



# From Local Appropriation to Global Documentation, or Contesting the Media System

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**Abstract:** In this essay I consider the performances of Pussy Riot as part of the global protest movement, which utilises appropriation as its main means of expression. The paper identifies the internet as a new platform of performative appropriation and discusses the logic of Pussy Riot as a global meme and its impact on our understanding of the media system in Russia. I analyse the phenomenon of Pussy Riot as an example of global networked media; it provides me with material necessary for theorising global post-broadcast media. Pussy Riot tells a story of media as a machine, device, exhibition and performance; and it functions as an internet-based television channel. Pussy Riot exemplifies the next stage in the development of the post-broadcast era whereby audiences (re-)produce original content and enable the emergence of a new type of user subjectivity.

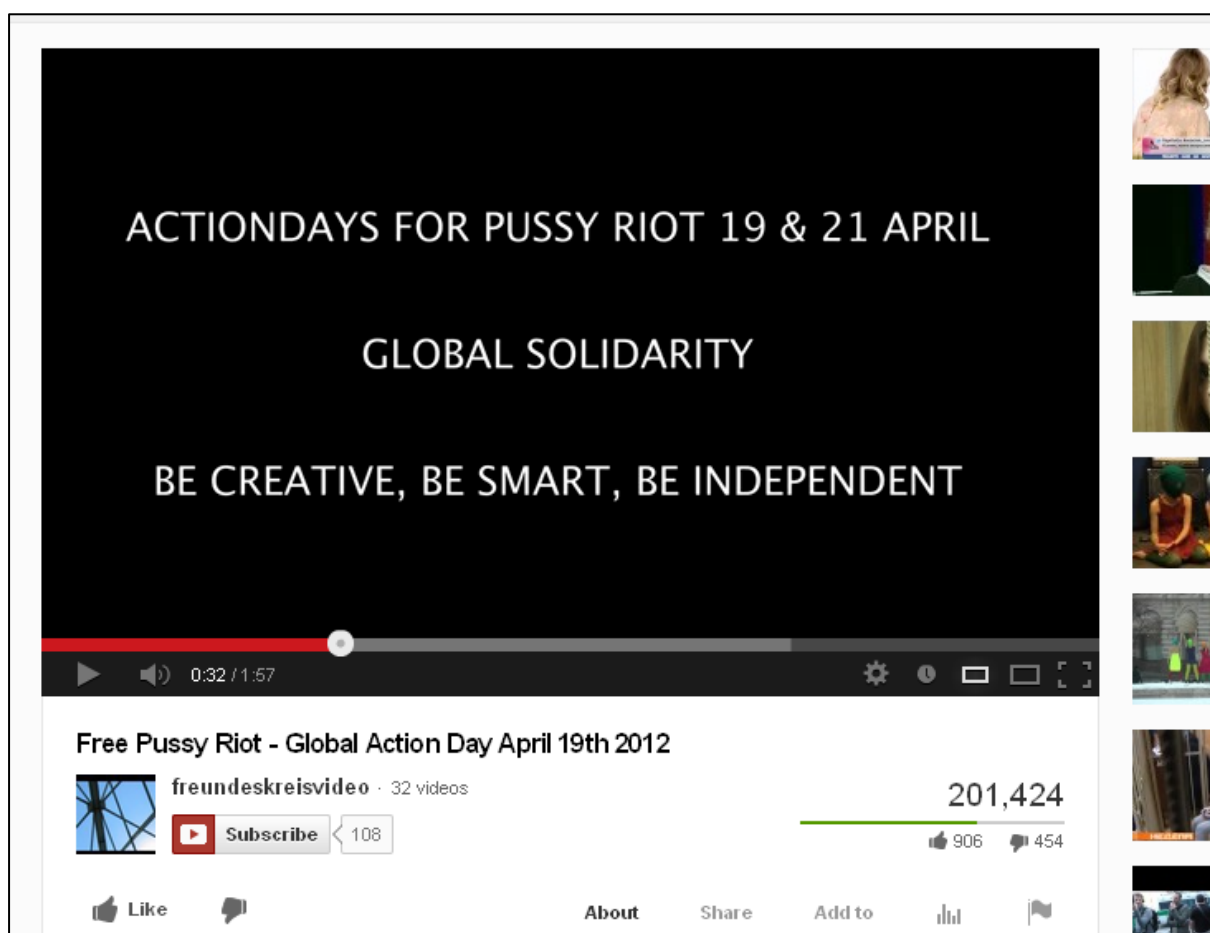
**Keywords:** Pussy Riot, post-broadcast, globalisation, performative appropriation, mega events, DIY media

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The performances of Pussy Riot and the ensuing legal battle and their mediation in world media are part of the global protest movement, which utilises appropriation—whether as an aesthetic endorsement, and/or occupying a physical space—as its main means of expression. In this essay I consider Pussy Riot in the context of Soviet and post-Soviet media tradition of appropriation as a form of political dissent. The paper identifies the internet as a new platform of performative appropriation and discusses the logic of Pussy Riot as a global meme<sup>1</sup> and its impact on our understanding of the media system in Russia. I analyse the phenomenon of Pussy Riot as an example of global networked media; the Pussy Riot phenomenon provides me with material necessary for theorising global post-broadcast media. The term ‘post-broadcast’ defines a number of changes in the media system of the past ten-fifteen years.

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<sup>1</sup> For meme theory, see for example Distin 2005.

**Image 1:** Pussy Riot Global Solidarity.

Source: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO2Io\\_1I-Fs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GO2Io_1I-Fs) (accessed 20 March 2013)

It refers to the changes in technological and social uses with far-reaching consequences for our understanding of media, social life and democracy. The post-broadcast media system includes multiplatform systems for producing and delivering media content, for example, television-internet hybrids; micro-casting, whereby personalized channels are available on YouTube and other platforms; the practice of file-sharing among fans; and participatory engagement of audiences. In relation to television, Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay contend:

Globalizing media industries, deregulatory (even reregulatory!) policy regimes, the multiplication and convergence of delivery platforms, the international trade in media formats, the emergence of important production hubs in new ‘media capitals’ outside the United States / United Kingdom / Europe umbrella (particularly in East Asia), and the fragmentation of media audiences—as what were once national audiences slice up into more and more taste fractions—are all changing the nature of television: its content, its production, how and where it is consumed (2009: 2).

While my essay is primarily concerned with the changing media landscape in Russia, extrapolations can be made for our understanding of the connection between a specific media sys-

tem and power regime. In his 2011 *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* Evgenii Morozov reiterated concerns expressed in Markus Prior's 2007 *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*, including the assertion that 'the Internet runs on trust, but its dependence on trust also opens up numerous vulnerabilities. Its effectiveness as a tool of carving out spaces of dissent and, in exceptional cases, even campaigning against authoritarian governments has to be judged on a much wider set of criteria than just the cost and ease of communication' (Morozov 2011: 148). These considerations constitute the broader framework for my conceptualisation of the post-broadcast era, which is not intended to be a definitive measure of media and regime change but rather an invitation to seek new paradigms of knowledge.

My conceptualisation is based on 1) the analysis of videos produced by, on behalf, and in the name of Pussy Riot; 2) observing live events in support of Pussy Riot in Austria, Russia and the UK, and 3) monitoring international media (especially in February-June 2012, and including such media groups as the BBC, The Daily Telegraph, The New York Times, Izvestiia, Kommersant, Afisha, Channel One, and Russia Today, as well as such platforms as *YouTube*, *LiveJournal* and *Vkontakte*). The essay consists of three parts in which I trace the phenomenon of Pussy Riot as a specific media phenomenon and theorise it in relation to the concepts of user-generated media and media events in the post-broadcast era.

**Image 2:** Appropriation of public space in Linz, Austria, as part of protest movement in support of Pussy Riot (August 2012).



Source: Vlad Strukov.

## 1. Pussy Riot as Media Histories

The phenomenon of Pussy Riot tells a story of media as a machine, device, exhibition and performance, and in doing so it speaks to the main concerns of New Media Studies, including automatization, interactivity, authenticity, authorship, amateur creativity, and ontology of digital video among many others. In this respect, the reaction of the Russian authorities, including the Russian Orthodox Church, to Pussy Riot might be viewed as a means to protect the existing media environment rather than to maintain their political power.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Russian authorities retaliated against the audio-video documentation of the performances rather than the performances themselves. To be more precise, they were unnerved by the popularity of such documentations rather than their actual content. In other words, the attack was against the internet as a system, which enabled such documentation and dissemination. Of course, individual users were found responsible for the phenomenon at large. This is because, as Andreas Broeckmann contends, ‘digital apparatuses abstract the visible as well as the conceptual, all sensory and mental information, to a high level of ephemerality where only the reconstruction in recognizable, concrete abstractions like text, image, and sound bring them into our perceptual range’ (2007: 193). Indeed, Pussy Riot brought into question the existing system of experience whereby its transmission over digital networks undermined the shared reality as monitored by the Russian government. Finally, Pussy Riot displayed hyper-presence of televised images and the televised truth, turning viewers into participants thanks to the interactive nature of the internet.

The iconoclastic gesture of Pussy Riot was also aimed at the established notions of space. Similar to the Occupy Movement, Pussy Riot staged activities that relied on the appropriation of public spaces. In general, their artistic activity is associated with the creation of spatial forms which are documented and disseminated on the internet. The novelty of their enterprise consisted in that it was perhaps the first time since the hostage-taking in the Dubrovka theatre that the space of Moscow was contextualized as global. Back in 2002 social media networks were still in development, government-sponsored transnational networks such as Russia Today had not been launched, and the proliferation of the internet in Russia was low. In 2012 Russia was already a powerful digital entity with a thriving online economy and extremely active political blogosphere. Thus, Pussy Riot celebrated the arrival of the new digital era; and their work challenged not only the configurations of media but of space itself (I discuss such configurations in the following section).

Thanks to Pussy Riot Russian art and politics suddenly became deterritorialized and, according to the Russian government, in hands of the ‘global mob’. Digital activity functioned as a form of global documentation of Russian social life; in the end Pussy Riot came victorious over both Russian public spaces and global cultural space. Pussy Riot performances have always been interactive; however, thanks to global mediation they soon became ‘alteractive’, whereby ‘alteraction’ ‘puts emphasis not only on the action but also on the encounter with the other, who, in the context of cyberspace, risks becoming an evanescent other because this “other” is not necessarily there, present on the screen’ (Poissant 2007: 235). Thus, Pussy Riot

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<sup>2</sup> Arguably, the latter is based on the protection of the former; however, there are indications of that the regime will remain whilst the media system will mutate.

‘othered’ global media and publics with the help of provocations which utilised user participation and co-creativity.

**Image 3:** Pussy Riot trial.



Source: <http://02varvara.wordpress.com/2012/08/17/update-on-the-pussy-riot-verdict-17-august-2012-updated-as-news-arrives/00-pussy-riot-17-08-12b> (accessed 5 April 2013).

## 2. Pussy Riot as DIY Media

Pussy Riot gained popularity thanks to video clips posted on *YouTube* in winter-spring 2012, especially after the release on 21 February 2012 of their ‘punk prayer’ entitled ‘Mother of God, Please Chase Putin Away!’ [Pank molitva ‘Bogoroditsa, Putina progoni’]. According to the website of the art group,<sup>3</sup> the clip was viewed 600,000 times in a matter of days. A year later the number of views of the clip on *YouTube* has exceeded a few hundred million, suggesting Pussy Riot has turned into a global media phenomenon. As with many other online events, the clips of Pussy Riot on *YouTube* can be re-posted on other platforms, creating a network of mediated experiences that can be searched, commented on and adapted for personal use.<sup>4</sup> As a result their video content has achieved a status of television, that is, an uninterrupted flow of audio-visual information made available to individual and group viewers via electronic systems of distribution.

<sup>3</sup> <http://freepussyriot.org/ru/about-ru> (accessed 25 March 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Videos with Pussy Riot performances have been posted and re-posted by numerous viewers around the world. Tracing their usage and links to the ‘original’ video is largely meaningless as authorship and originality are always attributed to Pussy Riot even though the video could have been created or adapted by a different user. The surge in re-postings occurred after the Russian Duma and Moscow courts began the discussion of permanently removing the videos from the internet in September 2012 (see, for example, publications in *izvestia.ru*). It is unclear how the authorities planned to enforce the possible removal and why they abandoned the plans at a later stage.

For many audiences in industrialized countries, the computer screen has replaced the television screen, making a transition to multi-modal, on-demand, immersive and increasingly private consumption of television, enabling transition to the post-broadcast era. As far as media are concerned, Russia has fully entered the new post-broadcast phase, whereby major television channels make their content available online and launch on-demand services. For example, in 2009 Channel One premiered its scandalous series *The School* [Shkola; 69 episodes], directed by Valeriia Gai Germanika (b. 1984), best known as the director of several short documentaries about teenagers and a feature called *Everybody Dies But Me* [Vse umrut a ia ostanus'; 2008]. The series was widely available for streaming and/or downloading from the website of Channel One and other platforms.

**Image 4:** Website of Channel One *The School* television series.

Source: [http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects\\_in\\_detail/si=5785](http://www.1tv.ru/sprojects_in_detail/si=5785) (accessed 5 April 2013)

Russia's entry into the post-broadcast era is evident not so much in the work of television channels but rather in the practice of file sharing on the internet. For example, Russian Torrent<sup>5</sup> has been used to enjoy television, films, music and other forms of cultural production. The extent of such practice is such that some Russian film makers choose to premier their films on Torrent since their release in cinemas or on DVDs inevitably results in illegal uploads on the internet. Furthermore, *YouTube* has been utilised by Russian government-sponsored channels such as Russia Today to promote their agenda in search of new audienc-

<sup>5</sup> Torrent is a peer-to-peer structure which enables parsing up content among its contributors and re-assembling the content on a single computer on demand.

es. As a result, *YouTube* and other platforms for distribution of the audio-visual content have become collections of self-produced content as well as mash-ups of networked-produced content, co-existing in a networked searchable environment.

Television products such as *The School* advance an uninterrupted narrative available in the form of episodes, or when the content is available online, in the form of webisodes. Conversely, Pussy Riot has emerged as a form of television thanks to the proliferation of numerous videos and their adaptations on the internet whereby each of them is a webisode in a continuous television saga called 'Pussy Riot'. As with other television channels, Pussy Riot encompasses frequent repetitions and re-runs, whereby the experience of watching Pussy Riot channel is characterized by rewinding, repeating and reiterating. The experience of the audiences is formed by their overall online activity.

In comparison with television audiences, the audiences of internet-based television channels are a secondary audience by virtue of the high 'level of commitment of its members, which has driven them to download and watch programmes in a more user- and time-intensive way. Their fan-ish behaviour is further augmented by their use of the internet for further exchange of information, news and gossip about individual series via other social networks, blogs and in some cases wiki sites' (Marshall 2009: 42). I argue that the audiences of Pussy Riot, while secondary in their type of behaviour, are primary in their function as sole consumers of the audio-visual content distributed via different electronic systems. Thus, Pussy Riot exemplifies the next stage in the development of the post-broadcast era, whereby audiences (re-)produce original content and enable the emergence of a new type of user subjectivity. Reproduction of content signifies new modes of production insofar as the boundaries between primary and secondary audiences are blurred.

In this section of my essay I applied the metaphor of television to consider Pussy Riot as a DIY media outlet; however, I am cognizant of possibilities offered by other types of media metaphors, for example, newspapers, film and radio. In this regard, I utilise the analogy of 'old media' in order to unpack the logic of 'new media', a distinction which is largely irrelevant in the post-broadcast era as I argue in the final part of the essay.

### **3. Pussy Riot as Mega Media Events**

Pussy Riot has achieved the status of a media event thanks to their celebration of a set of values and symbols through the formation of a specific public around them. In their influential *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992) Daniel Dayne and Elihu Katz identify media events as rituals of mediated communicative integration of a society normally conceived in terms of national discourse. Similarly, Nick Couldry shows that 'rituals are significant because they "hold society together" and do so by affirming a common set of values' (2003: 65). Their arguments evidently relate to the era of the national modernity and refer to a system of media that support the national structure by utilising unified systems of media. No matter if sponsored by the state or private capital, these media always claim to operate in the interests of the nation.

### Image 5: 'Free Pussy Riots' in Berlin (August 2012).

August 8th, 2012 by Theo Schneider

ALL IMAGES



Source: <http://www.demotix.com/news/1377827/free-pussy-riot-protest-video-made-peaches-berlin#media-1377736> (accessed 10 April 2013).

By contrast, Pussy Riot emerged at the time of Russia's post-imperial inertia and global system of media circulation whereby media events are increasingly untethered from the national structures. Moreover, the Russian Federation has repeatedly failed to produce a system of values shared by all; Nancy Condee identifies this lack with the help of the concept of 'the absent nation' (2009: 7). Furthermore, I think Russian society is hardly stable; in fact, it is perhaps one of the most fragmented societies in the developed world. As a result (or even as a cause), Russian media does not display a mediated centre, that is, an assumed centre of power-related, hegemonic imagination of media-nation (see, for example, the discussion in *Post-Soviet Russian Media: Conflicting Signals*, edited by B. Beumers, S. Hutchings and N. Rulyova 2009). Finally, it is not certain whether Pussy Riot themselves represent a coherent system of values. Arguably their ideological system is based on the anti-Putinist, anti-establishment stance which utilises interventionism as its primary aesthetic code. By appropriating public spaces Pussy Riot creates temporary performative installations; their strategies on the internet are quite different because their work online is more permanent and in fact lacks the characteristics of performances since these videos can be played over and over again. In this sense, Pussy Riot have contributed to the new logic of digital media by blurring the boundaries between different temporalities and uses and conventions of the digital code. Nevertheless their system of values does not contain elements of an explicit aesthetic or political programme. Therefore, in my analysis I use a different framework for considering Pussy Riot as an example of a mega media event, one which is based on the role of the audience in consumption and circulation of media content. I argue that in the post-broadcast era media events are constituted not so much by media themselves but rather by audiences that function as prosumers of content and define their own political agenda.



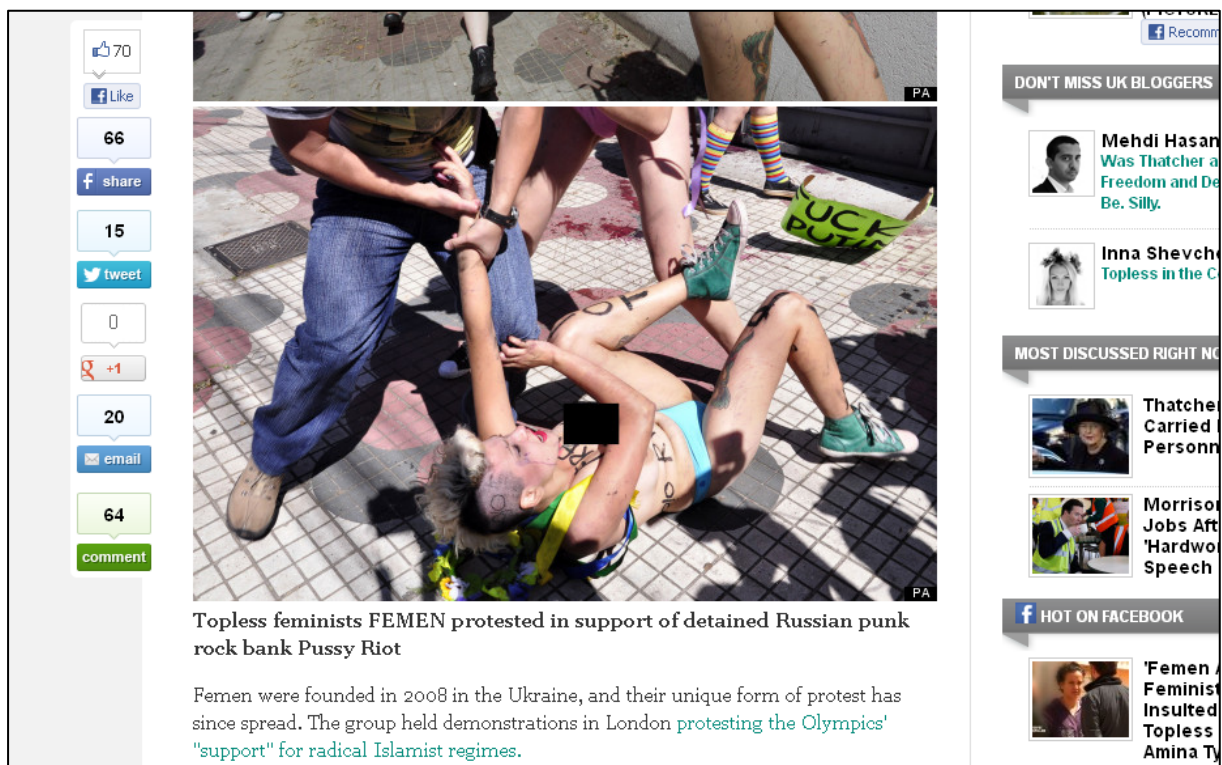
In his more recent study Dayne puts forward four major features of media events: '1) insistence and emphasis, 2) an explicitly "performative", gestural dimension, 3) loyalty to the event's self-definition, and 4) access to a shared viewing experience (2010: 25). He continues by stating that the first feature, emphasis, is manifested through the omnipresence of the transmitted events and the repetition of certain shots in seemingly endless loops. Indeed, these are the features of Pussy Riot that confirm their status as a mega media event. However, it is important to point out that, unlike in Dayne's concept, these effects are not generated by broadcast media but rather by audiences on the internet that react to stimuli distributed on social media, in the blogosphere and on other platforms. In other words, Pussy Riot showcases the impossibility of separation of media events as conceived by Dayne into actual events, their mediation and audience's reaction. Instead, the phenomenon of Pussy Riot demonstrates that in the post-broadcast era media events occur simultaneously, are increasingly performative in their status and participation does not lead to but rather constitutes the very core of the narrative continuity.

In relation to their narrative potential, Eric W. Rothenbulher understands media events as interruptions of the normal routine for a live broadcast 'from a remote location of a pre-planned event organised independently of the media; the tone of the broadcast is more serious, ceremonial, or even reverential than normal, it attracts unusually large and attentive audiences, and it often has serious political and social consequences' (2009: 61). As with Dayne's concept, the phenomenon of Pussy Riot demonstrates the inapplicability of Rothenbulher's definition to the post-broadcast era. First of all, as far as Pussy Riot is concerned, the identified interruption of the normal routine was not an outcome of an event but rather its essence and structure. Secondly, the tone of the event was intentionally offensive with the view of disturbing the monotony of discourse on Russian state-sponsored television channels. In other words, it achieved precisely the opposite effect in that it de-stabilised the discussion in Russian media and altered its dominant style. Finally, Rothenbulher's definition implies that the events occur on the same platform, for example, a television programme is interrupted by a live announcement of an event, or a radio transmission is suspended in favour of a more important radio broadcast. In his framework of media events Rothenbulher insists on the continuity and singularity of a given media flow whereby the audience is exposed to one channel of information at a given point in time. The experience of Pussy Riot, and networked media in general, teaches us that neither producers nor audiences occupy a singular media space anymore. Instead, media operate in a multi-modal regime of co-production and co-consumption, and the long-lasting effect of Pussy Riot as a media event is in the re-definition and re-segmentation of the entire media system.

The example of Pussy Riot clearly demonstrates that the internet in Russia is no longer subordinate to television as it has been claimed in studies far too many to mention here. Rather the internet is the media system itself, with older media forms and outlets such as television being its integral, subordinate parts. Moreover, the events concerning Pussy Riot illustrate that Russia's entry into the post-broadcast era had been completed in 2011-2012 and that we should search for new theoretical tools to analyse media in the Russian Federation, one that focuses on audiences and their power in re-distribution of media flows. I contend Pussy Riot and other political events in Russia and their mediation on the global scale should be

viewed as part of the discourse about the nature, function and parameters of democracy as a constitutive part of capitalist modernity, loosely, viewing the Russian winter of protests as part of the global crisis of capitalism and global movement of political dissent which is taking the form of the appropriation of public spaces and, by extension, of the public domain of exchange of meaning and values.

**Image 6:** The Ukrainian activist art group *Femen*, staging a protest in support of Pussy Riot in Ukraine (August 2012).



Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/08/16/pussy-riot-protest-topless-feminists-femen\\_n\\_1787741.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/08/16/pussy-riot-protest-topless-feminists-femen_n_1787741.html) (accessed 10 April 2013).

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