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Violence against Brazilian women in public and mediatic spheres

La violencia contra mujeres brasileñas en las esferas pública y mediática

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Abstract

This article explores the capacity of the media to incorporate controversies in circulation in the public sphere. For that, it is based on the analysis of a set of 607 news stories about violence against women in context of gender relations and proximity collected in nine Brazilian media during the years of 2013 and 2014. Recognized as one of the countries with the highest rates of violence against women, in recent decades Brazil has passed laws aimed at protecting victims and aggravating the convictions of perpetrators, which were the result of intense debates promoted by feminists, researchers and others social actors involved in the guarantee of human rights. The collected news stories were published in the years immediately prior to the promulgation of the Feminicide Law, in 2015. Analyzed through a combination of methodologies, such as content analysis and narrative analysis, the collected news stories show that Brazilian news media are still little permeable to illuminating tendencies of violence against women as a result of gender relations, prevailing approaches that present them as routine and/or futile crimes. Therefore, the analysis makes it possible to perceive that the media are some steps behind the actions and debates that elevate this issue to a dimension of controversy, as those held in academic spaces, by feminist movements and other social actors in Brazil.

Resumen

Este artículo indaga sobre la capacidad que tienen los medios de comunicación para incorporar controversias que circulan en la esfera pública. Para eso, se basa en el análisis de un conjunto de 607 relatos periodísticos sobre violencias contra mujeres en contextos de relaciones de género y de proximidad, recolectados en nueve medios brasileños durante los años 2013 y 2014. Reconocido como uno de los países con más altos índices de violencia contra las mujeres, Brasil aprobó en las últimas décadas leyes destinadas a proteger a las víctimas y a agravar las condenas de los agresores, procesos que resultaron de intensos debates promovidos por feministas, investigadores y otros actores sociales comprometidos con la defensa de los derechos humanos. Los relatos recolectados fueron publicados en los años inmediatamente anteriores a la promulgación de la Ley del Femicidio, en 2015. Abordados a través de una combinación de metodologías, como análisis de contenido y análisis de narrativa, los relatos periodísticos muestran a los medios todavía poco permeables al entendimiento de las violencias contra mujeres como resultado de relaciones de género,



prevaleciendo enfoques de crímenes rutinarios y/o fútiles. Por lo tanto, el análisis hace posible percibir que los medios de comunicación están algunos pasos detrás de las acciones y debates que se dan en espacios académicos, por movimientos feministas y otros actores sociales que en Brasil se ocupan de este problema, elevándolo a la dimensión de controversia.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Violence, gender, media, narrative, public sphere, journalism, news, women.

Violencia, género, medios de comunicación, narrativa, esfera pública, periodismo, noticia, mujeres.

1. Introduction

The many expressions of physical and symbolic violence against women have mobilized Brazilian society in significant ways in the last two decades. This includes discussions based on academic studies; on the militancy of different feminist groups, with perspectives that are not always coincident; on legal provocations seen in judgments led by many courts; on the actions of human rights organizations; on governmental programs; and on many others endeavors carried out by social actors and actresses. Abortion, rape, prejudice related to sexuality, race and economic stratum, murders in relationships of proximity or motivated by other gender dynamics and physical and symbolic violence are examples of issues that reach out Brazilian public sphere with different intensity-levels, as well as the multiple sensitization powers held by the media or by the mediatic public sphere (Gomes, 2008; Peñamarín, 2014).

Given its urgency, severity and complexity, gender violence acquires a clear status of a relatively long-lasting social controversy (Venturini, 2012). The intense debate that it has been generating within the Brazilian public sphere has even allowed the elaboration of two major laws. The “Maria da Penha” Law, from 2006, aims to curb violence against women by applying protective measures that, for example, alienate aggressive men and force them, when legally punished, to participate in-group dynamics to discuss violence against women and to develop means to avoid it (Blay, 2014; Beiras & Nascimento, 2017). A point that suggests its relation with the public debates about violence against women in the Brazilian public sphere is that the law was named after Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes, a woman who was, for many years, a victim of aggression by her husband. He tried to murder her and, in the end, made her a paraplegic. Since then, Maria da Penha managed to call up major sectors of the public sphere, whose pressures culminated in the approval of this legal instrument. There is also the Femicide Law, from 2015, which qualifies murder crimes from a gender variable, leading to changes in the Brazilian Penal Code. The law includes femicide among the “heinous crimes”, an expression used in Brazilian Law to designate the crimes with the most aggravated penalties.

The social and political processes that led to the existence of these laws certainly continue until now, since their implementation requires behavior changes from the lawmakers, as well as a set of actions that involve the State and many social actors and actresses. Looking at their effectiveness, we can assume that the public debates about the implementation of these legal instruments have led, particularly in the case of “Maria da Penha” Law, to a reduction, albeit timid, in the cases of violence against women. The research data collected by the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [Institute of Applied Economic Research] points out that elements like the available infrastructure for women victims of aggression care, the cultural disparities between Brazilian regions, and other variables, all interfere in analyzing the impact of the laws. Despite that,

We consider that the LMP [Maria da Penha Law] affected the behavior of aggressors and victims based in three aspects: 1) It raised the penalties for the aggressors; (2) It amplified empowerment and security conditions for victims to report; (3) It improved the jurisdictional mechanisms, allowing the criminal justice system to answer cases of domestic violence more effectively (Cerqueira & al., 2015: 32).



The battle against gender-based violence, however, is by no means coming to a disclosure and Brazil presents an alarming data on murders of women. According to the data compiled by Waiselfisz (2015), the country is the fifth in a global ranking of female homicides that includes 83 nations. Only El Salvador, Colombia and Guatemala (Latin American countries) and the Russian Federation surpassed the 4.8 homicides per 100,000 women presented by Brazil. These numbers are 48 times bigger than the ones observed in the United Kingdom, for example.

Another research, carried out by the Perseu Abramo Foundation and the Social Service of Commerce (Venturi & Godinho, 2013) in 2010, affirms that every two minutes, five women are beaten in Brazil. These numbers do not include death registers, but they help to enlighten the background of systematic violence in which the violence occurs. It is the same as saying that, by the end of each day, men in Brazil have injured approximately 3,600 women who lived together with them. Thus, it seems to us that understanding the complexity and the variety of the possible aggressions, as well as the connections between them, is decisive for comprehending gender violence and the murder of women, acknowledging that “femicide is the end point in the anti-female terror continuum that includes a wide range of verbal and physical abuse” (Pasinato, 2011: 224).

Facing such controversy, what role has the Brazilian media been playing? Is it effectively present or does it act in an elusive way, positioning itself distant from public debates and other agents in the public sphere? International literature on the subject (Berns, 2001; 2004; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Lloyd & Ramon, 2016; Richards, Kirkland, Gillespie, & Dwayne Smith, 2011; Simões, 2011; Simões, 2007; Taylor, 2009; Nettleton, 2011; Ryan, Anastario, & Da-Cunha, 2006) signalizes some recurrences employing different methodologies and analyzing the unique realities of each country some recurrences. Among these recurrences, we highlight: the understanding of gender violence as something private and non-concerning to the public sphere and public policies, cases being handled in a decontextualized way (often set up as either tragedies or common events), the lack of attention to intersectional aspects like class and ethnicity (a certain privilege for the aggressors, either by the concealing of their responsibility which is often under the rhetoric of a “crime of passion”), or by reaffirming myths and stereotypes about women. These are following the idea of “the good victim” (the mother-woman who works and has a regulated sex life). Although in some countries, we can find evidence suggesting an improvement in this approach, the scenario indicates that, at least in Western countries, sexist and patriarchal values are still being reinforced by media agents (Comas-d’Argemir, 2014; Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith, 2013; Gius & Lalli, 2014; González, 2007, 2010; Simões, 2011; Wozniak & McCloskey, 2010).

In this article, we seek to identify and reflect on the role of Brazilian media on this subject, considering that studies with different propositions, such as the ones from Pasinato (2011; 2012; 2014), Waiselfisz (2015), Carvalho and Martins (2016), among others, show us a lacunar and fragmented nature of the media coverage of gender violence. From these analyses, we ask whether gender violence is effectively a relevant issue for Brazilian media agents. In search for answers, we monitored the coverage of cases of gender-based violence in 9 Brazilian media between 2013 and 2014. The collected data suggests a contradiction: on the one hand, the media commonly report murders, rapes, assaults and other manifestations of gender violence, mainly the physical ones; on the other hand, the report of these events has not recognized or at least has not problematized, its gender component. Thus, we cannot say that cases of gender violence are absent from Brazilian media coverage, but neither can we assume that the controversy to which they are linked, and that mobilizes Brazilian public sphere is fully contemplated.

One way to attain a more precise description of the femicides phenomena as triggered from journalistic narratives is by using the notion of crime of proximity (Antunes, 2016; Carvalho, 2014; 2016; Carvalho & Martins, 2016; Leal, 2014; 2016). We propose the use of this expression to investigate issues related to gender violence by focusing on trust relations that occur in complex societies. It is true that, maybe more because of small concern in identifying their particularities so far, than for any other reason, crimes of proximity are still pretty much associated to the so-called crimes of passion, which are investigated with more diligence.



Every crime of proximity is subject to contradictions: it is committed by those who are linked (in an emotional way, but not only) by bonds of trust. After all, social coexistence and physical proximity (in family, at work, in public places etc.) in complex and risky societies (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1997) happens among social connections that involve work, school, religion and other associative contexts, including contact with people working with deliveries, domestic repairs, employees of energy and telecommunication companies, police officers, bus drivers and others. Assuming either the perspective of trust in expert systems, as proposed by Anthony Giddens, or the notion of circumstances imposed by a risk society, according to Ulrich Beck, we live in a time that forces us to expand our ways of living together. But above all, we have to trust on the actions of others (anonymous or not) to exist in society (Luhman, 1996; Quéré, 2011), which makes trust, as Niklas Luhmann says, some of “social inevitability”. This way, the crime of proximity concept exposes elements of disruptions in social trust and, besides that, it shows that violence against women is not restricted to domestic space, thus avoiding some conceptual problems related to the crimes of passion.

2. Public sphere, media and the formation of controversies

We believe that comprehending informative media's every day approach to crimes involving violence against women is a key factor for the subject to be publicly recognized. How gender-based violence is reported is meant to set up visibility for such occurrences, even though it implies the opacity and invisibility of some aspects that are pivotal within the public sphere (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015; Gámez-Fuentes, 2012).

Controversial as to its heuristic potentialities, the concept of the public sphere has been fundamental to identify how political, economic and behavioral issues, among others, circulate and are socially signified. Although fractured, the concept of public sphere can enlighten what constitutes a problem in a particular society and how different frameworks are applied to this problem. Following the seminal works of Jürgen Habermas, Wilson Gomes notices principal changes in the concept of public sphere over time, particularly to what concerns the differentiations between public and private domains.

Historically, the modern public sphere establishes itself in a set of relations with other institutions and spheres that are typical to the modern way of life. In order to understand the changes in the public sphere, it must be outlined in contraposition to other institutions and spheres, considering the historical context of its formation. Among a lineage of Habermas' readers (2010), it seems to have been established a belief that the public sphere encloses everything outside the domestic, family, and intimate spheres (Fraser, 1992: 110). The contrast exposed here is merely between what is public and what is private (Gomes, 2008: 42)

From this perspective that contrasts the domestic sphere, or intimacy sphere, with the public affairs and non-private sphere, it is necessary to remark that when we talk about physical and symbolic violence against women, the strategies for making them public consist in a key mechanism for actions that confront its motivations and consequences. That said, one of the challenges that must be faced is the overcoming of what scholars (Debert & Gregori, 2008; 2016; Biroli, 2010; 2016; Segato, 2012) indicate as one of the gender hierarchy modes in sexist and misogynist societies: what concerns to men naturally belongs to the public sphere, such as the business or State affairs, or any other great issue; meanwhile, to the women, the reserved space is restricted to home, to the housework, to taking care of the children, cooking, etc.

Consequently, for women, to bring their demands to the public sphere is a way of empowerment, which nowadays assumes the search for visibility in the media's public sphere as well. It also represents potential means for social learning on controversial subjects, because it addresses those social problems that are part of a struggle with understandings and practices that already are greatly disseminated in common sense, behavior, and performances. These social practices and traditional ways of understanding must be overcome to allow the rise of new dynamics that, talking specifically



about gender relations, hierarchies, prejudices, exclusion and other devices that represent physical and symbolic violence, will make possible the recognition of absolute equal rights.

It is also important to remember that there is not necessarily a continuity between the public sphere and the public media sphere. It may be more common to find divergences between them, or clear discontinuities when one or more media categories make the debates in the public sphere invisible. For our analysis, we take the postulations of Rousiley C.M. Maia as the reference, noting that she is interested in the political debates' dimensions and the influence exerted by the media in deliberation processes. In her words, we start from the premise that the media play an ambiguous role in pre-structuring the political public sphere. In certain situations, media agents can mobilize not only relevant political issues, but also the required information and the appropriate contributions for effective public debate. In other situations, they may, to the same extent, ignore or trivialize important political issues, obscure or distort information, exclude or delegitimize the voice of certain actors as they favor and advocate for the benefit of others (Maia, 2008: 201).

We are interested in reflecting upon the ambiguities of the media public sphere in the way they bring to light or hide events related to physical and symbolic violence against women, particularly in the so-called crimes of proximity. Therefore, we leave aside other constitutive aspects of the reality of what has been denominated media public sphere. However, a brief reflection on the notion of controversy is necessary.

Tommaso Venturini's thoughts on the cartography of controversies point to elucidating ways of understanding how coincidences, cleavages, and contradictions occur in the ways gender violence against women is seized in journalistic media, that are the subject of our analysis here, and in Brazilian society. Venturini says: "according to the cartography of controversies, public debates (vaguely defined as situations where actors disagree) constitute the best settings for observing the construction of social life. In controversies, actors are unremittingly engaged in tying and untying relations, arguing categories and identities, revealing the fabric of collective existence" (Venturini, 2012: 797).

The public sphere, media public sphere, and controversies form three conceptual dimensions that will help us analyze the *corpus* of journalistic narratives we collected. They will allow us to understand how the intersections between the public sphere and media public sphere are given or avoided, and what consequences do they bring to the amplification or reduction of controversies.

3. Methodology and results

In an effort to understand the role that informative media performs in the public establishment of gender violence, we followed the stories published by nine Brazilian informative media throughout 2013-2014. What we collected comprises eight weeks of news, the result of nine months of data gathering. To monitor the daily coverages, we divided the media into two different groups: a local one, based in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and a national one, with nationwide coverage. Our choice to look at the local media is justified by their closeness to "small events" of gender violence, the ones that could be more difficult to grasp. On the other hand, national media could be used to establish a counterpoint to the local witnessing, at the same time relativizing and contextualizing them.

The chosen media were Brazil's best-selling local newspaper; Belo Horizonte metropolitan area's most-listened radio news program; a traditional newspaper of Belo Horizonte metropolitan area; two newscast locally broadcasted, focused on regional coverage; an online news website with Belo Horizonte metropolitan area coverage; the most-watched newscast in Brazil, with nationwide coverage; the two most visited news portals in Brazil.

Data gathering and indexing were done in the period from May 2013 to February 2014, based on the following parameters:

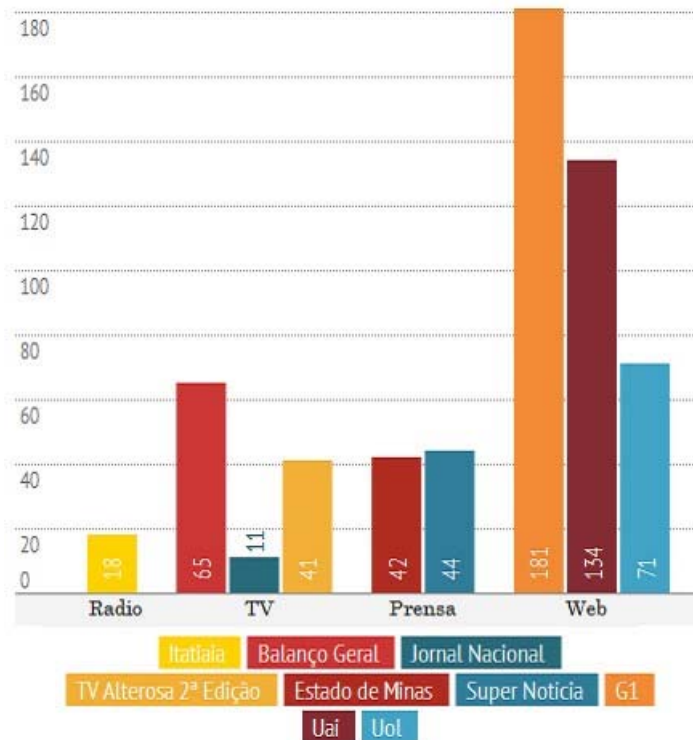
- a) Daily reading of the newspapers in selected weeks, including all its sections.
- b) Accompanying the websites and portals three times during the day: morning (around 10 am), afternoon (around 3 pm) and night (around 8 pm). We chose these schedules in an effort to keep up



with the constant updates that are typical of these media, as well as the daily flow and the production time of the news.

c) The newscasts and news hour programs were recorded during their broadcasting.

The work resulted in 607 collected stories, which are now part of an online database, organized as shown in the graphic:



Graphic 1. Stories by informative media.

All 607 collected texts were properly indexed in an online database, which allows that they are accessed and organized by general variables. Since 2014, this database has been regularly analyzed by following two major guidelines. The first one consists an effort to describe, from general variables, recurrent aspects of media coverage. This guideline includes the studies that seek to investigate unchanging factors that refer to the nature of the media (press, audiovisual, etc.), its editorial line (whether they're "of record" or "tabloids") or its scope (local or national). The second one is formed by case studies, in which textual, discursive and narrative aspects of specific stories are contemplated, with the objective to apprehend, on the textual surface, contradictions and particularities. This collection of analyzes allows us, so far, to at least glimpse the role of Brazilian informative media in the controversy over gender violence. And this role is not that positive.

Journalistic coverage in Brazil is characterized by reports of the occurrence of several violent crimes against women, with the media work routine oscillating between the coverage of events that show great repercussion and the daily coverage that consists in small notes about homicides. Much of this coverage is dedicated to the death of women victims of what we are calling crimes of proximity. If the events of great concern provoke a strong interest for analysis due to the dynamics they establish in the social texture, even interrupting the informative media's routines, the "small deaths" of women in journalistic reporting have been receiving an approach defined by the idea of register, according to the typological qualification and the analysis of the type of coverage that is carried out by the media (Leal, Antunes, & Vaz, 2012).



Web portals presented the majority of violence records, more than half of the reports, effectively functioning as some cases repository. These narratives hardly exceeded the information provided by police records. Another important aspect is that the informative media that focus on sectors that are more “popular” were the ones where, proportionally, we found the highest number of cases of violence against women registered.

A careful observation of the data also allowed us to perceive that the news presented a disparity, depending on which informative media they originate from, between the proportion of cases of women deaths and other episodes of violence. Murders are the most visible events under a perspective that focuses on the typical relations of violence in which the man in a proximity relationship to the female victim is the person who will answer for the crime. Intimacy appears then as a key context to define these homicides. In the news about crimes of violence against women, what we see the most are episodes defined by violence in emotional relations. It is noteworthy that aggressions happen both throughout the relationships and after their end, and one of the reasons most often indicated by the media as the cause of violence is precisely the non-acceptance of the breakup by the men. If journalistic interest follows this preference, only a thoughtful analysis of other elements and the published or broadcasted narrative will allow us to discuss how these deaths appear as “a natural consequence” of the “intimate relationship,” a result of violence dynamics that goes by different tension cycles in the relationship. In any case, we can also observe that journalism’s interest is based on a social perception that violence against women, in the context of intimate relations, acquires relevance when it leaves a supposed private dimension of the intimacy of people’s homes. The presence of other institutions, like the police, among other factors, makes a decisive contribution to the rise in the attention to the murders.

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the collected data, the primary assumption is that the news presents the events closed in themselves, without connection to its causes and consequences, with a narrative that turns itself mainly to the portrayal of the “crime scene”. In most cases, this portrayal is made according to the perspective offered by the police, ignoring consequences and, often, the path that women go through when they seek help. By reading the journalistic reports, we still find little permeability to issues under tension and controversy in the public sphere. It is significant, considering this, that the discussions that led to the Femicide Law in 2015, which also occurred in previous years, were completely absent from the coverage of everyday cases of violence against women, including murders. Not only the assassinations, but themes such as gender hierarchies, abortion, the impact of Brazilian laws for women protection and punishment of the aggressors are almost completely ignored in these stories, even though they refer directly to these and other situations of physical and symbolic violence against women, which, we emphasize, are present in debates and controversies that circulate in the public sphere.

In our view, at the present moment, thanks to the type of coverage that is being carried out, Brazilian journalism acts as part of what some authors (Meneghel & al., 2011; Sagot, 2000) call a “critical route”, in which the establishment of revictimization processes becomes more common, especially in care services and in those related to the police and the judiciary (Pasinato, 2012). Journalistic narratives are far from incorporating the comprehension of causes that prevent women from abandoning the cycle of violence, both the so-called internal causes – the feelings present in the situation –and the external ones– that correspond to how such causes are socially recognized (Sagot, 2000). In this case, there is a perception that the problem of women in situations of violence refers to something “private,” that is not proper to debate and public solution. Thus, Brazilian informative media seems to operate as a visibility *locus* that reiterates violent ways of dealing with the issue, not necessarily linking cases of violence against women to gender relations. Moreover, we can notice that media considered to have greater popular appeal exploit the cases of murder and aggression with more emphasis than the proclaimed journalism of record. It is also noticeable that journalistic interest is based on a social perception that violence against women, in a context of



intimacy relations, acquires relevance as it leaves a supposed dimension of the private or of the home intimacy and begins to involve other institutions at the time of the murder, like the police. It is important to observe that feminist groups and members of Law and Health operators and from many others governmental and nongovernmental agencies, people that fight against gender inequality in Brazil, they rarely appear as sources of information for the coverage of crimes of proximity. Even though our *corpus* of journalistic narratives in the studied media has indicated little openness to incorporating a more diverse group of social actors and actresses –which is also a symptom of the recurrence of police authorities’ statements– the controversies are not completely absent in the news about physical and symbolic violence against women in gender relations. As we tried to show with the opinion polls on violence against women, the controversies involving gender relations, murders and various forms of symbolic depreciation indicate, in Brazil, just as the statistic data on the violence decrease after the approval of legal instruments does, a kind of cartography of controversies whose outlines are not always too precise. Contradictions, differences, and the actions of organized groups, especially the feminists, are the tip of an iceberg to be discovered in further analyses, considering that our main goal here was to draw a universal “map” of the problem. As a consequence, what stands out from the collection of journalistic narratives that compose our *corpus* is a thin presence of debates that could locate gender violence against women regarding well-formed and/or sustained controversies by the news media as part of the media public sphere. As Peñamarín (2014: 117) reminds us,[t]o the debate about information and public sphere is important to observe that the great issues that have been incorporated to public debate in the last decades of XXth century –such as ecological, feminist, antinuclear movements and those geopolitical– were introduced by subject that were outside the official public sphere (external to the media and political institutions, as points out Habermas (2010: 199) These subjects and political movements have not been limited the debate within the common shared places, but precisely one of their fundamental objectives was to put those borders in question, together with the own limits of the public sphere, in order to propose the inclusion in the debate of new objects, new subjects and systems of meaning (Peñamarín, 2014: 117). Another dubiousness found in Brazilian media, considering the coverage of gender violence against women refers to, taking into account Peñamarín's propositions, a hesitant role between being a plural public space that could indicate the drama of gender hierarchies as violence builders, and approaches that, in the strict limits of journalistic narratives, are often presented as common crimes or crimes of passion. In this sense, it is possible to perceive that the media are some steps behind the actions and debates that are taking place in academic fields, feminist movements and other social actors and actresses that deal with this problem in Brazil, elevating it to the dimension of a controversy (Venturini, 2012).

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