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THE REPRESENTATION OF HOMOPHOBIA IN TWO ITALIAN DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

Homophobia, a phenomenon firmly rooted in intolerance, refers to negative attitudes towards homosexual individuals. Being a social and cultural phenomenon, the media can act as a tool to highlight changes in attitudes to LGBTQI reality. The aim of this paper is to analyse representations of homophobia by comparing articles published in two Italian daily newspapers: “La Repubblica” and “L’Unità”. The articles published in 2002 and 2012 were chosen in order to investigate the differences and determine whether there have been changes in the portrayal of this phenomenon in the media. Attention focused on the thematic section and the publishing format, the gender of the journalist and the font style used by the author to describe events. In 2002 16 articles appeared in “La Repubblica”, while the figure jumped to 246 in 2012, an increase of more than 900%. Between 2002 and 2012 there was a 31% increase in local articles. “L’Unità” featured 17 articles in 2002, as compared to 95 in 2012, a rise of over 400%. The interval between the two years selected saw the number of national articles decrease by 12%. Overall however, the remarkable increase in the total number of articles emphasises the impact on public opinion, and the larger amount of space dedicated to this issue probably indicates a greater degree of open-mindedness in the political and legislative fields.

Cuvinte cheie: *Homofobia, ziare, reprezentare în mass-media stereotip.*

Keywords: *Homophobia, newspapers, media representation, stereotype.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2009) reported that LGT persons experience harassment, bullying and discrimination, and in some cases face violent physical attacks. The majority of homophobic crimes go unreported to the police, and these acts lead LGT people to use invisibility as a strategy to survive. In 2012, the EU's FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) conducted an online survey on discrimination and violence towards LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) people (2013, 2014). The sample consisted of 93,000 people between the ages of 18 and 25, and of the 47% who claimed to have been targets of gay bashing, a staggering 90% of the victims did not report these incidents to the authorities. Homophobic and transphobic ideology and discrimination are manifested in the form of episodes and acts of verbal and physical violence against LGBT people. Although the expression homophobia may recall the idea of an irrational fear (fobos) of homosexuals, it actually refers to negative attitudes towards homosexual persons (Rollè, Brustia, Caldarera, 2014) and is associated with a wide range of conditions, negative attitudes and behaviour towards LGBT people "ranging from casual use of disparaging language to aggressive personal attacks" (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 277). This phenomenon thus involves different aspects consisting of psychological, behavioural, cultural, social and moral components (Rollè, Garbarini, Gerino, Marino, & Brustia, 2010). Homophobia is a phenomena directed against people who challenge the sexual stereotypes commonly accepted by society. Weinberg used the term "homophobia" in 1972 to describe the irrational fear of being in enclosed spaces with homosexuals and the subsequent reactions of anxiety, hate and intolerance towards LGB individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual). Weinberg emphasised the psychological and individual factors, while acknowledging the atypical nature of a phenomenon that is characterised by aggressiveness and often translates into violence. This view was upheld thereafter by MacDonald (1976), who described it as a fear of homosexuals and by Haaga (1991), who pointed to such connotative factors as anger, hatred, anxiety and fear. Expanding the vision of homophobia to its social and cultural origins led Blumenfeld (1992) to distinguish four distinct levels: (i) personal – individuals' prejudices toward LGB people; (ii) interpersonal – explicit manifestation of prejudices through behaviour resulting in discrimination, exclusion, and so on; (iii) institutional – discriminatory policies and discrimination

on the basis of sexual orientation entrenched at an institutional level, i.e. by government, business, educational and religious institutions, or professional organisations; and lastly, (iv) social and cultural – stereotypes and cultural representations. Meyer (1995) proposed that stigmatisation linked to their status as a minority causes chronic stress in LGB people: so-called minority stress. The stress experienced by LGB people has particular characteristics, which bring about critical consequences. The status of sexual minority in fact leads to several distressing factors, including social exclusion, hatred, aggression as well as rejection by the family. Meyer went beyond merely theorising the existence of this particular kind of stress and showed that it carries negative mental health outcomes in people who are subjected to it (1995). Meyer assumed that minority stress involves three processes: (1) internalised homophobia (2) expectations of rejection and discrimination, that may be identified with the expression perceived stigma and (3) actual prejudice events. Internalized homophobia refers to the internalisation of negative attitudes towards homosexual people that occurs before LGB persons recognise their own sexual orientation. As a result, when they become aware of their homosexuality, these individuals will simultaneously apply the internalised negative attitudes to themselves, which will play a crucial role in the psychological adjustment of the person for the rest of their life, especially with regards to self-esteem, disclosure, social relations, access to health care, depression, and many other aspects. These self-directed negative attitudes usually peak during the coming-out process but, as Meyer (1995) underlined, the worst thing is that, even when the person has accepted his/her homosexuality, internalised homophobia will hardly decline significantly. Perceived stigma is also connected to psychological wellbeing, especially at higher levels, since it causes the individual to remain watchful, a state which in turn is linked to expectations of rejection and discrimination. This expectation will both increase stress levels and push the minority group member into hiding and becoming invisible. Actual prejudice events have the power to elicit feelings of rejection, fear of violence, self-defiance and disgrace, which confirm both the feelings of internalised homophobia and perceived stigma, with significant effects on the individual's general wellbeing (Rollè, Marino, Gerino, Brustia, 2014).

The term homophobia is often used by the media and newspapers with reference to acts of discrimination and violence against homosexual persons committed solely because of their sexual orientation. The media have the power to

set the agenda, as it were, and direct public attention to the problem. They avoid reporting on rare events that are neither spectacular nor particularly appealing and will instead place their spotlight on stories that have a greater chance of influencing the public, simply because they deviate further from what is considered the framework of normality (Uscinski, 2009). This two directional influence between the public and the media, is mediated by the major institutions such as the family, social, religious and governmental institutions, and reflects the cultural context in which individuals make decisions (Yanovitzky & Bennett, 1999). The mass media are thus in a position to convey a set of values more or less consciously through the channels available to them. This may serve either to give greater visibility to LBG issues and provide a portal to promote respect for sexual diversity and gender or, on the other hand, to reinforce traditional stereotypes and prejudices that still exist to this day.

The aim of this first explorative study is to find the differences of expression and representation of the phenomenon of homophobia in the two most widespread Italian newspapers in 2002 and 2012: “L’Unità” (A) and “La Repubblica” (B). Following the National and International papers we hypothesize: an increasing of articles and a total change in respect of dealing phenomenon of homophobia, from 2002 to 2012 and changes about the meaning and the use of this word over the the course of a decade. This paper come from the desire of a group of researchers, involved for 2 years in a European project co-funded by the European Commission under the line Daphne III, with the title “Empowering LGT young people against violence: a peer to peer model” [JUST/2011-2012/DAP/AG/3059].

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Articles published by national newspapers A and B in the years 2002 and 2012 were surveyed using the keyword “homophobia”. After contacting all of the major Italian daily newspapers, these two were chosen based on their greater sensitivity with regards to the issue of homophobia. This preliminary study aims to extend the analysis in the future to further national and international newspaper journalism. The keyword “*homophobia*” was used in the online search engine to review all journalistic pieces stored in the newspapers’ archives in 2002 and 2012. First of all, *the variables* deemed *significant* to highlight the differences in representation of the phenomenon between the two years were evaluated. At a later

stage, *the items regarding these variables were compared* in an attempt to understand how the potential link between the two newspapers might affect representations of the phenomenon of homophobia.

In conducting the study, several potentially significant variables were also selected for the purposes of research objectives, namely, the number of articles on the subject, the choice of format, publication and style adopted for the discussion of this phenomenon. These variables reflect and can serve to emphasise different editorial viewpoints and the sensitivity of journalists in relation to homophobia and may be summarized as follows:

- number: the number of articles was determined by using the keyword “homophobia” to search pieces published in 2002 and 2012. This figure highlights whether and to what extent the issue has spread over the course of ten years;
- format: the articles published were divided according to whether they appeared in “print” or “online” in electronic format. As regards publication on the web, in addition to allowing the public to consult articles free of charge, it also offers the opportunity for greater reader participation in reacting to news thanks to both discussion forums and space provided for comments at the bottom of the page;
- distribution: articles can either appear in "national" or "local" editions;
- section heading: this dimension shows under which macro-topic the newspapers place articles pertaining to homophobia. Items were grouped into the following categories: "news section", relating to national issues; "comment", which express opinions about an emerging issue; "culture" for reports on general questions, "Economics" relating to financial matters; "foreign" for political or social events outside Italian state boundaries; "politics", which discuss aspects inherent to Italian Government; "arts" which focus mainly on events or news from the arts, music and theatre milieu, and finally, "sport" which contain sporting news or events;
- type of section: these reports deal with current events and can be divided into micro-categories based on the type of facts discussed. The following section were extrapolated from the Italian news articles surveyed: “white”, referring to socio-cultural, administrative or civic events; “black”, including criminal incidents or ones with adverse outcomes, such as violence, discrimination, accidents, homicides, suicides, etc.; “politics”, pieces which chronicle socio-

cultural events, comments or statements by political leaders or members of a particular party;

- pictures and images: depending on whether they are illustrated or not, articles were divided into groups of "articles with pictures/images", "articles without pictures/images" and "articles for which a image cannot be found". This variable attributes an added value to the quality of the news item and strengthens its impact within the page;
- type of pictures/images: this variable breaks down the previous criterion to further examine the object represented in the accompanying pictures and analyse the message conveyed. Images were thus classified as "portrait" or "event", according to whether they serve to document reality, or as "other" if they are intended to illustrate a point of view or suggest a particular interpretation;
- layout position: where an article appears on the page reflects its importance in the hierarchy of news within the newspaper. Items have been divided according to the following categories: "full page", when the news occupies most of the newspaper page; "editorial", which signed by the Director or a famous journalist and appears in a column on the top left; "shoulder", published in the top right column; "high cut", placed at the top and generally dedicated to the main news of the day, often referred to as the "lead story"; "medium cut", these articles occupy the middle section of the page and are dedicated to other important news; "low cut" articles cover the lower area and are reserved for minor news, "encircle" refers to a piece represented within a darker pane and containing a short summary article;
- Gender of the journalist: this criterion divides articles according to whether the author is "female", "male", "both" if the item was written by a man and a woman, "unspecified" if it is not signed or "missing" when the journalist uses an acronym to conceal authorship gender.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the first criterion relating to the number of articles published in A and B in 2002 and 2012 that contain the keyword "homophobia", a significant increase in the frequency of publication was revealed in the course of the ten year period. Indeed, only 17 articles appeared in A and 16 in B in the first year, as

compared to 95 and 246 reports respectively in 2012. This figure reveals significantly more widespread levels of public interest in the issue of homophobia.

As mentioned above in the description of the criteria for analysis, the format can be divided into "print" if the article was published in a hard copy of newspaper or "online" if they appeared on the web. In 2002, all the items found in the pages of A were published in print, whereas only one article appeared in a print edition of B the same year. Of the 95 articles published by A in 2012, 27% of them are in electronic format, a figure which represents more than a quarter of the total, while the remaining 73% appeared in print. For B, out of a total of 262 articles, 42% appeared online and 58 came out in print. It is worth noting that both newspapers exhibit a continued predominance of print articles on homophobia in the time period under investigation.

As for the criterion of distribution, out of a total of 17 items featured in A in 2002, 88% were published in the national edition, while the remaining 12% appeared in local editions. On the other hand, B featured a total of 16 articles, of which 50% were published nationally, while 37% came out in local editions and the distribution of 13% remains undefined. In 2012, 76% of all the articles in A were published in national editions, however the percentage of articles published in local editions rose to 23 out of the 95 items, which represents a 24% share of the total. Likewise, the number of articles published in local editions of B rose significantly with 167 of the 246 reports, accounting for 68% of the total number published.

In terms of the section heading criterion, which divides articles according to the topic they discuss and reflects the importance and relevance of their content, it is worth noting that in 2002, despite the limited number of articles (17) published in A, 7 of these appeared in the "news" section, while 6 items were printed in the "cultural" section. Under the "politics" as well as the "arts" section headings only one article appeared, and in both cases the journalist makes only passing reference to the question of homophobia. In contrast, not a single one of the total 16 items in the pages of B made it into the "news" section. Of the remaining reports, 1 piece appeared in the "cultural" section, 2 were the object of the "comment" section, 2 were featured in the "politics" section, 3 in the "arts" pages and 8 couldn't be defined. In contrast, 2012 saw an increase in the number of newspaper sections dealing with articles on homophobia in both dailies, which indicates a wider spread of interest, and in particular, the fact that articles also appear in the main "news"

section of B suggests a greater relevance and interest in the topic. In the newspaper A, the percentage of items on homophobia featured in the "news" and "cultural" sections remained predominant (38% of "news" stories and 22% of "cultural" items). In addition, it should be highlighted that the rise in the number of articles falling into the "politics" category, from just 1 case in 2002 to 20 articles in 2012, shows how significantly this figure increased to reach 21% of the total number of articles. Finally, it is important to underline that the presence of articles in the "comment" section (11%) points to greater public awareness in recent years, just as it does for the "sport" section (6%), in which the question of homosexuality has traditionally been considered taboo. It is also worth noting the increase in the number of articles published in B "news" section, which rose from 0 to 105 to represent 43% of the total. The "culture" section also jumps from only 1 article to 10. Finally, it is important to highlight the presence of the "comment" sections with 7%, the "politics" heading with 5% and the "sports" pages with 2% which emphasises that public opinion has become more sensitive to the issue.

As reported in the previous analysis, a large number of items were featured in the "news" sections of both dailies, which deals with current news and events of national interest. For this reason, it was therefore decided to further subdivide this variable according to the specific content of the articles and to classify these by type of section into "white", "black" and "politics". The majority of articles published in the "news" section of A in 2002 fall into the category of "white" (86%), as they deal with issues of public interest such as demonstrations or social events. Only 1 item, which deals with a murder case in connection with homosexual prostitution, was listed as a "black", while there were no articles classified as "politics". Not a single "news" article appeared in the newspaper B in this same year. In 2012 however, A published a majority of "black" (40%), which feature not only cases of serious physical violence, but also cases of verbal abuse or "internalised" homophobia resulting in teenage suicide because of bullying at school. Such reports indicate that the phenomenon has become more visible than it was ten years ago and its meaning is based on a better understanding of the phenomenon. As for B, the largest percentage of items refers to "white" (52%) such as socio-cultural events of administrative or civic interest. In 2012, the "politics" category also appears consistent with what emerged in the previous analysis of the section heading, with a significant percentage, namely 30% for A

and 11% for B of the total number of “national news” articles, suggesting the term homophobia is used in the political arena more frequently than it was in the past.

The articles analysed may be grouped according to whether they are illustrated with photos and images, that confer stronger visual impact and attribute greater emphasis to the events reported. In 2002, the newspaper A published more than half of the reports concerning homophobia as “articles with images/pictures” (59%) to enrich the stories’ contents, while B used images in only 1 item. In 2012, A further increased its use of photos and images, raising this percentage to 68% of the total, whereas B published a majority of “articles without images/pictures” (65%). Indeed, the two daily papers show opposite journalistic styles, as A consistently uses more visuals than B.

A further analysis of the type of images can also be conducted in order to distinguish between articles that contain pictures of public demonstrations or events (catalogued as "event"), portraits of people associated with the event or subject matter (catalogued as "portrait") or images that are unrelated to an actual episode but that provide an interpretation of the facts by sending a message with a deeper meaning to the reader (classified as "other"). In 2002, "event" visuals (40%) and "other" images (40%) outnumber "portrait" photos in A, which make up a much lower percentage with only 2 out of a total of 17 visuals. B features a single "portrait" photo in the same year. In 2012, in contrast, A features a majority of "portrait" photos (49%), followed by "other" (29%) and "event" (22%) visuals, while 37% of B’ 94 images belong to the "portrait" category, followed by "event" visuals (22%).

Of the various articles found it is possible to consider their layout position within the newspaper page which, as mentioned above, can be classified into one of the following categories: "full page", "editorial", "high cut", "low cut", "medium cut" "shoulder" and "encircle". From the observation of where the articles are printed on the page, it emerges that almost half of the items found in A in 2002 were positioned in the "medium cut" (47%), followed by "high cut" (35%) and "low cut" (12%), while only 1 of the 17 articles occupied the spotlight of a "full page". In 2002, B published a single article with a "high cut", placing it as "news". However, with regards to A in 2012, excluding items published online where you cannot apply this variable, the "medium cut" is almost non-existent (1%) being adopted only once out of a total of 69 print articles. Instead, the "high cut" spot is the preferred position with 38%, followed by 22% of the total items occupying the

"low cut". In addition there is a greater variety of layout positions using spots such as the "shoulder" (13%), the "editorial" (3%) and "encircle" (6%). It is worth underscoring that unlike in 2002, a far greater number of items occupies the "full page" (16%). As for B, it favoured placing 53 % of articles in the "high cut" spot and 46% in the top left hand column "editorial" layout position.

With regards to the gender of the journalist, in 2002 the majority of journalists behind the articles published in A were women at 59%, compared to 41% men. For B, most of the writers were men with 31%, versus 12% of female journalists. Women continued to be in the majority ten years later for A, though by a smaller margin at 51% compared with 21% of articles written by men. B gradually increased the number of articles written by women, actually reaching an equal 31% split in 2012 with those written by men, though the authorship of a significant number of authors remains unknown.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The mass media have the power to more or less consciously convey a set of values through a series of different means of mass communication. Through this process, which serves to give greater visibility to LBG issues, they can either promote respect for sexual diversity and gender or, on the other, end up spreading some of the traditional stereotypes and prejudices that still exist today. This paper aimed to understand how the phenomenon of homophobia has been presented by part of the media by analysing newspaper articles and examining what kind of changes have occurred over the ten year period from 2002 to 2012. The results of the study show that the number of articles dealing with homophobic phenomenon has increased substantially over the ten year period, consequently giving rise to increased public attention and visibility surrounding this issue. (*L'Unità* + 400%, *La Repubblica* + 900%). In addition, with many of the articles published in 2012 appearing online with free access, not only can the newspapers reach a wider public, but they also provide the chance for a more direct contact with readers, who can participate in online discussion forums or leave personal comments on the topic. It was also found that, while most of the earlier articles examined were almost exclusively national in scope, coverage has recently been expanded to include various local editions, thus symbolising the development of LGB reality even within small communities. The study also revealed greater public awareness

and sensitivity towards LGB issues as suggested by the relevance and importance given to articles through their position in the layout on the pages of the printed newspaper, the publication of articles on homophobia has extended to a series of different news sections, showing a growth in the areas of interest, especially in the news and current affairs section as well as in the political pages. From this it can be inferred that the media use the issue as a tool to attract the attention of greater numbers of voters. This hypothesis is corroborated by the large number of headshot photos of politicians placed in the lead headline news spot in the upper right hand column, which gives greater importance and credence to the news.

Another noteworthy finding is the increased number of articles that may be considered “black” in the news section. Such a development could be linked to the fact that the definition of homophobia has been expanded and diversified over the years and is no longer associated solely with episodes of extreme violence, but rather is also used to describe incidents of verbal aggression or acts of marked discrimination against LGB people.

The study highlighted the fact that the number of women journalists is very high and their pieces are spread throughout a range of different news sections. This would tend to support the hypothesis of a greater feminine sensitivity to homophobic phenomenon.

In conclusion, it is clear that treatment of the issue of homophobia has developed considerably in the newspapers examined over the past ten years and has made considerable gains in both reaching and expanding its target audience. This applies to the fields and subjects in which the term is used. Nevertheless, there is still a relative degree of censorship deriving, not from the omission of the issue, but from the editorial choices of layout that confer differing visual impact to its discussion. We would like to point out once again the importance of correct information from the newspapers to avoid the misunderstanding in the reader on the significance of the phenomenon. It would be interesting to expand this study to international newspapers so as to compare the situation in different countries.

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