THE RADICAL ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN POLITICAL IMAGINATION AND PRODUCTION OF COMMON FUTURE IN BELARUSIAN PROTESTS

Volha Davydzik

Master in Philosophy, researcher, Leuphana Universität Lüneburg
Universitätsallee 1, 21335 Lüneburg

E-mail: volha.davydzik@leuphana.de
ORCID: 0000-0003-2903-8558

Abstract: The following article explores the idea of how information technologies could serve the idea of a common future in the world of catastrophe. In a world of socio-political catastrophes, violent suppression of rights and freedoms, oppressive state machines and covert control tactics, attempts are being made to find soft tactics of resistance, non-violent forms of confrontation that would allow to overcome the existing patriarchal order and reveal neo-colonial practices. The digital environment can be not only a tool for the production of machines of total control or the maintenance of the capitalist order of consumption. They can also serve as a tool for soft, nonviolent resistance to rigid structures, creating emancipatory tools for overcoming oppressive power relations and transforming the socio-political environment into a more inclusive, open structure. The article also attempts to return to the discussion about the critical potential of the theory of cyberfeminism, which not only analyzes the social and political, but also revises information technologies from the point of view of their emancipatory potential.

Keywords: cyberfeminism, digital technologies, utopian future, soft tactics of resistance, new ontology, political imagination.

"...things aren't directly constantly present. They only appear to be when they malfunction or are different versions of the same things than we're used to"

Timothy Morton, All Art is Ecological

Introduction

In 2020, the next presidential elections were held in Belarus, which, however, led to significant socio-political upheavals. During the pandemic crisis, protest sentiments began to rapidly grow in society, which intensified during the election race, when alternative candidates appeared on the political stage. The spring-summer of 2020 became defining for Belarusian society, leading to mass peaceful protests on an almost daily basis, as well as the emergence of a "political nation", caring solidarity and a changing understanding of what political action and activism is in conditions of rigid political power and uncontrolled police violence. Information technologies played a significant role in intensifying protest actions, which became not only a tool for communication and spreading information, but also for creating resources and platforms for alternative management and solving problems on the principles of horizontal, decentralized solidarity of shocked fellow citizens.

Digital products such as:

- smart voting, solidarity platforms for various communities (doctors, lawyers, students);
- tools for mutual assistance in searching for those arrested, organizing the delivery of hygiene items and food to prisons, psychological and legal assistance to prisoners and their families;
- mutual assistance for patients and doctors in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic; the creation of chats of neighbors in residential areas, which have traditionally been pushed to the periphery of political activity, for communication, joint events, lectures, concerts and activism, and much more;
- made horizontal cooperation, non-hierarchical communication and inclusion possible, created a platform for new institutions political participation, where not only procedure is important, but also affect — care, love, respect and solidarity.

Unfortunately, following the protests of 2020–2021 political repression and persecution led the country to a deep crisis. Now when everything became shaky, fragile, broken, what used to be hidden under the thickness of the ordinariness and everydayness, came out, and became visible, tangible, co-present. Paul Edwards in the paper "Infrastructure and Modernity: Power, Time and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems" notes that for most technologies are still invisible until we discover disruptions. "Thus, infrastructure

is the invisible background, substrate or support, the technocultural/natural environment of modernity... They create both opportunities and limits..." (Edwards, 2003, p. 191).

We are definitely on the verge of a grandiose change or a grand failure: systems are falling apart, connections are collapsing, and the ground is falling out from under our feet (Latour, 2018). Perhaps a new stage of modernity will lead to a reconfiguration of the social and political fields, to new principles of freedom and connectivity of agents, or perhaps to an even greater integration of control and usurpation practices. Increasingly, we are seeing how soft tactics of resistance against harsh repressive systems allow us to achieve positive changes and maintain the horizon of a joint future, where there is still a place for human-sized conglomerations. Of particular interest is the question of how tech and feminist research optics analyze the ongoing socio-political transformations, what mechanisms and tools they see as transforming the space of cohabitation. The end of the 20th and the very beginning of the 21st centuries have become a vivid illustration of how new tools and mechanisms created by the digital space, among other things, lead to the development of fundamentally different forms of social institutions. IT technologies can be a tool not only for networking, activism, reaction, creating platforms for solving current problems, but also for consolidating subsequent changes in socio-political systems, their institutionalization.

How do soft resistance tactics contribute to the gradual unwinding of the patriarchy machine? What role does IT technology play in this process and how can we talk about a positive future together in a time of tragedies? How does feministic optics represent the optimistic and pessimistic strategies of the future? In addition, why is it important to have this convergence between tech and fem strategies of future transformations?

Digital Technologies in the protest movement

First, it is the possibility of new striking configurations of social and non-social relations, the transformation of power relations, the dismantling of hierarchical oppressive structures, and the possibility of going beyond the limits of organized monolithic environments. In the article Can you hear me now? How does communication technology affect protests and repressions? (Christensen, Garfias, 2018) the authors analyze how digital tools transform protest activity and repressive response mechanisms. Thus, among other conclusions, the authors argue that mobile phones and media contribute to the activation of collective action. It has been established that technologies, firstly, reduce the cost of resources spent on coordination, secondly, accelerate the process of disseminating information about the suppression

of protests and violence, and thirdly, make protests global and visible, which is especially significant and important.

What is more conducive to collective organization and solidarity in protests where digital tools are involved? Obviously, the visibility and rapid dissemination of information about the use of violence, scenes of police violence and arbitrariness just make it difficult for many people to maintain a neutral position.

Two factors are important for solidarity in protests: proper, correct, effective dissemination of information, and the transformation of this information into common knowledge in the sense of general awareness. Moreover, the nature of this general awareness is communicative — potential participants must not only have information and be informed, but must also give feedback, so that the source or sources of information are also in a state of awareness. Thus, fragile temporary connections are established that support the event, give participants the opportunity to solidify and communicate, make exchanges, and be physically present. Consequently, technology contributes to the growth of horizontal connections, the involvement of more factors that contribute to the fact that people express readiness and unite in chains and networks of interaction. Among these factors are also those networks and communities that existed before the events. At the same time, we cannot deny that digital technologies and tools can also give an illusory idea of participation, allowing you to consolidate the position of an outside observer, avoiding direct bodily participation in actions.

Together with Antonina Stebur[1], we approached the study of this topic in 2021 in a joint article titled "Features and Effects of the Digital Technologies in the Belarusian Protest"[2], which was dedicated to the analyses of the role of digital technologies in rebellious society.

In the article, we tried to show, firstly, how information technologies and, more broadly, digital systems determine the specifics (both in a positive and negative sense) of the Belarusian protests. And secondly, how do systems change or question traditional political or philosophical categories, such as citizenship, state borders, care, private and public spheres, agency, subject, object, etc. The digital sphere played out a significant role in the Belarusian protests, and its potential was used largely more than it usually happens when protesters use social networks to quickly exchange information and organize gatherings. We analyzed not only the use of social networks, but also the creation of new IT products and platforms through which citizens "connect" to the protest movement. Digital systems have proposed new organizational forms — horizontal, without hierarchies and leadership. The protest itself can be described as flickering and peripheral. Thus, this

1 Antonina Stebur — curator, researcher, Master of Arts, Faculty Member at Universität der Künste Berlin.

2 The article will be published in October, 2023 in Digital Icons.

horizontal format opposed the rigid hierarchy of power and gave a new sense of community and the horizon of the future.

The Belarusian protests, like other protests, used IT tools to communicate, organize and quickly inform the participants of the resistance, but in relation to it, the IT potential was embedded in the very logic of the movement, which largely determined the specifics and transformational power of the events that took place in 2020–2021. Within our approach we analyzed the depth of IT penetration into the protest movement, which is reflected not only in the use of the power of social networks, but also in the development of complex infrastructure programs that allow organizing decentralized, distributed, flickering resistance. In the article we have also noted that this feature of the protest movement became possible, on the one hand, due to the growth and development of IT within the country, on the other hand, it was noted that the tandem "protest-technology" became possible thanks to the network logic of both phenomena.

In addition, in the text we have presented a research of those transformations and reconfigurations that become possible due to the widespread and not superficial use of information technologies in protest. Among them are the emergence of horizontal and complex, non-hierarchical forms of collective action, the creation of networks of solidarity and mutual support, the creation of alternative infrastructures, the practice of policies that seek to capture the horizon of the future, policies that take into account the future. In addition, these crucial aspects unite tech and fem strategies together.

Cyberfeminist critique of oppressive political structures

I would like to refer to the theoretical constructions that could clarify my vision of the future social transformations, including our understanding of solidarity and political interactions. First of all, I rely on the idea according to which groups, free agents form a request for building horizontal solidarity and unstable networks, mobile and effective mechanisms for solving problems. Emerging and disintegrating associations correlate with the understanding of politics-as-a-structure (Davydzik, 2021): they act freely, locally, responding to ethical appeals, create fragile ties, in contrast to the state totality, which embodies the political, appropriates it and subordinates it to the interests of a closed professional group, encloses it in the clutches of protocol. The state as a crystallized totality with a finite set of values is unable to recognize its vulnerability, unable to rebuild its institutions or distribute functions from the center. On the contrary, the state machinery migrates from the field of the social guarantor to the aggressor and aggregator at the first threat, acts by traditional methods in changed conditions.

Bruno Latour writes about the need to abandon totalities and move to associations in which politics is only possible. "Isn't it obvious that only a bunch of weak connections, constructed, artificial, intended for something, responsible and amazing — is the only way to see some kind of struggle?" And further: "... action is possible only in the territory that has been opened, made flat, reduced in size to a place where formats, structures, globalization and totalities circulate inside small channels and where reliance on masses of hidden potentials is needed for any application." (Latour, 2018). The "flat" territory of the political, the open space of interaction outside hierarchical structures, and the building of interaction networks is the horizon of the utopian future that we need. The task is to identify the principle of communication, the configuration of the network, so that the actors have the opportunity to act freely, to become a reference point.

Thus, politics as openness, politics-as-a-structure (Davydzik, 2021) is an action, circulation, reconfiguration, a type of connection between scattered, free actors. This is a principle of architecture that includes various systems and agents: human, natural, technical. There is no one closed area over which it would be possible to nail the label "the political is happening here", because this is the very principle of organizing any associations in which any agents are included independently, forming fragile, unstable, "shimmering" groups.

Through the lenses of technologies incorporated into the social and political bodies, we can see the world differently; they may help us realize that the world could be composed in different ways, where both social and non-social chains and configurations interact, where human agents are equal to non-human agents, technical objects, and even other *strange* objects. IT can act as an interface for complex environments and newly appearing objects or emergent objects in terms of Helga Nowotny, such objects that arise at the junctions of interaction between different fields (Nowotny, 2006).

However, in the spirit of Agamben, it may give birth to institutions that are even more oppressive. Agamben outlines the generation of new invasive institutions interacting with "bare life" (Agamben, 1998) as forms of such pervasive control. For Agamben, subjective existence is determined not by the fact of the existence itself, reputation, publicity, social status, but by the fact of fixation of bio-anthropometric data that are representative for management bodies and systems (whether it is polyclinic registration or airport inspection). As well as freedom of action, autonomy are dependent variables in conditions of total, often hidden control and the desire of hierarchical institutions for subordination and universal coverage. In the biopolitical reality, the subject becomes subordinate to the elements in the system of state care, his body is the intersection point of many discourses, socio–political practices of submission.

Nevertheless, in the course of the Belarusian revolution, we noted how technologies opened previously invisible channels of exchange,

created an ability to generate utopian horizons of the future, where other ways of cooperation and co-existence are possible (Tolstov & Stebur, 2020). This ability to generate utopias makes technologies related to strategies, which also creates radical images of the future, where technologies are not reducible to their commercial component, they can be tools of solidarity, care, activism with the aim of explicating freedom, emancipation, the right to be visible and present in groups without violence.

Thus, we need a thinking tool that would have a diffuse character, the ability to rush through structures and meanings, push different elements of the system against their foreheads, and reveal hidden dislocations of systems. There is a great variety of feminist optics, however, I would like to turn to the theory of cyberfeminism, which, among other things, does not identify itself with an established theoretical trend, but rather associates itself with a diffuse, even parasitic one on the bodies of other theories or socio-political bodies. Alla Mitrofanova identifies cyberfeminism with "a browser for viewing and navigating in modern cultural shifts and historical heritage" (Mitrofanova, 2010).

One of the important strategies that activists(s) use is the manifestation and production of new subjectivities and cultural fem-representations in cyberspace that contribute to the ideas of the utopian horizon. However, as the theorists of cyberfeminism themselves note, the insufficient interaction of theory and criticism leads to negative effects and the reproduction of sexism and stereotypes of mass culture. From this perspective, the interweaving of socio-political theory and criticism would give more fruitful ideas for the strategy of NET utopianism (Plant, 1997).

NET or cyber utopianism, is a subcategory of technological utopianism and the belief that online communication helps to create a decentralized, democratic and libertarian society. However, it is obvious that the digital environment does not automatically provide this entire attractive value horizon, does not contribute to the decomposition of patriarchy and colonies. Just as cyber utopia does not automatically become an environment that releases identities, because it is also inscribed in the logic of social production and is a product of social environments, which, of course, does not ensure the freedom of gender, body, age, social class and race. The Internet grows out of systems that have discussed wars and systems of violence and at the moment are also the product of rigid hierarchical structures. This integration of the cyber environment, cyber utopia into the machines of hierarchies, at the same time, sets the normative aspect of cyberfeminism as a strategy that produces a radical hybridization of the masculine patriarchal oppressive order (Wilding, 1998).

On the other hand, this can also be a vulnerable point of cyberfeminism or any other fem-strategy that sees one of its tasks as the hybridization of the masculine world. Fem-strategies could be trapped in subordinate relationships when they act as fixators of errors of the

dominant and determining system, when they find their expression in a didactic function, in the role of a corrector of dislocations, consequences of "masculine tactics", when they work on mistakes and try to embed and demarginalize vulnerable groups. Moreover, from this point grows out the fear that the feministic episteme is devoid of heuristic potential, because this functionality is finite and has an auxiliary function. Thus, a certain radicalizing and revolutionizing element is always required. Politically enlightened cyberfeminism, which takes into account the experience of past generations, critically comprehending its tools and strategies, has the opportunity to build a model of political thinking, among the tasks of which is deconstructing the patriarchal order that produces codes, languages and structures in the present, including on the Web.

The way we define fem-strategies is, among other things, the modification of Another, the search for another subjectivity, even and especially within those to whose emancipation the telescopes of the femme agenda are directed. The discovery of the Other within oneself, the distancing and differentiation of this other subjectivity are the political tasks of both femme strategies and network connections and structures (Hayles, 1993).

The development of fragile ontologies, spontaneous agglomerations, sporadic associations, attention to microprocesses, micropolitics, switching from the policy of *recognition*, *distinguish-from* to the policy of *immersiveness* and *being-with* are the distinctive features of those utopias that are possible in the horizon of technology and feminist strategies for the transformation of reality. In addition, the more radically the task is formulated, the more clearly the outline of those dislocations and fractures that categorizes the actual social order emerges. At the same time, we must not forget that any strategy or tactics has a dark side: cyberfeminism has remained as an excellent project, digital technologies and digital environments remain in the status of potential for future changes, subjects are still under pressure from power structures, and a catastrophic future is occurring every day. However, there are many more opportunities to change everything.

Cyberfeminism, as a theoretical framework, aims to be a catalyst for insightful social critique and the development of new ways of perceiving the world that can facilitate significant political change. This field of transformative political discourse is closely tied to the idea of inclusivity, encompassing a wide array of participants, both human and non-human. According to Haraway, this manifests an ontological concern, the basis of which is co-thinking and thinking-for in conjunction with different, "strange" others, organic and non-organic. Cyberfeminism makes the colossal assumption that creates a gap to let in or contain the extra- or non-social. Haraway designates this state or this communicative co-existential process as "interspecies fellowship",

including with objects capable of developing other types of becoming (Haraway, 2004).

The interactions among these diverse participants are not merely driven by procedural rules but also carry an emotional and sensual component, particularly an erotic dimension (Behar, 2016). This erotic element intentionally blurs the boundaries between the different elements within these interactions, fostering a more complex and interconnected web of relationships and influences. Thus, any communication, including political, allows the effect to be entangled in connections, which allows to shift the register of perception from the linearity of communication processes towards networks, intricacies and weaves.

Conclusion

One of the main tasks of cyberfeminism theorists was to overcome the border between the actors of systems, to involve as many elements as possible, human, non-human, and technological in various forms of communication, to overcome the subject as an instance that subordinates and at the same time submits to the power of being such. Such a strategy creates resistance to market relations, capitalism and the profit economy, as it includes, among other things, an ecological perspective (inclusion of any agents of the environment in the chains of interaction), and also radicalizes the concept of solidarity and jointness. And, of course, this is the creation of a political dimension in information technology: how, thanks to information technology, care infrastructures and networks of collaboration are created and maintained, how tools produced in IT help to approach flat, flickering, unstable ontologies, to the intimacy of interaction and inclusion of various agents and environments in communication.

In terms of content, this is not only a change in the nature of relations, disposition recognition and mapping of power practices, but also the transformation of conservative political institutions by creating tools and institutions in the Internet space. Overall, it is important to highlight several key aspects of cyberfeminism as a strategy. It contains optics for political transformations: cyberfeminism seeks to provide new perspectives and frameworks for understanding and promoting political change. This could involve exploring how technology can be used as a tool for activism, organizing, and advocacy to challenge traditional power structures. And from all of the above, several key aspects can be drawn about the role of technology and cyberfeminism in the production of our optimistic and pessimistic expectations of future worlds.

Inclusion of actors: cyberfeminism advocates for the involvement and representation of a diverse range of actors in technological spaces. This includes not only humans but also non-human entities, like

algorithms and AI systems, which play a role in shaping our interactions with technology and each other.

Complex interactions: cyberfeminism emphasizes the creation of complex and nuanced interactions between different actors. These interactions are not just based on procedural rules, but they also incorporate emotional and affective elements. This might involve considering how emotions, desires, and relationships shape our engagement with technology.

Blurry boundaries: the mention of an "erotic component" that blurs boundaries suggests that cyberfeminism is interested in exploring how technology and digital spaces can challenge traditional concepts of identity, embodiment, and relationships. This can involve reimagining and redefining the ways we connect with each other and with technology. Overall, cyberfeminism seeks to analyze and intervene in the ways that technology and gender intersect, with an aim to create more equitable and inclusive technological spaces that allow for diverse perspectives and experiences to thrive.

The IT sector creates conditions for the growth of different infrastructures that provide more opportunities for emancipation and the rise of horizontal cooperation, allowing involvement of numerous actors and solving local tasks. Technologies make it possible to develop strategies and form a basis for long-term changes, they turn into an effective tool of political action in the welfare state, not excluding its concept, but enriching it with a big number of meanings and connections, aggregating spaces entirely composed of active agents and spontaneous groups.

An important factor in the existence of digital spaces is the hybridity of the formed groups that include both human and non-human agents and machines that undermine the totality from within. In "The Democracy of Objects" Levi Bryant reveals the significance of set theory for the social system, where 'what the power set reveals is the bubbling pluralism of "the" world beneath any unity or totality. Any totality, or whole, in its turn, is itself an object or One alongside all sorts of other ones'. (Bryant 2019: 279). The world appears in the form of the whole, the totality, a closed system that tries to reach some organic unity, to create the inviolability of ties, to naturalize order, as created by nature itself. However, the world does not exist as organic totality, and collectives are not something pre-established, originally given and final in the flow of unstable connections, formed and broken spontaneously. Objects of the world exist and are valuable not per se (on itself), but due to their functionality and ways of connections they establish.

The use of information technology in Belarusian mass protests created a unique situation of emancipation of the entire society under dictatorship, made it possible to act in different ways, to unite in peaceful tactics of resistance and to use the creative potential of digital environments for socio-political transformations offline. Thanks

to the potential of information technology, the boundaries of the political have been expanded to the possibility of participation of every actor, and political decision has ceased to be the prerogative of a professionalized closed community. Digital environments have allowed different associations and groups, random participants to join in with different needs, opportunities and identities, transforming political participation from regulations into activism, thereby creating a horizon of a shared future that was lost.

References

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer*: *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, 228.

Behar, C. (2016). An Introduction to OOF. In: *Object-Oriented Feminism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1–39.

Bryant, L. R. (2019). Demokratiia ob'ektov [The Democracy of Objects], Perm': Hyle Press.

Christensen, D. & Garfias, F. (2018). Can You Hear Me Now? How Communication Technology Affects Protest and Repression. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 13(1): 89–117.

Davydzik, V. (2021). Politics-as-a-thing vs Politics-as-a-structure. *Moscow Art Magazine* 119: 179–184.

Edwards, P. N. (2003). Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems. In: *Modernity and Technology*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2003, 185–225.

Foucault, M. (1997). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975–1976*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Haraway, D. (2004). *Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience*. New York: Routledge, 295–320.

Hayles, K. N. (1993). Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers, *October*, Vol. 66: 69–91.

Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Latour, B. (2010). An Attempt at a "Compositionist of Manifesto". *New Literary History* 41(3): 471–490.

Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mitrofanova, A. (2010) Kiberfeminizm v istorii, praktike i teorii, St.Petersburg, *Catalogue of exhibition* ZEN D'ART 2010: 67–76. — In Russ.

Nowotny, H. (2006). *Cultures of Technology and the Quest for Innovation*. New York, New York: Berghahn Books.

Nowotny, H. (2005). The Increase of Complexity and Its Reduction: Emergent Interfaces between the Natural Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences. In: *Theory, Culture and Society* 22(5): 15–31.

Nowotny, H. (ed.). (2006). *Cultures of Technology and the Quest for Innovation*. Oxford/New York: Berghahn Books.

Plant, S. (1997). *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture*. New York: Doubleday.

Tolstov, A. & Stebur, A. (2020). Kak voda. Dinamika belaruskogo protesta: ot sushhestvuyushhego tekhnicheskogo bazisa k utopicheskim gorizontam budushhego. *Syg.ma*, 5 September, https://syg.ma/@antonina-stiebur-alieksiei-tolstov/kak-voda-dinamika-bielaruskogho-protiesta-ot-sushchiestvuiushchiegho-tiekhnichieskogho-bazisa-k-utopichieskim-ghorizontam-budushchiegho (accessed 4 August 2023). — In Russ.

[Толстов, А. & Стебур, А. (2020). Как вода. Динамика беларуского протеста: от существующего технического базиса к утопическим горизонтам будущего. *Syg.ma*, 5 September, https://syg.ma/@antonina-stiebur-alieksiei-tolstov/kak-voda-dinamika-bielaruskogho-protiesta-ot-sushchiestvuiushchiegho-tiekhnichieskogho-bazisa-k-utopichieskim-ghorizontam-budushchiegho (дата обращения: 4 августа 2023).]

Wilding, F. (1998). Where is Feminism inside Cyberfeminism? In: *n.paradoxa* 2: 6–13.