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Gender-based harassment in cyberspace. The case of Pikara magazine

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ABSTRACT

The internet has brought about a radical change in the way people communicate and relate to each other. Widespread use of this new system of communication has resulted in a shift in conventional attitudes in human relations. Some of its features are anonymity, virality or disinhibition, which in turn determine norms of interaction. This paper offers an analysis of gender-based harassment on the internet, using the case of Pikara Magazine (a Spanish feminist electronic magazine). The comments posted on this online magazine during 2015 have been analysed from a qualitative perspective (using grounded theory methodology), focusing on discovering the major discursive categories related to harassment behaviours, as well as the different strategies of response and resistance. The categories identified make up a system to be contrasted on future analysis. Finally, different ways of tackling this phenomenon through the social work discipline are also considered.

1. Introduction

With the arrival of the internet, and especially the Web 2.0, some aspects of our daily routine have undergone significant changes. Social environments and establishments such as the organisation of work, the education system, our way of interacting, the media, political campaigning, artistic activity or urban development have been significantly impacted, giving rise to new challenges in areas of social intervention.

These online interaction environments, as digital public spheres, have become a new arena in which to develop human relations under old and new codes and norms. Social issues that have already been widely researched have taken new forms, resulting in different operating rules, features and repercussions from those studied in traditional social interaction environments (offline).

The advance of gender-based violence into the digital world has become a significant problem (Barak, 2005; Buelga, Cava, & Musitu, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Marwick & Miller, 2014). In fact, the level of prevalence is higher than in offline forms, as around “73% of women have already been exposed to or have experience some form of online violence” (United Nations, 2015, p. 3). Gender-based harassment is one of these forms of violence. It can be widely defined as the use of online aggression, and includes attacks, negative comments, mockery and sexual references, to which women are subjected when they publish online content simply because of their gender.

This paper analyses the different types of harassment found on the comments section of Spanish website Pikara Magazine from a feminist

perspective. Although this case study is specific to Spain, similar cases have been analysed in other parts of the world, such as Twitter threads in Turkey (Demirhan & Çakir-Demirhan, 2015), United Kingdom (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016), United States and Australia (Megarry, 2014). The problem remains difficult to quantify due to a number of reasons, such as the scarce acknowledgement of the issue, its naturalisation, and its relatively recent and ongoing development. It is therefore almost impossible to compare the number of people affected by it in different countries. The comments were examined using grounded theory methodology in order to create a discursive categories system that comprises the diversity of expressions of harassment. This research paper also points to the view that social work is a discipline that can both empower women in the digital world and continue to raise awareness and move towards equality.

2. Gender-based harassment in cyberspace

In the early 2000s, the expansion of the online world was hailed as a catalyst for the development of democracy, equality (Ferdinand, 2000) and women's empowerment by enabling access to information and social support (Finn & Banach, 2000). Therefore, online interaction environments have been introduced as spaces in which stigmatized or socially rejected individuals and groups can freely participate and express their opinions (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Furthermore, it has been argued that social movements such as feminism have the potential to exert more influence and reach a higher level of interaction using new

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and more participative channels of communication (Fernández Romero, Corredor Lanás, & Santín Durán, 2011; United Nations, 2015). Nevertheless, online environments become political habitats in which roles, social conflicts, discrimination, inequality and power are reproduced (Demirhan & Çakir-Demirhan, 2015). Thus paradoxically, within the sphere of the feminist struggle, the online world becomes an arena where opinions can be freely expressed and visibility improved, simultaneously becoming a forum where discourse and practices familiar in certain forms of gender discrimination are reproduced, which in turn gain greater exposure.

Gender-based violence in the online world takes many forms, such as abuse exerted by a partner using technology, sexual aggression and rape when information communication technologies (ICTs) are used to monitor and control women's activities, sexist violence culturally condoned when ICTs serve as a tool to excuse, accept and perpetuate violence against women and violence addressed at oppressed individuals because of their sexual identity (Fialova & Fascendini, 2011).

Online gender-based violence has been studied by different disciplines and from different perspectives. Cyberbullying by teenagers and young people has raised particular interest, generating a theoretical body of research that has in turn shaped subsequent, less common studies of other forms of online violence.

For these reasons it is relatively usual to find the term cyberbullying in relation to different forms of online violence, or to find that different terms such as cyberbullying, digital bullying, online bullying, electronic bullying, internet harassment, electronic aggression, cyber aggression or cyber stalking are used indiscriminately (Lwin, Li, & Ang, 2012; Ojanen et al., 2015).

In this context, it is essential to make a distinction between cyberbullying and online harassment. Cyberbullying can be defined as “an individual or a group intentionally and repeatedly using electronic devices or technologies to conduct hostile or aggressive behaviours” (Cao & Lin, 2015, p. 458). This concept can be applied to repeated episodes of aggression towards a specific individual or group, usually performed by individuals or groups known to them (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Online harassment is a more appropriate term when referring to isolated instances of online violence or aggression where the victim and perpetrator do not know each other or where the aggression is not specifically addressed to an individual or group, encompassing communications of rude, threatening, inappropriate or offensive content (Lwin et al., 2012; Wolak et al., 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

Another form of online violence is “the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014: 97), termed trolling. Such episodes differ from online harassment precisely in their random nature, as their main purpose is to gain notoriety and amusement.

Online gender-based harassment, as an expression of hetero-patriarchy, includes attacks on feminist views with the aim of discrediting the movement and supporting the growth of the hetero-patriarchal system (Momoitio, 2014). Online gender-based harassment must therefore be considered a form of violence against women and girls, as has been defined by the General Assembly of United Nations in its 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women:

“any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” (UN, 1993: article 1)

As an academic area of theory and practice, social work has been concerned with the feminist implications of its functions, methods and institutions (Alcázar-Campos, 2013). Within this sphere, issues such as inequality and gender-based violence have been addressed from two different perspectives; on the one hand, specific intervention plans, and

on the other, transversal plans designed from a gender perspective. However, we can conclude that there are no specific plans aimed at addressing the online manifestations of these issues. Even in the international arena, where approaches to confront cyberbullying have been developed in the last decade (Della Cioppa, O'Neil, & Craig, 2015), there is a lack of appropriate planning to tackle online harassment such as that analysed in this case study.

Social work, with its theoretical and applied focus on analysing and acting upon different social issues, should address this problem, developing specific intervention plans that consider the peculiarities arising from the online manifestations of more traditional forms of harassment. We believe that the analysis of this case study can shed light on this domain.

Online manifestations of gender-based harassment are not a simple translation of offline ones. Major features that lead to the shift of social relationships in these new interaction environments are anonymity, virality or amplification and permanence (Fox, Cruz, & Lee, 2015; Franks, 2012).

Anonymity makes it possible to forge new online identities, assuming a different age, gender, beliefs or any other personal attributes (Gosling & Mason, 2015; Megarry, 2014; Zegers et al., 2006). By using a pseudonym, true identity is diluted, acting as a catalyst for disinhibition and enabling the adoption of rhetoric and behaviours unlikely to be displayed in traditional interaction environments (Zegers & Larraín, 2002). Ultimately, thanks to anonymity, the internet acts as a free setting (United Nations, 2015) in which to express opinions about race, politics or society that would otherwise be socially sanctioned (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Therefore, a process of online disinhibition takes place (Chisholm, 2006), enabling the dissolution of certain psychological barriers that normally block the most intimate thoughts, feelings and needs, thus allowing the proliferation of certain behaviours during interactions in these new environments.

Virality, understood as the potential for a message to be spread and disseminated online, impacts mainly on the victim. Harassment spreads swiftly and its effects multiply rapidly, which makes it very difficult to curb its consequences. Permanence also makes the effects not only greater but more durable and very difficult to eliminate (Franks, 2012). McKenna and Bargh (2000) highlight too the importance of being able to communicate with other people regardless of their location, the irrelevance of physical appearance and non-verbal communication in many of the channels comprising these kinds of relationships. They also underline the opportunities for greater control due to the possibility of delaying communication. Other features in the online environment are the relative ease of interrupting communication at any time (Zegers & Larraín, 2002) and the ability to communicate regardless of geographical distance (Pittaro, 2007).

The different ways in which gender violence is replicated online pose new challenges, both in the academic and applied fields. It is undoubtedly a transdisciplinary problem to which social work, government intervention and education can make valuable contributions.

The internet could become the most appropriate platform for implementing initiatives aimed at improving the current situation. The new online interaction environments provide the “initiatives that emerge when a group or groups of women organise collectively around issues aimed specifically at tackling gender oppression” (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989: p. 46) with a range of possibilities beyond comparison with previous decades. Mechanisms are provided to achieve a desirable goal: for women to lead their own fight for empowerment and equality, with intervention plans designed by and for themselves (Alcázar-Campos, 2014).

3. Methods

The guiding aims of this research were to analyse the social processes of online gender-based harassment as they occur in online environments and to suggest strategies to tackle this problem from a social

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