

Social Media as Violent Environments to Expose and Impose Themselves: The Case of Cyber Gangs

Buoncompagni G*

Department of Political Science, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy

Abstract

The convergence of urban and digital spaces increasingly influences band behavior. The Internet is by its very nature a public and interactive environment, therefore much stronger than any typical brand or symbol of a band, it offers a free space to the criminal group to promote violent performances, transforming them into viral contents. A new youth crime cases are emerging that could be defined "cyber-gangs phenomenon".

Nowadays it's important to define the relationships between young people, new media and digital education, considering the social changes and the structure of the new transparent and public space.

Keywords: Violence; Digital media; Gangs; Social media; Public space

Introduction

Violence and Transparency inside the Web Society

Deviance is sometimes approached in situations of "discomfort" or "maladjustment", but, from a sociological point of view, it reveals, in reality, a deficit in the parsonian function of latency; it represents the attempt to escape social control, which tends to ensure the consent of social actors to the framework of the norms that legitimize a specific society.

Obviously, phenomena of this type cannot be explained only by analyzing sociological factors; psychology too, in fact, covers an individualized explanatory and comprehensible role in an individualized study path and a personalized analysis of the psychic structure, beyond the social experiences experienced starting from the family environment.

So violence and deviance are configured as extreme attempts to send messages and affirm roles and social identities, which are not always, however, so easy to recognize and interpret, and which confirm once again, the complexity of the human being and the reasons of his acting [1].

This appears even more evident if such behaviors occur within a virtual space.

In fact, there is a further aspect of considerable interest that cannot be left aside by the social and behavioral sciences if we want to arrive at constructing a correct and complete analysis of the deviance in post-modernity, especially the juvenile one, namely the role of communication and social interaction in online and off-line environments.

It is here that the contemporary individual defines himself and others, through new media practices, processes of communication and symbolization capable of influencing actions and the way of seeing reality: deviance and criminal behavior can be considered as communicative action, or better still, as products of a communicative-relational process [2] found today in the web society.

The totality of our age is given by the interdependence of others and by an incessant interaction, the speed is relative to the difficult biopsychosocial adaptation processes, the ambiguity, on the contrary,

can rest on the technological component, assuming conflicting and different values.

The evolution of society, the new electronic and digital media, the phenomenon of globalization, the political and economic changes and the constant and daily representation of crime and violence, all this has strongly influenced human interactions, calling into question the quality of the communication and radically changing the way of construction and perception of one's own reality and identity [3].

The profound technological revolution has transformed social reality into a Network Society [4], a social structure characterized by the technologies of network communication and information processing, occupied by more powerful "active publics" occupying a space of intersection between old and new media and claim the right to cultural participation [5].

With global media, people can cross larger spaces, radically opposed, discontinuous reality, with greater speed and accompanied by increasingly intense communication flows, developing the capacity that the philosopher Jacques [6] calls "virtual nomadism" [7].

Not only do technologies allow instant communication by involving us emotionally in what happens in every part of the world, but it also changes the experience of the world, living in a synchronic rather than a diachronic dimension [8].

The new forms of communication have not only produced positive social effects, they have also become instruments of the violence market, understood as a violation of social norms [7].

Electronics, information technology and the Internet have definitely changed the *modus operandi et vivendi* of institutions, businesses and citizens, but also of those who perform criminal activities.

***Corresponding author:** Buoncompagni G, Department of Political Science, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Italy, Tel: 340-5232024; E-mail: giacomo.buoncompagni@libero.it; g.buoncompagni@studenti.unimc.it

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Anonymity, slangs, speed and brevity information, as well as the encrypted data and the possibility of building multiple online identities, all this favors the implementation of illegal actions also involving individuals who, in the absence of a screen and an internet network, ever they would have committed illegal activity [9].

Paradoxically, it is precisely users who use chat rooms and social networks to feel free to commit crimes, their imagination extends into the online space without boundaries.

In past years, we could interact through visual contact, body language and physical appearance.

That said, even the network and digital media present a “shadow zone” as they have not helped to limit this phenomenon indeed, according to former FBI agent Douglass [10], the new crime has grown in parallel with the birth of new technologies and online communication methods.

The interaction is faster, often instrumental, it goes from one chat to another, from one email to another, and the lack of limitations and self-control have made cyberspace a deceptive sensual and violent place.

Youth Cyber Culture on the Web and Media Practices

There is a very simple way of describing the relationship between network and adolescents: everything is based on fear and on the need for identity, on the need to appear and to tell stories.

This is because they are always connected, therefore “alone together, but only”, paraphrasing a homonymous volume of the anthropologist of cyberspace Turkle [11].

Young people perfectly know the new digital space in which they move building multiple identities, yet they would be unable to distinguish real and virtual, willing to accept the end of the private dimension, which unknowingly and paradoxically keep alive by acting through false identities on the net, often embodying roles of executioner and/or victim.

The ability to easily use social and digital media to interact with others automatically multiplies the messages that each individual produces of himself.

There is a big and important difference between “being in public” and “being public” in a virtual space.

Teenagers instead of acting to achieve privacy, thus limiting the visibility of online content and their actions on social platforms, develop other strategies to obtain it in public [12].

The phenomenon of selfie, the habit of taking pictures with your smartphone and spreading them a few seconds later on the web, is one of the new mass practices and strategies of “social showcasing”, which are a communication model based on the spectacularization and the display of one’s external charm [13].

In 2001 the French psychiatrist Serge Tisseron proposed the term “esteem” to indicate the desire that drives many individuals to stage part of their intimacy on television, while today that movement has taken on a considerable breadth on the Internet [14].

The relationship that binds intimacy and esteem can be understood only on condition that a third element is involved: self-esteem.

The construction of the self-esteem does indeed need intimacy (its own space), but also of extimacy, which allows the validation of itself by the other.

The desire to find oneself is primary and recognition by other users, within digital platforms, is not the easiest way to get there.

Tisseron [14] also stresses that one of the dangers of this new online practice is to think of esteem as the simple implementation of one’s intimate desires, particularly of a sexual and aggressive nature.

The need to document one’s presence within the media arena and the need to obtain pleasure, deriving from the action of immortalizing oneself in a photo, in some cases leads to ignoring dramatic events and does not stop even in the face of death.

One example is the story of two young Americans, Chelsie and Jared, who took the initiative to take a selfie next to their friend who died of overdose¹.

An interesting element that unites the practices of use and consumption of young people concerns the social dimension of digital media: using the media to strengthen the relationship with peers (friendship-driven practices), to cultivate on-line the relationships that usually entertain in the presence [15].

Physical and digital spaces merge, thus losing the real/virtual meaning and influencing experience and interactions; digital and social media can increase access to one’s intimacy, but performance identity made by each subject within cyberspace, is implemented with strong intentions of social desirability.

The effort that is made, is not to seem inadequate to the rules that they consider acceptable, if only in relation to the group of reference that was thought to address the flow of communication [15].

The central issue is that there is no “digital dualism” between real and virtual life, as pointed out by the sociologist Nathan Jurgenson, and the phenomenon of cyber bullying and the multiple forms of Net Addiction (dependence Network), they tend to worsen their own in the absence of this awareness².

American psychologist, believes that spending a lot of time connected, bring the young person to experience over time an increasingly intense need to connect to the network and show themselves publicly, losing the ability to exercise control and failing more to interrupt the prolonged connections [16].

In the first research on the subject, the scholar was able to identify three distinct phases, linked to forms of deviance and dependence on cyberspace: involvement (curiosity to use what the Net offers us), replacement (friends and people with whom we shared the everyday life are in fact replaced by new users known on-line), escape (the longer and longer links cause in time loneliness, frustration, emotional excitement, identity and relational problems).

One could speak of a contemporary world as a post-ideological youth, since it is now difficult to decipher with the categories of interpretation from the past such as ethics, politics, identity.

Beyond Cyber Bullying: The Cyber-Gangs

In addition to the numerous cases of cyber bullying that occurred

¹ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/weird-news/crystal-meth-pair-t-or-ok-sick-4133600>.

² <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality/>

in recent years in Italy³, recent criminological studies [17,18] highlight how new phenomena of juvenile crime, at times similar to bullying, are emerging: that of cyber-gangs.

Increasingly, in fact, youth gangs use social networks strategically to build and strengthen their identity, define micro-celebrity paths and distribute photos/videos of beatings, torture and murder: this is what emerges in the recent media story of the real⁴.

A macabre “show” that becomes a daily performance through the media.

Such content uploaded on the Net, indicate on the one hand, how young criminal groups use the web to coordinate their activities, such as the transportation and export of illegal material, on the other, how they are using online social networks for communicating privately, reinforcing their image and verbally attacking, in a violent way, victims chosen in totally random ways⁵.

Womer and Bunker [17] have analyzed how the gangs on the border between Mexico and the United States, exploit the interactive nature of new media for the management of drug trafficking and weapons or to brag about their “heroic deeds”, spreading images publicly looking for like and celebrities.

The criminal behavior performed by youth gangs can be seen as a “normal” means of achieving a status, in addition those who are part of a subculture of violence, learn the propensity to practice it and share an attitude favoring the use of violent methods [19,20].

For these types of behavior, although they can be undertaken at all ages, attract especially those whose age is between adolescence and maturity [20].

About Latin bands Groups for example, considered for a long time the most dangerous and violent for their uninviting initiation rites (beatings and rapes of about 13 and 18 seconds), such as MS-13, M-18 and Latin Kings, present even in Northern Italy, they are building their virtual image, increasing their level of interaction and visibility.

Also in this case the online space is a further stage to show their victims, the injuries reported in the clashes for the control of the territory, tattoos and much more, but the most worrying element that emerges is that the protagonists of these actions are almost always young teenagers.

In this way the media arena is transformed into a space able to provide regular and daily occasions in which to exhibit emotions, anger, fears, resentment and fascination.

According to a study, published by the International Journal of Cyber Criminology, there are more than 6,000 followers of these bands on MySpace platforms, Facebook and Twitter, Telegram⁶, often attracted and recruited within these same spaces, new users who appear to be sensitive to the values and lifestyle of the gang.

A youth gang student and professor of criminology at Sam Houston State University, what happens on the social platforms is perfectly in line with what happens in the streets: what is created is a “electronic-

virtual graffiti wall “that can no longer be eliminated [21].

The convergence of urban and digital spaces is increasingly influencing band behavior [18]. The Internet is by its nature a public and interactive environment, therefore much stronger than any brand or symbol typical of a gang, it offers a free space to the criminal group to promote violent performances, transforming them into viral contents.

Historically, the rather strict territorial boundaries limited the clashes between gang members, but on the web, within digital platforms, this is no longer possible and hate languages, as violent behavior can circulate creating effects at the social level.

Young people belonging to gangs of Chicago, for example, have all become weapons and a Twitter account: this condition encourages further violence even on the road [18].

Immediate and simple access to social media it can extend the scope of threats and consequently reactive action in those urban spaces that criminology defines as “subcultural”.

What we see are new forms of interaction between criminals looking for respect, visibility and “survival strategies” to promote the gang culture and enhance their web-reputation⁷.

Bearing in mind the level of transparency offered by the web, it is no coincidence that videos and images published in their social profiles appear as too general content: what we find are rap songs, clashes between rival bands, pornographic content, situations that depict use and sales of drugs.

There is the possibility that these contents are directly downloaded by Google or other sites for the sole purpose of overloading their pages of information, not revealing the identity of the individual page manager, nor the quantity and type of illegal activities committed, but at the same time, being able to communicate to visitors about their profiles and new members, what it means to live as a gangster.

The typical forms of cyber violence used by gangs on the Net they are the same ones that constitute the behavior of a cyber-bully (flaming, impersonation, exclusion): what changes are the effects, duration and level of violence.

The hate comment of a cyber bully is different from that published by a member of a criminal group on social channels: that of the latter in fact, skips the phase of frustration, the humiliation of the victim and often turns directly into murder in the lap a few hours.

In April 2014, the nineteen year old Gakirah Barnes, a girl from the gang world of Chicago, published heavy tweets containing threats against policemen and rival gangs, posting some of his gunshot photos, indicating the address of an apartment frequented at the time by her and her peers: a few hours later, she was killed a few blocks away from one of the rival gangs⁸.

This behavior raises not only new questions concerning the identity of who manages the pages and the contents on the Net within the criminal group and their level of awareness about what it means to show itself publicly in the online spaces, but it is evident how the number is increasing of illegal behavior even within social media.

⁷https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257252945_Internet_banging_New_trends_in_social_media_gang_violence_masculinity_and_hip_hop.

⁸www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2616016/The-life-death-real-Lil-Snoop-Meet-teenage-queen-Chicagos-gangland-grew-warzone-turned-killing-avenge-brothers-murder.html.

³<http://www.lastampa.it/2017/04/20/cultura/scuola/e20/cronaca/bullismo/bullismo-e-cyberbullismo-unemergenza-sociale-vFVGhZwKHarr7ixA3RyzEO/pagina.html>.

⁴<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/117503/mall-mayhem-and-race-reality-arnold-alert>.

⁵www.ocregister.com/2012/01/06/santa-ana-celebrates-drop-in-homicides/

⁶www.cybercrimejournal.com/davidcarl_011julyjcc.pdf.

A first great paradox emerges in this regard: criminal activities by their nature require planning and a secret action, but to be successful, the criminal groups find themselves forced to act today in a public and transparent space like the Net [22].

Interesting study on street American gangs conducted by the forensic analyst Rossana Del Zio, specialized in the analysis of organized crime, through the creation of an application able to narrate, through navigable maps, the evolution of the bands, their history and how to use social networks average⁹.

The purpose of the app is to tell the evolution of street gangs in the US with feedback in Italy, because many of these since the end of the '800, were formed after the migration of Italian groups.

Thanks to this study it was possible to map and identify hundreds of gangs through social networks.

It's possible now using some specific tools as: hashtag, geolocation and keywords within the platforms Facebook and Twitter.

This could be interpreted as an advantage in terms of public investigation and security.

For the criminologist Collins [22] we can see how the same crime today is to self-limit itself in society.

This self-limiting process begins when a certain criminal organization begins to be more successful and tends to expand into a "small society" with its own rules and hierarchies.

Not being able to work in the open and in isolation, it automatically begins to tend towards normalcy and regularity: Crime works best when it is more organized, but the more it becomes, the more it will tend to self-discipline and respect the laws [22].

Therefore, "crime and society oscillate back and forth on this dialectic of paradoxes (...), if social life creates crime, crime creates its antithesis: crime drives away the crime" [22].

Conclusion

The analysis of the gangs on the Net, the recruitment techniques, the new languages, rituals and forms of self-celebration, are aspects that have not been scientifically addressed, especially at European level, while the attention of the mass media on these issues has been quite high.

On the basis of the above, two issues remain open and particularly interesting: the first concerning the construction of a digital identity of the young criminal groups with related communication strategies adopted within the social-digital platforms, the second, concerning the presence of new (and far from clear) elements of victimization accompanied by more and more episodes of petty crime in which appears a sudden and escalation of violence that a casual choice of victims lured online.

Western societies seem to have in common the refusal of both institutional and social authority especially in younger subjects; violent behavior of a physical, verbal or psychological nature can all be classified as acts of rupture of the social fabric and express a strong need for belonging, as a basis for the construction of the identity of the adolescent.

Within the media arena, violence, victims and perpetrators, scenes of a crime, acquire an increasingly economic value, deriving from the

type of narration put in place; the risk is that a "culture of cruelty" will increasingly prevail, fueled not only by the spectacularization of certain types of deviant events and behavior, but by a "refined de-selection of what we see" [23].

Violence in the media turns into daily trans-media narratives that perhaps guarantees a simple and illusory entry into the world of micro-celebrity: we are all active publics, "spect-actors" "who share and access to thousands of contents, embody different roles in apparently connected spaces, manipulating words to manipulate reality and building multiple identities.

These new processes of communication-action that we tend to personalize and control, often in an unconscious and irresponsible way, only reinforce that individualism, that aggression and that desire for domination and control of the Other that characterize human relationships and the beginning of a new "culture of violence".

It is therefore not only a problem of communication and the ability to immerse oneself in the Net, but also a profound educational and cultural problem.

There is no longer a unique cultural center, but a number of often contradictory value-options, different; there are a plurality of subcultures (often deviant and violent) definable as a subset of cultural elements shared by the members a group, understood as "internal relational more substantial than the external one, which place in open or concealed opposition to the norms and values of the dominant culture in which they are inserted" [24].

In the digital age the media are configured as projections of the human being and not devices separate from him.

The development of digital and intercultural skills, understood as new processes of literacy, appears to be beyond that necessary, the only peaceful way for coexistence and greater collaboration and communication in online and offline environments.

Man uses the media, but it is himself today that becomes medium: the web is no longer a space in which man communicates or a simple "technological game", but it's now a social space, made up of people: this is also a new ethical reflection of our communication.

According to the sociologist Morin [25] it is necessary to teach young people the human condition and this can also happen through the more aware use of new technologies: "the factors that foster mental growth are equivalent to the strength to elaborate life, and to awareness that thought, science, the arts, are irrigated by the deep forces of affectivity, dreams, anguishes, desires, fears, hopes".

Young people find themselves living in such a complex and competitive world, where flexibility and openness to continuous changes are required; one is therefore forced to confront the precariousness and to have to continually postpone the choices for the future.

What has been put forward so far raises two issues that need to be urgently re-considered in order to be able to answer the question: "where does all this uneasiness arise today that clearly emerges in the new youth media practices?"

Nowadays it's so important to consider two reasons:

- 1) The space in which young people move: so minimal, reduced, confused in school, in the family, in the media and so transparent and artificially expanded by the "webized" society;
- 2) The values: the situation in which we find ourselves should not

⁹<http://www.lettera43.it/it/articoli/attualita/2015/07/06/app-per-studiare-le-street-gang-del-zio-le-scoviamo-sui-social-the-news/> / 151892 /

be considered as much in terms of absence or loss of bases of reference, but rather of multiplication and inconsistency of the same.

It is necessary to recover the ability of listening by the adult, which presupposes silence, and is the prerogative of acceptance and cooperation, it would mean leaving the process of asocial and self-celebrating communication-relationship in the world of cyberspace.

But not only that, it would mean above all to demonstrate to young people the intention to want to know, consider and welcome their inner dimension: it's would be possible also in a virtual spaces, going beyond the "culture of connection" and rebuilding a "culture of relationship".

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