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*Lucia D’Ambrosi**, *Paola Papakristo*** and *Valentina Polci****

Author information

* Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: lucia.dambrosi@unimc.it

** Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: p.papakristo@unimc.it

*** Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: valepolci@yahoo.it

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Social Media and Gender Violence: Communication Strategies for a “New Education”

Lucia D'Ambrosi*, Paola Papakristo** and Valentina Polci***

Abstract: This study investigates the role of social media in cultural awareness-raising and engagement in the struggle against gender violence. The study was conducted using a quantitative/qualitative analysis approach of around 20 Italian social websites-platforms-pages dealing with the phenomenon of femicide. The analysis considers three main indicators: presence of Web spaces for awareness-raising (e.g. advertising campaigns, contest); the existence of Web channels and participatory tools targeting the achievement of shared objectives and projects (e.g. signatures, online petitions); activation of online educational courses (e.g. information-based pages on the themes and terms of gender-based violence, creation of “pedagogical” and comparative spaces). The study sought to detect the extent to which the opportunities offered by new technologies in terms of social channel use, the viral spread of messages, and even the capacity to create new spaces for shared reflection, actually have an educational/pedagogical purpose rather than a merely awareness-raising or mobilization function.

Keywords: gender violence, social media, education, social campaign, violence prevention

* Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: lucia.dambrosi@unimc.it

** Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: p.papakristo@unimc.it

*** Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy. Email: valepolci@yahoo.it

Introduction¹

Participatory experiences in the Web nowadays increasingly have a specifically communicative and educational connotation. This is particularly so when such aggregations are oriented towards expressive-symbolic action (Della Porta, 2003) reflected in the pursuit of a common cause. These are often impactful and emotionally engaging phenomena that can quickly promote the creation of “networked publics” (Boyd, 2010, p. 41), or “imagined communities” of people who are “restructured by networked technologies” for several purposes. They are “connected public spheres”, i.e. interactive spaces where power comes from the ability to aggregate around a specific theme (Boccia Artieri, 2015). Or they may even be organized networks (Lovink, 2012), i.e. networks formed by dispersed individuals establishing strong bonds with one another around a common purpose.

These tendencies are reflected in recent experiences connected to gender-based violence. In this compound the Web occupies a space of memory and reflection in relation to a state of non-acceptance already existing in society (D'Ambrosi & Polci, 2017) and shows itself to be fundamental in its ability to aggregate people separated by physical distance but with similar experiences. These are often forms of unconventional involvement associated with political issues, where political is understood in its stricter sense (Norris, 2002). Moreover, forms of “light” participation, such as signing a petition, the organization of flash-mobs, demonstrations or other forms of non-institutional mobilization, which are fairly common in social pages addressing violence against women and femicide, mark a degree of interest in issues of political relevance (Ceccarini, 2011).

However, it should be noted that the web offers a wide range of different content in relation to gender-based violence. Together with opportunities for more distinctly “political” discussion, it offers social campaigns that are also present in other media, while at the same time offering experiences of involvement and education specifically designed to be used through the internet and social media. Furthermore, the horizontal diffusion and individual appropriation of the themes, which through digital channels become part of each individual’s interpersonal networks, go beyond organizational constraints, produce visibility and attract the attention of the traditional media (Jenkins, 2007).

The informing and awareness-raising role performed by communication, including in long-term cultural change, is crucial (Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017). There are numerous publicity campaigns against violence against women in Italy. Most of them address the issue of fear and silence, which

¹ Paola Papakristo wrote par. 2, Lucia D'Ambrosi par. 3, Valentina Polci par. 4. The introduction, methodology and conclusions were written by all three authors.

feed the hidden world of lack of reporting (Cardellini, 2017). Images show the effects of the violence, as though this might discourage further perpetration of abuse or suggest to women that they should escape (Frosali, 2011). While in other European countries the site of the violence, the home, is depicted with apartments that become boxing rings or gymnasiums, in Italian publicity campaigns the problem is addressed in a broader sense, without specifying its type and more from a safety perspective (Frosali, 2011). However, social communication encounters many difficulties because it promotes values and suggests behaviours that the public is not always willing to adopt (Polesana, 2005), especially for complex issues such as gender-based violence.

Accordingly, the role of the communication promoted by online platforms becomes fundamental in a context in which prevention is the weak point, while the communication focuses more on describing the effects of violence.

Although there is a conspicuous literature on online communicative strategies promoted to prevent and raise awareness of violence (Murtarelli, 2015; Mishra & Monippally, 2014; Manca & Rainieri, 2013; Calvani, 2006), there are almost no studies on the opportunities offered by the Web for promoting new educational processes (Greenhow & Sonnevend, 2016; Boyd, 2010; Livingstone, 2010; Buckingham, 2003).

This study seeks to open up debate on this gap, by investigating the role of social media in cultural awareness-raising and engagement in the struggle against gender violence. How do such communicative events actually translate into educational proposals or strategies? The objective is to examine the communication strategies undertaken to raise public awareness, to assess the impact of the social dimension in educational terms and to develop a participatory culture on matters of violence against women and femicide.

Methods

The research uses a qualitative analysis approach of around 20 Italian social websites, by applying an interpretative scheme of study. The scheme observes how the various promoters of these digital spaces choose to tackle gender-based violence and intends to verify how far the existence of such communities and sharing and participation in them is a strategic vehicle for awareness-raising / education in the country. The study also detects if the social channel use, the viral spread of messages, availability of a wide variety of content and image formats and vehicles and even the capacity to create new spaces for shared reflection, actually have an educational / ped-

agogical purpose rather than a merely awareness-raising or mobilization function.

The research is articulated in three steps. At the first step, a background investigation was conducted, aiming at selecting and mapping different pages addressing femicide, managed by non-profit organizations and institutions, but also by groups of male and female citizens². Many of these pages aim at promoting and developing cultural awareness raising and engagement in support of gender identity and specificity. In a certain sense, they seek to involve themselves in a new way in the educational process leading to the struggle against gender violence, by using the potential of the Web and the social character of communication and interaction.

For this purpose, at the second step the study applies a specific observation grid, considering three main indicators: presence of Web spaces for awareness-raising (e.g. advertising campaigns, idea competitions); the existence of Web channels and participatory tools targeting the achievement of shared objectives and projects (e.g. signatures, online petitions); activation of online educational courses (e.g. information-based pages on the themes and terms of gender-based violence, creation of “pedagogical” and comparative spaces).³

At the third step, the study estimates the educational coefficient in order to provide a more complete picture of the research, about the impact of social media in a participatory education culture against gender violence. The coefficient is assessed in quantitative terms, considering the percentage weight of the “education” indicator compared to the overall rating of the “activism” dimension. The emphasis is on the strength and ability of different promoters to support projects and initiatives role through a request to get involved and create network focused on education and protest.

The communication of awareness-raising

Analysis of portals shows some substantive differences in how public opinion or, in particular, network users interact with the virtual community. The goals of Web communication campaigns (Table 1) have different degrees of progressive engagement: from awareness-raising on the issue generally

² The starting point of the research is a previous project aimed at mapping national and international social websites and pages addressing femicide through three dimensions of analysis: “Memory” as a dimension of recall and sharing; “Reflection” as a dimension of encounter and awareness; “Action” as the dimension of activism and responsibility. This study selects the most significant social experiences at the level of action (Cf. D'Ambrosi & Polci, 2017).

³ Each of the three indicators is scored based on a scale going from maximum (1) to medium (0.5) to minimum (0).

(basic level) to a didactic / pedagogical role through a request to get involved (middle level), to incentivising / discouraging behaviours (high level).

Table 1. Different levels of online awareness-raising.

Level	Aims	Indicators
Basic	Awareness	Information on the topic and activities of associations Awareness-raising on the topic in general
Middle	Involvement	Awareness-raising on specific aspects of violence cases Request to get involved
High	Support	Request to support initiatives or the association Fundraising to support the association or specific services offered

At basic level, awareness-raising on sites and portals mainly involves the achievement of cognitive goals linked to knowledge of the problem generally or to the association and its work. At middle level there are sites /portals where awareness-raising addresses specific aspects of cases of violence and requests to get involved. At high level, we find initiatives asking users to participate, such as activation to support the association or fundraising for specific services offered.

Connected to the goals there are communication tools used to convey the message (Table 2). There are videos of different duration and with different characteristics, the organization of events in the area, social networks used to amplify communicative reach and as tools for the direct involvement of the target audience. In the case of the videos we find films of different durations, from the thirty seconds of the most traditional spot to short films lasting 25 minutes, with different narrative styles.

In some cases the narrative is dramatized as a brief story interpreted by professional actors involving themselves as advocates of a social cause, while in other cases the main form is the documentary with contributions from experts, practitioners and those affected by stories of violence who mediate the message content (Lombardi, 2010).

Among awareness-raising actions through events impacting on social media, we can mention the 2017 #befreefromviolence initiative, created by the Befree Social Cooperative, in which Italian and international artists exhibit their works to advocate against domestic violence at the Pelanda Factory Space museum in the streets of Rome. The invitation is to take a selfie with the befreefromviolence sign and to post it on social media. Among the awareness-raising actions that drive fundraising for the association, we can mention the #imnotanexception video by www.differenzadonna.org. Another important aspect to be analysed is the tone of communication: we note

that humorous and dramatic tones seem to be excluded from this form of communication, while positive approaches are prioritized, unlike the trend in social publicity on gender-based violence, which is towards strong dramatization.

Table 2. Communication tools promoted by platforms⁴.

Tool	Features	Examples
Spot	Format also suitable for television broadcasts	"Your life is not a game. United against violence" by Doppia Difesa. "New future" by Telefono Rosa.
Video	Short duration. Fully or partly dramatized narration	#imnotanexception by Differenza Donna. video on parental alienation by Doppia Difesa. "The words to say it" by the D.i.Re Association.
Short film	Medium duration. Fully or partly dramatized narration	"Killed waiting for judgment" by Doppia Difesa. "Giulia beaten Filippo" by Differenza Donna.
Events	Exhibitions, meetings, conferences, workshops	#befreefromviolence by Befree Festival "The illustrated violence" by Casa delle Donne
Awareness-raising meetings in schools	Targeted interventions based on school type (primary, lower secondary or upper secondary)	www.casadonne.it
Social media as a generator of events	Sharing of user generated content	selfie for #befreefromviolence by Befree, communications materials at noino.org
Youtube channel	Dissemination of videos	All videos are available on both the portal and Youtube

⁴ Video, film and events original italian titles: "La tua vita non è un gioco. Uniti contro la violenza", "Futuro nuovo", #iononfaccioeccezione, "Le parole per dirlo", "Uccisa in attesa di giudizio", "Giulia ha picchiato Filippo", "La violenza illustrata".

An example of awareness-raising videos on the theme and presentation of the association's activities with an informative tone is "The words to say it" by the D.i.Re Association⁵. The #imnotanexception video "Every woman wants to be free... I'm not an exception" shows life experiences that even women suffering violence can regain, with a positive approach. Another positive approach is provided by *Telefono Rosa's* "Words" spot, where images of the daily lives of women who have left violent situations show how taking the first step and talking about what is happening, can lead to a more peaceful life. By contrast, an example of a dramatic tone is *Doppia Difesa's* short film, "Killed waiting for judgment".

Regarding the structure of the messages (Lombardi, 2010), different creative codes are used: the advocacy of famous people, real testimonies the telling of a story. The short film "Giulia beaten Filippo" is a documentary on the activities of the organization that uses testimonies to target the prevention of and fight against violence, produced by the *Differenza Donna Association*⁶. The video presents both testimonies and a narration constructed using professional actors who tell a story to show the roots of macho culture from childhood. "Your life is not a game. United against violence", a TV spot that is part of *Doppia Difesa's* fundraising campaign with football's Serie A in 2016 led by Michelle Hunziker and Giulia Bongiorno together with Mauro Icardi and Ignazio Abate, the captains, respectively, of Inter Milan and A.C. Milan as the spokesmen of a message uniting a decidedly male world with the theme of violence against women. An interesting example of a multi-level initiative is the women's world promotion campaign of the *Casa Internazionale delle Donne*, "Women resist"⁷. The hashtag #womenresist is the vehicle for requesting participation in the collection of testimonies of women's life stories and struggles: images, quotes on gender resistance, to give value to women who resist in their daily lives. However, a serious problem that arises with regard to the forms of communication analysed is that of visibility, which is not always guaranteed merely by a web presence (Rossi, 2014).

An interesting example of the use of web communication is noino.org, which offers the possibility of downloading and printing the balloon with the logo, taking a photo or shooting a video for upload to the gallery or haring on social networks. Users can therefore create content for dissemination on the web.⁸

⁵ *Donne in Rete contro la violenza*, a network of over 70 anti-violence centres in Italy, helping women to move away from violence.

⁶ Directed by Francesca Archibugi, funded by the Department for Equal Opportunities, the National Anti Racial Discrimination Office (UNAR).

⁷ Original Italian title "Le donne resistono".

⁸ At international level, the website www.endvawnow.org collects expert organizational initiatives for the construction of effective communication actions on gender-based violence.

Web Participation

An interesting dimension was the analysis of social media in relation to the ability of various promoters to develop online and offline projects and initiatives to counteract gender-based violence. As shown in the literature, social media can facilitate engagement (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Bennet 2011; D'Ambrosi, 2010) by promoting forms of connected action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, P.748) in which “group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks.”

The analysis takes account of three different levels of participation: at basic level are those social experiences where participation often has an informative purpose, predominantly focused on sharing news about facts/events but also regulatory updates. For example, individual blogs that relate to stories of personal experiences and which sometimes collect readers' comments (Table 3)⁹ but also institutional sites such as pariopportunita.gov.it, where the main goal is to raise awareness, by providing key information on the issue.

Table 3. Different levels of online participation.

Level	Aims	Indicators
Basic	Informative	Exchange of information/news
Middle	Affective	Networking Sharing listening and reflection spaces
High	Active	Participation in consultations - voting Collaboration with initiatives / projects

At middle level, there are sites/social pages offering an affective, emotionally engaging involvement. Individuals participating in them are “affective publics” (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 2), i.e. subjects that “come together and / or disband around bonds of sentiment”. The ability to network, but also to feed interactive reflection and listening spaces is essential. Very often, these are the sites of qualified professional/ operators active in the industry but also of associations/institutions sites such as telefonorosa.it,

⁹ See for example Pasionaria.it, a project which has focused on dissemination and information on feminism issues since 2014.

casadonne.it, created to provide information, advice and assistance services in the area.

At a higher level there is active participation, i.e. where the form of engagement aims to amplify voice and visibility (Carpentier, 2011; Couldry, 2012; Papacharissi, 2014) through online and offline modes. Online protest tools (petitions, consultations, etc.) often take the form of collective mobilization. As in the case of doppiadifesa.it, or passionaria.it, which seek to raise public awareness through the support of collaborators and/or legal advisers who draft texts, articles and communiques for both online and print distribution.

Furthermore, analysis of the selected social sites/pages highlights a very good level of design. There are several examples of women's or men's collective sites, i.e. groups of individuals uniting for social purposes engaging in projects/initiatives. Many of these social sites/pages use primarily open source technologies to provide women with the tools they need, information and support against gender-based violence. An interesting example is Chaynitalia.org, a feminist tech project to provide women with the tools they need, information and support against gender-based violence.

In general, the platforms analysed present a fairly satisfactory level of participation, aimed above all at online action through the creation of networking. In this sense, the women's/men's communities against sex discrimination are interesting. They are configured as produsage Bruns (2008), builders of networks whose members not only assume more responsible behaviour but also collaborate in the creation of projects and initiatives. Likewise, the possibility that many of these platforms will promote local protests or specific initiatives (Norris, 2011).

Strategies for a new education

The education indicator is cross-cutting and biunivocally linked to prospects for awareness-raising and participation in terms of functionality. The basic level consists of traditional offline education / training courses, such as meetings in schools or projects to combat gender-based violence involving interested workers or citizens or even the victims of violent behaviour or psychological harassment themselves (Table 4). In this sense, a zero score has been assigned to those sites / pages / platforms in which the online element is a mere service and showcase of offline activities and of initiatives implemented by the association or reference group in life and in real spaces, even when these forms of activism are particularly coordinated (as in the case of nondasola.it, an association linked to the Reggio Emilia anti-violence centre or cerchiodegliuomini.it, a portal essentially aimed at the dissemination of "what we do" offline).

The middle level includes traditional information tools (news, blogs, data collection) used as an educational vehicle and to push deeper awareness, as drivers of social and personal responsibility. For example, *associazionelui.it*, which states that it is “a point of reference for comparison with all men who wish to embark on a journey of introspection into the meaning of “being a man in today’s society” and, among other things, recommends books, readings, visions. In these cases, education is a key node of choice networks, where social choice includes choosing to activate communication and connectivity linked to new technologies significantly increases the choice of interlocutors and the intensity and densities of interaction (Castells et al., 2007).

Also *doppiostandard.wordpress.it* stands out in education by providing users with articles against slut sharing, gender stereotypes, homophobia, and gender-based discrimination. From this perspective, the educational function is closely linked to the concept of the public sphere, but it still seems to be anchored in the traditional Habermasian conception of it.

The high level is associated with the concept of “new education”, i.e. education using new technologies and social channels (Buckingham, 2003): pedagogical communication addressed directly at the connected user and not merely conveying education operating elsewhere in offline mode. Three sites that are very different but equally useful in terms of new online educational practices, can be considered to be particularly effective and exemplary: *maschileplurale.it*, *pasionaria.it* and *inquantodonna.it*. In the first, the association’s men state that they are engaged in, among other things, “producing reflection and documents of political significance on issues of masculinity and the relationship between men and women, offered for discussion through the site, a newsletter and on Facebook and Twitter”. The women of *pasionaria.it* discount the fact that they do not have a physical home (“our home is online”) and create culture and insights through the sharing of stories - such as those collected under the aegis of *#quellavoltache* - on webzine, social channels and in workshops and meetings. *inquantodonna.it*, the first database on violence against women, which was established in 2013, is a site that above all educates through images, by publishing the faces of the murderers and victims in all cases of femicide known in the information system: the immediacy of the photo is used pedagogically in the online context, to create a very strong impact on the user’s consciousness and to drive growth. The level that we consider closest to a “new education” is that which is developed online, but in a material space and time, defined by the communicative-educational act itself.

However, the level of interactivity/simultaneity of these spaces is still limited - addressing this inadequacy would represent a real development in online education culture towards an open participatory culture where

the public sphere is dispersed into a multitude of connected public spheres (Boccia Artieri, 2015).

Table 4. Different levels of online participation.

Level	Aims	Indicators
Basic	Demonstration	Promoting education and offline education practices
Middle	Stimulation	Explicit tools used to achieve the degree of responsibility
High	New education	Digital educational tools Online educational practices Connected public spheres

Conclusions and future perspectives

The analysis of the three dimensions (awareness, participation and education) highlights a new face that the web is developing in addressing the issue of femicide/violence against women. Scattered and weakly linked pages are joined today by structured and coordinated websites/blogs, which are set up as spaces for listening and meeting. Such virtual spaces are often anchored to significant images and symbols, chosen to “sensitize” in relation to emotionally engaging topics through new participatory and educational strategies (D'Ambrosi & Polci, 2017).

In particular, with regard to online awareness raising campaigns, social publicity campaigns differ from those designed for traditional media, in both communication tone and approach. The strongly dramatic tone of social campaigns leaves room for a positive approach with a key role for testimonies and advocacy. The platforms provide an interesting perspective on which to work, especially due to the greater involvement they can offer in relation to users (Murtarelli, 2015). However, the most obvious problem is the lack of strategic planning in the activities undertaken, which risk going unnoticed (Dodson, 2016). Another area for improvement is the greater involvement of users as drivers of portal initiatives.

Moreover, the Web appears to have a significant role in the participatory dimension. The focus is on the possibilities offered today by digital technologies as new collective tools for networking between women and much more. The digital platform is an interactive cross-cutting container open to

and available to all and against all sexual discrimination. In particular, open source platforms and some types of blogs with free software show great ability to implement networks across the country, by promoting communicative and participative strategies (D'Ambrosi, 2017).

On the educational level, online is today a new direct instrument for teaching practices involving a circular educational and educated process. The awareness, first and foremost of the operators of the various sites, of the potential of the network and the networks that can be activated appears to be decisive. Central to Education combating violence against women is overcoming the notion that online can only act in these issues as a service and showcase of offline initiatives: in fact what is necessary is a commitment to a new educational frontier, which finds, in online spaces and communities, places for comparative practices, information and growth with its specific and relevant features, not least its potentially infinite ability to reach the largest and most diverse target audience. If, in fact, we analyse the educational coefficient, i.e. the weight of new education within the entire dimension of action, we find that only 15 % of the cases analysed score high in the educational coefficient, while 30 % are at the basic level, and 55 % are at the middle level¹⁰.

Such evidence requires thorough reflection on the need for change in the online education model (Livingstone, 2010) - towards greater interactivity and the development of a participatory education culture in the fight against gender violence. In this sense, a comparison with international sites enables reflection on the specificity of the tools deployed to raise awareness, depending on the type of communicating subject. In the case of sites promoted by institutions, the communication it tends to be less participatory and uses more conventional instruments, while sites promoted by sector associations have a more friendly tone that is more suitable for the web, with more varied tools, in particular video of different genres and duration. Associations show more urgency to offering themselves as points of reference close to interlocutors, with capacity to excite and engage.

While the institutions adopt a more formal and institutional tone of communication, setting themselves as a reference for the operators in the sector.

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¹⁰ The education coefficient, calculated by dividing the value of Education by the total value of Action, was linked to three levels: high, with a higher value, 0.5; middle, between 0.2 and 0.33; and basic, of 0.

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