Social Media and Symbolic Violence

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Abstract
On this essay, I briefly discuss by means of a few examples how social media is used to reproduce and legitimate violent discourses, focusing on the concept of symbolic violence.

Keywords
social media, discourse, symbolic violence

One of the key issues that my research group has been focusing their attention on in the last years is the mechanisms through which social media reinforce and promote violence. Violence promoted by social media is usually not the most perceivable one in contrast to, as Žižek (2008) would point, the “subjective” type, such as, for example, terrorism or robbery.

But social media is violent because it is a medium of discourse and discourse is strongly related to another type of violence, the symbolic violence. Žižek (2008) explains symbolic violence as an objective type of violence, which happens through language. While objective violence is easily perceived against a background of “normality,” it is precisely in this background that symbolic violence stands, sustaining, through language, the current status quo. Bourdieu (1999) also proposed a concept of symbolic violence as the one produced through language. However, to him, it has another effect: Symbolic violence naturalizes the discourse about things and legitimates the domination system. Violence is thus also a product of discourse, and its effect is the naturalization of the power (and dominance) relations.

Discourse, in this sense, is not merely what is said, nor only the meaning of an utterance, but rather a system of knowledge created by what can and can’t be said. This concept comes from Foucault (1972), who argues that discourse is a form of representing the world in terms of relationships of power and dominance and its production is controlled through certain rules accepted by society.

But what does this have to do with social media? In my opinion, social media have, in many aspects, given “superpowers” to symbolic violence. Social media have provided a key space for the reproduction of all sorts of discourses, including violent ones. We’ve been studying these cases in our research group (name of author’s group) and will give some examples of the ongoing research.

Social network sites such as Facebook comprise social networks that are usually bonded to different social spaces with different interaction rules. Networks from work, family, and friends are all in the same space. It is thus very hard for users to devise the adequate tone to speak to such different groups, what can and can’t be said, and to set and perceive contextual rules for the interaction. Person-to-person communication is also organized through feedback signals that inform people when they are entering a “dangerous” or “tense” zone during speech and allow them to change subjects or mend what was said. This information doesn’t exist online. Users are “speaking” to a screen, not a person. They may imagine their audiences as someone who agrees with them in that situation. But there are many others, many who are not always “visible” (as boyd [2010] argues, “invisible audiences”). Thus, what is published to some audience may often offend some others, who may react violently. And because of this “context collapse” (boyd, 2010) of social media, these tools seem to be often allowing the creation of animosity and aggressiveness among social networks.

Brazilian 2014 elections, for example, were an emblematic case. While there was a political polarization between the two runner-up parties (PT—the worker’s party; and PSDB—Brazilian Social Democracy Party) with hostility between candidates, social media reflected an even more polarized country. People started posting aggressive and offensive messages in social media against voters who, instead of flame wars that usually happen in forums and other sites through anonymous people, this time are using their own profiles on sites like Facebook to be aggressive.

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with their own neighbors and family. When the election results came out, reelecting Mrs Dilma Rousseff (by a very close margin, 51.6% against the runner-up Aécio Neves with 48.3%), showing which states she won, the aggressiveness became even more serious. Social media was flooded by racist and xenophobic messages (Figure 1) against the poorer states where Mrs Rousseff had won with larger margins.\textsuperscript{1} The violence online was unprecedented and reported by conventional media all around the country.

However, symbolic violence is not always self-evident. Sometimes, other types of messages reinforce and legitimate violence. We’ve been also studying these forms of discourses. One particular case is what people tweeted about “women” during Women’s International Day in 2014. We found out, for example, that stereotypes about women being “frivolous” and “weak” and that they should aspire to be “beautiful” were present in most of the retweeted messages in several countries (Figure 2).

When people share the message that girls should aspire to be pretty, they are reproducing a discourse of thousands of years of patriarchy. Even though it is sometimes unconsciously done, its effects are devastating because it helps the naturalization of these ideas (as Bourdieu [1999] argues) about women. Not only is one person saying this, but rather hundreds of people are reinforcing this discourse, creating a knowledge (Foucault, 1972) that this is how things are. It may be a tweet, it may be a picture of beautiful very thin women, or it may be a fun meme about obesity. Each and every time, timelines of people are flooded by reinforced symbolic violence.

Social media, obviously, are not all bad. Social media can help promote democracy through contact with different opinions, help education through the spread of information, and also defy the dominant discourse by proposing and legitimating different ideas. However, does it do such things? What are the effects of this symbolic violence in social media for society, in the long run? Does symbolic violence online correlate with violence offline, as suggested by Žižek (2008)? Can we counter-act these discourses? If so, how?

We need more research to understand these things. I hope Social Media + Society will help us in this matter, by inspiring, publishing, and being the place to discuss this subject.

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\textbf{Note}

\textsuperscript{1} http://globalvoicesonline.org/2014/10/09/tumblr-account-shames-online-hate-directed-at-brazils-north/

\textbf{Figure 1.} Hate speech captured in Facebook. The message reads, “That’s it, black and poor should vote for PT, now with Marina [Silva, a black candidate in 2014 Brazilian elections] out of the game we don’t need the vote of miserable people. We want the vote of quality people. Black and poor can fuck themselves.”

\textbf{Figure 2.} Meme from Facebook. The image reads, “Is trafficking ugly women . . . drug traffick?”
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Author Biography

Raquel Recuero (PhD, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul) is a Professor of Media and Cyberculture at the Universidade Católica de Pelotas. Her research interests currently include the investigation of social media phenomena related to discourse and violence, activism and political participation, and social capital.