

Gender perspective on digital environments

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CHAPTER 3

GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS*

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ABSTRACT

The chapter “Gender perspective on digital environments” addresses the challenges that arise in the digital context and how stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination are reproduced. One of these prejudices manifestations is symbolic violence through images: how women are represented in image databases? What effects do stereotypes have on the self-representation that people who use social network make of themselves? What implications does this representation have for machine learning? In addition, the different types of online violence that occur on digital media environments are analyzed, and the role played by the issue of anonymity and identity theft. Finally, the chapter concludes with a proposal to incorporate a gender and intersectional perspective into research on digital media and communication.

Keywords: Symbolic violence, gender stereotypes, digital media.

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RESUMEN

Se abordarán los retos que se plantean en el contexto digital y cómo se reproducen los estereotipos, los prejuicios y la discriminación. Una de las manifestaciones de estos sesgos de género es la violencia simbólica a través de las imágenes: ¿cómo se representa a las mujeres en los bancos de imágenes? ¿Qué efectos tienen los estereotipos en la representación que hacen de sí mismos los usuarios de las redes sociales? ¿Qué implicaciones tiene esta representación para el aprendizaje automático? Además, se analizarán los diferentes tipos de violencia en línea que se producen en el entorno de los medios digitales, así como el papel que desempeña la cuestión del anonimato y la suplantación de identidad. Por último, se hará una propuesta para incorporar las perspectivas de género e interseccional en la investigación sobre medios digitales y comunicación.

Keywords: Violencia simbólica, estereotipos de género, medios digitales.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a reference technological source for domestic leisure, information and entertainment (Craig Watkins, 2009). In this context, the Manuel Castells's citation (2006) "Internet is the fabric of our lives" takes on even greater meaning, which refers us to a daily media routine in which thousands of people around the world share information and experiences, interact with their peer group through social network, while some of them are also content creators through different web platforms such as YouTube.

The gender perspective can be incorporated into any field, and the digital environment is one of the recent fields in which its application has evidenced the reproduction of patriarchal structures in a context of "ones and zeros" which, despite "the novelty" of its creation, reproduces and creates gender inequalities. By definition, the United Nations (UN Women, 2021, n.p.) defines the gender perspective as

The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

Therefore, the gender perspective is essential to understand the true impact of digital media and supports on the social changes in recent decades. In addition, it cannot be ignored that digital environments -in addition to being a place where violence occurs- can be a space for raising awareness and creating spaces to eradicate violence against women. Incorporating the gender variable into the analysis and scientific knowledge of digital environments helps to explain the relationships of inequality and power established between men, women and other genders.

However, the gender perspective, although fundamental, is not always enough. In recent decades, the intersectional perspective

has been incorporated into the gender perspective (Cerqueira & Magalhães, 2019). Intersectionality is an analytical tool incorporated into the social sciences after the fourth wave of feminism (especially from black, decolonial and cultural feminisms) which warns that gender alone does not explain how various identity categories intersect (such as gender, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, nationality...) and are inserted into the respective systems of domination and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Nogueira, 2011; Toupin, 2018). In this sense, Conceição Nogueira (2011) proposes the intersectional approach to gender issues as it allows one to escape from the classic gender binarism and other social structures of oppression and privilege that are not alien to gender, to analyze social reality using a range of social categories -such as gender- that, independently, fail to reflect the degree of social complexity of the realities under study.

As the historian Gerda Lerner warned in 1987: "the androcentric fallacy, elaborated in all the mental constructions of Western civilization, cannot be rectified simply by 'adding' women. To correct it, a radical restructuring of thought and analysis is necessary" (Lerner, 2017, p. 329, our translation). The critical perspective of Feminist and Gender Studies recovers the hermeneutics of suspicion to point out that any theory that downplays the demand for equality or reintroduces a mystifying discourse must be distrusted (in Spain one of the referents of this term is the philosopher Celia Amorós). Applying this critical view to the field of digital media and supports, this chapter addresses some of the issues underlying this environment in light of the apparent rationality and free will of the Internet and technological developments.

2 A TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE WITHOUT A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Are the technological developments of the Internet of Things perpetuating discriminatory gender biases? The multidisciplinary field of feminist studies on technoscience has shown how gender issues and other sociocultural differences of power and identity are embedded in scientific knowledge, as well as in the sociotechnical networks and practices of a globalized world.

Technology, as in scientific knowledge, "takes men and

masculinity as the norm and women and femininity as deviations” (Haslanger, 2001, p. 123, our translation), reiterating women’s invisibility.

Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) underscores the need to link the feminist perspective to science and technology. The cyborg emerges as a new subject, “the cyborg is a kind of personal, postmodern and collective self, disassembled and reassembled. It is the self that feminists must codify” (Haraway, 1991, p. 164), becoming aware of feminism, Haraway adverted, completely changes the map drawn by categories such as women or race, denaturing them and avoiding new universalizing concepts.

The initial disembodiment of the Internet and digital environments was a potential illusion of being able to be anything regardless of gender constructions. For Wajcman (2006), digital platforms that emerged from web 2.0 offer women new opportunities for political mobilization and the creation of information exchange networks. However, technology and its uses have ended up reproducing the same social schemes. But the consequences of the new technologies go further, since women are a minority in the professions that the women of the future are designing, most of them returning to jobs linked to care.

In this line, Remedios Zafra (2011) alludes to the patriarchal power relations inherently inserted in the differential valuation of work in digital culture and in the “occupation” of those spaces,

Let’s think “who does what on the Net”, and “how they benefit from said work”; who are the prosumers who feed their digital selves on social networks (perhaps it should be said mostly: prosumers), and who are the ones who make these spaces profitable (YouTube, Facebook, Google or Tuenti, to give a few examples). Let us see that the creators of these tools coincide in this case with a unique profile of this technological age: very young boys who made their computer –and in many cases their garage- the center of a technology company. However, the value of these companies in each case is not so much the device itself, but conceiving them as “spaces” that manage to bring together millions of “I’s”, spaces that become a very part of affective relationships and that transform users into producers and into content.

Undoubtedly, these relationship structures also tell us about forms of distribution of people and spaces that are not exempt from political significance. (Zafra, 2011, p. 121, our translation).

Although the Internet has become a reference for interpersonal communication, the economy, education or entertainment, it is not alien to ideological components and the logic of power. “There is nothing natural or inevitable about the practices, discourses and behaviors that arise on the Internet. To the contrary, the Internet is quintessentially unnatural; that is, it has certainly not arisen organically out of a state of nature” (Mantilla, 2015, p. 189). Judy Wajcman (2006) warns of the profound misogyny present on digital environments where pornography pages and sexual harassment, in addition to what happens on the dark web is the tip of the iceberg that shows how the status-quo and male domination of the offline world are reproduced, a digital environment built again by men and for men.

The presence of recommendation algorithms and the stratification of profiles based on their popularity or their behavior is a common practice on digital environments that generates a factory of inequalities. The logics of the market inserted on digital environments (applications, social networks, search engines, chatbots...) seek to satisfy their clients’ expectations, turned into needs - which at the same time are their product - shaping the expectations of their customers, users according to a series of algorithms and metrics that socially stratify a mediated and molded intimacy.

An intersectional feminist approach to new technologies reveals the discriminatory biases of gender, race and class in data generation and use through ICTs, whose maximum exponent is social networks (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

An example of sexist and racist biases present in the new media is the study by Safia Noble (2018) *Algorithms of oppression: how search engines reinforce racism*, which points out how the Google search engine perpetuates stereotyped, sexist and pornographic narratives about racialized women, and which reflect the historically unequal distribution of power in society (Noble, 2018, p. 71-83). The intersectional perspective evidences the patriarchal and racist biases in technology design and how these practices are co-constituted in

racialized and gendered forms that implies power and often uphold systemic discrimination and oppression (Toupin, 2018).

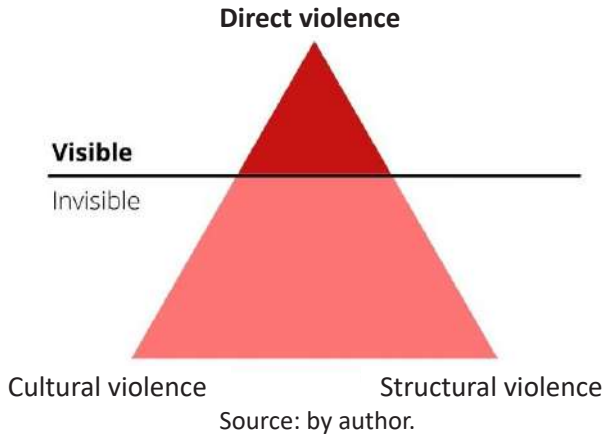
3 SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE ON DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Symbolic violence is a muffled, insensitive and invisible violence for its own victims, which is exercised essentially through the purely symbolic paths of communication and knowledge or, more precisely, ignorance, recognition or, ultimately, of feeling (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 12, our translation). As Varela (2017) alludes, symbolic violence is structural, attitudes, gestures, behavior patterns, beliefs... sustain and perpetuate that domination and is present in all other forms of violence, ensuring their effectiveness:

Not all of its manifestations have the same weight or significance; some are ephemeral, the product of a cultural machine always looking for a new approach. Taken together, however, these codes and hoaxes, whispers, threats and myths have a clear and definite goal: they try to send women back to their roles, either as daddy's daughters, or as vibrant romantics, either as an active procreator, or as a passive object of love (Varela, 2017, p. 194, our translation).

To understand the relevance of symbolic violence as a support for discrimination and violence, it is appropriate to use Johan Galtung's triangle (2003), who conceptualizes violence as a triangle (Figure 1) in which visible violence, direct violence (by example, violent acts or abuse) is only a small part of the conflict. Structural violence is related to the system and is represented by numerous situations of injustice (for example, it is observed in large cities such as Paris or Madrid with misery. While some eat and drink in abundance, others have nothing to eat). And cultural violence, which creates a legitimizing framework for violence.

Figure 1: Galtung's violence triangle



Consequently, symbolic violence on digital environments is part of the base that sustains and perpetuates all other violence (attitudes, gestures, behavior patterns, beliefs, discrimination, abuse...). The myth of beauty (Wolf, 1992), *micromachismos* (Bonino, 2016), myths of romantic love (Bosch, Ferrer, Navarro, & Ferreiro, 2011; Blanco-Ruiz, 2020), sexist language (Bengoechea, 2015), the rape culture (Tardón, 2017). They are part of that cultural and symbolic base of the violence iceberg.

This symbolic violence is learned through gender socialization, a process through which different roles and qualities are attributed based on sex (Walker & Barton, 1983, cited by Bosch & Ferrer-Pérez, 2013). In this process, which is based on the theory of the complementary natures of the sexes¹, men are assigned the role of provider/protector, they are socialized to be independent, to occupy and progress in the public

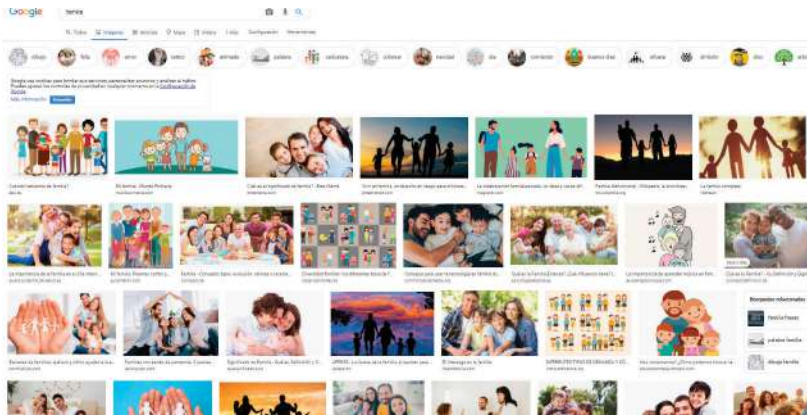
1 The theory of the complementary nature of the sexes on which all gender inequality is based was consolidated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries both in culture and in ecclesiastical doctrine and scientific thought. In the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Locke or Rousseau and scientists such as Darwin stand out, who, with their works, contributed or legitimized such theories by which women could not be considered citizens in the same way as men, because, by nature, they had different attributes which made them closer to nature. Therefore, males were born to rule and make decisions, and women, on the other hand, to procreate and take care of the family.

sphere; whereas women are attributed the role of reproducers and caretakers of the home -wives and mothers- promoting the emotional sphere and educating them so that their source of gratification and self-esteem comes from the private sphere.

The sexual division of labor is not trivial and is transferred to the symbolic universe. The differential representation of men and women in the Internet media (news, videos, banners, images, etc.) responds to stereotypes that must be analyzed and evaluated because they often constitute a source of production and reproduction of inequalities and discrimination. If we observe women who star in movies, series or advertising campaigns, we realize that the representation of women with disabilities, elderly women or African descent women, for example, is hardly existent and, when they do appear, they are usually very stereotyped. The same is true when looking at expert sources who participate in streaming programs or people who produce content on different platforms (YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, etc.).

These biased cultural imaginaries are clearly perpetuated on digital environments, and can be verified simply by searching the word “woman”, “girl”, “man”, “boy”, in the search engine of an image database. For example, if we introduce the word “family” (Figure 2), the results show in 99% a traditional family model (mother, father, son and daughter, and sometimes also the grandfather and grandmother) made up of white people.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Google search results for the term “family”



Source: Google, 2021

Digital environments based on artificial intelligence use previous cultural products to learn to be “more human”. This machine learning extracts, therefore, from the predominant male view in most cultural representations (Mulvey, 1975), a view that not only has an impact on the machines, but it also has a strong impact on how women build our identity and show our self-representation on social networks.

4 DIGITAL VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Social networks are used natively, not only to consume entertainment, look for work or establish relationships with friends, but also to establish affective and/or sexual relationships. However, these virtual spaces are not neutral (Mantilla, 2015; Carrera, 2016), but instead, under the veil of horizontality and equal opportunities in terms of access to the Internet, specific violence occurs which continue to reproduce situations of inequality and subjugation from aggressors to their victims.

Gender violence is defined as any act of violence against women for the simple fact of being. This violence may result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, as well as threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether it occurs in public or private life. This violence is transferred to the digital

sphere, where it continues to have a structural nature and constitutes a human rights violation of over half of the population (also on digital environments).

Some of these forms of digital violence are the following:

a. Sexting, refers to sending sexual messages (erotic or pornographic) through mobile phones or computers.

b. Grooming or sexual cyberbullying, refers to the set of strategies that an adult person develops to gain the trust of the minor on the Internet with the ultimate goal of obtaining concessions of a sexual nature.

c. Cyberbullying, anglicism used to refer to the harassment and digital violence suffered by a minor who, for different reasons, is physically and/or psychologically abused by other minors through attitudes such as repression, discrimination, homophobia, violence sexual or corporal punishment. This type of violence is closely linked to bullying or gender-based violence, and has negative effects on physical health, emotional well-being and academic performance, especially if the violence is repeated over time or is severe, in addition to influencing the school setting of the educational center.

d. Stalking, Anglo-Saxon word that means stalking and describes a psychological condition known as urgent bullying syndrome. The affected person, who can be a man or a woman, obsessively persecutes the victim: he/she spies on them, follows them down the street, constantly calls them on the phone, sends gifts, sends letters and text messages, writes their name in public places and, in extreme cases, he/she even threatens them and commits violent acts against them.

e. *Pornovenganza* or porn revenge, refers to the use of photographs or videos of a sexual nature taken in a private and intimate space to publish or make them go viral without the consent of the protagonist through social networks or websites. This is a crime even when there is an agreement between the parties involved for the creation of those images or videos.

These are some of the increasingly problems in society, and in many of them the gender component is very marked (Blanco-Ruiz,

2014; de Miguel Luken, 2015; Nardi-Rodríguez, Pastor-Mira, López-Roig, & Ferrer-Pérez, 2017; Donoso-Vázquez, Rubio Hurtado & Vilà Baños, 2018; Linares, Royo Prieto, & Silvestre Cabrera, 2019, among others).

These new crimes carried out through social networks often go “unnoticed” among the youngest who consider this type of harassment as irrelevant or innocuous annoyances typical of the Network use. This gender-based cyberviolence becomes a 24-hour-day present element through the mobile or computer screen. However, cyberbullying as a form of gender violence is increasingly common, and it is a form of freedom limitation that generates domination and unequal relationships between men and women.

The digital environment has favored a romanticization of control over third parties. The WhatsApp double-check is the paradigmatic example of this control that may be subtly covering up the first stages of gender violence. The borders of intimacy and privacy have been diluted and, under the umbrella of love, a part of the digital society renounces its privacy, accepting increasingly generalized control behaviors. For example, in adolescence in Spain, 57.9% of the women surveyed do not agree at all that “When you are in love with a person you must give up your intimacy/privacy for love” while men do not. They are at 35.2% (Blanco-Ruiz, 2020).

It should not be ignored that the Internet, as Carrera (2016, p. 245) warns, “demands an active audience not due to the supposed nature of democracy of the environment, but due to the controlling nature of the environment”, an idiosyncrasy that directly affects intimate life.

5 FEMINIST PROPOSALS FOR RESEARCH ON DIGITAL COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENTS

The incorporation of gender mainstreaming (also known as mainstreaming) to digital communication environments implies a reorganization, improvement, development and assessment of all communication processes. However, incorporating women in the processes of producing or disseminating messages is not enough. The incorporation of gender perspective goes beyond the incorporation of the sex variable in the methodology, “it is no longer just about access

to research for women, but also about reforming science itself” (San Segundo, 2017, p. 1), in this case, digital communicative environments.

One measure to improve and develop the application of gender perspective in a transversal way more efficiently and fairly is to incorporate the intersectional perspective to the gender perspective (and how gender converges with issues of social class, ethnicity, race, disability, educational level, etc.). This feminist and intersectional approach should not be applied exclusively to the message, but should also reflect on the position of the sender and to whom the message is being sent (receiver).

Research on digital communication environments confirms the need to bet on communication models that incorporate the feminist perspective and are not limited to Western models (mainly Anglo-Saxon and/or European). An example of this is the magazine *Comunicación y Gender*, whose commitment to the feminist perspective, the digital sphere and open access, together with an internationalization model with a focus on science produced in Latin America, aims to combat gender bias and place bias of origin of the articles imposed in the production of scientific knowledge (Franco & Blanco, 2021).

On the other hand, from the perspective of the very elaboration of the message, Blanco-Ruiz and Sainz de Baranda Andújar (2019) recommend the following guidelines to be able to elaborate more inclusive and representative messages of society. According to the authors, it is important to assess the presence of people with different physical, ethnic, socioeconomic, age characteristics to represent all the people who exist in society in a real way. These people must star in roles without being attributed a supposed personality associated with gender stereotypes to build diverse reference models that propose attitudes, behaviors and values different from traditional representations. In the particular case of women, it should never be suggested that they occupy trades and professions that may be incompatible with femininity or masculinity, as they should be attributed equally. In addition, women should be shown in active positions and avoid images that show them passively (arms crossed, hands in pockets, etc.) or with an attitude of sexual availability.

Digital environments have brought a proliferation of media and supports whose emergence could have led to a change in the

gender status quo. Although at present it is not possible to speak of the Internet as an egalitarian space, the very nature of the medium allows to imagine a future in which, through the incorporation of the gender perspective and intersectionality, a more egalitarian and just digital environment can be built.

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