

ARTICLE

# THE MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE #FIRSTHARASSMENT CAMPAIGN AND ITS PERCEPTION BY FACEBOOK FEMALE USERS

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**ABSTRACT** – This article aims to reflect on the impact that the campaign #PrimeiroAssédio [first harassment], created by the NGO Think Olga, in 2015, had on the perception of Facebook female users on the subject of harassment, drawing from the perspective of Cultural Studies. This hashtag encouraged the sharing of content and placed the feminist issue of combating sexual harassment on the agenda. We have used Martín-Barbero's (1997) concept of mediation to investigate the context in which users published posts on Facebook and have conducted interviews with women who have published comments in the campaign's posts. In a context of prolific content generation and intense participation, with many people speaking to many people, many authors see the emergence of politically driven action on social media, the so-called "digital activism", as being relative, holding little expectations of radical social change. Our interviewees' answers indicate that, in terms of tangible changes, they found that they were able to engage in dialogue about the topic with the people who were closest to them.

Key words: Harassment. Feminism. Cyber-activism. Journalism. Social media.

## #PRIMEIROASSÉDIO NA MÍDIA E NA PERCEPÇÃO DE LEITORAS NO FACEBOOK

**RESUMO** – Este artigo tem como objetivo refletir sobre o impacto da campanha #PrimeiroAssédio, criada pela ONG Think Olga, em 2015, na percepção de leitoras no Facebook sobre o tema assédio, sob a perspectiva dos Estudos Culturais. A hashtag incentivou compartilhamento de conteúdo e agendou veículos de mídia sobre assédio, uma pauta que é bandeira de movimentos feministas. O conceito de mediações de Martín-

Barbero (1997) é usado para investigar o contexto de postagens no Facebook e entrevistas com mulheres que comentaram em posts da campanha. No cenário de geração de conteúdo em profusão e da participação de muitos falando para muitos, a atuação política nas redes sociais, o chamado ativismo digital, é perpassada com alguma relativização, sem expectativa de mudança radical. As respostas das entrevistadas sinalizam que campanhas como essa podem alcançar repercussão fora das redes, mas indicam que a mudança gerada foi o diálogo mais frequente sobre o tema com o círculo de pessoas mais próximo.

**Palavras-chave:** Assédio. Feminismo. Ciberativismo. Jornalismo. Redes Sociais.

## #PRIMEIROASSÉDIO EN LOS MEDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN Y EN LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LECTORAS EN FACEBOOK

**RESUMEN** – Este artículo busca situar el periodismo literario como disciplina de saberes complejos y transdisciplinarios, necesaria para la formación de todo periodista. Se trata de entender y de integrar la práctica de narrar los problemas de los niveles de realidad. Los conceptos de literatura de complejidad y de transdisciplinariedad sirven de base a nuestra reflexión. Con el conto “Com o vaqueiro Mariano”, traemos la literatura de João Guimarães Rosa y sus relaciones con los saberes periodísticos, desde la noción de entrevista, pasando por el sistema de producción y circulación de la información hasta las técnicas de escrutinio que el autor empleaba. Por último, concluimos que el periodismo literario permite no sólo situar el periodismo en el circuito de la comunicación, sino también, y de forma ampliada, extender el circuito de la comunicación a su dimensión cultural, ejerciendo tal disciplina un papel pedagógico relevante para cualquier área del saber.

**Palabras clave:** Periodismo literario. Complejidad. Transdisciplinariedad. Educación. Comunicación.

### 1 Introduction

The struggles of minority groups have gained grounds in Brazil in a content in which the political parties are facing a representation crisis. As of October 2015, we have witnessed several campaigns that advocate for women’s causes emerge on the internet. Since then, several hashtags that refer to feminist issues have gained visibility on social media – such as #PrimeiroAssédio (#firstharasment), #meuamigosecreto (#mysecretfriend), #meucorponãoépublico (#mybodyisnotpublic) and #eutambém (#metoo) – have triggered the debate about topics that had been historically treated as taboos and that had been covered in stigmatized ways by the traditional mainstream media.

The hashtag #FirstHarassment<sup>1</sup> went viral in Brazil after an episode in which one of the participants of the program Masterchef Junior, a 12 year-old girl called Valentina Schulz, received vicious

comments by pedophiles on Twitter. The NGO Think Olga then launched this hashtag with the objective of raising awareness against sexist discourses. According to the NGO's website, with the campaign, over a period of four days, over 80 thousand people published posts in which they described their own episodes of harassment on twitter.

The hashtag, used to categorize the content that had been published, also took off to *Facebook*, a social media platform that had around 2 billion active users, as of July 2017. As Leão (2007 as cited in Prado 2011, p. 184) states:

Since 2005, tagging systems (with tags or keywords) have become extremely popular. Tagging allows users to add keywords to www platforms and resources, such as websites, pages, images, songs etc. The advantage of the hashtags is that they can be customized, which means that people can use words that are not institutionalized and labels that are not controlled or predefined [...]. Therefore, tagging systems represent powerful tools that can stimulate conversations in communities or groups with similar interests. They are simultaneously flexible and adaptable to discourse flows. (Prado, 2011, p. 184).

This article aims to shed light on the impact and consequences of this campaign, created by Think Olga in 2015, focusing on female *Facebook* users' perception of the subject, which led them to telling their own harassment stories and influencing the media agenda on the topic.

As Ferreira and Vizer (2007) suggest, "the internet has become the stage for promoting and spreading information about various social movements, NGOs, etc. Indeed, as they have little access to the hegemonic media spaces, many civil society organizations are able to highlight their issues on cyberspace" (p. 207).

Because of what happened in social media, the initiative was widely covered by various traditional media outlets in the week that followed the launching of the hashtag (by weekly magazines such as *Época* and *Istoé*, broadsheet newspapers such as *Folha de São Paulo*, *Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Povo*). According to André Lemos (2003), cyber-activism consists of associative social practices by politically motivated movements on the Internet.

In April 2017, the *Veja* magazine published a cover story that once again tackled the issue of harassment. The story detailed harassment complaints by the costume designer Susllem Tonani against José Mayer, a famous actor known for his work at Globo Network soap operas. In one excerpt, the story stresses that the "#FirstHarassment 2015 campaign represents a milestone in terms of mobilizing women against abuse from men".

These stories attest to the campaign's expressive reach on social media, which helped set an anti-harassment agenda on the traditional media. The women's initiatives, exposing episodes in which they had been victims of harassment, had both an individual and a collective character and prompted the media to address the topic.

Moreover, we wish to analyze the ways in which Think Olga's feminist discourse gained strength on *Facebook* and explore the extent to which this collective's interventions on feminist causes mobilized women to speak out, reporting harassment cases that they had suffered.

For this research, we collected data from Think Olga's 10 *Facebook* posts, published between October and December 2015, and analyzed their content. Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with followers of the NGO's *Facebook* page in order to investigate whether the campaign-related posts about harassment generated any kind of action or changes in behavior amongst users.

Our aim was to find out whether the content published made the subject of harassment become more integrated into these women's daily lives. We then based on analysis on the data collected from Think Olga's *Facebook* page and on semi-structured in-depth interviews, drawing from the perspective of Martín-Barbero's (1997) mediation theories. According to the author:

When redefining culture, it is key to understand its communicative nature. That is, its meaning-making character rather than just playing a role in circulating information. In this way, the receiver no longer represents a mere decoder of whatever the sender has infused the message with, as he or she is also a producer. The challenge presented by the cultural industry emerges at the crossroads between these lines of renewal, which place the cultural question at the core of politics and communication, within culture. (Martín-Barbero, 1997, p. 287)<sup>2</sup>.

In this research, we are interested in a concept of mediation as a place for both production and reception, engaging in meaning-making and taking into consideration its cultural context. For Martín-Barbero (2006), "what social movements and minorities – ethnic, racial, women, youth or gay communities – demand is not so much being represented, but rather being acknowledged; becoming socially visible with their diversity" (Martín-Barbero, 2006, p.161)<sup>3</sup>.

The campaign #FirstHarassment obtained a great degree of visibility both on social media and in traditional media, highlighting, even if temporarily, the subject of harassment, particularly on the month that followed the hashtag creation.

Martino (2009) argues that mediations represent knowledge and people's social practices. "They consist of dynamic symbolic structures that can be used to assign meaning to a message in a particular moment in space and time" (Martino, 2009, p 180).

Since 2015, the general interest on gender issues has increased significantly in Brazil. The search for the term "feminism", for instance, has increased over 200% in the last two years in the country. This information can be found in a report published by the Google BrandLab in October 2017<sup>4</sup>.

Thompson (1998, p. 46) believes that we are actively modifying ourselves through accessing meaningful messages and content offered by media products. In this article, we wish to analyze the extent to which the discussions about harassment, which had little presence or which had even been previously neglected by the media, have gained visibility and depth because of campaigns like #FirstHarassment.

## 2 Feminisms and the new public sphere

Think Olga identifies itself as a "feminist NGO that struggles for female empowerment using information as its tool". Created in 2013, in São Paulo, its mission is to "empower women with information and to widen the reach of women's actions by taking them to places where dominant voices ignore women's existence". As of 31 October 2017, the page had 174,464 followers on *Facebook*.

The hashtag #FirstHarassment has obtained over 11 million Google searches, making it to Google Trends most searched items in the 2015 ranking<sup>5</sup>. On Think Olga's website, we can find an analysis of the campaign, which states "information is empowerment", and congratulates the brave women who shared stories and encouraged other women to do the same. We attempted to contact the NGO to obtain more data, however, in June 2017, they informed us that they are an emerging organization, with reduced staff and that therefore they had adopted a policy to refuse answers to academic requests. Because of this negative answer, we were unable to incorporate the NGO's perspective into this article.

The NGO works on initiatives that aim to influence journalism coverage. It has created a database of female sources ("Interview a Woman") and a "Mini Manual of Humane Journalism" offering guidelines to journalists who wish to avoid sexist discourses.

The Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence Against Women, adopted by the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1994<sup>6</sup>, defines violence against women as any type of act or way of conduct that causes death, physical, sexual, or psychological suffering or damage, either in the private sphere (relationships of kinship), or in the public sphere (at work, in school etc.).

Maria João Silveirinha believes that the field of communication emerges as a decisive space for political struggle, in a context in which new social movements take action and establish their identities: “Feminists will play an important role to re-politicize what the media have de-politicized. The issue here is that we need to know the extent to which identity politics are being undermined by the apparent apolitical nature of the mediatized public sphere” (2001, p. 10).

The campaign #FirstHarassment brings the struggle against violence to the fore, which has been one of the main flags within the feminist movement. It is worth noting that the movement presents a great diversity in both theoretical and political terms. However, an explanation of the different strands of feminism – divided into radical, social and liberal feminism – is beyond the scope of this article.

In this sense, Cisne (2014) highlights the need to establish a distinction between women’s movements and feminist movements, which, “in theoretical and historical terms is reflected on the content of their demands”. The first movement is linked to social demands, such as the fight for an improvement in life and work conditions. The second movement embraces causes that are more controversial, addressing issues of sexuality, abortion, violence, female autonomy, and civil and political rights. “However, in Brazil, historically, both movements’ paths have crossed in significant ways” (Cisne, 2014, p. 129).

Feminism as a political and intellectual movement emerged at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century (Miguel; Biroli, 2014, p. 20). The organized struggle took off as women have fought against male domination and for their rights for about 200 years.

Malcher (2016, p. 45) emphasizes that in the 1970s the feminist movement gained multiple new possibilities and was able to embrace more complex issues (if placed in contrast with some of its classic debates). In a postmodern context, words such as “empowerment”, “representation” and “rights” started to become widely used. This study tackles such issues by analyzing the content of Think Olga’s posts.

Since the 1990s, as they seek more and better representation, women’s movements and feminist groups have

started to use the internet to gain a wider share of political voice (NATANSOHN, 2013, p. 23).

After two decades, women's and feminist movements have started to pay more attention to the subject. What is at stake for feminist ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) strategies is much more than issues of technological competency. They need to understand the political and cultural reach of digital cultures as well as the technological surrounding as a way of living and as an environment where we can develop our struggle, and our life. (Natansohn, 2013, p. 24).

This online context enabled the rise and growth of collectives that deal with gender issues, such as the Institute Patrícia Galvão and “Articulação Mulher e Mídia” (Women and Media Articulation). This motivated the emergence of more articulate representative work with data collection and the shaping of organized discourses about women in Brazil.

### **3 The topic of harassment on Facebook**

The rise of collectives that identify themselves as being feminist and that use the internet to encourage debate on issues like abortion, sexual harassment, representation in politics and in the job market have unveiled many women's personal standpoints. Indeed, many of these women probably would feel uncomfortable to discuss these issues face to face.

Some future directions for this research include evaluating how these individual initiatives might lead to a collective construction of meanings and empathy and how they encourage reflection, expressions, and attitudes to confront sexist practices.

According to Neves, “the specific #FirstHarassment hashtag movement represents a specific struggle, which carries women's collective identity, and which questions how a disrespectful act, that of harassing someone, can be naturalized by society” (2017, p. 4).

With the #FirstHarassment campaign, one could observe an intense interaction between the women who shared stories of harassment or who left comments on posts written by people who reported similar stories. This was a key motivating factor and it helped the campaign achieve a wide media reach. Isabel Babo (2017) notes that the use of electronic devices turned network communication into something of a more individual nature whilst it also connected everyone to everyone:

With the rise of internet, we have media that allow for interpersonal exchanges, as they widen the reach of mail and telephone. Simultaneously, one could say that the internet plays the role of mass media (widening the reach of radio and television), originating what we could refer to as 'interpersonal mass communication' (Baym, cited in Mercklé 2011, p. 11). This form of communication dynamic takes place with the use of individual devices (smartphones, tablets, notebooks, smartwatches etc.) and individualized forms of media on the internet (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.). Yet, it operates according to a logic of message and information exchange from 'everyone to everyone', promoting individualization, social participation, autonomy and dependence at the same time. (Babo, 2017, p. 83).

Our first stage of data collection consisted of interviewing women between the ages of 23 and 64 via email. We asked them to comment on five of ten pre-selected posts from the #FirstHarassment campaign. Our sample comprises five Think Olga posts with comments from the NGO itself and from users on *Facebook* in October 2015, month in which the campaign was launched. We chose to analyze posts on *Facebook* because there are no character limits in the text and because of the interaction possibilities between followers that *Facebook* offers.

We sent questionnaires to 20 people, but only eight people agreed to respond to them as long as their identity remained anonymous. We selected the respondents on the basis of people having made a comment about the hashtag #FirstHarassment in any of the ten posts published on the Think Olga page. They also had to be a follower of the page. The aim was to find out the implications of this campaign for users' everyday lives and if the hashtag motivated them to speak about the subject, share content about harassment and interact on posts discussing the issue. We contacted them via private inbox *Facebook* messages.

Even though this was a small sample, we were able to confirm our hypothesis that the campaign contributed to more discussion about the subject amongst Think Olga's *Facebook* page followers. All 20 people we contacted were women. Eight did not respond to us and four replied saying that they were unavailable. Out of the eight women who completed our questionnaire, six declared that they had shared stories of harassment in their profiles or in comments in posts published on the NGO's page.

R. S., 32, from Rio Grande do Sul, was one of our first interviewees to interact on Think Olga's posts, celebrating the positive impact of the #FirstHarassment campaign. She revealed that she had shared two harassment episodes experienced during her childhood



in her *Facebook* profile. She also commented on the impact that the hashtag had on her own behavior:

Firstly, the #FirstHarassment campaign reminded me of my first incidents of harassment. One of them happened when I was 6 or 7, and the other was when I was 11 or 12. Perhaps that made me become more alert about male behavior, the power of men and the ways in which they try to intimidate us. I realized how important it is to take care of our children. I tried to raise the issue with other mothers, telling them to stay alert too. Never ignore anything your children tell you. The elderly man who almost kissed me when I was a child was seen as a 'caring man' (he was the father of one of my dad's employees and we were at a barbecue). My dad had even mentioned that he had noticed that he would not let me go and my mother said 'why didn't you get away from him if he was annoying you?'.

Another female respondent, C. M., 38, from São Paulo, told us about how the #FirstHarassment initiative also made her share a story of childhood harassment.

I think that the campaign was excellent because it sheds light on a topic that should not be hidden. This could easily be considered something that 'one should not talk about' or even, wrongly, make women ashamed. The person who harasses is the one who should be ashamed of his behavior. I think that I talk about this more now (after the campaign) and now I can talk to friends about which types of behavior are acceptable or not, and this is always good.

C.M.'s comment, in which we can find the expression "sheds light" touches upon the visibility level, achieved by the #FirstHarassment campaign. According to Gomes (2016, p. 71), the everyday use of the internet has resulted in "a great transformation that has radically changed our relationship with time, space, work, and life in the last two decades, approximately".

In this context, the internet, as well as the content that circulates online, achieve impact and relevance on media terms by raising important issues on the everyday debates that social media users engage with. Thus, Gomes addresses how the influence of social media on the social construction of reality has increased:

With social media, the internet has become a protagonist in terms of measuring narratives about the national reality. More than that, in Brazil, social media platforms have started to play the role of public spaces where all the main public debates take place and where public discourses about important political issues in Brazilian society circulate. Indeed, today, we are witnessing a fierce dispute in terms of what constitutes a process of establishing the "truth" in Brazilian society. This relates to the increasing legitimacy of social media, whilst traditional media experience a decline in trust. (Ibid, p. 91).

In this way, the concept of mediation (Martín-Barbero, 1997) becomes of particular relevance to this article as they represent meaning-making structures to which the receivers are connected. As Luís Mauro Sá Martino puts it: “[...] one’s personal history, the culture of one’s group, one’s social relations, one’s cognitive capacity... these are all forms of mediation that might also interfere with one’s way of watching television, one’s relationship with the media and its messages” (2009, p. 179).

N. M., 23, a university student from São Paulo, described her participation in the #FirstHarassment campaign, and spoke about how the campaign motivated her in an email interview: “I never had the courage to speak about any specific case of harassment, but was able to express how much I admired people who had this courage. Their stories made me feel less lonely and motivated me to fight for a better society”.

Another interviewee, A. S., 31, from Salvador, described what she felt after writing a post telling an episode of harassment. “It was liberating. I needed to talk about it”, she said. Importantly, women were able to recognize themselves in other women’s stories and, indeed, A.S.’s confidential tone shows how the campaign provided women with an incentive to present their narratives in public.

Santaella (2017, p. 93) suggests that the analysis of social actions implies in new network interaction practices and in new emergent meanings of what can be interpreted as social.

One can make skeptical evaluations about a movement’s transformative political power and about the controversial aspects that surround a movement’s reformist or revolutionary nature. Yet, the important lesson here is the realization that social networks have altered the classic notions of political movements, introducing a new paradigm in which citizens play the role of protagonists both in and outside of the online networks, protesting in the online networks and on the streets in a continuous way. (Santaella, 2017, p. 99).

However, most of our interviewees did not attend meetings, did not take part in debates or any kind of demonstrations related to feminist struggles after the mobilization that they helped create on *Facebook*. N.M. was the only one to tell us about the experience of going to a protest on International Women’s Day on 08 March 2017.

I often go [to protests] but I haven’t attended many protests this year [2017] because I feel that nothing effective happens after the demonstrations because the authorities do not care about them. Additionally, there is always the risk of one getting hurt because of police brutality. The last demonstration I’ve been to was on 8 March 2017 in São Paulo on Women’s Day.

We also noticed that many (predominantly female) users have left comments on posts by Think Olga on *Facebook*, in October 2015, month in which the campaign was created, to emphasize the issue of how the topic of harassment can trigger a collective discussion. A few women revealed that they only realized that they had been harassment victims when they were able to recognize themselves in stories that friends and even strangers had published on social media. One of the wrote: “this was the first time that I spoke about this in my life and after 17 years I was able to take like 800kg of weight off my shoulders. Thank you (Figure1)<sup>7</sup>”.

**Figure 1** – Comment from reader on Think Olga’s Facebook post



Source: Think Olga’s *Facebook* Page

It was remarkable to observe the ways in which sexual harassment was openly discussed on social media, making it to the mainstream media agenda in the period that followed the campaign, as this is a sensitive matter that exposes intimate issues and even traumas. In this episode, a large number of people used the hashtag #FirstHarassment as a way to place the issue on the agenda of news stories. This exemplifies the ways in which the sender-receiver communication schemes have changed after the rise of web 2.0 with its multiple interaction possibilities.

In a context in which minorities are seeking political representation and representativeness, in general, the internet plays a key role as it can be widely used to spread information with texts, videos, images, and audio files. Indeed, for Martín-Barbero, “the debate must shift its focus from media to mediations and the latter refers to the articulations between communication practices and

social movements, to the different temporalities and to the plurality of cultural matrices” (1997, p. 258).

In this case, we can find a double flow between senders from traditional media outlets and senders that use social media and the hashtag #FirstHarassment to express themselves. The multiplication of personal accounts, made possible by the hashtag use, allowed the issue of harassment to have a significant impact on traditional media.

A few well-established Brazilian magazines published stories about the topic. The *Época*<sup>8</sup> magazine, for instance, reported on the mobilization that the hashtag generated and ran a cover story on “Women’s Spring”, in a reference to the Arab Spring, in which political cyber-activism played a role in starting revolutions or civil wars in countries like Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, since the 2010s. Another weekly magazine, *IstoÉ*<sup>9</sup>, also published a cover story with the headline “Women’s shout”. In a regional newspaper, *O Povo*<sup>10</sup>, from the city of Fortaleza (Ceará), feminism also made it to the headlines on the Sunday issue of that week. The story was entitled “Feminism – Renewed, the struggle goes on”.

Two of Brazil’s largest and most traditional newspapers, *Folha de S. Paulo*<sup>11</sup>, and *O Estado de S. Paulo*<sup>12</sup>, also tackled the subjects of harassment and violence against women a few days after the campaign #FirstHarassment had started. The issue was also covered by a Globonews<sup>13</sup> documentary piece.

The significant number of news stories that were published on the subject during a period of one month after the hashtag had been created attests to an event’s potential to become news. Hohlfeldt explains this in relation to the concept of newsworthiness:

The conventions and organizations of this kind of work define what news is and confer legitimacy to news production processes. This constitutes the concept of newsworthiness or the likelihood of an event becoming news. In other words, this refers to the set of characteristics required to determine that a given event must acquire the status of news, or even, the set of criteria that mass media outlets must use to choose which facts, amongst multiple facts, will acquire the status of newsworthy. (Hohlfeldt, 2001, p. 208).

According to Traquina, journalism represents “an intellectual activity that is in consonance with democracy and that specializes in telling stories in contemporary society” (2012, p.

132). This might help explain the salience of the campaign and the spreading of the subject of harassment on social and traditional media. Traquina (2012) adds that journalism news values must include freedom; independence and autonomy; credibility; truth; rigor and accuracy; honesty; objectivity and equity. The author also cites the theorist Mauro Wolf to provide details on the criteria for constructing news:

For Wolf, news values refer to the criteria that journalists use to select events, and that is, the decision to choose an event based on its potential to be turned into news, leading to forgetting another event. News values for the purposes of selection are divided into two sub-groups: a) the substantive criteria that relate to the direct evaluation of the event in terms of its importance or interest level as news; b) the contextual criteria that relate to the context of news production. News values offer construction qualities to news and operate as guidelines for the presentation of news materials, indicating what should be highlighted, what should be omitted, and what should become priority in the process of constructing an event as news. (Wolf, 1987 as cited in Traquina, 2008, p. 78).

The Collective Think Olga encouraged the sharing of personal stories about harassment. Indeed, many of the women admitted to having experienced harassment episodes during their childhood, as we can see in the comment below. In this comment, published on *Facebook*, the NGO reveals that the women who used the #FirstHarassment hashtag had an average age of 9.7.

In one of the posts, we could find stories like the one we will read below, and which indicate how socially invisible the topic has become:

I was 8 and it was with an uncle. My mother felt guilty because she had to leave me in my aunt's house so that she could go to work. After all, even in the 80s, if a husband earns a good salary, why should a woman have to work? He wasn't supposed to be home on that day and his wife's presence didn't prevent him from touching me. As it usually happens, he threatened me if I said anything, but I told my mother. The whole family denied that it had happened and they still pretend that nothing has happened. I have to thank my mother for my mental health because she stood up to the whole family<sup>14</sup>.

**Figure 2:** Comment from reader on Think Olga's Facebook post



Source: Think Olga's Facebook Page

The *Facebook* mobilization generated greater demands for offline initiatives. This calls attention to the need for effective actions that go beyond virtual environments. This page follower's comment obtained no answer on Think Olga's *Facebook* page. "I find internet mobilizations very important, but isn't it time that we take to the streets? [...] If I get out there by myself, I won't be able to make an event work, but you have the strength to achieve this".

#### 4 Networked minorities

In the 2000s decade, with the development of a mutating media environment, we are faced with a different context in which there are basic cyberculture principles: the principles of freeing the sender, having generalized connection, and witnessing a process of political, economic, and social restructuring (Lemos & Lévy, 2010, p.46). In this environment, we see the rise of cyber-activism, which refers to associative practices of internet use by politically motivated movements that aim to reach new and traditional goals (Lemos, 2003).

In this article, thus, we wish to investigate whether the concept of bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1978 as cited in Lemos & Lévy, 2010, p. 59) as a dimension for social mediation between the State and society has become broader, attracting subjects that play more plural roles. This new public sphere is marked by collaborative processes and enables people to provide, filter, organize and integrate

into their lives networks of content exchange. This paved the way for the emergence of collective initiatives such as Think Olga, which are mainly active online.

In this context, social media plays the role of updating the concepts of public sphere and public opinion, as Raquel Recuero demonstrates.

With this, social media sites can be understood as elements that amplify social media, allowing for a space in which social actors can socialize, express and reproduce political opinions and ideas that offer a contribution to the public debates. The technical ease in producing and reproducing messages of support (liking them, or tweeting them, for example) is consistent with a concept of public opinion as a communication network that mediates multiple relationships between social systems. (Recuero, 2015, p. 35).

Some of the key characteristics of this new digital public sphere include fostering peer relationships and collaboration. This is distinctive from traditional media's idea of having one centralized sender as it evolves to a horizontal distribution system (Lemos & Lévy, 2010, p. 50).

The Think Olga Collective has promoted mobilizations and the use of hashtags operating mostly in an online front to combat sexual harassment and to tackle women's issues. Prudêncio (2014, p. 88) notes that "digital activism relates less to large causes and more to specific causes that are based on hashtag use and sharing informative content to mobilize collective and individual actors".

Before launching the #FirstHarassment campaign, Think Olga had previously organized the "Enough of Wolf Whistling" (Chega de Fiu Fiu, in Portuguese) campaign against street harassment. Yet, the NGO also recognizes the limitations of using hashtags, as we can see in this post published on *Facebook* on 19 October 2017, almost two years after the #FirstHarassment campaign was devised:

[...] As the creators of the #FirstHarassment and #Enoughofwolfwhistling campaigns, we are aware of the impact that hashtags can have. We used these tools to place on the agenda issues that the media had ignored. At the same time, we recognize that these campaigns say much more about women's courage than about society's willingness to combat the problem.

[...] We noticed that the internet could be a powerful tool to spread women's desires and demands. However, if people saw these stories as being valid and took measures to prevent these problems, from the very moment in which the stories are told, we wouldn't be in the same situation now, having to use new hashtags. We still need to shout about how urgently

we need to combat gender violence. Women shouldn't need to be kept repeating painful stories over and over again, but they still do. We need people to take our issues seriously. You are already familiar with our painful stories. What is the next step?

Thus, whilst the internet can contribute in significant ways to the spreading of minority issues, we also need to recognize that initiatives like hashtag campaigns have their limitations. Wolton, for instance, remarks that it is challenging to distinguish the different logics and to organize information in a media-saturated world in which knowledge is widely accessible and freely available.

In its contemporary form, communication brings about a triple revolution in terms of human freedoms, democratic models and technological progresses. Currently, we are at a turning point. Two ideologies are threatening in the field of communications: individualism, that is, the reduction of expression and interactivity, and communitarianism. The latter means that the issue of alterity is being marginalized, bringing closure in virtual spaces. (Wolton, 2011, p. 24).

It is worth stressing that, in a context of prolific generation of content and of participation of many people who speak to many people, our analysis of political activism does not hold expectations of short-term radical changes. *Facebook*, for example, has its own sets of rules and criteria in terms of the content that is more likely to be shared by people, and these are not completely transparent to users.

Jenkins, Ford and Green (2014), for instance, remind us that we must address the structures and practices of collaborative culture with a degree of “healthy skepticism” as these forms of participation “usually involve some degree of connection with commercial logics”. (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2014)

## 5 Concluding thoughts

The #FirstHarassment campaign brought to light an important debate about sexual harassment, a subject considered to be a taboo both by online and by traditional media, motivating users to tell their own experiences of violence and share personal accounts on social media.

The Collective Think Olga used its online interventions to influence the public sphere. Based on a sample of eight women who had taken part in the campaign and answered our interviews, we



could infer that, with the hashtag, the harassment cases reported on *Facebook* have generated a form of collective catharsis. The campaign was able to generate empathy and solidarity between women who shared and made comments on the posts, amplifying the debate about the subject on social media, making it the topic of stories on traditional media, such as TV, newspapers, and magazines.

Among the interviewees and participants of the campaign, this virtual mobilization helped create a significant change in terms of behavior but also in terms of respondents' meaning making processes on the subject of harassment. Many of them recognized that they started to discuss the issue on a daily basis and outside of the social media environment, noting that they had rarely discussed it before.

There is no doubt that the initiative generated greater interaction and collective participation on social media. However, some interviewees stated that they did not take part in other forms of action that could provide continuity to the online mobilizations, such as street demonstrations and monitoring institutional forms of political action that could ensure more protection to the women affected by this type of violence.

The instantaneous aspect of virtual environments triggers an important question: to what extent can likes turn into types of action that are more effective? Our interviewees' answers indicate that campaigns such as #FirstHarassment bear relevance when their impact goes beyond social media. However, in terms of tangible results, not much had changed in terms of combatting harassment other than having dialogues about the subject more frequently.

Even though the campaign generated a greater awareness for the cause, the participants' answers demonstrate that, there was little continuity in terms of creating interventions that can modify a social and cultural scenario of perpetuation of violence against women after the period in which the hashtag went viral.

Finally, with the women we interviewed for our research, the impact was limited to an individual level or to a micro level of close friends and relatives. This leads us to question the limits of the feminist collective Think Olga's campaign as we could see little change in terms of the wider political and institutional spheres. Indeed, in an era in which causes become easily and quickly outdated, this seems to be a central dilemma for the new social movements and, specifically, for the feminist movement.

## NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of making the English version of this article reader-friendly, we will use an English translation of hashtags that were originally published in Portuguese, such as #PrimeiroAssédio. However, it is worth reminding the reader that in case she or he wishes to search for the hashtag online, she or he will only be able to find the original material by using the hashtag in Portuguese.
- 2 Our translation. The original quote in Portuguese is: “a redefinição da cultura é fundamental a compreensão de sua natureza comunicativa. Isto é, seu caráter de processo produtor de significações e não de mera circulação de informações, no qual o receptor, portanto, não é um simples decodificador daquilo que o emissor depositou na mensagem, mas também um produtor. O desafio apresentado pela indústria cultural aparece com toda sua densidade no cruzamento dessas duas linhas de renovação que inscrevem a questão cultural no interior do político e a comunicação, na Cultura”. (Martín-Barbero, 1997, p. 287).
- 3 Our translation. The quote in Portuguese is: o “que os movimentos sociais e minorias – as etnias e as raças, as mulheres, os jovens ou os homossexuais – demandam não é tanto ser representados, mas, sim, reconhecidos; fazerem-se visíveis socialmente em sua diferença”.
- 4 The dossier Google BrandLab is available online <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/pt-br/tendencias-de-consumo/dossie-brandlab-diversidade/>
- 5 Data on #FirstHarassment (#PrimeiroAssédio) on Google Trends. Retrieved from [https://trends.google.com.br/trends/story/BR\\_cu\\_Awe0NVEBAADmsM\\_en](https://trends.google.com.br/trends/story/BR_cu_Awe0NVEBAADmsM_en)
- 6 In 1996, The Brazilian Federal Government issued a decree to enact the 1994 Inter American Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence Against Women. Retrieved from [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil\\_03/decreto/1996/d1973.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto/1996/d1973.htm)
- 7 Comment left in the post published on 23 October 2015. Screengrab of comment cited on Think Olga’s page and link for

- the post on 23 October 2015 on Facebook with the title #First-Harassment (#PrimeiroAssédio) 29 thousand tweets. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/thinkolga/photos/a.289412727860922.1073741826.289405207861674/694954033973454/?type=3&theater>
- 8 Grillo, C.; Oliveira, G. & Buscato, M. (2015, January 7). A primavera das mulheres. *Revista Época*. Retrieved from <http://epoca.globo.com/vida/noticia/2015/11/primavera-das-mulheres.html>
  - 9 Brandalise, C.; Perez, F. (2015, November 6). O grito das mulheres. *Revista Istoé*. Retrieved from [http://istoe.com.br/440121\\_O+GRITO+DAS+MULHERES/](http://istoe.com.br/440121_O+GRITO+DAS+MULHERES/)
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  - 13 Globonews Especial. (2015, November 1). Campanha #primeiroassédio faz brasileiras compartilharem experiências. *Globonews*. Retrieved from <https://globosatplay.globo.com/globonews/v/4579390/>
  - 14 Link for the post published on 26 October 2015 about the average age of victims of harassment, from which we extracted the comment that we analyzed. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/thinkolga/photos/a.289412727860922.1073741826.289405207861674/694954033973454/?type=3&theater>. Access on 15/08/2017.

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