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“It’s to trust not trusting”: tensions and conflicts between LGBT activism and media

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between Brazilian LGBT activism and the uses of the Internet, specifically in the context of tensions and conflicts with the traditional media. Through the observation of four digital platforms pro-LGBT and interviews with the responsible activists, we seek to contribute to the debate about the impact of these new spaces of communication in the strategies of LGBT activism. The tactical and creative uses of the Internet enable activists to dispute narratives by compensating the unilateral information flow of traditional media, especially in terms of visibility, diversity of representations, dialogue strategies and the search for recognition.

Keywords

LGBT Activism; Media; Internet uses.

Introduction

Issues related to gender and sexuality have assumed a central role in current political agendas, especially during the 2018 presidential elections. The return of the discussion on sexual reversal pseudo-therapies, popularly called “gay cure”¹; the commotion surrounding the “*Escola Sem Homofobia*” project, known pejoratively as “kit-gay”²; and the discrepancies between the implementation of policies to fight LGBTphobic violence and the speeches that accompany them, are some examples of this complex conjuncture.

With the subsequent Jair Bolsonaro’s election, such topics continued to receive special attention. In his first documented act, the President of the Republic formalized, in January 2019, a Provisional Measure³ removing the LGBT population from the policies and guidelines to promote human rights, under the competence of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights. In April, the government banned the use of words and terms related to the “LGBT universe” in advertising and publicity pieces for all Brazilian state-owned companies.

The frustration with institutional policy can hinder the perception of other forms of collective action developed in daily life, challenging cultural standards, such as those carried out over the internet, for example. E-mail lists, discussion forums, blogs, YouTube channels, pages on social media, present themselves as new resources for engagement and politicization that redesign the communication practices of contemporary social movements.

In cyberspace, activists have found a potentially democratic place that, although subject to information niches and the restrictions imposed by the logics of each platform, represents a way of contesting the homogenizing performance of traditional media, as well as the possibility to promote debates; fill representativeness gaps; counter-scheduling the media and building new forms of organization around their causes, often spreading out, in a complementary and simultaneous way, to the streets.

The present article integrates a broader research that analyzes the social uses of internet in the fight against LGBTphobia through the life stories of Brazilian activists. Here, we address the relationship between LGBT activism and internet uses focusing on the convergences and conflicts established with the media. Our main objective is to point out how the interviewed activists perceive the relationship between activism and the traditional media in terms of visibility, diversity of representations, dialogue strategies, etc. Also, how they understand the new communication spaces’ potential in redirecting the media.

The term media will be used as a reference to the group of printed, radio and television communication vehicles, as well as to their respective spaces in the digital environment. Based on the proposal of Eliséo Verón (1997), we consider as media the means of communication marked by plurality and simultaneous access to messages. Likewise, “mainstream media” and “traditional media” are used to designate vehicles of national or regional reach, due to the wide circulation or social influence, differentiating them from those with less influence and greater independence, also called “alternatives”. Although the theoretical problems and contradictions are recognized, such definitions are similar to the interviewees’ use of the terms.

1 The term “gay cure” refers to the 234/11 Legislative Decree, which sought to authorize psychological treatment to change the sexual orientation of homosexuals. In 2017, the matter was discussed again due to a court decision that granted an injunction authorizing psychologists to offer such sexual reversal pseudo-therapies, prohibited since 1999 by the Federal Council of Psychology.

2 The project, which consisted on a set of didactic materials by the Ministry of Education (MEC) to address gender, sexual diversity and prejudice with teachers in schools, caused great controversy among conservative sectors of society and it’s distribution was forbidden, in 2011, by President Dilma Rousseff. However, he was infamously rescued during the 2018 elections.

3 Through Provisional Measure No.870 and Decree 9.668/2019, the promotion of LGBT’s rights is in charge of a board subordinate to the National Secretariat for Global Protection, which represents a significant loss of status in relation to the treatment previously given.

After mapping pro-LGBT digital platforms, such as, websites, blogs and pages on social media, two pre-investigative premises were strengthened: LGBT activism has expanded its performance on the internet⁴; and this performance results in a broad, unstructured, and sometimes conflicting scenario between different groups. The survey on our field, although not exhaustive in its proposal, was fundamental to select participating activists. Then, we conducted in-depth interviews, over two years, with the activists responsible for such platforms.

There is a growing interest in researching the relations between the LGBT movement and the Brazilian media. Important contributions such as the works of Ribeiro (2010), Péret (2011), Leal and Carvalho (2012) and Coletto (2013) were conducted in the last decade. Our proposal, therefore, is based on the desire to centralize the activists voices involved in this relationship.

Considering the unique roles they play in LGBT activism, we have chosen to maintain, with due authorization, the identification of participating activists. Thus, through the observation of these communicational spaces and the interviews, we seek to contribute to the debate about the impact of the digital environment in the reconfiguration of the relationship between Brazilian LGBT activism and the traditional media.

Visibility and representation in LGBT daily life

History is the sequence of facts, changes, revolutions that weave the future of societies. It is also the narration of all of this, as Michelle Perrot (2007) reminds us. When looking at the historiography of women, the author points out that history, since it came into existence as a scientific discipline, from the 19th century onwards, is strongly marked by a male and heterosexual view. It is necessary, therefore, to be understood as the result of interpretations and representations based on asymmetric power relations.

The androcentric perspective crossed the centuries and held up the symbolic division of the sexes in a hierarchical way under the supposed biological neutrality of individuals. Men and women were understood as separate beings. Different anatomies, different essences and, therefore, different social functions. This concept of gender was progressively challenged by the postwar women's movements (Haraway, 2004), and it was up to the feminists of the mid-20th century to rethink it beyond the essentialist perspective.

In 1975, anthropologist Gayle Rubin elaborated the so-called "sex/gender system", stimulating the theoretical rupture that was to come in the following decade. When debating the oppression and social subordination of women, Rubin (1993) denies biological determinism and sees gender as a system of social representations guided by the individual's belonging to a biological sex intertwined in domination relations.

The concept of gender, in the 1980's, started to serve as an analytical tool (Scott, 1995) and, at the same time, a political tool (Louro, 1997). It refers to the way in which sexual characteristics are brought into social practice and made part of the historical process. According to Louro (1997), gender is now used with strong relational appeal, since the justifications for inequalities were sought no longer in biological differences, but in social arrangements, conditions of access to society's resources, and forms representation.

To Scott (1995), a perception of gender inequalities allows it to be used as a category to understand, explain, and justify other hierarchical relationships, such as class and sexuality, by the association between positions of power and what is conventionally as masculine. Body, gender and sexuality (and by extension, sex, desire, sexual practices and identities), acquire nuclear position in individual experiences, and also in the way these experiences are interpreted in contemporary societies, strongly rooted in heteronormative

⁴ Of the 106 mapped platforms that are updated frequently, 40% were created in the last five years (2014-2019).

values.

According to Miskolci (2009), heteronormativity expresses the expectations, demands, and obligations that derive from the assumption of heterosexuality as something natural. Going beyond the notion of “compulsory heterosexuality”⁵, it represents a set of basic precepts to the social processes of regulation and control. According to the author, it is a regime of visibility where heterosexual monogamy is sustained as a norm, while other sexualities are marginalized.

In this context, communication processes are at the center of a complex phenomenon of interaction between cultural values, instances of power and society in general, intervening widely in everyday life. Understanding the participation of traditional media in the production of meanings is fundamental to understand how differences and social hierarchies are produced and reiterated.

Therefore, we questioned four activists linked to the Brazilian LGBT movement as to their perceptions about the relationship between gender/sexuality and traditional media. Antonio Kvalo, designer, stylist, gay activist, and one of the creators of *Tem Local*⁶ - the first collaborative platform to map LGBTphobia in Brazil; Eric Seger, physical educator and trans activist, co-founder of the group *Homens Trans em Ação* - HTA⁷; Hailey Kass, trans and bisexual activist, writer and creator of the *Transfeminismo*⁸ blog; and Natasha Avital, public servant and bisexual activist, member of *Bi-sides*⁹ - one of the main sites focused on bisexuality issues in the country.

In the matter of visibility strategies, two subjects gained prominence: news coverage about LGBT Pride Parades and representations in telenovelas. Inspired by the Stonewall riots¹⁰ and spread throughout the United States and Europe, the LGBT Parades arrived in Brazil in 1995, in Rio de Janeiro, and became the movement’s greatest public-media symbol. In Facchini’s (2012) view, they are the most innovative social and political phenomenon in urban Brazil, uniting protest and celebration, and setting media coverage due to the strong public appeal.

Trans activist Eric Seger says in interview:

Prides are the moment when we can put our message out on the street. We can show that you are there, organized and have things to talk about. And it is also important for other trans men or families of trans men, who do not know that there is an organized movement close to them, to be able to approach us. And for us it is important in that sense, to be present, to put on a flag, to wear the group’s t-shirts. You are there carrying the HTA symbol, this affects people, and gives us the visibility we need (Eric’s Interview).

Antonio, one of the creators of *Tem Local*?, says media coverage on Pride is often generic and, at times, repetitive:

Year in, year out, is the same: they talk about the theme, how many people participated, then the number of thefts, images of people drinking and some straight family talking about the importance of supporting the cause. If you seen one, you saw them all. But

5 Term used for the first time by Adrienne Rich, american feminist theorist, in the essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, written in 1980 and published in 1986. It represents the expectation of a continuity between sex, gender, gender identity and sexual identity, in that the final cause is heterosexuality (Miskolci, 2009).

6 Retrieved January 10th, 2017, from: Available in: www.temlocal.com.br.

7 Retrieved January 10th, 2017, from: www.facebook.com/HTAContato.

8 Retrieved January 10th, 2017, from: www.transfeminismo.com. 7

9 Retrieved January 10th, 2017, from: www.bisides.com.

10 On June 28th, 1969, a group of trans, gays, bisexuals, and lesbians resisted police repression in New York. Known as the Stonewall Riot, the date is recognized by literature as the beginning of the civilly organized LGBT movement.

at least they are talking, right. I think they are trying (Antonio's Interview).

The activist's views reflect the complexity of this issue by identifying a pro-LGBT narrative on mainstream media while also reinforcing the LGBT agenda invisibility. Another example is the Lesbians and Bisexuals Women's March in São Paulo, which takes place on the Saturday before the LGBT Parade, since 2002. Natasha, a member of the Bi-sides, highlights some disparities:

The movement in Brazil is still very GGGG. Proof of this is that many people, including newspapers, still call the Parade "Gay Parade" or "Gay Pride Parade". And the Women's March is both a form of resistance to it and an evidence of it. There is no support, no sponsorship, not even a note in the media. Not even publicity. There are people who cross and ask if it is a "pre-stop" event. So, this is an event to fight for this visibility in society, but also within the movement, you know? (Natasha's Interview).

Even though the Parades does not use the title "Gay Pride" since 2008, many vehicles insist on maintaining the nomenclature and end up reinforcing the erasure of lesbians, bisexuals and trans people. The criticism made by Natasha is not new and similar tensions were registered in works like MacRae (1990); Facchini (2005); Simões and Facchini (2009). In the interview with Hailey Kass, creator of the Transfeminism blog, we identified a similar criticism:

There is no way to talk about visibility without the Pride Parades. It is hard to ignore three million LGBT people on the street. So the visibility exists, but we have to think about that visibility. For example, October 22 is the Trans Depathologization's International Day but, normally, you will not find any news about it. Even inside the movement itself. It looks like LGBT activists have no interest in the trans' fight. You have to keep remembering people that the movement is not just G, there are L, B and T too (Hailey's Interview).

Hailey's assessment reiterates the criticism previously pointed out by Natasha about underrepresentation in the media and also within LGBT activism. These dissensions are accentuated as we move forward in the debate on media representations. Natasha, for example, highlighted the need for a careful approach, in order to avoid the perpetuation of already known stereotypes:

We had a really bad experience with the Galileu Magazine a few years ago. They were doing a story about bisexuality¹¹ and I was one of the interviewees. The reporter seemed very interested, asked several pertinent questions, etc. But before publishing, she sent me an email to check it out. The title was already something like "A generation without labels" and I was shocked. We have labels, we have names, the name is bisexual! But the story came out anyway (Natasha's Interview).

The stereotype behaves, as described by João Freire Filho (2004), reducing the whole variety of characteristics of a given social group to some attributes considered essential. By encouraging intuitive knowledge about the Other, usually through pre-defined judgments, the stereotype acts as a form of social control, helping to maintain symbolic boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, the integrated and the deviant, the acceptable and the unacceptable (Freire Filho, 2004). On the impact of such representations, Natasha adds:

Biphobia, in a cultural spectrum, is the lack of representativeness. It's basic, the society have to stop working with the assumption that people like me don't exist. In a recent telenovela, for example, there was a bisexual character, and I was very happy with that. But at the begginig I thought she was a lesbian. The reason? Through media and social networks I only saw people talking about "the lesbian couple". It is common in literature, cinema and media products in general to place bisexuality as something that a partner will correct or define in you (Natasha's Interview).

11 Retrieved September 19th, 2017, from: www.revistagalileu.globo.com/Revista/noticia/2015/01/nova-revolucao-sexual.html.

Natasha's words reflect a critical position on the erasure of bisexuality that can be explicit or diluted in the idea of "people without labels". Similarly, Seffner (2003) highlights, in his research on media representations of bisexuals, the hetero/homosexuality polarization as a perpetuating agent of the "undecided bisexuals" representation's whose "stability" or "correction", as Natasha points out, is achieved with a monogamous relationship.

To represent is to attribute meanings, produce norms and reveal a value systems that points to a social desire. It is through the representations that we give meaning to our experiences and formulate identities. These meanings also determine identities that are "correct" and those that represent "deviants". Such a distinction is evidenced in Hailey's assessment:

Representativeness and visibility have significantly improved in the last years. There are some trans artists gaining prominence, some characters appearing in telenovelas, but still far from representing a multiplicity of bodies. Personally, I do not feel represented because I am fat, you know. it is difficult to see a fat trans woman in media products. Gordophobia seems to me to be more problematic than the trans issue nowadays. And the trans people are always very "passable". It is a limited representation, within a certain standard. Maybe one day we will get there. But I will not hold my breath (Hailey's Interview).

Passability, explains Hailey, is the possibility of "impersonating" cis men or cis women. According to Butler (2015), these are socially established norms of intelligibility. Intelligible genders are those that maintain coherent relationships between sex, gender, sexual practice and desire. For example, an individual born with female genitals must identify as a woman, assume social roles reserved for women and become sexually and emotionally involved with men. In Hailey's view, although there is an increase of trans people presence in the media, the available representations are still centered on bodies that are close to the aesthetic standards valued by hetero-cisnormativity.

Ribeiro (2010), in his book "TV in the closet", highlights the implicit ways television products are able to propagate heterocentric views and maintain hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality at the same time that repel the prejudiced label. Such control is also perceived by Beleli (2009) when analyzing LGBT visibility in the media. The author notice a increasing participation of LGBT people in telenovelas and public advertisements, however, she draws attention to the "sanitized" representations, often permeated by normalized social conventions, such as a monogamous relationship with a promise of marriage (Beleli, 2009, p.128).

Eric makes a weighted assessment of the unprecedented trans gay man representation on television:

Did this character leave a mark on people? The telenovela [*A Força do Querer*] tried to be politically correct by having someone – a trans man character - explaining what means to be a trans man, and etc. But at the same time, there was another trans man character "tricking" people about his gender. So I don't know if this question was properly explained, but I think that, in the end, it was positive to be able to refer to that. To say: "look, remember that character on TV?" I will not be picky and demand everything correctly. It is a step by step matter. In our group [HTA], some members complained about how things were approached, but most identified themselves with the characters. They also said it was helpful to begin certain conversations, and that the families cried watching because they identified themselves as well (Eric's Interview).

Like Natasha and Hailey, Eric highlights the limitation of what to expect and what can be achieved through media representation, because at the same time that the telenovela in question tried to build a narrative close to reality, it also reinforced the opposition between "a real man" and "a fake man". For the trans activist, the positive point was the potential to connect the transexuality subject to social daily life.

The representativeness debate as an LGBT politics has advanced in activism and also in academia.

The number of LGBT characters is growing, mainly in international productions¹². However, in addition to the quantity, the interviewees highlight the importance of paying attention to the ways in which these representations are constructed. We agree with Colling's analysis (2011) when reinforces that media products can provoke socially relevant discussions, as long as they offer diverse representations and humanized characters.

The media occupies a central spot in our culture by contributing to the understanding and production of meanings. It filters and shapes realities through its representations, providing criteria and references for the conduct of daily life. Although it is not our intention to analyze exhaustively the representations built on LGBT identities, understanding the activists' views on the meanings available in the media is fundamental to visualize the personal and political motivations that result in the creation and maintenance of activism platforms.

Activism and the media: between negotiation and surveillance

In a scenario of globalization and computerization, social movements have diversified and, to the same extent, become more complex. Strengthened by the uses and appropriations of information and communication technologies (ICTs), these movements inaugurated new forms of interaction, new networks for the dissemination of knowledge and new visibility mechanisms. Networked social movements, as they were designated in the recent work of Manuel Castells (2003; 2013; 2013b), are defined as collective actions of the 21st century that are manifested in and through the internet and seek the transformation of society's values and institutions.

However, Castells (2013b) emphasizes that such movements are not the result of the internet's development or any other technology. For the author, social movements arise from contradiction, conflicts and, mainly, from the desire to build alternative projects of society. At the same time, he explains that, although it is not a unique element in the formation of these collective actions, the internet goes beyond a purely instrumental role:

It creates the conditions for a form of common practice that allows a movement without leadership to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand. It protects from repression, maintaining communication between people in the movement and the society in general in the long march of social change required to overcome institutionalized domination (Castells, 2013b, p. 171).

It is necessary to emphasize, as Martín-Barbero (2006) recalls, that the technologies are not neutral. Today, more than ever, they constitute groups of condensation and interaction of economic and political interests with social mediations and symbolic conflicts (Martín-Barbero, 2006, p. 70). The internet is surrounded by the power of large business conglomerates and, at various levels, regulated by governments. In addition, it is necessary to consider the existing asymmetries in the conditions of access to new technologies, especially within the limits of digital exclusion, in order to avoid deterministic perspectives on their performance.

Another important point is brought up by Gustavo Cardoso (2007) when he underlined that the internet, as a place for circulation of discourses, can also lead to conservative appropriations, acting in the maintenance of social life as it is constituted, even within the same centralizing logic of mainstream media. The internet is constituted, therefore, through its uses.

The expansion of new technologies has driven the replacement of traditional hierarchical

12 The report *Where We Are on TV*, by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) group, specialized in media monitoring in relation to LGBTQ representations, points out that, in 2018, 8, 8% of the characters represented on open, cable and streaming TV were LGBTs, the highest percentage reached in fourteen years of research.

communication structures with flexible and horizontal structures, inaugurating a new model based on communication networks. This new form of communication provides the technological platform to enhance individual autonomy in relation to the society's institutions. Some examples are the communication established through online social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube and also blogs and websites.

The history of interactions between LGBT activism and the media is not new in Brazil. Several actions, such as open letters, rejection notes, right of reply, and etc, have been taken by groups linked to the movement in the last ten years. On tensions established between the LGBT movement and the Brazilian media Coletto's (2013) research points out a set of action strategies that mainly involve dialogue and legal activism addressed to a series of sectors, especially telenovelas, press media, advertising and music.

Here, we highlight a third strategy: the creative uses (De Certeau, 2011) of online communication spaces where minorities can subvert the grammar established by hegemonic media, challenging the dominant content and forms. By observing the selected platforms, we found the presence of multiple interaction strategies between activists and the media, but two stand out: there is a clear direction to fill gaps created by the State and the mainstream media regarding LGBT issues; and it is constant the negotiation and surveillance of how these media products address such topics.

Through these spaces, activist groups bring neglected subjects to the public domain, and through the production and distribution of information they encourage the dissemination of countless discussion. The *Homens Trans em Ação* (HTA) page on Facebook is an example. According to Eric, it emerged from the need to occupy a place ignored by the institutions:

There was no space to concentrate information on trans men in the country, you know. To be honest, information and knowledge are still lacking in schools, in universities, in the government, and in media in general. A lot of people don't even know that we exist, they don't know what it's like to be a trans man. That's why we created the page, to talk about what nobody else talks about (Eric's Interview).

Eric's criticism refers to the systematic erasure of the trans people's struggle in society. During the interviews, the activist remembered stories that reflect the importance of the HTA website on inform and guide men on their civil rights, health resources and public policies, as he discussed below.

There are few organized groups of trans men in Brazil. In the South we are the only ones, so we receive a lot of questions on the page. They ask about hormone therapy; how to start using the men's restroom; about where to get a Social Name Card. And it's our right. Here in the State [Rio Grande do Sul], at least. And frequently people do not know that they have this right, or if they do, they do not know how to guarantee it. So we explain, guide, indicate. It is important to have someone to talk to. Being a trans man is sometimes a very lonely process (Eric's Interview).

The activist's view reinforces the significance of the trans movement's presence on the internet, overcoming geographic-territorial barriers and allowing people from different places to come together. In her doctoral thesis, Simone Ávila (2014) followed several spaces where Brazilian transmen¹³ circulated and, after four years of participant observation, signaled the strong recurrence of isolation and social exclusion of trans people, especially due to prejudice and rejection in the family environment and school. Researches such as that of Ávila (2014) and Carvalho (2015) indicate support networks through the internet as the main sociability space for trans men.

13 In her work, Ávila (2014) explains she uses the term "transmen" because she imagined, at the beginning of the research, that this was a "native term" since at her first searches on the topic she found a blog called "Transhomem Brasil" (Transmen Brazil). However, over time, she realized that the most used term by her interlocutors were FTM (Female to Male) and male transexual (Ávila, 2014, p. 32). In our research, however, the term "trans man" was chosen because it is the term used by the interviewees, specially Eric.

In a similar way, the *Transfeminismo* blog connected women from all over the country around the debate, until then still rare, of transexuality allied to feminism. During the interviews, Hailey said:

Through Tumblr I learned that there was a feminist trend called transfeminism, so I started reading about it and thought “we need a debate like this here in Brazil”. Then I made a group on Facebook for some people that were interested and together we decided to create a website. At the time, there was no one else talking about it on the internet, and there are things that cis feminism does not achieve. We needed a space to debate specific issues of trans women. There is a lot of strength in being able to talk with those who understand the same pain (Hailey’s Interview).

Hailey, who identifies herself as trans and bisexual, reinforces that the idea was to create a safe environment for debate, but also for acceptance. Similarly, is Natasha’s narrative about the Bi-sides’ creation. Today, the website is the main communication platform focused on bisexuality and, like the Transfeminism blog, it was motivated by the lack of information spaces aimed at a specific LGBT segment. In addition to the website, Bi-sides also has a page, with more than 5,000 likes, and a moderated group on Facebook, which has 4,000 members:

We get a lot of messages and a lot of comments of people thanking us, saying that it is the only place they feel comfortable, that it is the only place where they do not need to explain themselves. I believe it is very important to feel like you don’t need to explain yourself. Because, sometimes, we are among people who are nice and accepting, but they don’t really understand our specific issues. So, there you are among people who truly see you, because everyone already knows what you’re talking about, you know? This is very important (Natasha’s Interview).

Research such as that of Nussbaumer (2004) and Daniliauskas (2014) has indicated the relevance of online sociability spaces, especially for LGBT youth, in the processes of recognition, emancipation and self-acceptance. In our interviews, the same can be seen. Activists have repeatedly indicated how expressive it is to be among peers in strengthening individuals and the LGBT movement itself.

Another relevant point in the relationship between activism and the media are the strategies of surveillance and dialogue constantly engaged through digital platforms. When we asked Eric about the positioning of HTA in relation to media products, the activist highlighted:

We need to keep an eye out, always. It’s to trust not trusting. Some approaches only reinforce prejudice. Sometimes the stories portray us as “a man who became a woman” or “a woman who became a man”. And that does not help us, quite the opposite. It is not any visibility that is good. In May [2017], *G1* website published a very cool article against the compulsory admission of transgender people in psychiatric institutions. They used the social name and everything. But then, in July, same year, a trans man was murdered here in Porto Alegre [Rio Grande do Sul] and at *Clicrbs*, which is from the same news conglomerate as *G1*, used his registered civil female name during the hole article. It is a double murder: they kill us and then deny us our identity (Eric’s Interview).

These two articles were shared on the HTA’s social media page. The first one, of the *G1* website, was reposted with the title “the importance of the media”¹⁴ and received praise for the socially responsible approach and proper use of articles and gender pronouns. The second one, from the newspaper *Zero Hora*, affiliated with the *Globo* media group, was accompanied by a disapproval note¹⁵ for repeatedly using the civil female name of a trans man.

The fight for the correct use of articles and gender pronouns for transgender people is perhaps

14 Retrieved September 13th, 2017, from: <https://www.facebook.com/htacontato/posts/691888494348058?tn=-R>.

15 Retrieved September 13th, 2017, from: <https://www.facebook.com/htacontato/posts/719133094956931?tn=-R>.

one of the oldest in the LGBT movement in relation to the media and, even so, the use of a male pronoun following the term “transvestite” or identifications by the registered civil name in journalistic articles remains very common. Antonio also pointed out this problem:

When we do not receive complaints directly on the platform, we end up receiving them through some newspaper article. And newspaper articles insist on calling trans people by their registered name. We have read horrible things, for example: the civil name highlighted plus “but answered by the nickname”, and then the social name. So we started with this process: “No! That person is a trans person and her name is these”. It is a denial of gender identity after another. So I think the role of activism is to correct the media, to try to improve information for society (Antonio’s Interview).

The interviewee points out the importance of an active role correcting news media. In a similar way, Eric describes the identity denial that occurs even after death as a “double murder”. The trans activist reiterates the line of argument presented by Antônio when he underlined the importance of a critical look at the representation of LGBT agenda in the media. Hailey, on the other hand, makes a different assessment than Eric and Antonio. For her, transphobia in media discourse has another main front:

To me, it seems that the slightly more committed newspapers have improved in terms of using the appropriate gender pronoun. And that is because the activists have been raising and criticizing this issue a lot. I think a big problem is the pathologization. People still do not have much sense of the trans issue outside the framework of pathology. For example, reinforcing the idea that the trans person will only feel complete after surgery. So, it seems to me that the most elementary questions, such as respect for the social name and the use of the correct pronouns, have improved a lot. But the notion of transexuality as a pathology is still very strong and very difficult to fight in the media, including the most progressive ones (Hailey’s Interview).

Hailey’s speech denounces the posture of exoticism and fetishism that trans bodies are often portrayed. Similarly, Eric criticized the news that refer to trans people as “a woman who became a man” or “a man who became a woman”. For both, that is an attempt to delegitimize trans bodies. The “sex-body” (the body-man and the body-woman), as defined by Berenice Bento (2006), finds its own discursive limits in transsexual experiences, since in them gender will give mean to the body, reversing one of the supporting pillars of for gender norms.

Gender identity is not an essence that gains visibility through acts and behaviors; on the contrary, it is the acts, linguistic and bodily, that build up the gendered subjects. Gender is, therefore, permeated by performativities (Butler, 2015). As Bento (2006) recalls, the looks used to the dualistic division of gender are lost when facing a trans body, which cross the seemingly fixed limits of male and female and claim, through their bodies and ways of being, an opposite identity of gender to that informed in their biology.

The activists’ views on traditional media’s attention to the LGBT population demands are therefore diverse. In common, they have a positive perception of the internet role in the recognition and political articulation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and trans people. As Facchini and França (2009) remind us, the LGBT movement is a complex social actor, necessarily in relation to other actors who influence it and are influenced by it. The same can be extended to activists who are part of it, whether in organizational contexts or not. Thus, although our effort to reflect these differences in the composition of the interviewees, it is far from representative of all the tensions and conflicts of Brazilian LGBT activism.

Final considerations

With the societal changes resulting from digital communication, power relations have also been transformed. To Castells (2015), power relations, the basis of the institutions that organize society, are largely built on people’s mentality through, among other structures, communication processes. Which,

in the author's view, constitutes a more decisive and lasting form of domination than subordination by intimidation or violence, as it occurs within a perspective of hegemony.

However, where there is power there is also counterpower, highlights Castells (2013). Represented by the social actors ability to challenge the power embedded in society's institutions in order to claim representation of their own values and interests. It is a deliberate attempt to change power relations by reprogramming networks around other values or breaking the prevailing alternations.

In this context, the internet presents itself as a broad, diversified, social space and less likely to the intervention of mediators. Upon observance of the restrictions, whether in relation to asymmetries in access conditions or in the limits imposed on their autonomy by the transnational capitalism market logic, the internet allows individuals to create new forms of communication as a compensatory force to the unilateral flow that is typical of the commercial media.

Networked, LGBT activists find unprecedented potential for interaction and organization. The digital platforms here analyzed, without exception, emerged from willing to connect people around common interests and motivated to fulfill a place of production and distribution of information neglected by other institutions. As a result of these engagement processes, they have also become spaces for welcoming, sociability and recognition between LGBT people.

In the view of our interviewees, the traditional media has been showing certain receptivity to the LGBT agenda. However, the majority of media coverages are punctual and scheduled events, generally related to mega-events, such as the Pride Parades. Such positions have different degrees, but they gravitate between severe criticism and suspicious looks¹⁶. To them, the LGBT movement has interacted with the media through collective actions and also by individual protagonism, revealing a non-systematized strategy of surveillance and negotiation. Through the internet, they denounce articles and reports identified as harmful to the LGBT population or seek to correct them.

In regard to media representation, most of the interviewees made negative assessments, at different levels, especially to the characters in telenovelas. Representations were considered limited and often perpetuating stereotypes. Among the criticisms made, the following were most pointed out: the existence of a certain cleansing of trans bodies, following a model of "passability"; the portrayal of bisexuals in stories where they will be "corrected", choosing between homo/heterosexuality; and the idea of trans people as "deceivers".

Quite clearly, the opinions converge on the major internet impact on the organization of LGBT activism on network. The strategic and creative uses of the Internet, as seen in this work, allow political-institutional changes capable to politicize new actors, renewing democratic processes and tensioning the heteronormative structures that bind us.

Although each individual builds their own meanings before the world, this mental processing is strongly permeated by the communicational environment. What can be assumed is that a change in communicative practices can, therefore, affect the construction norms of meanings and, consequently, power relations. If at the beginning we showed that where there is power, there is also counterpower, we can conclude that wherever there is domination there will be resistance.

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¹⁶ It is important to remember that our research involved only the reports of activists. A change in the profile of respondents would certainly bring more varied points of view.

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