, and the empowerment process has been strong for all who have been involved. The social networks are now managed by the sex workers themselves, who also campaign in the street. This process has shown the kind of agency that feminist technopolitical strategies can produce.

Inverting patriarchal semantics

Twitter hashtags were used to combat the stigma of prostitution. These included #MejorPutaque¹² (“It’s better to be a slut than”), or ones calling for support for the sex workers’ struggle, such as #26AlaPutacalle¹³ (“26 of April all together to the fucking street”) and #Putamani¹⁴ (“Fucking Demo or Slut Demo”).¹⁵ The language used in the hashtags, which played on words like “slut” as a way of reclaiming identity, aimed to generate strong interest and support for the call for sex workers’ rights to be realised, and to encourage people to join the sex workers in their street protests.

By analysing the campaign on Twitter we came to realise that many of the social media messages generated by the campaign were in support of sexual diversity, and free abortion, or against gender violence.¹⁶ Here are some examples of statements: “More sex, less violence”, “sexual freedom”, “Get your rosaries out of our ovaries”, “Happy hooker”, and “I rule my body and the streets”.

The idea of the sex worker in the social imaginary has a number of features that reflect sexist fantasies and myths about female sexuality.¹⁷ Because of this,

9 <https://twitter.com/PutasIndignadas>

10 <https://www.facebook.com/.../Prostitutas-Indignadas>

11 <https://prostitutasindignadas.wordpress.com>

12 topsy.com/s?q=%23mejorputaque&offset=10&mintime=1333238430&maxtime=1341100850

13 topsy.com/s?q=%2326Alaputacalle&window=a&offset=40

14 topsy.com/s?q=%23Putamani&window=a&type=tweet

15 In addition to meaning slut or prostitute, the word “puta” can also be used as an adjective in a similar way to “fucking” in English.

16 twitpic.com/9e2h22

17 Osborne, R. (Ed.) (2004). *Trabajadoras del sexo. Derechos, migraciones y trafico en el siglo XXI*. Barcelona: Edicions Bellaterra.

much of the solidarity with the online campaign comes from feminists, who are reclaiming dissident sexualities and the right to our own body. By popularising the struggle of sex workers and overcoming discriminatory and derogatory attitudes against women involved in prostitution, the rights of all women and dissident sexualities are secured.

Sex workers, in as much as they are women, reclaim their sexual and reproductive rights. This works towards ending the stigma associated with the whore-mother dichotomy. For example, during the campaign an image of a sex worker caring for her child in the street went viral.¹⁸

The slogan “Yo también soy puta” (“I am also a whore”) also went viral. By appropriating derogatory categorisations such as “whore”, the slogan becomes an act of subversion. Words that have the intention of degrading their subjects are redefined, neutralising their negative effects, and recasting them in a positive light.

The fact that many people in the campaign were claiming the identity of a “whore” shows that we are transgressing patriarchal limits on female sexuality. We are saying we actually *want* to be “evil”, “bad” or “dirty”, as defined by “the establishment”. We are challenging stereotypical definitions, but simply asserting our sexual interests and desires.

From the net to the street

The campaign made explicit references to the issue of anonymity, starting with the ambiguity of a collective social media identity and ending with the use of Anonymous masks in demonstrations to protect the sex workers’ identity.¹⁹ The idea was to act according to the hacker ethic, which promotes anonymity and ambiguity: more open and less specific things become most replicable. If everybody is wearing a mask, who is a sex worker and who is not? If we all talk about sexual rights on the internet, who cares if our profession is related to sex or not?

The slogan on the official banner used in the march was: “Do not forbid my rights”. Following the deliberate ambiguity of discourse used in the campaign one can ask: *What rights?* And the answers were there, on banners made by individuals who demanded their sexual rights – the right to be in the street, and the right to free sexuality – demands that were also made on Twitter.

¹⁸ codigoneuvo.com/el-street-art-sirve-como-medio-para-regular-la-prostitucion

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/Ahurea_/status/393685287647576064

Empowerment and the agency of the media

Coverage of the campaign in the mass media was strong and can be measured at different levels. First, there was coverage of the campaign itself as an innovative form of communication. Three articles appeared in the mass media within two weeks of its launch regarding the strength and momentum of the campaign. They talked about the emergence of the collective identity in social networks and recognised the great impact it was having in such a short space of time.²⁰

The political achievements of the campaign were also echoed in the press. We would find different media talking about the meetings between sex workers and politicians to discuss public policies and the legal status of prostitution.²¹

The international impact of *Prostitutas Indignadas*’ achievements was also felt. For example, we can find articles published in France, a country where there is very restrictive legislation regarding sex work.²² We can also find news about a European Parliament debate on the decriminalisation of prostitution, where the *Prostitutas Indignadas* campaign was frequently mentioned.²³

Finally, regarding sex workers’ representation in the media, it has meant a very important change. Up until the campaign, sex workers have always emerged as marginal subjects of the street, almost never interviewed and appearing on TV without their consent, even if their faces are not shown. The campaign allowed sex workers to have a leading role and to decide how to be represented and what to say.

With the *Prostitutas Indignadas* campaign we feel we achieved the redistribution of power associated with our technopolitical goals. Cyber feminism has been opening spaces, and the dynamic change seen in transforming gender roles in the campaign is a strong example of this. The campaign, as we have seen, has helped and still helps sex workers to become political agents and to avoid press marginalisation.

²⁰ Some examples: www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20120426/54285531200/protesta-prostitutas-raval.html www.publico.es/espana/prostitutas-indignadas-acoso-institucional-barcelona.html

²¹ <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/libertades/trabajadoras-sexuales-hablan-claro-xavier-trias.html>

²² www.lemonde.fr/europe/video/2012/04/27/les-prostituees-espagnoles-manifestent-dans-les-rues-de-barcelone_1692536_3214.html

²³ pt.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/12/22/luta-contra-o-traffic-de-mulheres-abolir-ou-regulamentar-a-prostitucia

Conclusions

Since the 15-M Movement in Spain, there have been several analyses²⁴ of how technopolitics is an effective organising tool. Technopolitics acts as a mechanism that joins internet activism with street activism in a feedback loop, producing exponential growth for a campaign message and support for a cause.

In the Prostitutas Indignadas campaign we realised that feminist technopolitics can have a great impact on society. The values of technopolitics – such as collaborative participation, the “hive” mind, a horizontal communications approach, among others – are related to feminist values of autonomy, rights and freedoms. This is important.

However, there is a big gap in practice between feminist movements, the internet rights movement and technopolitics. Through the campaign we found some intersections that allowed us to work together. This meant *being* in the net, not only using it. Becoming a different kind of agent of the internet means recognising it as a new public space in which we can cast a spotlight on issues which in the traditional public space – the street – are forbidden and marginalised. We share with the internet rights movements the fight for this space.

The internet is a transformative public and political space that facilitates new forms of citizenship which allow individuals to claim their rights. Sex workers from Raval in Barcelona, nowadays, are a part of this space. They have gone through a process of empowerment by accessing the internet. Prostitutas Indignadas is a clear example of the net amplifying alternative and diverse narratives of women’s realities.

Action steps

Our learning so far leads us to affirm the following steps:

- Keep empowering sex workers to be part of social networks and use feminist technopolitics to achieve their demands and to organise for feminist social justice.
- Use social networks as a tool to fight against institutional violence, especially for the rights of those who have no citizenship or those, such as the prostitutes in Barcelona, who do not have the legal protection offered by a regulated working environment.
- Keep promoting the right to privacy and anonymity in corporate social networks such as Facebook. This allows users to express diverse sexualities and sexual rights in an anonymous way.
- Speak out against censorship by the corporations who own the networks. Private sector censorship affects everyone who uses online platforms, regardless of the different laws governing each country.

²⁴ codigo-abierto.cc/el-metodo-15m-como-sistema-operativo-de-la-nueva-era-de-partidos

Sexual rights and the internet

The theme for this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) is sexual rights and the online world. The eight thematic reports introduce the theme from different perspectives, including the global policy landscape for sexual rights and the internet, the privatisation of spaces for free expression and engagement, the need to create a feminist internet, how to think about children and their vulnerabilities online, and consent and pornography online.

These thematic reports frame the 57 country reports that follow. The topics of the country reports are diverse, ranging from the challenges and possibilities that the internet offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) communities, to the active role of religious, cultural and patriarchal establishments in suppressing sexual rights, such as same-sex marriage and the right to legal abortion, to the rights of sex workers, violence against women online, and sex education in schools. Each country report includes a list of action steps for future advocacy.

The timing of this publication is critical: many across the globe are denied their sexual rights, some facing direct persecution for their sexuality (in several countries, homosexuality is a crime). While these reports seem to indicate that the internet does help in the expression and defence of sexual rights, they also show that in some contexts this potential is under threat – whether through the active use of the internet by conservative and reactionary groups, or through threats of harassment and violence.

The reports suggest that a radical revisiting of policy, legislation and practice is needed in many contexts to protect and promote the possibilities of the internet for ensuring that sexual rights are realised all over the world.

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2015 Report

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