Ismini Sioula - Georgoulea[*]

APPROACHING TWITTER SOCIOLOGICALLY: A CASE STUDY OF THE PUBLIC HUMILIATION OF HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the online discussion on Twitter regarding the stigmatization of HIV-positive women in Athens in May 2012. The method of critical discourse analysis is applied on the anti-sovereign discourses that were articulated on Twitter, while the incident was taking place. The virtual countersphere is analyzed with regards to its political implications, such as the reproduction of the unfree sovereign discourse and the mobilization towards political action.

Keywords: *gender, nation, sexuality, anti-dominant discourses, public sphere(s), social media*

INTRODUCTION

In May 2012 in Athens, during the pre-election period, we witnessed an unprecedented women hunt. The population of immigrant women prostitutes, through its identification with the HIV virus, is being stigmatized as dangerous and labeled as a "health bomb". Next comes the arrest and custody of 32 HIV-positive women which lasted for 1,5 years, until their final proof of innocence, while at the same time their photographs, their personal and medical information were publicized for the "protection" of their male customers and, thus, the "greek family".

The present paper draws from a former study of news articles of the five (5) most visited greek news websites, which examined how the sovereign

*MA in Sociology, Panteion University of Athens ismini.sioula@gmail.com

discourse was articulated, while the arrests and custodies were taking place (04-10/2012). The focus was on the way three systems of power are being intertwined in the above paradigm: gender, nation and sexuality and how they (re)produce a nationalist, conservative and unfree discourse.[1] In this paper the focus shifts to the impact that the same paradigm had on social media, especially on Twitter.

Our main research question is *how* the political discussion on Twitter contributed to a virtual space (enhancement of discussion) and not to a virtual sphere (enhancement of democracy)[2] or, in other words, to another virtual countersphere. Although the majority of the recorded tweets seems to be anti-dominant and to constitute a democratic virtual space (i.e. against the government's decision to prosecute and stigmatize the HIV-positive women and against the mass media which reproduced the state's narration on the "health bomb" posing a threat to the foundations of the greek family), yet this anti-discourse did not become mainstream in the virtual sphere. At the same time we investigate how the anti-dominant discourse articulates its arguments through the embodiment of the same stereotypes that the sovereign discourse is using, leading to the reproduction of unequal power relations. In this aspect, this study follows the rich body of work examining sexist and nationalist narratives at the site of ostensibly resistant discourses. For an example of a Greek case study that is instructive, see Halkias (2004).

A MULTIPLICITY OF PUBLIC SPHERES LEADING
TO AN AMBIENT JOURNALISM

The notion of the public sphere was inducted in social theory by Habermas as "the democratization of the modern territorial (nation-) state" (Fraser, 2007), as a rational public debate (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11) of the bourgeois class, open and accessible to all, which emerged in the 17th and 18th century and declined in the 20th. This "theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" (Fraser, 1990, p. 57) was later criticized for not fulfilling its claims.

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2. Following Papacharissi's (2002) definition of the virtual sphere and space.

Critics have argued that while the bourgeois public sphere claimed to be open and accessible to all, women of all classes were excluded on the basis of their gender, men of the working class were excluded due to their lack of property and women and men of racialized ethnicities were not included in this 'democratic debate' regardless of their class (Fraser, 1990, p. 63).

Another point of critique focuses on Habermas's choice to examine the character of the bourgeois class without taking into account its relations to other classes (Fraser, 1990, p. 78, note 9). Since society is not a homogeneous unit, but rather the *locus* of conflict between competing publics, several critics have adopted the term of public sphere in its plural form (see Fraser, 1990; Fraser, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005). The act of addressing society as the domain where multiple public spheres interact is the acknowledgment of the legitimacy and efficacy premises that publicity, as a solid body, mystifies. By showing *who* is part in that unitary "public opinion" and on what terms, critical theory seeks "to contribute to struggles for emancipation" (Fraser, 2007).

This debate was revitalized due to the development of new media technologies. This rise of new possibilities led to the unwrapping of scenarios which idealized the public sphere either in a utopian manner, as the *topos* of the democratization of society and the deliberation of all classes, or in a dystopian one, that of the domination of the ruling class (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 9-10). These scenarios are steadily giving way to more complex and non-dichotomic theorizations of the internet's role.

Since the flow of the news in mass media is linear (that is, one-to-many), the role of the audience is limited to that of the receiver of the news, resembling that of the consumer. Social media –and especially Twitter, the world's most popular micro-blogging service–enrich the role of the audience to that of the sender, the commentator and the receiver of the news, transforming the flow of the news to non-linear (that is, many-to-many).

This evolution has led some critics to speak for the rise of an "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010; Bruns, 2010; Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013). Social media platforms such as Twitter, by helping its users create, disseminate and discuss news and information, are becoming key mediums for the emergence of a virtual space, in the sense that Papacharissi (2002) has described. Nonetheless, we recognize this enforcement of discussion as a premise for the constitution of a public countersphere, as Fraser (1990; 2007) has conceptualized it. By doing so, we wish to enhance the position that a democratic perspective does not lie in the creation of a homogeneous

virtual sphere, but in the existence and identification of multiple, competing virtual spheres.

Yet, these virtual counterspheres do not always constitute a radical critique of the dominant discourse. Therefore, the role of critical theory is to highlight the social inequalities that underlie in those counterspheres. We choose this standpoint after acknowledging that social scientists are not just observing and describing social reality, but contribute to its construction and establishment in performative ways (Berger and Luckman, 1991).

Scholars from different fields have studied online political discussions on Twitter about major events, such as political elections (Larsson and Moe, 2012; Vergeer et al., 2013; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013), or protests (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012; Penney and Dadas, 2014). Our research focuses on a specific event that occurred in Greece, the public humiliation of hiv-positive women, and more specifically on the tweets that were recorded during the first three days of the unraveling of that incident. The process we followed to collect our sample and the methodology we applied to access our data is further discussed in the next section.

METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis

The object of this paper is the in-depth study of the discourse that was articulated in the Twitter-sphere around the incident of the public humiliation of the HIV-positive women in Athens, in May 2012. To approach this discourse we apply the qualitative method that Fairclough induced in the social sciences, the critical discourse analysis (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 2001). Our choice is based on the thesis that the relationship between discursive practices and the social world is dialectical, i.e. that discourse is both constituted by social practices, while it also constitutes them. This method reveals the way that discourse constructs social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and meaning.[3] In our approach we focus, mainly, on three interlocking systems of power that show us how social identities are constructed: nation, gender and sexuality. These systems constitute the main fields where power/resistance (Foucault, 1991, p. 98) is

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3. For a further study of the construction of social identities, relations and social meanings through discursive practices see: Foucault, 1991; Butler, 1993; Halkias, 2011.

being practiced, leading to the reestablishment or destabilization of social constructions. Our aim is to study how discourse on Twitter –as a virtual countersphere– confirms or rejects the stereotypes that dominant narration builds around nationality, gender and sexuality.

We have already stated that our approach acknowledges the political dimension of science and, thus, denies the positivist ideal of scientific neutrality. For this reason we also draw from postmodern social theory, which illustrates the materiality of discourse by showing *how* discursive practices produce and reproduce aspects of social reality that seem to be unchangeable and, also, highlights social practices which destabilize this oppressive normativity.[4] Postmodernism and critical discourse analysis converge in their aim to expose the role of discursive practices in the reproduction of unequal power relations, their struggle for a radical social change and their commitment to the oppressed social groups.

Data collection

Although some scholars have created tools –Twitter APIs[5]– for the collection and analysis of extensive number of tweets in quantitative methods, via computer programming, such as *yourTwapperKeeper* (Bruns, 2011), we did not follow their paradigm since our approach differs in multiple ways. Except from our unfamiliarity with programming procedures, we were interested in a much smaller sample than the one collected from these researchers in order to apply the qualitative method of critical discourse analysis.

Part of every research on Twitter is finding the most suitable search engine. In the beginning of our inquiry we faced difficulties in that area mainly for two reasons, which we wish to mention in order to facilitate future studies. Firstly, a great number of free access search engines have been privatized, commercializing online research, and, secondly, most of open search engines for Twitter allow access to tweets that are up to one month old, making them more suitable for real time research. Since our paper examines tweets which are two years old, the majority of those engines is excluded, leading us to topsy.com.

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4. The notion of normativity refers to a social relationship or practice which is established through its performative iteration, leading to the violent exclusion of those who do not conform (see Butler, 1993). For a thorough investigation of the discursive practices that were articulated in mainstream media during the emergence of a "demographic crisis" in Greece in the late '90s through the prism of critical discourse analysis see Halkias (2004).

5. Application Program Interface.

Topsy.com is a certified Twitter partner search engine which maintains data from the creation of Twitter in 2006, but permits access only to a hundred of them referring to a specific date range. Therefore, we collected our sample separately for each day of May in order to obtain the maximum number of tweets possible, ending up collecting 3.976 tweets.[6] Taking under consideration that in 2012 the number of users tweeting from Greece was estimated around 250.000,[7] representing 41%[8] of the total users of social networks in Greece, we acknowledge that our access to data is limited and our research is not a comprehensive sample, but is rather representing the discourse that was articulated in Twitter during the first three days of the event.[9]

Keywords

The lack of available tweets under the hashtag #orothetikes led us to the decision to use keywords in order to collect our data, while in the majority of researches on Twitter hashtags (#) are commonly used (see for example Bruns, 2011). This lack of a hashtag for our topic could symbolize a limited use of this tool among Twitter users in Greece during 2012.

Our research on topsy.com launched with the keyword "HIV-positive women" [οροθετικές], which led us to 1.229 tweets for May (see Figure 1). We noted that the majority, 52%, of those tweets were referring [or retweeting (RT)] to an article generated from online mass media (see Figure 2) and that 56% of these tweets has been accumulated during the first three days of May (see Figure 3). These assumptions led us to the addition of more keywords in our research, found in the tweets which we had already accessed, concentrating this time on the first three days of May.

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6. We managed to collect more than 100 tweets per day by modifying the ULR of our search. Each search allowed us access to 10 pages of tweets per day (10 tweets per page). The number 90 in this ULR http://topsy.com/s?q=οροθετικές&offset=90&mintime=1335880810&max time=1335967250 signifies the 10th page of access on tweets with the keyword "HIV-positive women" [οροθετικές] on the 1st of May. By altering 90 to 100 we have access to the 11th page and to 10 more tweets regarding the same keyword and day, to 110 to the 12th etc.

7. According to trending.gr: http://trending.gr/2012/.

8. According to the "Annual Research of Greek Users of Social Networks", elaborated by the E-Business Research Center (ELTRUN) of the Athens University of Economics & Business, regarding 2012: http://www.eltrun.gr/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/EthsiaEreynaKoinonikhs-Diktyoshs2013-4.pdf

9. The problem of the inevitably limited access on Twitter data is also discussed in Bruns (2012, p. 4).

The second keyword we searched on topsy.com was "prostitutes" [ιερόδουλες], leading us to 2231 tweets for the first three days of May, 1406 (63%) of which were republishing an article with no comment. The third –and last– keyword we looked for was "whores" [πουτάνες] resulting in 516 tweets, none of which was referring to a link. The distribution of the three keywords from 01/05 to 03/05 can be found in Figure 4.

The amount of tweets referring to an already published news article is understood as part of the journalistic character of Twitter that we already discussed. Our research was concentrated on the 'original' tweets that commented on either some article or the incident itself. In order to access our results in a structured way we coded manually our sample through the use of the tool QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis). Finally, due to the qualitative character of our research we did not use any quantitative methods regarding the popularity of certain tweets or the number of RTs except from the figures displayed in the appendix.

ANALYSIS: CASE STUDY

Mass media

Through our study[10] of the dominant media narrative that was articulated in the five most visited greek news websites during the unraveling of events (05-10/2012), we noticed the complete accordance of mainstream media with the actions of the government via its minister of health. The examined articles reproduced the dominant discourse around this incident reinforcing the criminalization of seropositivity and the crystallization of four main social subjects with specific material results. This crystallization was made possible through the dispersion of a kind of 'moral panic' within the society, regarding the unknown dimensions of the spread of HIV-virus.

The first social subject that emerged concerned the 'perpetrator' of the transmission of the HIV-virus and was formed by the HIV-positive women who were represented as migrant prostitutes.[11] The second actor referred to

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10. We are referring to our master thesis; see Sioula-Georgoulea (2013).

11. The minister of health associated the recorded augmentation of HIV cases to "illegal" prostitution, which was further linked with "illegal" immigration, targeting in this way the population of migrant women sex workers. That was further reinforced by the nationality of the first woman that was arrested for seropositivity and illegal working in a prostitution house, which was Russian. Although the majority of women that were arrested in the streets of Athens the next days were Greek drug addicts –who may have had sexual intercourse for money in order to

the "unsuspecting" victim of this story, the *Greek* customer of sexual services. The third concerned the disquieted *greek* wife of the customer, who would stand, along with her victimized husband, under the protection of the fourth social subject, the *greek* state. Here one can notice the centrality of the social construction of nation, which hierarchs social groups and subjects, through the benefit of some and the disapproval of others. We also observe the gendered categorization that takes place: women is the population under persecution; and a sexualized one: the greek state represents the father that takes care of the health of the greek family (Greece), punishes any enemy in the interior (HIV-positive women) and is ready to reprimand his greek son (customer of sexual services) only in case of negligence.

Moreover, this shape can be further analyzed through the use of the analytical category of sexuality. The HIV-positive women are represented to perform an 'aggressive' sexuality. Through the accusation of "serious bodily harm intended" they are being ascribed with the intention of transmitting the virus to their male sexual partners. The title of one article is quite characteristic: "Russian stunner spread death in the center of Athens"[12]. In this way, two stereotypes are being reinforced: the stereotype of the responsible "prostitute" for the transmission of HIV, which is accompanied with that of the unsuspecting male customer; and the stereotype of the sex worker 'femme fatale', the 'spider woman' who captures in her web innocent male customers. The combination of those meanings (different national identity, contagious and gendered body) creates an enemy within the nation that needs to be confronted.

Twitter

Contrary to the discourse articulated in online mass media, the discussion on Twitter focused on a critique of the political system. The majority of accessed tweets argued in multiple ways against the government's choice to prosecute and stigmatize HIV-positive women.

Nevertheless, the expression of this disappointment over the applied politics during the years of crisis in Greece is being filtered by a masculine regard. The discourse articulated in our sample of tweets chooses to

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assure their dose but were not sex workers– mainstream media continued to represent them as migrant sex workers who were endangering the health of the greek family.

12.   http://www.newsbomb.gr/koinwnia/story/131217/rosida-kalloni-moiraze-thanato-sto-kedro-tis-athinas (27/04/2012).

criticize government through the embodiment of the same stereotypes that emerge by its acts.

In Figure 5 we display the most frequent codes found in our sample. Since we are not applying a quantitative analysis, this display serves only as a mapping of the examined material.

We chose to divide the examined tweets in four main categories according to the topics that had a special significance by abbreviating multiple expressions of disagreement over the governmental politics and appeared more or less frequently. These categories are often interlocked but we separate them in order to analyze the social identities and notions that emerge. The first category of tweets is concentrated in the demonstration of the remarked link between the actions of the ministry of health and the forthcoming elections. The second, and most common, topic is the usage of the example of prostitution and/or seropositivity as a metaphor to criticize government politics. The third category covers tweets that avoid commenting on the governmental acts, but chooses to comment on the "unappealing" appearance of the hiv-positive women. The last category seeks to ask a more radical criticism to the governmental actions.

i) The pre-electoral game

A great amount of tweets is pointing towards the pre-election nature of this prosecution, accusing the government for hypocrisy in the case of HIV-virus. Characteristic is the following tweet on the 1st of May:

> *"Why so much fuss about AIDS and prostitutes 5 days before the elections? Did they discover it now? I can't trace any other usefulness"*

AIDS, in this fragment of speech, seems to be a well-known phenomenon in greek society and, thus, the "fuss" around it 5 days before the elections seems suspicious.

There are also tweets that underline the ephemeral character of this phenomenon, by foreseeing the disappearance of the issue after the elections (which were taking place on Sunday the 6th of May):

> *"Wait and see, until Saturday they will be finding millions of hiv-positive prostitutes. From Monday, though, they will all disappear & I bet"*

Politicians are depicted as trying to deceive voters by disorienting them from the major social issues that should concern the pre-election period. However, we can notice the rise of a complaint in this tweet: since the num-

ber of "HIV-positive prostitutes" will be "millions" by Saturday and zero on Monday we can assume that the government's choice to arrest those women is not disapproved, regardless of the lack of a negative or positive comment on it. Maybe those arrests are a necessary measure against AIDS that politicians chose to use it only for pre-electoral reasons.

Except from politicians, we noticed the emergence of another important actor in this disorientation. The role of media in the evolvement of events is also stressed out:

> *"5 days before the elections and everyone is dancing in the rhythm of Mass Fascistization Media, concerned with HIV-positive prostitutes and shit"*

Mass media are portrayed as the main subject responsible for the overexposure of the news story of HIV-positive women. Fourth power seems to have made an informal alliance with the executive power towards the "fascistization" of society. Although, the prosecution is identified as anti-democratic, since the dance that drifts away voters is a fascist dance, the concern over HIV-positive women is compared with "shit". The news story of HIV-positive women should be, thus, neglected since its only utility is the disorientation of public opinion.

Yet, there are other discourse fragments arguing that the way mass media and politicians try to disorient voters signifies the content of applied democracy:

> *"Once on the eve of elections we were promised public constructions, now we are promised prisons and cleansing from immigrants and whores"*

The promises that politicians use to give before the elections are being portrayed as the mirror of the dominant social and political climate. Here, the fascistization that was mentioned above is explained deeper. The noticed paradigm shift of pre-election promises indicates a shift in the concept of 'growth': the years before crisis, growth was understood in terms of public constructions, while during crisis we notice a nationalist discourse around hygiene. In this tweet the distorted example of democracy is denounced, since immigrants and sick sex workers (or drug addicts) are perceived as parasites threatening nation's integrity and should thus be expelled.

This derailment of the political discourse towards far-right is several times claimed to be responsible for the rise of the neo-nazi party of 'golden dawn' to the political foreground:

"Immigrants, whores, aids, grist for the mill of golden dawn. We will be flabbergasted the night of the elections. OUT!!!"

This agony over the empowerment of the neo-nazi party indicates the restraint of discussion around the elections and the rates of parties that was a main issue in the debates that took place in the Twitter-sphere. The arrest and custody of HIV-positive women is understood as just an event in the context of elections.

The issue of who are the voters of those deceiving politicians with the anti-democratic views came also in the foreground, as well as their right to vote. The 'unsuspecting male customer' of sexual services that we described earlier is commonly identified as matching that of the voter of such politicians:

"The concern of pasok/nd[13] for HIV-positive prostitutes is logical, you must be voting for them in order to fuck in a brothel without condom"

Irony in this tweet is used in order to deride the recklessness of the clients of sexual services who do not use condom and, at the same time, is implicitly referring to clientelism, the unofficial, but well established, system of exchange between politicians and voters. The diminution of governmental politics derives from the diminution of their male voters.

These male voters are also represented as a dangerous figure:

"QUESTION those who went with prostitutes without protection have the right to vote?"

In this context the noticed recklessness of those men is being perceived as a denial to align with the rationality of modernity and is therefore scrutinized. The choice of those men to have unprotected sex with sex workers connotes either their ignorance about the contagion of HIV-virus or their unwillingness to conform their actions in order to protect themselves and their sexual partners. This act is perceived to be on the limits of the acceptable and the rhetorical question which is raised over their right to vote implies that maybe they are not worthy of it, because this represented recklessness is further mirrored in their political decisions, which are harmful for democracy.

This unwillingness of compliance of the male customers is, in other cases, a symbol of resistance against the dictates of modernity:

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13. PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) and ND (New Democracy) were two of the three governing parties before the elections of May 2012.

> *"Since there are so many who take orders from power even when they fuck prostitutes, then we are surprised by the way they vote…".*

This tweet is the representation of an "unrestrained" masculine sexuality which does not conform to specific rules, especially when those rules are imposed by the power. Sexuality is symbolized here as the locus of freedom, where power relations are absent. The body of sex workers signifies the domain where a man is absolutely free to exercise his unmediated masculinity. Men who limit their "unrestrained" sexual appetite, by using a condom for example, are devalued and represented as less masculine. This lack of masculinity is further mirrored in their political choices. These compromised devalued men vote for politicians who are responsible for the undesired governance. We notice, then, an intersection between sexuality and politics: not masculine enough men are also the obedient voters/ citizens responsible for the restriction of social freedoms. This intersection is discussed further in the next part of our analysis, where politicians are represented as "prostitutes" and the greek state as a brothel.

ii) *"Sexing the nation"[14]*

The adoption of the topical example of prostitution and/or sickness during the last days before the elections was the most frequent metaphor used to express the relationship between voters and politicians. The paradigm of public humiliation of hiv-positive women is commonly recognized in the discourse articulated in Twitter, as an anti-democratic political choice that serves as a medium to express the discontentment of the participants. On the one hand, politicians were either characterized as sick "prostitutes" endangering national health or given the role of the pimp, pushing Greece on prostitution. Voters, on the other hand, were also occasionally paralleled to prostitutes in order to denounce their clientelistic affiliations with politicians.

This outcry of politicians was in many instances expressed through humor; a tool commonly used in this micro-blogging service, as we have already noticed. The most frequent tweet we came across, in a multiplicity of variations, was the upcoming:

> *"By the district attorney's order the real photos of the whores are out! They spread poverty to 10 million Greeks"*

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14. See Mostov (2000). Sexing the nation/ desexing the body: politics of national identity in the former Yugoslavia.

This tweet was always followed by a link referring to a webpage where the photograph of six Greek politicians was posted. The photograph was that of the first six hiv-positive women that police had published after their arrest the previous day, only this time the faces of those women were cropped and replaced by the faces of six popular Greek politicians.[15] This scheme repeats and, therefore, reinforces the dominant narration of the clear and separate roles of the perpetrator and the victim. Six people are responsible for the transmission of poverty to the total population of Greece. Through this identification of an enemy in the faces of some politicians, the inhabitants of Greece are represented as a homogeneous community of single citizens with the same interests. We notice, then, that regardless of the specific constructed enemy, the homogenizing function is the same.

The sickness which politicians are accused to have 'contracted' to the total population of Greece is further explained in tweets like the following:

> *"Hiv-positive prostitutes are being publicly humiliated and the whores of politics who infected our future with the DEBTS-virus stay immune"*

Debt here is represented as a sexually transmitted virus that threatens the future of citizens and does not have any impact on politicians. Sex seems to be frequently used in order to describe the relationship between voters and politicians. For example:

> *"Greeks are being fucked by sick whores all those years and they vote for help from the same whores, and then we blame the HIV-positive women"*

The imposition of disagreeable political and economic measures on the population is being conceived as rape: politicians fuck Greeks without their consent. Politicians are sick, suffering from the DEBTS-virus, because they are "thieves"[16] who stole public money from the greek state, charging the greek people and undermining its future. The public humiliation of the HIV-positive women is denounced in different ways and the rise of the news story is represented as a tactic to diverse public opinion from the main political and economic problems. It is the photos of politicians that should be disclosed. The devaluation of the represented as responsible politicians comes through the devaluation of prostitution and, thus, the devaluation of femininity. Reading between the lines we see a 'wake-up call'

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15. Venizelos, Samaras, Bakogianni, Papadimos, Karamanlis, Papandreou.

16. See for example another tweet: "When are they going to show us those that stole the greek public?".

of the voters who continue to support the same politicians that are accused to have stolen the greek state.

This 'wake-up call' is symbolized by the violent and masculine act of penetrating sex:

> *"Loverdos [minister of health]: 'prostitutional sex without condom should be penalized'. During the elections though we can do you sex without condom"*

Here sex is punitive, reaching, once again, the limits of rape. Voters will punish politicians for their unwanted actions through unprotected sex. They will now be the ones to transmit a threatening virus, shifting the distribution of action: the passive subject becomes active. In many tweets, elections seemed to be a moment that citizens take an active role, while during the rest of the years remain passive. In other words democracy emerges via the (often symbolized as sexually violent) act of elections.

This shift of action is often described through sex terms. As we have already noticed, during the time between two elections, politicians are represented to take political decisions that over draw the rightful boundaries set by the citizens–thus they seem to 'fuck' citizens– while during the elections, discontent voters send a violent message to their political representatives –symbolized through the act of rape. Their revenge is also sexualized in the dominant online discourse. It is a masculine revenge in the name of democracy.

> *"[…] Prostitutes are hard working women. They [politicians] just want to make our country a prostitute"*

The contradiction of this fragment of discourse is quite interesting. Women who work as prostitutes are honest on the basis of the hard nature of their work. Thus, politicians should not have targeted those women, but, instead, they should have cared more for their own country. Although it seems honest for a woman to exchange sexual services for money, this does not apply to the status of a country. This contradiction is probably resolved if we clarify the different sexualities defining the status of the prostitute and that of a nation. Polyamorous women are accepted only if they do it in order to earn a living. If this status cannot be applied to a country we, therefore, suppose that it is due to different imageries that co-construct the notion of the "nation". Since nationhood is a "masculine construction" (Mayer, 2000, p.18) and the national plan is the work of (heterosexual)

men, patriarchal hierarchies and norms are established as the foundations of nation, gender and sexuality. Women are conceived as "the nation's social and biological womb and men as its protectors" (Mayer, 2000, p. 10). Once women are assigned with the cultural and biological reproduction of nation, nation is feminized and represented as men's property. We see, therefore, that sexuality plays a key role in the construction of the nation and the constitution of national identity.

Greece is sexualized[17] in a way similar to the one explained above, sexual practice is set in the service of a national cause: the reproduction of nation through gendered roles. The greek state is depicted as the father of the greek family, responsible for the protection of his wife (Greece) and children (greeks). Greece, as mother land, symbolizes the imaginary female, loyal to her husband and responsible for the reproduction and nurture of their children. Any other sexual practice is represented as a dishonor to the greek family. Therefore, through their acts politicians expose Greece on an international level, leaving her unprotected to the appetites of other, more masculine, nations.

iii) "Ugliness"[18]

Although tweets which praised the prosecutions and public humiliation of HIV-positive women were rare, we noted that an acceptance of this could be observed in a supposedly non-political discourse. We assume that tweets that do not explicitly state an opinion over the governmental acts and instead comment over the physical looks of the prosecuted women are supportive of the discrimination which was taking place. Through tweets like the following, the arrested women are represented as less feminine than they should and, thus, less human:

> *"Are there men who go with whores like the ones whose photos were publicized? Not even a dog comes near them"*

While on the one hand male customers are portrayed as subordinate to dogs, this classification is attained through the representation of HIV-positive women as objects that not even a dog would desire.

In other words, the devaluation of the actions of the greek "family-men" is made possible through a commentary of the appearance of the

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17. For a further investigation of the sexualization of the nation; see Mostov (2000).

18. From a tweet, further analyzed in this section.

arrested women. The 'wrong' performance[19] of their gender legitimizes the public humiliation of HIV-positive women. Their bodies are not materialized enough and are thus (re)produced as less worthy enabling their prosecution. Along with this dehumanization comes the enforcement and normalization of sexual desire. The fact that these women are not desirable originates from the representation of their bodies as less feminine. This failure to fulfill the feminine ideal leads on the one hand to the entrenchment of the approved performance of gender and sexuality, while on the other hand to the punishment of the delinquent bodies. In this way, the formation of the subject's sexual desire is built through a masculine perspective.

Despite the fact that we did not take under consideration in our analysis the gender of the twitter users, we have noticed that a large amount of the tweets commenting on the looks of the prosecuted women were written by women (judging from their usernames). An example of these tweets is the following:

> "The blame shouldn't be on the prostitutes since the typical macho Greek is still an asshole… Now that I said it… If I were a guy I wouldn't want them even to have a look at mine [my penis]… Ugliness…"

This is an exceptional example of the ambivalence that we observed in our sample. While Twitter discourses seemed to criticize the prosecution of the HIV-positive women and tried to shift the blame onto men that had unprotected paid sex with them, they ended up accusing those women through comments on their appearance. The fact that women participate in this discourse shows that a masculine critique does not mean critique by men, but the internalization of the masculine viewpoint which has nothing to do with the gender of the subjects that articulate speech.

iv) Radical critiques

In this last section of our analysis we focus on tweets that tried to express a more radical critique to the ongoing public humiliation and stigmatization of HIV-positive women. Under the term 'radical critique' we encompass discourses that –on the one hand– did not reproduce the rhetoric of the hegemonic discourse and attributed responsibility both on the men clients of sexual services and the state, like the previous critiques, but also on

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19. We draw the notion of performativity from Butler (1993).

society. On the other hand, radical discourses lead to political activism against the prosecution of those women outside of the internet sphere.

The destabilization of the dominant narrative that represented the HIV-positive women as immigrant sex workers was made possible on Twitter-sphere through the effort to restore the 'truth' about those women. This effort can be found in tweets like the following:

> *"11 out of 12 prostitutes with aids are greek… But don't spread it out, it ruins our propaganda on the dirty immigrants"*

And:

> *"10 out of 12 prostitutes that were found positive on the HIV-virus are greek. Mostly drug users"*

Both these tweets begin with a statement of facts published in the news: 11 or 10 out of the total 12 arrested HIV-positive women are greek. As we have previously mentioned, while the nationality of those women was reproduced from all the mainstream media, the narration of the immigrant sex workers who transmit the HIV-virus remained. The ironic nature of the first tweet highlights this inconsistency between facts and narrations and stresses the underlying racist discourse which portrays immigrants as dirty and contagious. The second tweet chooses to place emphasis on the fact that their identity is mainly formed by drug use and not from selling sexual services. These two tweets constitute examples of an ambient journalism that is being developed in Twitter and which attempts to shift the responsibility from the HIV-positive women to the state's actions.

In the same spirit of critique we found tweets that comment on the ignorance of the way HIV-virus is transmitted. Two examples of those tweets follow:

> *"Prostitutes with surgical masks and cops holding them with medical gloves. Who is going to infect whom?"*

And also:

> *"Are there photos from the HIV-positive girls with masks? If it's true then it's a nazi style pre-election propaganda"*

This unawareness is treated in the first tweet with humor, implying that "cops" might be more 'dangerous' than the arrested "prostitutes", destabilizing the supposedly protective role of police; while in the second tweet an expression of fear and disgust can be depicted. The representation of the

HIV-positive women as contagious is not limited in an ongoing discourse published in the news, but is also illustrated through photographs of them with surgical masks. This image is recognized by a part of Twitter users as a dangerous trick of the government in order to increase its popularity before the elections. The danger lies in the rebirth of an authoritarian regime ("nazi style"), reviving memories of the past.

Part of the discussion on Twitter, except from the attempt to undermine the mainstream discourse, tried to affiliate this incident with similar ones from the recent past of Greece or even from the history of Europe. The detection of a racist discourse was represented as a conservative turn back to medieval times:

> *"We still haven't burnt the whores who spread the lethal virus to our stout-hearted men? We are not able to live properly even in our Middle Ages"*

In this tweet we see the emergence of a couplet between modernity and tradition, where greek society seems to be living in medieval times, when Enlightenment was not yet established. The customers of sexual services are ironically identified as "bravemen" whom the HIV-positive women tried to contaminate and should, thus, be burnt like witches used to be during the Middle Ages[20].

While in the first section of our analysis we noted that the public humiliation of the HIV-positive women was understood as an outcome of the forthcoming elections, we also came across tweets that tried to associate it with the tolerance of the greek society:

> *"The 'lazy greek worker' brought the memorandum, the publication of photographs for the crackdown of 'violence' brought the photos of the prostitutes"*

In this fragment of speech the conservatization of society is explained historically through the establishment of a stereotype and set of a precedent. The phrase "crack down of 'violence'" refers to the publication of photographs of anarchists protesters that took place during the February

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20. The discourse around the modern medieval era occupied an important part of the 'radical critique' on Twitter. See for example the following tweets: *"They should take the prostitutes to Amygdaleza [detention center for immigrants without papers] and burn them along with the immigrants. To the FIRE! Like the witches!"*. And: *"men with intense sexual life are 'fucks' [men who have many sexual intercourses and are, thus, perceived as more masculine], while women who act similarly are 'whores'. Happy new year. Happy 1512"*.

2012 manifestations against the memorandum[21] and the publication of photographs of football fans that clashed with police during a football match. Here, discourse is recognized as a constitutional practice, the iteration of specific narrations leads to the establishment of new social relations. Therefore, the indifference of society over the restraint of social rights is perceived as more crucial for the prosecution of HIV-positive women than the agency of politicians.

The responsibility is now shifting directly towards greek society in general:

> *"People's court for the prostitutes-drug addicts and their clients and no mention for the responsibilities of society #old_time_classic"*

In the context of this 'more radical critique' we notice that the responsibility for the government's anti-democratic act does not lie solely on politicians or clients, but mainly on citizens. The immunity of greek society is now broken. Historical, social and political reasons led to this prosecution and not pre-electoral games.

One important difference of this critique in comparison with the previous analyzed discourses is the constant tweeting on political manifestations. Through calls for political action, Twitter users try to spread a radical discourse over the incident and mobilize others to take action outside of the Twitter-sphere.

During the first three days that we examined we found a large amount of tweets informing for the upcoming protest (on the 4th of May) outside of the court where HIV-positive women would be brought to give their testimonies:

> *"Solidarity protest for the publicly humiliated HIV-positive women"*

In this claim, which calls for action, the prosecuted women are defended as HIV-positive and not as sex workers, questioning the sovereign narrative. Once again, the responsibility of society rises: citizens are the ones who should act against anti-democratic prosecutions, and Twitter arises as a broadcasting medium enabling political activism.

Another common practice was the republishing of photographs of slogans on the streets of Athens, like the one stated here:

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21. See also another similar tweet: "*And now the state publishes all these photos of homeless hiv-positive women because when photos of anarchists were being published some were looking the other way*".

> *"No prosecution of the HIV-positive women. Beating on the customers,*
> *though"*

This slogan demands ending custody for those women and expresses
its discontent with the effort of the government to protect the customers of
sexual services through the encouragement of a violent response on them.
This effort of the government is portrayed in another slogan as racist:

> *"Go back racist worms, we are all HIV-positive" [it rhymes in greek]*

Here, the solidarity for the women is expressed through the identifica-
tion of oneself with their seropositivity and this act is inscribed as an op-
position to the dispersion of racist practices and discourses.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the online discussion on Twitter over the
stigmatization of HIV-positive women in Athens in May 2012 as a non-
homogeneous virtual sphere, counter to the mainstream. Twitter-sphere,
as a micro-blogging service, seems to enhance the discussion among
different views and the dispersion of news. In this context, we studied
the articulation of different discourses and the stereotypes which they
reinforced or destabilized.

While for the mainstream media the arrested HIV-positive women were
depicted as responsible for the transmission of the HIV-virus and their
prosecution was pictured as a necessary action; on Twitter, criticism on
governmental politicies was expressed from different standpoints. We no-
ticed that the main subjects who were represented as responsible for the
public humiliation of those women were: politicians, their voters, mass
media, the state, and, according to more radical critiques, greek society.

Our sample was divided to four categories according to the main repre-
sentations that were featured in the articulated Twitter discourse. Although,
in the two first categories, the majority of those discourses declared its op-
position to the applied policy, we noted that arguments against it ended up
supporting it. This was made possible through the embodiment of a mas-
culine perspective around femininity and nationality, which reproduced
the dominant narrative. This mediated support on the prosecution appeared
also in discourses that did not state any opinion, and by comments on the
"undesirable" looks of the women, which were trying to devaluate the cus-
tomers of sexual services through the devaluation of HIV-positive women.

The forthcoming elections were often portrayed as the trigger of this incident. The prosecution of the HIV-positive women was seen as a pre-electoral game of the politicians in order to spread a kind of 'moral panic' within society in order to increase their popularity. At the same time, the male customers of unprotected sexual services, represented as victims from the mainstream media, were identified as the voters of the responsible, for this prosecution, politicians. Except from this prosecution, politicians are also responsible for the austerity measures that are being applied on the economy of the greek state. Therefore, the blame for the consequences of state policies was put on male customers of unprotected sexual services.

Among the examined tweets we noticed the crystallization of a critique of the prosecution, which was recognizing the responsibilities of society over it. The key factor of this prosecution is not found in the choices of politicians or their voters, but in society's tolerance of the restraint of social rights. In parallel, this discourse tried to destabilize the sovereign narratives concerning the nationality or the occupation of the HIV-positive women and mobilized Twitter users to participate on political manifestations outside Twitter. This mobilization is being activated on the basis of empathy and we, therefore, notice an expression of solidarity through the identification with the HIV-positive women.

While this paper was being written, Twitter announced the opening of its archive of tweets to public. This act could lead to more accurate and representative samples, enabling social research in paths that were almost impossible to trace before. For example, further research on the incident we studied on Twitter could focus on conversations during May 2012 and the way meaning was articulated, or on the way the medium enabled the organization and propaganda of political actions, or even comparative research between different case studies (e.g. greek state's policy on migration and its representations on Twitter after the drowning of 12 migrants –9 children and 3 women– in the Aegean Sea, close to the islet of Pharmakonisi in January 2014). Through the evolvement of the research tools small-scale qualitative research is enriched, providing an in-depth view of specific corners of virtual 'reality'.

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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1
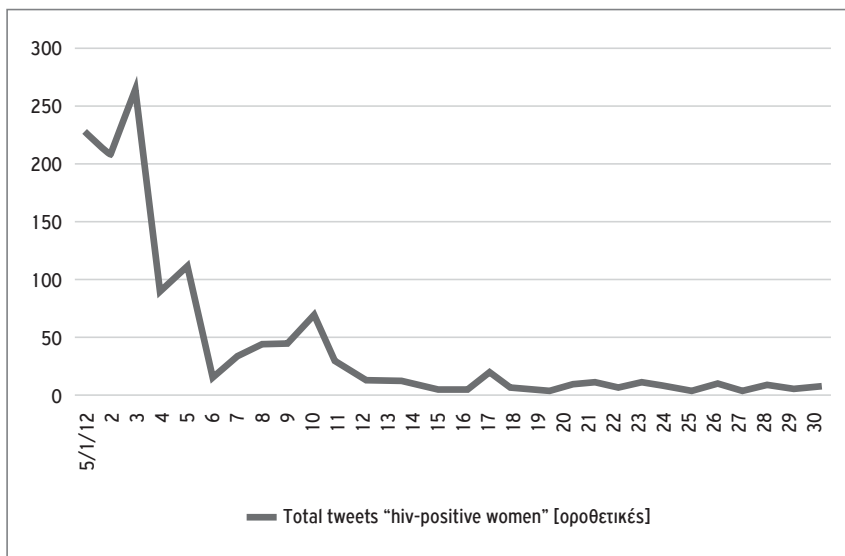*Total tweets "HIV-positive women" [οροθετικές]*

FIGURE 2
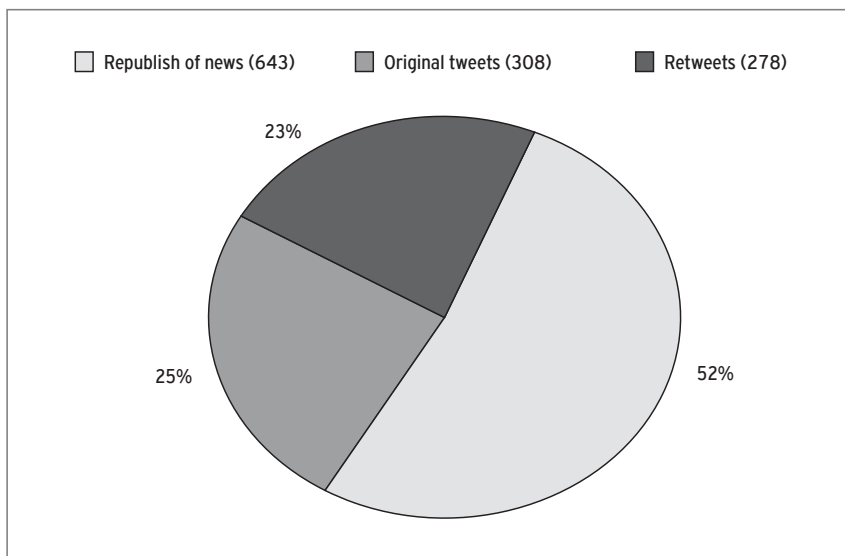*Tweets "HIV-positive women" May*
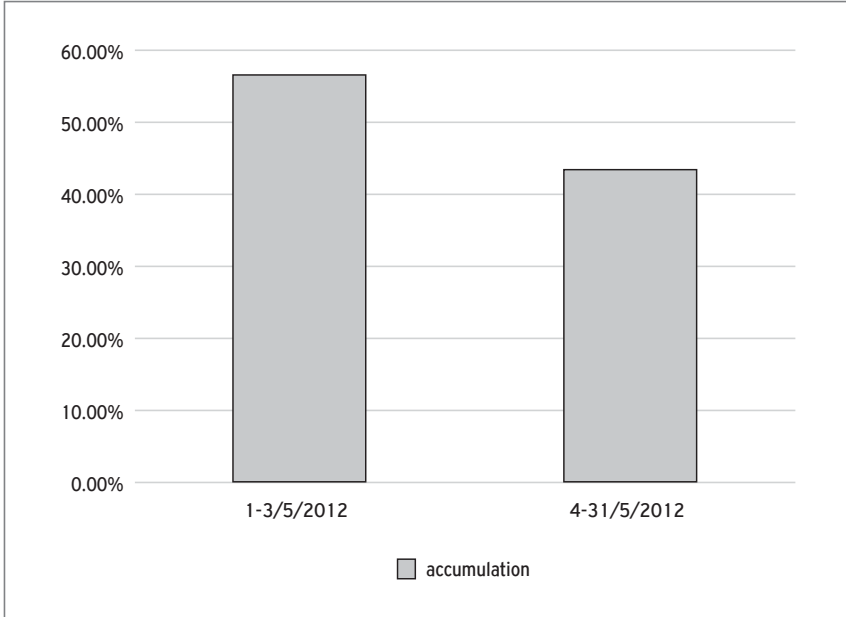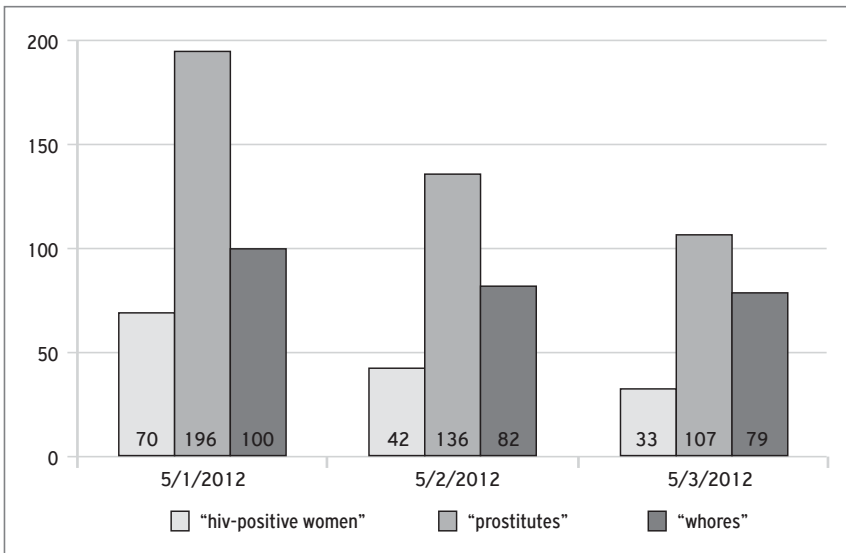
FIGURE 3
Accumulation of tweets

FIGURE 4
Distribution of the 3 keywords

FIGURE 5

Distribution of keyword (Frequency)