BOUNDARIES OF TRUST AND TRANSGRESSION: STUDYING THE CIRCULATION OF OBSCENE CONTENTS WITHIN ITALIAN PRIVATE GROUP CHATS

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Introduction

The mainstreaming of obscene and offensive contents in non-public networks is often cited as one of the hallmarks of the "dark side of the web." However, since this phenomenon is observable mostly at an interactional level, thus leaving no durable or accessible aggregate data, the research on this topic is still lacking. Our study provides an analysis of users' meaning-making and boundary maintenance activities regarding violent/pornographic contents in group chats on Telegram, that combines participant observation and in-depth interviews with active participants of such groups.

Socio-technological background: groups chats and the mundane circulation of the obscene

The Cambridge Analytica scandal shed light on a dangerous mass surveillance context and the revelations about Facebook's plans to use WhatsApp as a tool to track user data, lead developers to provide IM applications with greater security. End-to-end encryption has been adopted in several IMs (i.e. WhatsApp), while some others have had 'security' as the main selling point from quite a while (i.e. Telegram). Closed and

private groups answered to the need of having spaces in which to communicate and to connect many-to-many (Facebook 2010) within a less visible environment avoiding the "context collapse" (Marwick and boyd 2011), while private group chats became an everyday experience among peers, family members or other social networks made by trusted ties.

The existence of this kind of 'safe spaces,' in which users' privacy is not menaced, has renewed the debate on the virtues and dangers of enclosed non-public digital environments. On the one hand, some studies show how the practice of joining secret groups or group chats with strangers can happen because of different reasons, such as crisis events (Malka et al. 2015) or activism (Hensby 2017). On the other hand, the role of such platforms in facilitating users coordination in illegal or harmful activities has also been raised (Prucha 2016).

Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2018) referring to messaging apps and Facebook groups as "dark social media," emphasize the specificity of the articulation between public and private that these spaces provide, and their role in shaping the meaning-making processes that happen there, for example in the daily circulation of news.

So far, however, the styles and contents of the more mundane aspects of communication that moves through messaging apps have received scarce attention, also due to the technical difficulties in applying quantitative and data-oriented approaches to study of such environments (Garimella & Tyson 2018) and no research has yet tackled this phenomenon outside the cybercrime framework (Halder 2015). Our paper attempts to examine instant messaging apps as cultural platforms where the popular culture circuit unfolds, with its inherent excessive, carnivalesque and often disruptive features (Fiske 1989; Riley 2010). To this extent, it is necessary to take into account: 1) the multiplicity of uses and motivations that draw users to consume and share shock imagery (Bartsch et al. 2016; Alvarez 2017), 2) the current normalization of an ambivalent, transgressive and nihilistic ethos fostered by internet subcultures and by troll culture in particular (Phillips 2015; Phillips & Milner 2017), 3) the interactional construction of group norms and transgressions in online environments.

Research questions and methodology

This research aims to understand the relationship between the sharing of extreme imagery in non-public spaces and the mainstreaming of transgressive, violent and extreme contents. In particular, the study addresses the problem of groups' boundaries regulation by analysing users' connected reflexivity (Boccia Artieri 2012) on shared posting norms.

Therefore, three research questions are investigated:

1) Which motivations and gratifications move users participation in group chats where graphic violent and pornographic contents are shared?

2) How users define the boundaries of trust within such group chats with strangers?

3) How users define and regulate the sharing of these contents outside group chats?
Given the exploratory nature of this study and the technical and ethical obstacles in retrieving data from non-public group chats, this study uses a qualitative approach, that combines digital ethnography (Hine 2015) and in-depth interviews.

In the first phase, researchers' direct experience as social media users is employed to find a significant amount of Italian-speaking non-public group chats on Telegram where extreme/graphic contents, generally prohibited by social media community guidelines, are shared. Facebook closed groups linked to pages dedicated to black humor contents constituted a primary source for the collection.

In the second phase, we join, daily monitor and participate in ten of the most active and popular Telegram groups, collecting field notes on types of contents shared and emerging controversies regarding improper sharing behaviours.

In the third phase, we conduct ten in-depth interviews with active participants, regarding their experience in these chats and their rules and practices of extreme contents sharing outside the group borders.

Preliminary outcomes of the research

In this exploratory research on the use of porn in Telegram private group chats, we tried to understand how obscenity is shaped in spaces where the visibility affordances are different from that of websites and social networks sites.

First, we find that, contrary to those narrations that frame Telegram as a new digital wilderness or as an extension of the dark web, group chats show a high level of technical and cultural permeability with the rest of the digital sphere. Contents and languages, even when hateful, misogynistic and degrading, are not very far from the levels of misogyny and homophobia one could easily find on mainstream glossy and socially responsible porn sites.

Telegram does not appear to be chosen just as a place of concealment. The affordances of anonymity and privateness of the platform have to be taken into account in a dialectical relation with the affordances of reciprocal reachability that are used to foster conviviality, dating and advertising opportunity.

Third, group rules evolve over time towards an incremental codification and synchronization with legal discourse.

Fourth, the pleasure in participating seems not to be driven much by contents exclusivity, but by how they are assembled and used. Users don't just exchange pornographic materials but use it to create affective atmospheres, which arouse and excite, but which are also functional to perform transgression and homosociality. This form of "group casting", where both content flow and interaction is present, can act as further normalization agent, being both de-stigmatizing but that may also lower the guard on problematic and illegal contents.

In the next phases we would like to expand the research along three paths: first, we want to interview also group members, second, we would try to approach and observe secret groups, third, start to set up a comparative work Whatsapp group chats.

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