

# Beyond the “Subculture of Connection”: Youth Violence and Criminal Gangs on Social Networks

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## Abstract

The convergence of urban and digital spaces is increasingly influencing the behavior of street gangs.

The Internet is by nature a public and interactive environment, so it is much more powerful than any typical gang brand or symbol.

It provides a free space for criminal groups to promote violent actions, turning them into viral content. Today, it is important to define the relationship between young people, new media and digital education, considering the social changes and the structure of the new transparent and digital public space; it is necessary to recover the adult's ability to listen, which presupposes silence, and is the prerogative of acceptance and cooperation, it would mean abandoning the asocial and self-celebrating communication-relationship process in the world of cyberspace.

**Keywords:** violence, digital media, gangs, digital-public space

## I. INTRODUCTION: INTERCONNECTED TEENAGERS

There is a very simple way to describe the relationship between networks and teenagers: 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", paraphrasing a homonymous work of the anthropologist of cyberspace Sherry Turkle (2012).

Young people know perfectly the new digital space in which they move, building multiple identities; 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 (Boyd 2014).

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" (Codeluppi 2015), which are a communication model based on the spectacularization and the display of one's external charm.

In 2001 the French psychiatrist Serge Tisseron proposed the word "estemacy" 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 (Tisseron 2001).

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

The construction of 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 (2001) 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 from an overdose.

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 (Stella, Riva 2014).

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 (Riva, Stella, 2014).

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 cyberbullying and the multiple forms of *Net Addiction*, they tend to worsen on their own in the absence of this awareness.

Kimberley S. Young (2000), an American psychologist, believes that spending a lot of time connected, leads 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.

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 share everyday life are in fact replaced by new users known *on-line*), escape (the longer and longer links in time cause 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 past categories of interpretation such as ethics, politics and identity.

## II. BEYOND CYBERBULLYING: THE CYBER-GANGS

In addition to the numerous cases of cyberbullying that have occurred over the last few years in Italy and in Europe, recent criminological studies (Morselli 2009, Wormer 2010, Patton 2013) 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 real (Ahlert, 2011).

This represents a macabre "show" that becomes a daily performance through the media.

Such content uploaded on the Net, indicates 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 ways (Emery, Salazar, 2012).

Womer (2010) and Bunker (2010) 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.

As Miller (1958) stated, 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 (Williams, McShane 2002).

These types of behavior, although they can be undertaken at all ages, attract especially those whose age is between adolescence and maturity (Williams, McShane 2002); Latin gang, 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, are building their virtual image and 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 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 by Morselli and Decary-Hètu (2011), published by *the International Journal of Cyber Criminology*, there are more than 6,000 *followers* of these gangs on *MySpace* platforms, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, *Telegram*, who are often attracted and recruited within these same spaces. These new users appear to be sensitive to the values and lifestyle of the *gang*.

According to David Pyrooz (2015), Professor of criminology at Sam Houston State University, what happens on the social platforms is perfectly in line with what happens on the streets: what is created is an "electronic-virtual graffiti wall" that can no longer be eliminated.

The Internet is by its nature a public and interactive environment, therefore it is much more powerful than any typical brand or symbol of a *gang*, it offers a free space to the criminal group to promote violent actions, transforming them into viral content.

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 speech and violent behavior can circulate having effects also offline.

According to Patton (2013), all the gangs of Chicago, for example, hold weapons and a *Twitter account*: this condition encourages further violence even on the road.

Immediate and simple access to *social media* can extend the aim 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-reputation*.

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 gangs, pornographic content and situations that depict the 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, and what it means to live as a *gangster*.

The typical forms of cyberviolence used by *gangs* on the Net are the same as those 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 cyberbully 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 a very short time.

### III. MICRO-CELEBRITY AND VIOLENCE "ON-LIFE"

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 her gunshot photos and 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 by one of the rival gangs.

This behavior raises not only new questions concerning the identity of those who manage 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 amount of illegal behavior even within social media is increasing.

A first great paradox emerges in this regard: criminal activities by their nature require planning and secret action, but to be successful, the criminal groups find themselves forced to act today in a public and transparent space like the Net (Collins 2008).

An interesting study on street gangs in the US 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 gangs, their history and how to use social networks.

The purpose of the *app* is to see the evolution of street gangs in the US with *feedback* in Italy, because many of these 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*.

This is possible now by using some specific tools such as: the hashtag, geolocation and keywords within the platforms Facebook and Twitter.

Furthermore, this could be interpreted as an advantage in public investigation and security.

For the criminologist Randall Collins (2008) 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: the crime works best when it is more organized, but the more it becomes so, the more it will tend to self-discipline and respect the laws.

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*" (Collins 2008).

### IV. 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 a European level, while the attention of the mass media on these issues has been quite high.

Two issues remain open and particularly interesting. The first concerns the construction of a digital identity of the young criminal groups with related communication strategies adopted within the social-digital platforms, while the second, concerns the presence of new (and far from clear) elements of victimization accompanied by increasing episodes of petty crime in which there appears to be a sudden *escalation* of violence with 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" (Coudry, 2015).

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 have 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, different value-options, ; there is 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*" (Cipolla, 1997).

In our digital age the media is configured as a projection of the human being and not as a separate device.

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

Man uses the media, but it is he himself today that becomes the *medium*: the web is no longer a space in which man communicates, nor is it a simple "technological game", but it is now a social space, made up of people: this is also a new ethical reflection of our communication.

According to the sociologist Edgar Morin (2015), it is necessary to teach young people the human condition and this can also happen through more

awareness in the use of the 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 by postponing 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 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 co-operation, 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 demonstrating to young people the intention to want to know, consider and welcome their inner dimension: it would be possible also in a virtual space, by going beyond the "culture of connection" and rebuilding a "culture of relationships".

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