

AFFECTIVE POLITICS AND INVOLUNTARY AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: BACKLASHES AGAINST #METOO



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Introduction

One of the challenges that you sometimes face as an affect scholar is the need to identify your own affects in relation to the material that you study. Sometimes your research even works as a catalyst for media events, folding you into affective intensifications being modulated through a range of interfaces. Intensifications that you could hardly have foreseen. Obviously, this ‘becoming your data’ poses a methodological challenge, and requires a keen eye to the ways in which affect is governed.

In the beginning of 2019, I published a research communication piece about the Danish news media's coverage of #metoo on Facebook (Reestorff 2019). Even though the piece was published on a scholarly website called *videnskab.dk* (translation: science.dk), I quickly received hostile and dehumanizing messages. The experience reminded me that sometimes, as researchers, we are forced to conduct an involuntary but necessary autoethnography. When you are drawn into an intense media debate, as I was, you are simply forced to consider the way in which you are affected and not least being framed and resituated in relation to your data. In the meshwork of affects that emerge in these situations it is crucial to find ways to rearticulate your research and insist that it is placed in the context for which it was intended. More specifically, I had to find a way to make categorical mapping and autoethnography merge in order to study the ways in which affect is intensified and governed.

In the following, I first introduce the methodology 'categorical mapping' and the key findings from my study of the Danish media's coverage of #metoo on Facebook. Then, I turn to the analysis and suggest that, what I will call, posthumanitarian journalism is tied to the governing of affect and to a democratic deficit in the debate concerning #metoo. Finally, categorical mapping and autoethnography are combined in the attempt to shed further light on the specific affective atmosphere that exists in between long-term pulsations of despair and the repetitive immediacy of angry outbursts. Understanding how affect is governed across media texts in intense affective environments can, hopefully, contribute to the reinvention of the democratic dialogue in what has been called the age of despair.

Investigating social news: categorical mapping

Many studies have pointed out that especially younger generations tend to get their news primarily from social media—from what has been called “social news” (e.g. Hermida 2012; Kerrn-Jespersen 2016). However, this does not mean that professional media outlets lose their importance. News shared online is often produced by professional media and shared on social media either by themselves or their followers. Yet, when news is spread online their affective dynamics are altered, simply because they are legitimized: not only by professional news media, but by also by friends and family. It is in this altered landscape of social news that my study takes place.

In a way, I was lucky to have conducted my study before the news media caught wind of it. I had conducted a systematic study before I was thrown into the debate myself. The study investigated all the articles about #metoo shared on Facebook by the nine major Danish news media (the two public service channels *DR* and *TV2*, and the seven newspapers *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende*, *Information*, *Jyllands-Posten*, *Kristelig Dagblad*, *Ekstrabladet* and *B.T.*). I investigated their communication on Facebook, because Facebook, in Denmark, is the most used social media site both amongst the general population, politicians, and news outlets.

#metoo was the only keyword I used. If I had used more than one keyword, there would probably be more articles related to sexual assaults. However, I wanted to limit my search to one keyword in order to have comparable data between the media, and because a number of strong and repetitive refrains (Bertelsen and Murphie 2011) emerged over time: Refrains that only emerged as a result of #metoo. Therefore, I used #metoo as the sole keyword in my search. This choice also reflects the fact that my interest was not sexual harassment and assaults as such, but rather the ways in which sexual harassment and assaults are represented in relation to the #metoo-movement.

The methodology that I used is called categorical mapping (Fritch, Kofoed and Reestorff 2019). Categorical mapping was inspired by Adele Clarke's methodology of mapping and work on situational analysis (Clarke 2005). However, I do not focus on situational maps, but on laying out visually what was in the archive by categorizing the way in which #metoo was being addressed. This mapping was necessary to grasp what was in the archive: by means of mapping, for instance, positive and negative attitudes towards #metoo, the complexity of its reception, became visible and the otherwise intangible #metoo-stream became tangible.

The categorical mapping revealed that—in the period between October 1, 2017 and November 1, 2018—there are 371 articles tagged with #metoo. 138 of these were about the media and entertainment industry, while 74 were opinion articles. Of the 371, 104 expressed a negative attitude towards #metoo, and 66 presented a positive: By positive and negative articles, I mean articles in which the journalist, the news media, or the opinion writer reveal an explicit opinion on #metoo, or in which the update and the article is exclusively framed around a person that holds a positive or negative attitude towards #metoo. This is for instance the case, when *Jyllands-Posten* posts the article “Comment: Perhaps it is about time that the #metoo movement lie down to die” and writes in their Facebook post: “MeToo appears to have reached a point where the movement radicalizes to an unfolded gender war or lie down to die”, claims historian Henrik Jensen. What do you think—is it time to bury the metoo-movement?”

News Media	#metoo articles	Articles about the media and entertainment industry	Positive articles	Negative articles	Opinion articles
B.T.	24	13	2	9	
Berlingske Tidende	65	20	9	23	16
Dagbladet Information	63	12	17	14	13
Dr.dk & DR Nyheder	48	24	5	13	
Ekstrabladet	11	6		5	
Jyllands-Posten	44	18	5	16	10
Kristelig Dagblad	9	2	1	2	4
Politiken	70	17	24	15	31
TV2 & TV2 News	37	26	3	7	

There are many points to be drawn from the categorical mapping. Here I will merely mention five. First of all, only two Danish men were named in the articles and updates: Peter Aalbæk Jensen and Lars von Trier. Both are from Zentropa Film and Aalbæk Jensen's problematic behavior towards his interns, and Lars von Trier's controversies with Björk have been known for at least ten years – thus prior to #metoo. Besides these two, the articles primarily named international celebrities such as Bill Clinton, Kevin Spacey, and Asia Argento. This is interesting because it is often, including in the articles that I studied, raised as a concern that #metoo will destroy the lives of innocent men. Yet, in Denmark the tendency seems to be that names are not mentioned.

The second and third points are that #metoo was often covered as Hollywood and gossip journalism and in opinion pieces, and thus as something everybody is entitled to have an opinion about and not as something that necessarily demands political attention and action. This is problematic because articles that do in fact discuss sexual assaults as a social and political problem tend to be drowned in the large amount of gossip and opinion journalism.

The fourth point requires more data before a final conclusion is made. Yet, in the data there was a tendency to name male journalists in the posts while failing to do so when the journalist was female. Likewise, male scholars were celebrated in posts,

for instance when *Politiken* wrote: “the master thinker Fukuyama.” Furthermore, there was a disproportionate focus on women who are critical of #metoo. *Politiken*, for instance, had seven articles centered around Marianne Stidsen, an associate professor from the University of Copenhagen, who amongst other things claims that: “The feminist, left-populist totalitarianism is comparable to the wildfires that have been spreading across the country all summer.” Similarly, *Ekstrabladet* quoted the former porn star and actor Sussi la Cour for saying: “Where are women’s self-respect? Why don’t they say no?” As such these women are, to use Sarah Ahmed’s (2017) term, inserted as policing feminists. The problem is that hearing the feminist as police “is a way of not hearing feminism” (2).

This leads to the categorical mapping’s fifth point, namely that seven out of the nine media had more than twice as many negative than positive articles about #metoo. Thus, there was a significant negative distortion of the coverage of #metoo.

Affective governmentalization

The hypodermic needle model—suggesting that media content is simply transferred from the media and absorbed by its users—was, as we know, long ago rejected. Yet, not only content but also affect seems to flow back and forth between the news media and their users. Let us look at an example: there were 168 comments to *DR*’s article “#Metoo continues in Denmark: 132 female singers call for action.” 101 comments attack #metoo, 59 comments find #metoo necessary, and 8 comments are impossible to understand or merely attack others in the thread. The article is in itself neutral, which is also why it was not the most intensely commented-on article, and it does not mention any names of accused men. The comment field reveals that a number of refrains are recurring. According to Deleuze and Guattari the refrain is “a prism, a crystal of space-time. It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that what surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity and thereby to form organized masses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 119). As this indicates, refrains form masses from that which moves and may even appear at odds. Thus, the refrains—depicted in the table below – fold affect, anger, and objects, and phrases that may or may not be related to #metoo into a shared intensity of repetitive refrains. Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie (2011) explain that a focus on refrains orients the analysis towards understanding the role of the refrain in the emergence of new territories, new functions within this territory, and the further refraining of this new

territory and new functions. A focus on refrains was thus not only a way to focus on words and language, but a way of understanding how affective mobilization and political territories are attached to the words (Fritsch, Kofoed and Reestorff forthcoming). At least fifteen refrains acted as catalysts for angry affects:

Refrains	Examples from the comment field
Time (24)	"If a smack in the bum is more than five seconds old it exceeded the statute of limitations"
Fame (17)	"All of the sudden I feel violated and contact eb, DR & TV2 to get my 15 minutes"
Pathetic (16)	"Shut the fuuuuuck up we cannot care less"
Violation culture (16)	"mass hysteria is 'in' at the moment" "nonsensical accusations"
Undocumented claims (16)	"If you accepted it when it happened, even though it was abuse, then let it go"
Smack in the bum (12)	"Women who come forward 5-10-15-20-25 years after a smack in the bum have failed themselves and their sisters"
People's court (10)	"people's court", "purgatory", "pillory", "cowardly people's court"
Real victims (9)	"F*** it is disrespectful towards the people who really suffer, Attention-horny nobodies"
Female sounds (8)	"shriek", "whine", "yell", "howling choir", "I cannot stand hysterical women who hiss and sharpen their nails"
Quit or leave (7)	"Stand by yourselves and show some courage ... I would rather lose my job and career and love myself"
Witch hunt (6)	"ARGH shut the f... up ... it is super sickening and it has developed into a witch hunt... Why did you let it happen?"
Extreme #metoo (6)	"frenzy of bloodlust", "tsunami", "tidal wave", "it is a flood that can no longer be taken seriously"
Anti feminism (5)	"girl stuff", "stupid geese", "hysterical bitches", "just stop the femi kvinfo [knowledge center about gender, equality and ethnicity] nonsense"
Media frenzy (5)	"#metoo and the media are bursting into self-oscillation"
Misconstrued flirtation (5)	"The by-product is that men are losing all their initiative and motivation"

The comments and the refrains reveal a specific form of affective intensive atmosphere. Without distinguishing between affects and emotions, Ahmed (2004) writes that emotions “are intentional in the sense that they are ‘about’ something: they involve a direction or orientation towards an object” (7). In the comment field, angry affects are certainly oriented towards #metoo, but also towards women more generally, the media, feminism, and the unidentified and allegedly innocent men. Furthermore, affects become “sticky” (Ahmed 2004) when refrains such as witch hunt and smack in the bum are repeated. It is as if these refrains capture and even transport affect. Donald Trump, for instance frequently uses witch hunt to defend himself against accusations, and to mobilize his supporters. Something similar happened in the comment field of my research: the refrain witch hunt was also, in this case, used to mobilize and intensify anger. Yet this mobilization was not in defense of one man, but of an undefinable “we.” It was the sum of these refrains and affective orientations that constituted the collective intensification of anger in the comment field.

The refrains provided the affective cues and orientations that allowed the crowd to be rendered into a public. In the context of Twitter, Zizi Papacharissi (2016) argues that tweets work as framing devices that allow publics to emerge because they provide a way in which people can “*feel* their way in to politics,” and thus “tune into an issue or a particular problem of the times, but also to affectively attune with it” (Papacharissi 2015, 118). Yet, in my study, when the users in the comment field felt their way into the politics of #metoo, they were not ‘in tune’ with #metoo. Their affects were oriented not towards #metoo, but towards the refrains that were sticking to it. This also entails that the comment field was not only about #metoo, but about the affective intensification itself. The mere fact that people write the same thing that several others have just written testifies to the fact that they invest their affect in the collective intensification. The collective intensification of anger appears to be the purpose when Facebook users are gearing each other up “for a passage towards a diminished or augmented state” (Massumi 2008, 2).

It is crucial to keep in mind that the refrains and the collective intensification did not emerge out of thin air. The article “132 female singers call for action” is, as mentioned, neutral. But the refrains used in the comment field could be found in many articles. For instance, *TV2* ran an article entitled: “Famous Danes are warning against frenzy of blood lust,” in which the Minister for Equal Opportunities claims that we “must be careful not to draw the victim card.” The movie director Ole Bornedal argued that: “It is difficult not to laugh when women feel traumatized 25 years after a smack in the bum,” and all the news media had updates and articles that mention witch hunts, people’s courts, or warn that we

must not feel violated too easily. Thus, while the comment field certainly was angry and intense, this was legitimized through the refrains found in the news media's articles and updates. This also entails that when the Facebook users in the comment field "feel their way in to politics," they do so through the logics of multiple media texts and interfaces. The Facebook users are imitating each other and media texts that they have encountered elsewhere. As such, the various refrains are mobilizing "imitative encounters" (Sampson 2012). This means that refrains and affective orientations are floating between media texts, and that the publics that come together in the attacks on #metoo are "affective, convening across networks that are discursively rendered out of mediated interactions" (Papacharissi 2016, 308).

The collective affective intensification fostered through the refrains were not simply about imitation. Different media texts impacted the Facebook users and they did not experience affect in the same way. One user, for instance, used her experience as a rape victim to dismiss the experiences of the singers and argue that, unless accompanied by aggravated assault and beating, sexual harassment and rape are not an assault. She writes that: "If violence is not involved we often decide for ourselves if we let it happen," to which another responds "You know what, I said no when I was raped this summer. It didn't help. He didn't give a shit." These two women are both rape victims, yet they experience the affective intensity differently and they use it to tune into the article and the singers' experiences in different ways.

The different roads into affect are even more apparent when a Facebook user wrote: "They are whining! They are free to quit, leave, not come back." To which another answers: "Wow, there are so many people in this thread that have not understood what metoo is about: power. As a starter I would recommend that you google privilege blindness." The exchange exemplifies the different forms of affectivity that can be involved in the affective intensification of an event and it corresponds with Brian Massumi's notion of differential attunement. He writes: "There is no sameness of affect. There is affective difference in the same event" (Massumi 2008, 6). Accordingly, collective affective intensification is shaped by each body and its lived past as well as by orientations towards specific refrains.

This has three consequences. Firstly, even if the Facebook users wholeheartedly disagree and enter into completely different affective registers when confronted with the article, they still contributed to the collective intensification of the event.

Secondly, seven out of nine news media had more than twice as many negative articles about #metoo than positive and the majority of comments in the comment field are negative and angry. In this regard, the study of comments revealed that while those holding a negative attitude towards #metoo felt their way into a public through a repetitive use of refrains, the positive attitude lacked these mobilizing refrains and thus, in the comment field, they appear scattered. Thirdly, this also suggests that the news media and their followers conducted an affective governmentalization (Reestorff 2017) of #metoo, in which they engaged in the governing of which affects are appropriate in relation to which bodies (Ahmed 2004). As such, the news media's Facebook pages became a battleground on which affect is governed and on which it is determined who are deemed legitimate players and which voices are heard in the debate about #metoo.

Posthumanitarian journalism

I have argued that there are at least five consequences of the negative distortion of #metoo. These consequences are related to depoliticization, deterritorialization, shame, the imaginary real victim, and the ironic solidarity of posthumanitarianism. I will not go through all of these consequences, but merely touch upon the ways in which the refrain that manifests as the 'imaginary real victim' is intertwined with what I will call posthumanitarian journalism.

In relation to posthumanitarianism, Lilie Chouliaraki has argued that a shift in emotionality has emerged, in which the truth-claims of suffering "move from an emphasis on suffering as external reality, to suffering as subjective knowledge, validated by psychological grounded criteria of authenticity" (Chouliaraki 2013, 173). Chouliaraki ties this shift in emotionality to what she calls the ironic spectator, who over-humanizes the spectator and dehumanizes the sufferer, who already lies outside the centers of power and visibility (Chouliaraki 2013, 187). This shift in emotionality is visible in the media coverage of #metoo on Facebook. When seven out of nine news media have more than twice as many negative articles about #metoo than positive, it reveals both a double mediation and a split emotionality. Whereas the articles that cover #metoo by focusing on what has happened to the victims of sexual assault are mediating their accounts and emotionality and the history of sexual violence, the articles that are proposing a negative framing of #metoo premeditate (Grusin 2010) what might happen to the people (primarily men) who are 'falsely' accused of sexual violence. The latter articles do not align the emotionality with actual victims, but with any potential future falsely accused. I am not suggesting that it would not be awful

to be falsely accused, but rather that it is interesting that through premediation the emotionality of the falsely accused is prioritized over the mediation of victims of sexual assaults and their emotionality.

The shift in emotionality also reveals a shift in journalistic practice. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) has pointed out that journalism draws on both a ritual of objectivity and a ritual of emotionality. Yet, when journalism is communicated on Facebook it is the ritual of emotionality that is prioritized. This is obviously an attempt to generate traffic and clicks. But, as my data shows, the ritual of emotionality also impacts the ritual of objectivity when articles are framed around the emotionality of premediated victims.

Thus, posthumanitarian journalism concerns both a double mediation and a shifting emotionality. This shifting emotionality is also pertinent when emotionality is placed neither upon actual victims nor the premediated falsely accused, but in the hands of the reader/viewer. The news media are constantly addressing their followers as ironic spectators by asking them to validate the truth claims that they themselves or their sources put forward. For instance, an article in *DR* reported that the Swedish Press Council has criticized some articles about #metoo, and *DR* asked their followers “do you agree with them?” As if the individual Danish reader even reads Swedish journalism or has knowledge about press ethics. A similar displacement of emotionality takes place when *B.T.* ran an article about a blogger and radio host and writes: “Kasper doesn’t get the #metoo-movement. ‘Idiots like me do not get smarter.’ Do you agree with Kasper? = yes = no.” When the news outlets constantly ask “what do you think?” or “do you agree?” it is obviously because they want to generate clicks and funding, but the result is also that the coverage of #metoo is posthumanitarian, and that #metoo and victims of sexual assault are presented as something that the individual reader/viewer can judge for truth-value.

The displacement of emotionality has consequences for victims of sexual assault. This is because, when the individual reader/viewer/journalist becomes the judge of what constitutes a sexual assault, the boundaries for what constitutes an assault are up for negotiation and constantly shift according to where the emotionality is placed and where the affective relations occur. This means that a victim might come forward, but they never know if they will be accepted as victims. Recently, for instance, a so-called hugging-therapist was convicted of rape. Yet,

even after the conviction he was invited to talk at the school of a famous Danish sexologist. When she had to defend her choice to invite him, she said to *B.T.* “‘I haven’t talked to the girl’ but ‘I know him. He is not a rapist. He just hasn’t been good enough to understand how the girl felt about it.’” Thus, even after the conviction she insists that her feeling is more valid than the woman’s experience and the court’s decision. Likewise, a Facebook user writes responding to the article mentioned above: “I can distinguish between assaults, real violations and self-absorbed nonsense. As long as violence is not involved, we most often decided if we let it happen”; the movie director Christian Braad Thomsen argued to TV2 that: “The #metoo-campaign degenerated into a media stunt with no content by covering everything from consummated rapes to sexual jokes.” This reveals that the refrain “real victim” is an imaginary trope that is constantly used to redirect the affect that might otherwise be directed towards the victims. The repetitions of the imaginary real victim entail that sexual violence is made to appear less significant (in the case of the hugging therapist it is, for instance, claimed that it was just bad intercourse and not rape) and that victims are often only accepted as a ‘real victim’ if extreme violence as well as rape has occurred. Yet if we maintain this narrow understanding of what constitutes sexual assault, we miss the point that sexual violence is often not about sex, but about social control. The refrain of the imaginary real victim is also displaced, because the victim can be shamed and thus no longer be accepted as a victim. This entails that posthumanitarian journalism contributes to the repetition and circulation of the refrain ‘real victim’, which becomes an affective point of orientation that can never fully be reached by victims of sexual assault.

Involuntary autoethnography

A little while ago the public service channel *DR’s* ran a review of the new cinematic remake of Stig Larsson’s crime novels, *The Girls in the Spider’s Web*. The headline stated that the reviewer was outraged about the film and that the main character Lisbeth Salander was being misused as an “unimaginative #metoo-bad-girl.” #Metoo, only a year after the movement took off, was being used as a derogatory phrase. According to the review, the degree of the violence of the sexual assaults portrayed in the film was one of the reasons to dismiss the ‘new’ Lisbeth Salander. The refrain ‘real victim’ was being used almost automatically in a subordinate clause. This reminded me of how exhausting I sometimes find it to study material concerning sexual violence and of Sarah Ahmed’s (2017) point that recognizing what has not yet ended is a slow, painstaking, and recurring step. Every time I enter into these research fields, I hesitate but somehow remain with the unsettling sensation. I am drawn to the material but also repulsed by it.

The recognition of the affective relation between the researcher and the material studied is important no matter which methodology you apply. But it is of course especially important when utilizing autoethnography. I did not set out to conduct autoethnography. Rather, I only began to utilize this methodology after I published my research communication article and began to receive vile messages and emails demanding that I should be sacked, declaring that I am a stupid little missy, a radicalized hyperfeminist, blank and whining, and suggesting that I support, for instance, lynching and should hang myself. It was these messages that made me realize that we sometimes, as researchers, are forced to conduct an involuntary but necessary autoethnography. When forced into media events that move across our research, news media, and social media, we must situate ourselves in relation to our own data. The messages did not pose a methodological challenge for my initial categorical mapping, which I had already done at the time, but they did make it clear that I needed to pay close attention to my own affects. Firstly, it seems pertinent to include auto-ethnographic reflections in relation to the study that I have conducted, secondly becoming a part of this kind of media event is research data in and of itself, and thirdly since I intend to continue these studies I must thoroughly think through my situatedness and affects in relation to the data.

One of the crucial points in autoethnography is that it serves to “strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with academia” and make the researcher “accountable and vulnerable” (Denzin 2003, 137). This potentially destabilizes the boundaries between academic work and the rest of one’s life and breaks through the self-other dichotomy. Yet, while autoethnography contains elements of auto-biography, it goes beyond it; according to scholars such as Sally Denshire (2014), autoethnography engages in a critical reflection of the depersonalizing tendencies that come into play in social and cultural spaces that have asymmetrical power relations. While classic “evocative” autoethnography in the words of Leon Anderson (2006) runs the risk of self-indulgence, I attempt to utilize an analytical autoethnography in which the recording of my own affects is used to advance a theoretical understanding of the broader social phenomena in which I am only one of many participants.

Autoethnography is helpful to get a sense of the affective experiences associated with being subjected to the governing of affects. When people send harsh messages to you day and night you must be certain to silence your phone to avoid the repetitiveness of the ‘ding’, ‘ding’, ‘ding.’ The sound of messages arriving can

lead to discomfort and perhaps even make you avoid the devices and interfaces that you normally engage with. The messages are embedded in an environment that is “not just social, material and technological, but multisensory, charged with energy, emotion, and contingent on the activity of non-human organisms too” (Pink 2012, 23). In this case, the technology itself becomes a constant reminder of the possibility of the next vile message and as such the affective experience is shaped by the interface.

The vile messages were intended to make me shut up – to exclude me from the democratic public debate. As such they were essentially depoliticizing democracy. Yet even though this analysis is obvious, the messages got to me. After I received the first message arguing that I was stupid and should be sacked I didn’t want to let it affect me. But. It. Did. I was about to write a tweet about my research, my stomach made itself felt and I considered if it was really worth it. I wasn’t afraid, angry, sad, or any other specific emotion, I was just exhausted. I did write the tweet, simply because my self-identification as a researcher would not allow me not to talk publicly about my research.

The attacks that I encountered only took place in the timespan of three weeks. In this regard it is crucial to keep in mind that while I was in *Politiken*, *Berlingske Tidende* and *TV2*, I did not get media coverage because I shared a #metoo-story, but simply because I reported my research findings. Nevertheless, the anger that I met resembles the anger that victims of sexual abuse are met with when they come forward. Therefore, my affective experience was shaped both by the fact that the messages targeted me, and by the fact that they made me feel my way into something that I cannot myself feel, namely how it must be to be subjected to vile attacks because you are a survivor of sexual assaults. I can feel myself into a relation to something that I cannot feel myself, but it is crucial to keep in mind that the concept of differential attunement, mentioned above, teaches us that we cannot simply equate affects on the grounds of a shared experience. Affect is experienced differentially. Thus, I cannot simply conclude that sexual assault survivors, who come forward, experience the affectivity of vile messages the same way as I do. To make such an assumption would be to ignore not only that different bodies are different points of entry to the affective experience, but also that the affects cued by harsh messages depend on whether you receive them because you are a researcher or because you are a sexual assault survivor. Autoethnography can be an important methodological tool, but we must not be blind to the privileges associated with our position as researchers – or to the fact that these privileges are primarily bestowed upon tenured faculty and permanent employees. Vile online messages are never enjoyable, but they are experienced differently when you – as I did – have the support of your network and a big research institution. Thus, it

is not only crucial that we are aware of our privileges as scholars, but also that we continuously expect of our research institutions that they provide support to academics – including non-tenured faculty and PhD students – who are targeted by these kinds of vile messages and media frenzies. Without this kind of support we run the risk of compromising our academic freedom.

Concluding remarks: rhythms, pulse and affective peaks

News media and their followers engage in a governmentalization of affect in which it is negotiated which affects can be oriented towards which bodies (c.f. Ahmed 2004). In the 371 updates that I studied, this negotiation rendered the refrain “real victim” an affective point of orientation that can constantly be displaced and thus never fully reached by victims of sexual assault. With that in mind, my autoethnography can only provide a minor theoretical addition. The results of the autoethnography obviously had a different foundation than that of the categorical mapping, but it has made it possible to identify and highlight changes in affective capacities (Larsen 2013, 60), to understand that the affective intensity of harsh messages are experienced and extended in the interfacial encounters provided by e-mails, messages, and tweets, and made it possible to feel my way into something that I cannot feel: namely what intensities arise in the public nature of coming forward as a survivor of sexual assault.

There is one final point to be made. I have previously written extensively about affective politics in culture wars and emerging forms of nationalism (Reestorff 2017) and I have also received harsh messages in that context. Yet the repetitiveness of the anger still gets under my skin. Every time it happens I am struck by the lack of regard for research and engagement in dialogue. In these moments it is as if different levels of affect merge: rhythm, pulse, and peak. Rhythm is intensity and repetition. Pulse is the basic beat of the rhythm construed by multiple intensities and affects playing together, “the pulse is not solid, but exists in the shape of uncertainty and that other intensities (it could be awkwardness, pleasure, fear) work affectively in relation to this uncertainty-pulse” (Kofoed 2013, 173, my translation) The peaks are a bit more complex. Nick Couldry has accused affect theory of neglecting the role of the media in the continuous reproduction of structural inequality and he argues that media events are centering performances of mediated communication focused on a specific thematic core (Couldry 2012,

x). Yet, without understanding the role of affect in relation to media events, we overlook the fact that many media events do not manifest as the centering performances described by Couldry. On the contrary, affective peaks manifest as affective overload in which both rhythms and pulses are intensified and in which refrains both center and destabilise the thematic core. Thus, while #metoo might be a thematic core, there is no centering performance. This entails that affective peaks are crucial aspects of media events because they expand the affective realm of possibilities and the refrains available in the continuous maintenance of the pulse.

The affective peaks are often the moments in which you experience the affectivity of the event most intensely. Yet, the experience of affective peaks, when on the receiving end of harsh messages, is cued by the long-term pulsation of despair bound by the repetitiveness of rage. This long-term pulsation is one of uncertainty, because you never know if and when the anger will erupt into more than the underlying pulse and if it will be directed at you. It is also cued by the rhythmic repetitiveness of intensity, the intensity that emerges and erupts into anger in the comment fields below almost every article on #metoo. Affect is being modulated and governed in between rhythms, pulses, and peaks. This is because these affective levels either provide an invitation to join in the collective anger against #metoo and the accounts of sexual harassment, or to be excluded from the debate or even become a target yourself.

As such, all of us, including the news media, have a responsibility to pay close attention to the ways in which affect is being governed. Affective governmentalization, after all, inherently concerns access to and agency in the public democratic debate. Thus, we need to continue developing frameworks through which we can understand affective politics and its intersections with the current democratic and political climate. In doing so we must pay close attention to the ways in which affect is utilized to regulate and govern which voices are accepted as legitimate political players. Simply put, we need research that scrutinizes how affective politics contribute to the molding of both those in power and the mediatized democratic debate as such.

This, obviously, also means that we must continue to study the role of affect in relation to sexual assaults and harassment, i.e. further the understanding of the affective conditions that enable sexual assaults, abuse and harassment, and the affective intensities experienced by survivors. Yet, we also need to understand how affective politics can partake in bridging the gap between those who have

been victimized by, for instance, sexual and racial assaults and harassments and the mediatized democratic debate.

Scholars such as Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller (2019) have done important work to highlight how “feminist politics are positioned as a form of problematic ‘willfulness’, in which feminists must learn to manage and negotiate as they practice feminism in their everyday lives” (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, 25) and how, for instance, affective solidarity is at play when “diverse feminisms are being practiced, performed, and negotiated” (26). But even more research is necessary to understand the affective conditions and economies that facilitate the spreading (or lack hereof) of hashtags such as #metoo and not least people’s willingness or reluctance to participate herein.

Affective politics is, of course, not only utilized in hostile digital environments. It can also be the backdrop for, for instance, support and inclusion. But the current political climate in which extreme nationalism, reports of assault, intimidation, and abuse directed at politically active women, and anti-feminist and anti-LGBT sentiments and assaults, are on the rise calls for further scrutiny of the role of affect in the exclusion of specific voices from public debates and spaces. In this regard it is crucial that we as scholars not only seek to understand the role of affective politics in the practices of exclusion and marginalization, but also scrutinize the role of the institutions that are sometimes understood to be objective, sober, nuanced and reflective – such as news media or academia. This also entails paying ever closer attention to the ways in which we are situated and affected in relation to and by our data.

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