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SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: MEMORY, REFLECTION, ACTION

Abstract
Social media can provide strong opposition to traditional cultural values and to the preconceived portrayal of women in mass media. The objective of this article is to analyse the way in which digital platforms can lead to the social emergence of certain issues and to examine the cumulative effect produced online through these channels. Are these platforms able to create online communities and inspire positive circles of information, sharing, and participation? What are the ways through which such themes have undergone an educational transformation with regard to related communities?

The primary objective is to investigate how these interactive tools contribute to the formation of a collective conscience, focusing in particular on the dimensions of ‘memory’, ‘reflection’ and ‘action’. The study also investigates the opportunities for education and training that are available on the Internet, for a more proactive critical reflection of the issue.

Keywords
Gender-based violence; social media; education; participation; women.

1. DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON THE INTERNET

The battle against gender-based violence is one of the issues on which the mobile-social network community is focusing attention. New media and the Web 2.0 increase the degree of pluralism in contemporary society and permit greater diversification of sources of information, especially by giving space to independent and alternative sources that are more difficult for political and economic authorities to control. With the new type of sociability that Welmann identifies as part of networked individualism, individuals acquire more power as they are freed from the ‘traditional’ limitations of the physical space of their own environments and registered status, and the Network replaces the group. The social bond is no longer based on physical proximity between people, but rather on individuals and their network of contacts: personal networks offer (in terms of support, sociability, information, identity, and sense of belonging) that which was once

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1 Lucia D’Ambrosi wrote paragraphs 3 and 4, Valentina Polci paragraphs 1 and 5. Both wrote paragraphs 2.
provided by traditional communities. In fact, every member of a person’s social network constitutes a portion of his or her social capital. The creation and dissemination of Social Network Sites (SNS) has helped to emphasize the value of the concept of social capital in social relationships mediated by the computer. These are inter-subjective ways in which the perception of having relationships originates from the connection of experiences through digital media. This represents a shift from the concept of the public as an audience (media studies) to that of “networked publics”.

This transformation attracts scholars specifically interested in exploring the world of digital networks, blogs, and Social Network Sites, so as to analyze processes of increasing reflexivity, the emergence of new social dynamics, the structuring of social bonds, and the birth and stabilization of best practices.

Social media is an opportunity to expand new social relationships and to strengthen or enhance existing ones, yet these groups are often held together by weak bonds, characterized by images, changing symbols, and gut reactions and are not based on important experiences. The fluidity of systems of interaction on the Internet prevents them from solidifying or joining together into rigid, stable structures. People share emotions, pictures, thoughts, and opinions, but these do not build upon one another and this makes it difficult to maintain relational and social systems. For this reason some critics of the networks have emphasized the importance of establishing, as opposed to networks with a low density of social significance, organized networks that are capable of encouraging the development of stronger and more structured bonds and that focus on a common purpose.

In this process, the sharing of information and content is one of the most effective methods for promoting the engagement against gender-based violence. The web can promote symbolic resources useful in building a social identity based on knowledge, ideas, images, information, and shared values to interpret and organize a collective memory. Moreover, the circulation and solidification of narratives and images highlights awareness spaces on the theme of gender violence as open source, website of association or blogs.

This is an important fact which indicates the attention of public opinion towards the more general problem of femicide, not exclusively confined to the media narratives. Femicide, in fact, breaks often, in mass media with an emergency narration of men who kill their partners and ex-partners because they are women, as a crime of domestic and

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intimate partner violence\textsuperscript{11}. Omitted, then, is the deepest understanding of violent relationships between men and women, not necessarily linked to the patriarchal power and its emergency approach.

The complexity of the problem needs to be addressed, by analysing and contrasting such a structured and paradigmatic violence as the gender violence, with broad-spectrum studies and measures\textsuperscript{12}.

2. MAPPING SITES. THE ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of over 30 Italian and non-Italian websites, platforms, and social networks, operated primarily by non-profit associations and institutions, as well as by groups of citizens, both men and women, that focus on the issue of femicide, promoting and developing activities dedicated to cultural awareness and engagement in an effort to support gender identity and specificity. Additionally, some interactive platforms serve as incredibly useful reference points and forums for promoting the rights of women who have been victims of violence. The Italian websites were selected according to what type of entity was the creator or promoter of the site, using a categorical reconstruction. Six specific categories were identified, broken down into the following groups\textsuperscript{13}: personal blogs written by individual bloggers in the form of Internet diaries that recount personal experiences, share thoughts, and sometimes solicit reader feedback (for example ‘In Quanto Donna’ by Emanuela Valente); collective men’s (for example Maschile Plurale) and women’s (for example ‘Doppio Standard’) websites, or rather groups of ordinary individuals who come together for social purposes, are more structured and interactive than blogs, and frequently provide opportunities for participation; websites for professionals or qualified industry operators, or professional networks (for example ‘Rete Di.R.e contro la violenza’), are often informational showcases or spaces for reflection and listening and present thematic motifs according to the topics covered; open-structure coordination centres (for example ‘Casadonne.it’) are operated primarily by volunteers and use primarily open source technology to provide women with the tools, information, and support they need to combat gender violence; and websites of associations/institutions (for example ‘Associazione Casa delle donne contro la violenza onlus Modena’) which are often more static and provide information, advice, and local assistance.


\textsuperscript{12} Mattucci, Corpi, linguaggi. Violenze. La violenza contro le donne come paradigma, 2016.

\textsuperscript{13} 24 Italian websites were analysed, divided into 4 categories: personal blogs “In Quanto Donna” (www.inquantodonna.it), “Stop al femminicidio” (www.stopfemminicidio.it), “Pasionaria” (www.pasionaria.it), and “Femminicidio” (www.femminicidio.blogspot.it); websites run by collectives of women “La rete delle reti femminili” (www.retedelledonne.org), “Be free cooperativa” (www.beFREEcooperativa.org), “Doppio Standard” (www.doppiostandard.wordpress.com), and “Differenza donna” (www.differenzadonna.org); websites run by collectives of men “Maschile Plurale” (www.maschileplurale.it), Noino.org, “Associazione Cerchio degli uomini” (www.neroicloghiuenmini.org), and “Associazione LUI” (www.associazionelui.it); professional networks “La ventisettesima ora” (www.27esimaora.corriere.it), Zeroviolenza.it, Doppiadifesa.it, and “Rete D.i.Re.” (www.direcontrolaviolenza.it); open-structure coordination centres “Casa internazionale delle donne” (www.casainternazionalidelledonne.org), “Coordinamento dei centri antiviolenza dell’Emilia-Romagna” (www.centraintantioludenzaer.org), “Chayn Italia” (www.chaynitalia.org), and “Casa delle donne per non subire violenza onlus” (www.casadonne.it); websites of associations/institutions Telefonorosa.it, “Donne insieme contro la violenza” (www.donneinsieme.org), and “Associazione Casa delle donne contro la violenza onlus Modena” (www.donnecontroviolenza.it), Nondasola.it.
The study was conducted by applying an analysis framework that examined the level of involvement and organizational autonomy with which the different sponsors of these digital spaces (institutions, non-profit organizations, citizens) choose to deal with the issue of gender violence, and to verify the extent to which the existence of, sharing of, and participation in such communities is a strategic vehicle for educating/raising awareness in an area. Three specific interpretive filters were used: ‘memory’, understood as recollection and sharing; ‘reflection’, understood as encounter and awareness; and ‘action’, understood as activism and responsibility (Table 1).

Table 1 - Filters and analysis indicators

| Memory (recollection and sharing) | - Presence of an online information network dedicated to recording the event  
|                                | - Existence of channels and tools for sharing memory  
|                                | - Creation of the building blocks for a collective social memory |
| Reflection (encounter and awareness) | • Presence of an online information network dedicated to knowledge and reflection  
|                                | • Existence of channels through which to talk about one’s own experience  
|                                | • Strengthening of the network |
| Action (activism and responsibility) | • Presence of online spaces dedicated to promoting awareness  
|                                | • Existence of online channels and tools aimed at achieving and completing common goals and projects  
|                                | • Creation of outlets focused on education and protest both online and offline |

Specifically, in relation to the ‘memory’ filter, the degree of openness towards the social community was evaluated in terms of the ability to promote online informational spaces dedicated to recording events (documents, images, photographs), promote the existence of channels and tools through which to share one’s own experiences (social networks, message boards on Instagram), and provide steps for the creation of a collective social memory (for example, tools that define the group as an entity of support, as opposed to something else).

The ‘reflection’ filter was evaluated on the basis of the website’s/portal’s ability to promote online information areas dedicated to knowledge and reflection (regulations, handbooks), provide and cultivate channels and tools through which to share one’s own experience (blogs, discussion forums), and ensure ways to strengthen the network (open source platforms, websites such as online networks). Finally, the ‘action’ filter dealt with the analysis of social media in relation to the ability of different promoters to promote projects and initiatives, both online and offline, that combat prejudice, discrimination, and violence against women. Specifically, indicators included the presence of online spaces dedicated to spreading awareness (proposals for advertising campaigns, contests of ideas), the existence of online channels and tools aimed at achieving and completing common goals and projects (subscriptions, online petitions), and the creation of outlets focused on education and protest (collective movements, meetings in schools, training courses)\(^4\), both online and offline.

\(^4\) The indicators (3 for each filter) have been evaluated on the basis of the presence or not (1=present, 0=absent) of the item being considered, according to various levels of involvement that go from providing information, to sharing experiences, to participation, for a total of 3 points.
3. PRIMARY RESULTS OF THE STUDY

One of the first analysis filters was that of ‘memory’, or rather the ability of the selected sites to record and share moments and events from the past so as to include them with other memories and stories within the online community. The average score obtained from the analysis of the three indicators for each category revealed some interesting results (Table 2). Websites run by professionals are considered to be the richest (average of 2.7) in terms of their celebratory function and are, in fact, quite different from the online spaces that serve as archives of experiences and which are strengthened through redundancy and through the mediatization of memory. Furthermore, for many of the web pages analysed, a more articulated management of social media appears to elicit reader involvement, from simple commemoration to sharing and, sometimes, participating in the creation of a collective memory.

Table 2 - Memory filter according to promoter type (average value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Average Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Blogs</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Collectives</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men’s Collectives</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Networks</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open-structured Coordination Centres</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associations/Institutions</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Websites run by collectives of women and personal blogs (average of 1.9) are considered functional in the process of memory sharing. In many of the analysed pages ‘memory’ seems to materialize mainly in online spaces and informational tools: a major repertoire of images, documents, and videos. However, the building blocks for a collective social memory are lacking. On the other hand, by comparison open-structured coordination centres, despite having the same average value, are more open to the promotion of active memory tools. In these platforms, the act of identifying oneself online as a supportive entity as compared to others, appears to be the result of a different process of awareness: memory is not limited only to the acknowledgement of facts/events, but rather becomes part of one’s own personal history and provides the chance to create shared networks based on social values, meanings, and actions.

Association’s/Institution’s Websites are, on the other hand, more informative (average of 1), with an organizational and communicative structure geared primarily towards providing assistance. In this case ‘memory’ and ‘reflection’ play different roles, representing ready-made and partially-matured items in the subconscious of the individual users and are ‘shared implicitly’ in offline environments.

Lastly, the structure of websites run by men is extremely different. The emphasis is primarily on the value of the encounter as a jumping off point for the common promotion and planning of new ways to raise awareness and to educate. Thus, if ‘memory’ seems to be almost negligible (average of <1), ‘reflection’, the study’s second reference category, takes on a central role that is closely tied to communication initiatives (average of 2.6). Some of the cases examined are actually attempts to substitute, encourage users in the process of reconstructing-framing-connecting events, which is essential for the subsequent steps of thought and action. Equally significant in terms of ‘reflection’
are the open-structure coordination centres (average of 2.5), whose promotion of processes, awareness, and thought is primarily ‘conveyed’ through social networks and digital media, which become strategic vehicles for initiatives that lead citizens to action (Table 3). These types of activism are disconnected from traditional methods of political mediation, strongly characterized by inclusiveness and universality\(^\text{15}\), which prefigure a collective movement whose purpose and method is dictated by the expansion of technological communication\(^\text{16}\). These spaces are, in fact, designed to welcome differences and recognize rights and equal opportunities among men and women as well as among different religions and cultures.

### Table 3 - Reflection filter according to promoter type (average value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promoter Type</th>
<th>Average Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL BLOGS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMEN’S COLLECTIVES</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN’S COLLECTIVES</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEN-STRUCTURED COORDINATION CENTRES</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSOCIATIONS/INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also on websites run by collectives of women or professionals, online spaces transform from merely informative spaces to communicative ones (average value of 2). Communication geared towards raising public awareness is carried out through various activities undertaken by employees and/or consultants who process texts, articles, and public announcements to be disseminated and promoted, primarily online, through social networks. User participation in strengthening networks through the promotion of, for example, open source platforms based primarily on the sharing of knowledge is also quite strong.

Meetings and thought play a central role in personal blogs and websites run by associations/institutions as well. The structure of these websites is strongly geared towards providing information, and those sections dedicated to regulatory and social issues related to gender violence, for example, as well as those providing support and assistance, have a lot to offer. Interactivity and online engagement, however, are less present.

Lastly, ‘action’, as the final category of analysis, seems primarily to qualify websites operated collectively by men and women, as well as by open-structured coordination centres (average of >2.5). Within these platforms activism takes place through the existence of online spaces where true participatory communities are developed and collective actions are promoted, such as online petitions, fund-raising, and video calls capable of getting a diverse public involved. The section devoted to educational projects is also quite interesting: from the creation of promotional materials, such as video campaigns, to specific educational initiatives, such as training workshops (Table 4)\(^\text{17}\).


\(^\text{17}\) A significant example is the online petition promoted in the summer of 2015 by various websites run by collectives of women against the Intimissimi-group’s Calzedonia brand and its social network campaign “I wanted to be a researcher but now I’m the face of Intimissimi”. The petitions called for the withdrawal of the campaign which promotes a stereotypical and degrading idea of women. #iamMystory was launched on Twitter to highlight the philosophy that “I am what I choose to be and not what the media tells me to be”, which gained huge momentum on social networks.
Table 4 - Action filter according to promoter type (average value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROMOTER TYPE</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL BLOGS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOMEN’S COLLECTIVES</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN’S COLLECTIVES</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEN-STRUCTURED COORDINATION CENTRES</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSOCIATIONS/INSTITUTIONS</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less active in terms of ‘action’ (average of 2) are websites managed by professionals, in particular when it comes to the existence of online participatory channels and tools focused on achieving and completing common goals and projects, an issue that is also present on websites managed by associations/institutions (average of 1.6) and individual blogs (average of 1) where the tools for mobilization and online protest are scarce and inefficient.

Generally speaking, the analysis highlights how effective these tools are in combating and preventing gender-based violence, but the interaction between various social media outlets is likely to atrophy into ‘merely’ an enrichment of the present without any connection to the past. Open-structured coordination centres and professional networks tend to occupy this position, as well as some websites run by collectives of women that attempt to achieve a more profound level of thought, thus stimulating the recollection and reconstruction of memory and social significance in one’s own community. This fact is reflected in the new ways with which the Internet is beginning to address the issue of feminicide-violence against women, appearing in increasingly more structured and organic forums/websites/blogs. In fact, disjointed and weakly linked pages are now being replaced by a true network of various digital realities.

Sharing is also fundamental to maintaining a trusting relationship with one’s own target and to strengthening online communities. In this regard, websites managed by collectives of women, as well as coordination networks, are effective channels as they promote the online platform within a more cooperative and innovative dimension.

Figure 1 - Analysis filters according to type of website
4. A COMPARISON WITH OTHER EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

The study also analysed several other European websites. Specifically, it looked at 10 different non-Italian platforms that are particularly interesting in terms of their ability to create online communities and inspire positive circles of information, sharing, and participation. The study considered ‘memory’, ‘reflection’, and ‘action’, in an effort to understand both the differences and similarities that exist in these processes of emotional and thoughtful stimulation.¹⁸

Three primary conclusions emerge. The first refers to the structuring of such websites with respect to ‘memory’ education. In both the Italian and non-Italian websites a great abundance of information is recorded which at times is emotionally engaging, and at other times is rather fragmentary and superficial.

While this aspect represents the ability of such websites to perform celebratory functions, a trait which is even more evident on websites operated by collectives of women, it also contributes to the real challenge of how to share a common history on the Internet. Collective memory is not built by simply archiving historical facts, but is sought out in the stories which the community tells about itself and which establish its identity. This is a fundamental process that goes beyond simply providing information, and requires actual exchanges and participation: recognizing oneself in the personal and collective biographies of others is the critical first step to sharing values, significance, beliefs, and symbols.

This issue is present on many of the websites examined, especially in personalized networks where the social dimension of the relationship and of awareness are lacking. In this regard, when it comes to ‘reflection’, these websites have not been particularly successful in establishing themselves as spaces for meeting and dialogue. The groups that are established in these online environments are often anchored to changing images and symbols, selected to provoke gut reactions rather than thoughtful reflection on meaningful experiences. This aspect is evident primarily in the non-Italian websites where there is greater difficulty in ‘connecting’ the present experience to that of the past. However, it is important to note that non-Italian platforms, especially those backed by large associations, have a greater capacity to promote symbolic-relational resources that strengthen the network, as well as to encourage more complex and elaborate cooperative networking experiences at the global level. Meanwhile, on Italian websites, especially those run by associations such as centres against violence, the strong internal bond is established at the local level, thanks to the opportunities that the Internet provides for the sharing of proposals and initiatives locally.

The final point looks at ‘action’ in relation to the ability of these websites to position themselves as networked publics through the promotion of people’s autonomous ability to mobilize, sharing their emotions and experiences on their own turf. On many of the web sites analysed a real transformation can be observed in the ‘media’s narrative’ on violence. The emphasis is on the strength and ability of female victims of violence

to react and to leave their bad experiences behind them, transforming their private grief into public engagement, with a positive impact on the community. This can be seen on both Italian and non-Italian websites with a more sophisticated platform design geared towards creating consensus and awareness. However non-Italian websites demonstrate a higher level of maturity in terms of experimentation with media involvement and the actual organization of local initiatives.

5. FROM INFORMATIVE SHOWCASES TO EDUCATIONAL PORTALS

The question that our study has posed is whether the educational pathway towards a widespread and continuous opposition to violence against women, could pass through the channels made available by new media and its social representations. Specifically, several aspects have been the focus of study: the indicators with which the cumulative effect produced online through channels pertaining to ‘memory’ can lead to the social emergence of certain issues; the means through which such themes are transferred into personal agendas (‘reflection’); the ways in which different informational windows related to institutions, professional or associative networks, and personal blogs have undergone an educational transformation with regard to related communities (‘action’).

What we have observed thus far is that the websites/portals/blogs representing subjects that are disconnected from established associations and institutions operating locally to combat violence against women, are generally more active online in sensitizing, mobilizing, and promoting a culture of opposition and gender equality. The study has, first and foremost, revealed a new relationship present within the digital environment between forms of interpersonal communication, forms of mass communication, and traditional networks.

The interactions generated within online communities, and those which exist around the issue of gender violence, are fragile and short-lived, or rather, they have peaks of concentration determined by criminal events such as feminicides. Communication needs to be more constant and integrated, and must be developed through various channels (websites, blogs, social networks) according to specific needs, by helping to empower new actors and new groups, promoting political and cultural innovation, or stimulating the digital inclusion of citizens that are already politically and socially active. Furthermore, some characteristics of online sociability provide a glimpse into the potential for strengthening networked publics by encouraging the autonomous ability of individuals to mobilize, sharing their emotions and experiences in their own territory. The results demonstrate the possibility, while perhaps only hinted at and certainly not fully taken advantage of, of aligning measures to combat violence against women with the practice of movement networking. This is a practice that goes beyond the instru-

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23 See M. Castells, Comunicazione e potere, Milan: Università Bocconi, 2009; Id., Comunicazione e
mental function of coordinating and taking advantage of the flexibility of the widespread activist network, so much so that it is considered strategically, organizationally, and legally crucial to promoting a common spirit. In fact, the relationships and interactions that develop within these environments actually amplify the expression of alternative social movements whose central core of action is geared towards shared values and projects. It is precisely with these coordinates, in which the Internet is the message, that our study has developed and will continue to do so in order to spread awareness and combat gender violence. New network sociability must be interpreted as an ‘emerging cultural practice’ that responds to a transverse logic towards different media platforms, on the basis of a cross-media and trans-media philosophy. Ideas, images, stories, relationships stretch out on the widest possible range of media channels, converging not only to act as a trigger for the development of a new network, but also as the impetus for a thought process and/or medium and long-term initiative aimed at developing the social representation of gender violence necessary for growth and for building a movement of opposition. Creating a memory capable of representing awareness and culture, as well as of becoming an educational tool, is the new challenge for the type of movement that comes to life on the Internet thanks to a Facebook page, a blog, a website, a hash tag, or a naked, raw, and genuine story. The goal is to foster a movement capable of reaching out to civil society, schools, and institutions from the online world.