

THE CULTURE OF RAPE IS DEBATED:

the discord of meanings between journalism and *Diário Gaúcho* readers

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ABSTRACT - From the understanding of journalism as a discursive gender (Benetti, 2008) which contributes towards maintaining consensual values in society (Hall et al, 1993), this article analyzes the discourse of readers on news stories from the *Diário Gaúcho* newspaper, published on the internet in June, 2016, addressing assaults on women in the city. Using post-structuralist feminist studies and the Discourse Analysis (DA) as theoretical support, 201 comments were examined, identifying four nuclei meanings: blaming the victim, naturalizing assault/instinct, relativizing assault and disqualifying journalism. These meanings were evidence of the discourse from these readers going towards crystallizing historical-cultural constructions on gender and social roles of men and women, justifying and emphasizing the importance of journalistic approaches that break from traditional cultural maps of meaning.

Key words: Journalism. Gender. Readers. Discourse. *Diário Gaúcho*.

A CULTURA DO ESTUPRO ENTRA NA PAUTA: a disputa de sentidos entre jornalismo e leitores do *Diário Gaúcho*

RESUMO - A partir do entendimento do jornalismo como gênero discursivo (Benetti, 2008) que contribui para manter os valores consensuais da sociedade (Hall et. al., 1993), este artigo analisa o discurso dos leitores sobre a reportagem do jornal *Diário Gaúcho*, publicada na internet em junho de 2016, que aborda o assédio urbano a mulheres. Com aporte teórico dos estudos feministas pós-estruturalistas e por meio da Análise de Discurso (AD), foram examinados 201 comentários e identificados quatro núcleos de sentido: culpabilização da vítima, naturalização do assédio/ instinto, relativização do assédio e desqualificação do jornalismo. Tais sentidos mostraram que o discurso desses leitores opera para a cristalização das construções histórico-culturais sobre gênero e papéis sociais reservados ao feminino e ao masculino, o que justifica e ressalta a importância de abordagens jornalísticas que rompam com os tradicionais mapas culturais de significado.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Gênero. Leitores. Discurso. *Diário Gaúcho*.

LA CULTURA DE LA VIOLACIÓN ENTRA EN LA PAUTA: la disputa de sentidos entre periodismo y lectores del Diário Gaúcho

RESUMEN - A partir de la comprensión del periodismo como género discursivo (Benetti, 2008) que contribuye a mantener los valores consensuados de la sociedad (Hall et. al., 1993), este artículo analiza el discurso de los lectores sobre el reportaje del periódico Diário Gaúcho, publicado en internet en Junio de 2016, que aborda el acoso urbano a las mujeres. Con aporte teórico de los estudios feministas post-estructuralistas y por medio del Análisis de Discurso (AD), se examinaron 201 comentarios y cuatro núcleos de sentido se identificaron: culpabilización de la víctima, naturalización del acoso / instinto, relativización del acoso y descalificación del periodismo. Tales sentidos mostraron que el discurso de estos lectores opera para la cristalización de las construcciones histórico-culturales sobre género y papeles sociales reservados al femenino y al masculino, lo que justifica y resalta la importancia de enfoques periodísticos que rompan con los tradicionales mapas culturales de significado.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Género. Lectores. Discurso. Diário Gaúcho

1 Feminist Spring: discussing gender

The historic advances arising from the fight for women's rights to independence, liberty and equality has changed social structures, changed culture and brought forth new ways of thinking about the roles of men and women in society. Despite a number of achievements, structural male chauvinism, violence and gender inequality still exist and are disseminated in various forms.

The year 2015 was quite a symbolic one for feminist causes in Brazil. The outbreak of organized women's movements against violence, discrimination and gender prejudice perpetuated by male chauvinism had the internet as a means of mobilization and visibility. Facebook pages and groups became spaces for sharing experiences, having discussions and social activism. The campaign #primeiroassedio, released by the feminist collective *Think Olga*¹ started an online campaign where thousands of women shared their experiences of sexual harassment or assault. The *Chega de Fiu-Fiu (No More Catcalls)* movement created by the same collective also put the issues of male chauvinist culture and sexual harassment or violence in the public eye. Another action

also arose from this called *Vamos Juntas? (Let's Go Together?)* which also generated debates on violence, encouraging women across Brazil to unite together.

Besides the internet, bills for restricting abortion in cases of rape, presented by right-wing parliamentarians in Congress, also brought thousands of women to the streets of São Paulo in 2015. What's more, in the Brazilian High School National Exam (ENEM) from the same year², philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's thought provoked a strong debate on gender, leading to discussions on constructions and consensus related to the roles of men and women in society. The feminist agenda was included in a number of traditional media vehicles and, in May 2016, debates on the "culture of rape" took center stage after a 16-year-old girl was gang-raped in Rio de Janeiro (RJ). According to UN Women³, the term "culture of rape" is used to "address the ways in which society blames the victims of sexual violence and normalizes violent sexual behavior from men". The expression, which originated in the 1970s, was coined by feminist movements to bring attention to a cultural environment that naturalizes this type of crime through norms, values and practices in which some violence against women is accepted and authorized by society.

This historical moment of social mobilization and feminist action on the internet and on the street, referred to by some media outlets as the "Spring of Women" or "Feminist Spring", is perpassed by a collective resistance and confrontation to chauvinistic culture, by upholding rights acquired and by more advances in legislature on gender issues. Historian Margareth Rago (2004) states that feminism, recognized today as one of the biggest and most successful movements of the twentieth century, has gained more ground in this century, reaching younger populations in Brazil and other countries. This new scenario has an affect on institutions, among them journalism, which have started to put new maps of meaning in their agendas and approaches on issues of gender and feminism.

Journalism as a social institution and a producer of present time reports (Franciscato, 2005) follows the transformations within society and the public debates it has on controversial issues. The question of gender roles are still prevalent in the field of social dissensus as they involve values, beliefs and habits which are naturalized and built in culture. That is why current

feminist movements and actions that take to the streets and the internet draw the attention of society and, consequently, the agenda of journalism.

This article is based on the premise that journalism functions as a specific discursive gender (Benetti, 2008), as well as being one of the contributors to building a consensus in society (Hall et al, 1993; Traquina, 2002). The study focuses on a report called “Why ‘catcalling’ a woman on the street makes a simple journey uncomfortable”, published online at *Diário Gaúcho* (DG) on June 2, 2016. It is known that when an enunciation breaks the logic and regularity of producing common sense, the reaction from the public, which is accustomed to a particular journalistic vehicle’s discourse, is strong and immediate.

With the gradual democratization and establishment of spaces of interaction in webjournalism (where the DG report and reader comments were made), getting the audience interested in the content is paramount (Bruns, 2014), shaping journalism as a conducive environment for public debate (Carvalho & Mitozo, 2016). The speed and simultaneousness of online news production and distribution processes, and easily accessible content for the public have changed how news products are being consumed (Bradshaw, 2014). The consumption now goes uninterrupted, it is immediate and instantaneous, reinforcing interactivity as one of the defining traits of webjournalism (Canavilhas, 2014). Active audience participation (Masip et. al., 2015) that comments, suggests and “converses” with news text and other online readers is incorporated into the discursive practices of journalism.

Reports on assault, a controversial social issue which is sparsely reported on and one which journalism almost always tends to digress from, despite its importance, led a significant number of readers to protest against the newspaper’s coverage of the issue. The aim of this article is to use French Discourse Analysis (DA) to map out the main meanings in the 201 comments registered against the distribution and position of the DG report, and cast doubt on the main arguments put forth by readers to delegitimize new maps of meaning in circulation.

2 Journalism and the social construction of reality

This study partakes of the perspective of journalism as a social body for building reality. Journalistic vehicles, through active discourse, make events known (Alsina, 1989) and therefore produce realities that are given form by a particular point of view and by techniques that make up the work of a professional journalist. People consider news to be truthful discourses on facts about reality (Guerra, 2008) that confer legitimacy and reliability to what journalists report on. These real events are the base for journalistic discourse: "What newspapers report on is based on what is real, it is received by the public as an expression of a real fact" (Guerra, 2008, p.57).

As a social institution and producer of present time reports, journalism is entrenched in in the historical and social environment in which it operates (Franciscato, 2005). At the same time that it influences and changes its environment it is also influenced and modified by changes and trends in contemporary society: "Journalism, by its obligation to report on the present is affected by new flows of information, reading habits and social interaction, having to redefine its modes of social practice" (Franciscato, 2005, p.165). Actualities and newness are therefore cornerstones of performing journalism, connecting it to its time and era.

In its daily construction of reality, journalism draws on stereotypes and common sense that condition what readers interpret. Therefore, the perception of this built reality is influenced by predicted concepts that the public has on things in the world (Gomis, 2004). The events, which themselves unfold in a disorderly and chaotic manner, are framed, identified and contextualized by journalism in order to acquire meaning; in other words, they "make sense" when they are inserted in an environment of recognized social and cultural identifications, in environments "that derive in part from this notion of *consensus* as a basic characteristic of daily life" (Hall et. al., 1999, p. 227). However, the "consensual" points of view in society, coherent with maps of meaning from the social world which journalism reproduces, coexist with their opposites. Discourses around notions of consensus will always be embedded in journalistic narratives, connecting with the readers' expectations and world views, whether conflicting ones or not. Schudson (2010, p.108) reminds us that "News mainly seeks to create experiences

of esthetic satisfaction for readers to help them interpret their own lives and relate them to the nation, city or class they belong to". These created experiences that journalism reports can sometimes make cracks in the consensual values and expectations of readers. The report from the *Diário Gaúcho* on sexual assault in the city is an example of how journalistic discourse can create gaps in the maps of meaning and give alternative points of view, in this case, on the relationships of power and constructions of the imaginary on gender roles.

Addressing tensions that stem from the social and cultural naturalization of gender identification and facing opposite thoughts and dispositions expressed in readers' discourses are attributes that journalism should provide. It is important to note that constructionism thinks about reality as a produce of human action (Guerra, 2008) in such a way that "realities" emerge from different interpretations depending on the perspective of the subject that interprets them. Therefore, reality is impregnated with the moral, social and cultural values of the individual who acts in it. "In short, reality is the materialization of objective interests and values of a society which provides maximum expression through its institutions like family, property, the state...and the press" (Guerra, 2008, p.75). The ideas, thoughts and opinions that surround gender roles paint a specific reality that contextualizes and acts on meanings produced by journalism and reader discourse on these role.

3 Gender, language and the production of meaning

The attribution of certain social roles and of gender to men and women is instituted socially through historically dispositions and practices. These identities are volatile and are built through language, building the subjects as masculine and feminine. Besides transmitting and expressing relationships of power, everyday language helps towards and collaborates with its production and institution. This is why it is important to understand power not as a guaranteed stable entity but as a network of relationships in constant activity; it is exercised by subjects and it affects their actions:

Men and women are definitely not built on mechanisms of repression or censorship, they make themselves through practices and relationships of gestures, ways of being in the world, forms of speech and action, conducts and appropriate postures (usually diverse). Genders produce themselves, in and through relationships of power (Louro, 2003, p.41).

The concept of gender arose in the 1960s in order to emphasize the social and historic character of relationships and to differentiate the processes that constitute masculine or feminine, which up until that time were naturalized and explained only through biology. More than just a simple analytical category, the concept seeks to demarcate that the inequalities between men and women over the course of history were not the result of a single act, but of a series of actions and social constructions. For Miriam Pillar Grossi (1998), the role of gender speaks of social construction and depends on the ideology of each place and time in order for it to be realized. The notion of gender and individual identity built on the basis of each subject's life in a particular society.

Gender codification is expressed in social organization through different bodies of power, sometimes not so obviously. "The hierarchical structures depend on generalized understandings of so-called natural relationships between men and women" (Scott, 1995, p.91). Language is one of the paths that leads to understanding how genders are endowed with meaning and how they are developed in relationships of power and knowledge. Naturalizations regarding sex, gender and sexuality and how these social markers are established in social conventions can be deconstructed when they retrieve the ways in which these constructions operate in culture, using discourses that guide current social standards and norms (Veiga da Silva, 2014). The concept adopted for this paper conceives gender as an analytic and an epistemological/theoretical category capable of reflecting on how social conventions regarding masculine and feminine are produced and operate in society. According to Aline Bonetti (2007, p. 217), gender can be seen as "a fundamental and constitutive principal of social, impregnated by the concept of power".

Discourses of authority such as science, the church, morals and the law, identify, classify, divide, rule and discipline the forms of being in the world. More than this, knowledge on gender and sexuality is an essential dimension, safe and universal, which "cannot/should not be damaged or altered" (Louro, 2004, p.

23). It is of note that other markers like class and race are also articulated to political regimes of power and knowledge formed in dominant thinking; they are subordinate to hegemonic social norms which today are still referred to as “natural”. The study of gender as an epistemological category provides a reflection “on how social conventions of masculine and feminine are produced and associated to distinctive forms of power relationships and how these conventions produce hierarchies and inequalities” (Veja da Silva, 2014, p.80).

Accordingly, as Guacira Lopes Louro points out (2003), we need to recognize the power of language and observe how it both institutes relationships and positions of the subject and produces and establishes differences. The naturalization of ideas on gender roles and practices in culture, like assault in the city for example, constitute the discourses of subjects who occupy a social and historic place and who are always relating with other subjects and discourses. This context and all processes and conditions of producing language should be considered by the discourse analyst, who identifies, analyzes, interprets and even assesses such constructions, as described below.

4 Discourse analysis and reader-text interaction

In order that something be said at any particular point in time there are conditions needed for it to appear, exist and circulate; in other words, according to Foucault (1971), the possibilities of discourse are regulated and governed by an “order of discourse” in which each enunciation is understood as an asset that has rules for appearing, and conditions for appropriating and utilization.

The issue of sexual assault is addressed in a widely circulated newspaper like *Diário Gaúcho* at this point in time because it was given the opportunity to appear and circulate through discourse. The scenario and the social context mentioned in the introduction to this article have made it possible for this and other related enunciations to break through. It is worth remembering that in February, 2016, students from Anchieta school⁴ in Porto Alegre protested against using shorts at school and was brought this issue to the attention of the public and media in all of Brazil, leading to discussions on

sexual assault, chauvinism, objectification and sexualization of the female body. Later on, at the end of May, the debate on the culture of rape grabbed the media's attention after a gang-rape was carried out in Rio de Janeiro⁵. The presence of these debates in the public sphere and addressing the issue of gender in mainstream media set these enunciations in circulation, allowing for new maps of meaning to arise in journalistic spaces. The set of these events, the regularity of these discursive events and of these assertions that "say the same thing" revealed a positivity that exercises the role that Foucault (2007, p. 146) called historical *a priori*; a set of rules that characterize a discursive practice at a determined time-place.

The Discourse Analysis (DA) method allows to identify meanings of discourse, and recognize the historicity of its subjects and the circumstances surrounding interaction. Therefore, the meanings of a discourse are not literal, stuck to the text, but are built between the subjects of interlocution, produced in the relationship between these interlocutors, constituting an intersubjective and dialogic process. Discourse Analysis acts as an organizer of gestures of interpretation that relate subject to meaning to better understand these meanings which are produced by a symbolic object (Orlandi, 2007). News reports are made up of social and historical traits that make up part of its meaning; it is in this interaction between news text and reader where meanings that may be interpreted are produced.

Just like the subject that enunciates in news discourse, the subject-reader is also conditioned by its historicity and subjectivity. When reading news, "while finding meaning, a reader mobilizes his or her reading history, relating the text that is being read to other previously read texts" (Mariani, 1999, p.106); in other words, the subject of the discourse does not manifest itself completely because it is subjected to historical conditions, to culture and to the ideology of a specific reality (Benetti, 2016). From there comes the importance of understanding how meanings built in the text and the externality of these constraints are articulated. According to Marcia Benetti (2016), a text has a more visible discursive layer and another ideological one because it deals with how meanings are attributed and taken, most often, as natural or true. As posited in DA, for this article we decided to use a methodological approach to analyze the meanings built by reader discourse, paying careful attention to the relationship that discursive markers establish with cultural and ideological components.

5 Sexual assault on the *Diário Gaúcho's* agenda

The most-widely circulated newspaper in the South and the third largest in the country, the *Diário Gaúcho* has 1,129,000 readers, 101 thousand visitors every day and 5.6 million pageviews on its site⁶. The RBS Group⁷, the media conglomerate to which it belongs, describes it as “a vehicle dedicated to providing quality content for the working class of RS”. It has been on the market for 15 years.

On June 2, 2016, the *Diário Gaúcho* published an online report on the street harassment of women. This newspaper observed female nursing student Raquel Sampaio (Figure 1) in the city centre of Porto Alegre⁸ and recorded the reactions, looks and comments that men directed towards her, making it clear that sexual harassment against women in the city (and in public) “is common and needs to be addressed”, as written in the report. Not only did we hear from Raquel, who reported feeling uncomfortable and bothered by the harassments in an article called “Why ‘catcalling’ a woman on the street makes a simple journey uncomfortable”⁹, we also heard from a public defender, director of the Women’s Defense Centre (Nudem), Luciana Artus Schneider, who explained how harassment is defined, and explained the meaning and differences between “abuse”, “harassment” and “rape”. The text describes the uncomfortability that Raquel felt and discusses the problems with this masculine behavior being described as something natural. In order to do this, the newspaper describes the conduct of men – the comments and looks they gave Raquel – as harassment.

Figure 1: Photograph of Raquel used for the article published in *Diário Gaúcho*.



Source: *Diário Gaúcho* online (06/02/2016). Image: Anderson Fetter/Agencia RBS

The report registered 577 comments, among which were criticisms, compliments, and disapproval of the choice of theme. Comments that only marked people, emoticons or links to videos or images were excluded from this analysis. This first selection made up the *corpus* of 261 comments. From these, only 60 were in favor of the topic and 201 against. The 60 compliments were mainly reader opinions identifying with the topic. There was a determined effort in some reader comments to explain the differences between looking, “catcalling”, harassment and abuse to other readers. The experiences reported on agreed with the article’s point of view, highlighting the seriousness of the problem.

The 201 negative comments contained criticisms directed at the report, mainly disagreeing with the idea of harassment; they believed the pants that Raquel was wearing (leggings) were the reason for the men’s reactions, calling the report repressive as they

believe the looks that men give women is something normal and part of the nature of masculinity. They also did not consider the report to be serious and some comments even delegitimized it for aligning with feminism and adopting a left-wing position.

In addressing the reader comments in journalistic space, our study borrows from a study by Sampaio and Barros (2012) that analyzes the possible social and democratic effects of reader comments on the internet and from an investigation by both Teixeira (2014), who verifies the relationship between user and newspaper online, and Carvalho and Mitozo (2016), who investigate the manifestation of internauts against the presidential elections of 2014 in Brazil. Other studies conducted along the same perspective showed that readers' discourse in comments can be connected to journalism through emotions like rage, fear, contempt or satisfaction (Benetti & Reginato, 2014), and can move the imaginary and meanings of the real and fiction (Benetti & Dalmaso, 2014), or even still, produce meanings of hate and gender prejudice (Stocker & Dalmaso, 2016).

There is no doubt that the interactive capacity of online journalism gives the audience a much more significant role in assessing news than ever before (Shoemaker et. al., 2010). In this scene where more actors take part in the production and circulation of news, the options of instant feedback and active public participation required journalistic organizations to reposition themselves (Heinrich, 2011) and now need to deal with the intense interactivity and the thousands of comments posted everyday by its audience, few of which have any helpful contributions and many which are just insults and messages that take on a racist or xenophobic tone to them (Masip, 2011). It should be pointed out that even though the report had generated engagement and dialogue between readers in the comment section, the newspaper did not mediate or intervene in online conversations among comment makers. What the newspaper did do was publish a second article the following day with the title "Reader comments show why it is important to speak about the culture of harassment"¹⁰. Existing in an institutionalized space, the newspaper selected reader comments asked specialists to discuss the content of those comments. The newspaper did not reveal the identity of any of the comment makers when it published prints of seven comments and one email which was sent to a reporter in an attempt to highlight the chauvinistic, sexist and prejudiced attitudes of these readers. This second publication

generated 177 comments, showing reader engagement in the topic. Once again, most of them (79%) were against the focus of the report. The *Diário Gaúcho* did not continue with the debate or interact with its readers, keeping the expressions in the space reserved for articles.

In order to conduct the analysis of meaning stemming from the text-reader relationship in this article, we concentrated on the negative comments (77%) containing arguments and/or remarks about the topic of the report and how it addressed it. These comments were analyzed and gave rise to four nuclei of meanings which were located by mapping out more important discursive sequences on the examined comments. After mapping we observed and assessed the problems with the readers' discourse. Keeping our objective in mind, we did not focus on "who said what" but only what was being said, what could and should be said in a particular place and specific historical context which is on the surface of discourses that circulate in our times (Foucault, 1971). In an epistemological perspective on gender, we did not deem it necessary to reveal the readers' identities seeing as how conventions of gender and hegemonic social values are independent from an individual's body and livelihood; they are structured within society. The nuclei of meanings and their respective discourse sequences, including the original wording from the comments posted on the DG page will be presented in the next section.

5.1 Blaming the victim

This nucleus of meaning has 53 reader comments that believe the harassment cases caught by DG reporters only happened because of the pants (leggings) that Raquel was wearing. They also believed that women like and want to receive "compliments" and know that when they wear certain clothes they are going to attract the attention and looks from men. There is also an idea registered here that women should "respect themselves" and dress more "adequately" in order to avoid harassment, as evidenced in the following discourses (with emphasis added by the authors):

[SD135] A store puts its merchandise on display because it wants to sell it!

[SD137] I work downtown. I know who this lady is. She ALWAYS wears eye-catching clothes. One day, in the shopping center bathroom on the top floor, close to the bank machines, she

*was showing herself off. When we left the men's bathroom and walked past the women's entrance, and you can see the floors, and she was "freshening up" in front of the mirror, pulling her panties up and **doing everything to attract the men's attention**, and she is really beautiful but she's no saint.. [...]*

[SD141] What is the point of wrapping up? *What is the intention of someone who wants to be attractive? I feel violated when I see a young girl like that. And what do women think about it? "It's your problem, you can look, drool, but you can't do anything because it's my right to dress like this". **Do you think she knows how men work?** Do you think she knows that men imagine her naked? Of course they do, they leave everything out there. They value the body look more sexy this way than they do naked, full of cellulite and stretch marks. Value the best you have, since the guy won't help. At any rate I think it's disgusting to harrass a woman. **But leaving the sugar bowl uncovered and blaming the ants is irrational.***

[SD142] *Do you think she prefers to be fat and ugly and no one looks at her? I doubt it! **I bet she gets a kick out of it and a boost to her self esteem every time she goes out on the street dressed like that. They like the attention they receive.***

[SD150] *I'm a woman, and I can tell you that **every woman who dresses this way, a little vulgar if you ask me, wants to be catcalled.** Men are going to look, even women look! But you don't need to be vulgar or anything like that.*

The issue of blaming the victim should be interpreted through a historic perspective. According to Daniella Coulouris (2010) we need to observe the relationship that has been historically built between women and the truth to understanding the naturalization of distrusting a woman's word. Considered to be evil on Earth, perverse beings, naturally subversive and deceptive, numerous discourses throughout history written by theologians, doctors and legal experts wildly exclude women from being considered subjects of truth. According to aforementioned author, distrusting women's testimony is right behind the principle of innocent before guilty (Coulouris, 2010, p.12). In the middle of the seventeenth century, the crime of rape was treated as a sexual sin of men, they gave in to the temptation represented by women. Coulouris reminds us that a theoretical construct, crossed with old discourses and representations about women and the truth restricted the main objectives for researching cases of rape, making it possible to think of some women as subjects of truth: one needed to distinguish which women, among all the others, deserved to be punished, for which women would it be characterized as rape, attributing the truth to some victims in detriment of others. The instrumentalization of the trinomial proper behavior – credibility –

truth, as of the end of the nineteenth century, characterized the games of truth they intended to attribute, according to certain criteria, truth in the discourse of individuals.

We can identify the marks of these historical discourses on women in the readers comments. Although it is a discussion on harassment, the judgment that falls upon the victim and not the aggressors and the different ways of blaming the victims are identified in the discourses from SD 137, in which he states that he knows the lady and is sure that she does “everything to attract the attention of men”; in SD 141, in which the man asks: “Do you think she knows how men work?”; in SD 142, in which the man states that “they like the attention they receive” when they go out dressed “like that”; or even SD 150 who is sure that women dress “that way, a little vulgar, [...] they want to be catcalled”.

5.2 Naturalizing harassment/instinct

This nucleus of meaning had 69 reader comments that believed the harassment portrayed in the report to be something naturalized and unchangeable, a natural instinct of heterosexual men. For these readers, not looking at the woman from the report was synonymous with homosexuality and the newspaper would be suppressing and criminalizing the nature of men:

*[SD55] Ok, we won't look at asses anymore and just be all gay. **Butts like that beautiful woman in the report has, they are cultural patrimony of our nation.** My god...most people are going crazy or is it my impression. Up yours you s*** leftists with your stupid dictatorship policies.*

*[SD23] But wait, **look at her sexy shape!** Seeing a woman like that **gets any man with testosterone excited, only gays are not attracted to a woman like this.** And honestly, when a woman dressed like that it's because she wants to get an ego boost, they pretend they don't like it but deep down they love every bit of it. It's no use, **no feminism in the world will stop these women from being the sexual objects of men.** Its in our nature and nothing is gonna change that.*

*[SD35] Look at the way she moves, **only if everyone becomes GAY. It's impossible not to look at woman like this.***

*[SD184] **All males from all species share the same behavior of trying to spread their DNA as much as possible.** Yeah, we are thinking beings and have codes of ethics. Each one has their own limit, each man.*

*[SD185] Catcalling is definitely sleazy. But looking is perfectly normal. Is this not going to be allowed anymore? Next thing you know flirting will be harassment. **They are repressing the natural instinct of men.***

Understanding sexual violence in its many forms and motives became an important field of study among the debates on gender. The relationships established in abuse or harassment go beyond the subjects involved as they imply a relationship of power. Saffioti (1995), as quoted in Coulouris (2010)¹¹ points out that even though masculine supremacy has distinct forms and levels according to history, we still live in an age marked by its domination. We can see the social representation built in gender relationships of the dominant position of the male over the submissive and dominated female, as emphasized in the comments that attribute the female body with the status of object and public property – saying that the buttocks of the woman who was in the report are “cultural patrimony of our nation” (SD55) – or being sure that “no feminism in the world will stop these women from being the sexual objects of men” (SD23). Attributing a certain behavior to biological characteristics is what Tania Navarro Swain (2001, p. 16) calls historical generalizations regarding women/men: “the fruit of an anachronistic positivism based only on affirming its premisses: it’s natural because it is and always will be”. Therefore, women are blamed for “seducing” innocent men, making them lose control, or better yet, they follow their “masculine instincts” due to “testosterone” (SD23), needing to “spread the DNA” (SD184), something inherent to their sexuality and explained biologically:

Defining the submission imposed on women as being symbolic with violence helps to understand how the relationship of domination, which is a relationship that is historical, cultural and linguistically built is always affirmed as a difference in nature; radical, irrefutable, universal. It’s not important to pit term against term, a historical definition and a biological definition of masculine/feminine opposition, but to identify for each historical configuration the mechanism that enunciate and represent it as “natural”, however biological, social division, and historical of the roles and functions (Chartier, 1995, p. 42).

In this way, the sexual difference (where one is subjected and the other dominates) continues to be inscribed in the practices and facts, organizing reality and daily life and being crystallized by discourses like these which legitimize them.

5.3 Relativizing harassment

There were 48 reader comments in this nucleus that relativized the seriousness and importance of the issue addressed in the newspaper. There is an attempt to decentralize harassment as something strictly masculine: women who say they also look at men on the street, readers who remembered that feminine harassment against men also exists and that lesbian women can also harass other women. Besides pointing out these false symmetries, some comments relativized the seriousness of the issue and were against criminalization of harassment as they believed that looking and “complimenting” is natural and that women expect this “initiative” from men:

[SD61] Even I, a heterosexual woman, if I see a gorgeous woman on the street I look! And if me and my husband are on the street and a gorgeous woman walks by WE look!!! If a muscular man walks by on the street even the men look!!! This is not masculine nature, it's human nature [...]

[SD84] do women think that us men, by being physically stronger, are not afraid to walk alone in certain areas too? In other words, the world is a dangerous place, not only for women, stop with this victimization!OK?

[SD86] I met a woman like this. She was waiting in line at the buffet during lunch break. Beautiful but not slutty, she was nice and educated. If I hadn't "harassed" her I probably would still be single. And, for those who believe in destiny, I used to always have lunch in that shopping center. She didn't. When I met her it was totally casual. We started dating, then we got engaged, married, children. Wow, that was 25 years ago. We're still together.

[SD93] This isn't catcalling, don't be mistaken. This is pure nonsense. And a guy who is really interested in gaining a woman's respect would never say this. By the way, the biggest complaint women have about men nowadays is that they don't TAKE CHARGE!! So, what do you do??

[SD95] What if I was some dyke harassing another woman? I'm sure that harassment among women isn't on the feminist agenda or for that matter even considered harassment. Too much boo-hoing

The relativization of harassment can be observed in the reader comments mainly through the false symmetry used to neutralize the seriousness of the issue. The concept of “false symmetry” explains why an attitude does not have the same consequence when realized by different actors in a relationship, when the relationships of power that act on the different subjects are disconsidered. In this case, chauvinism and gender oppression that are structured within society are disregarded by readers who

are looking to compare harassment of men to that of women as if the effects and consequences were the same.

When affirming that a woman also looks and that “when a muscular man walks by on the street even men look” (SD61), the reader erases the differences and the consequences that this type of harassment has on women. According to the action “Chega de Fiu Fiu” (No More Catcalls) from the Non-Governmental Organization *Think Olga*, 99.6% of the 7,762 participants stated they had already been harassed, and 83% said they did not like being catcalled on the street. 81% had already stopped doing something (going to a certain place, walking by a construction site, going out on foot) and 90% had already changed their clothes in fear of being harassed. This data reinforces how much this problem is structural and cultural and results in very specific consequences for women, besides being something they have to deal with every day that makes them change their behavior. To say that “the world is a dangerous place, not only for women” (SD84) is to ignore the different levels of risks to which men and women are exposed. Besides the violence that also affects men, women are subject to other dangers; rape for one. A study conducted in 2016 by the Datafolha Institute at the request of the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety revealed that 67% of the population are afraid of being sexually violated. Among women, this percentage rises to 90%. Highlighting a specific case, like that of SD86, who said that he would probably “still be single” if he hadn’t “harassed” his wife in the *buffet* line or disqualify the topic of the report because one considers that women want men to take charge (SD93) is to disregard that that same action of “harassment” is different because those involved in the debate do not benefit from the same privileges in social terms

5.4 Disqualifying journalism

This nucleus of meaning contains 31 reader comments criticizing the newspaper’s approach to the issue, disqualifying the journalistic work as “ideological”, “sensationalist”, “hypocritical”, “stupid”, and “manipulated”, as well as associating the journalists, the newspaper and the company with the government or with having left-wing political views – social movements, feminism and the LGBT movement (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals and Transgenders).

[SD116] *All right, but half-naked women that this credible paper puts on its front page, as an object to attract horny guys, isn't this also a "culture of rape" or is it just hypocrisy? **Society is this garbage because of left-wing manipulations, not because of the culture of this or that.***

[SD122] *Just the fact that they treat all men as potential abusers does away with any possibility that this campaign will be successful. **If they start to relax and put things in more reasonable terms** then there might be some improvement. If not, **feminists will continue to kick and scream and complaining...***

[SD198] *I think this is part of the **MASS HOMOSEXUALIZATION PROCESS** introduced by **Rede Globo and its affiliates**, which is in full swing.*

[SD195] *[...] I'm totally in favor of campaigns for awareness and the fight against rape, I consider it to be a heinous crime, **but RBS is already (like usual) making sensationalist news...***

[SD201] *ok, but do you really think that **RBS wanted to do a serious piece?** It doesn't look like that to me. **Serious journalism is extinct.***

As mentioned previously, the issues addressed by journalism are not apart from current concepts of the society which it is a part of (Correia, 2011). Even remaining attentive to newness and current movements, journalism tends to reproduce social values that are consensus and this explains why certain issues, due to the controversy that surrounds them, are not usually discussed with much regularity by news vehicles. For Traquina (2002), the journalistic field prioritizes covering events and not problematic issues, avoiding covering issues that might be against the consensual nature of society: "Within this sphere, journalists do not feel compelled to present opposing points of view, actually, they often feel that it's their responsibility to act like lawyers or ceremonial protectors of the values of consensus" (Traquina, 2002, p.195).

Given this context, we can understand why the institution of journalism is a focal point for argumentative comments from this nucleus of meaning, demonstrating readers' awareness of the contract of communication with journalism. This contract presupposes that the public trust in the news or in the discursive reconstruction of the world (Franciscato, 2005) and has the premise of being able to make truth in journalism from the facts and events that are true, and that are a part of reality (Charaudeau, 2006). Besides questioning the seriousness of the report (SD109 and SD201), calling DG "sensationalist" (SD195) and "hypocritical" because it has half-naked

women on its cover (SD116), the readers see the report's approach to the feminist movement (SD122) and LGBT (SD198) in a negative light, classifying them as ideological and manipulative. The break in the reproduction of consensual values and the decision to tackle the problematic issue of harassment generated a negative response in readers because journalism does not usually open space to debate controversial topics in its agenda.

6 Journalism, readers and disputing meanings

Violence against women, problematized by the *Diário Gaúcho* newspaper in a report it published on harassment is a phenomenon of enormous complexity, rooted even more deeply within the structure of society. The so-called "culture of rape", which blames the victims and naturalizes aggressive behaviors is still strongly disseminated and crystallized in daily social relationships. Therefore, capturing the meanings that come from the relationship between journalistic texts that propose new maps of meaning regarding gender and the readers shows itself to be productive towards thinking about what can and should be said in our society at this particular point in history.

By addressing the issue of harassment, the *Diário Gaúcho* breaks from the logic and the regularity of producing meanings of common sense. The public has an important and immediate reaction to the news maps of meaning, showing their opposition to the issue (77% of readers from the sample) and blaming the victim, naturalizing harassment/instinct and disqualifying journalism. Even though it did not appear in the comment section, the *Diário Gaúcho* released a second report in response to the overwhelming number of readers, talking to specialists and statisticians about harassment and violence against women in order to respond to some of the arguments. Once again, most of them (79%) were against the report's approach, and blamed the victim, naturalized harassment and questioned the quality of the journalism.

These two reports represent important movements in journalism as they tension maps of meaning on gender which the public and journalism itself are accustomed to. The DG's approach takes on even more importance because it is a popular newspaper with a strong connection to its readers (Amaral, 2006). Publishing the second report and answering comments is also important as it

opens space for readers but rarely mediates or intervenes in what the public is saying.

The analysis of meanings reveals historical-cultural constructions on gender and roles which are socially reserved as masculine and feminine, resulting from other discourses that are consolidated in the place where readers can speak. Within this conformation, it is important to remember that both saying and interpreting are affected by systems of meaning and for this reason journalism builds meaning on reality in a continual and mutual interfering process (Benetti, 2007). If journalistic discourse is full of possible interpretations, then the interaction of text-reader in the comment section is productive towards understanding the meanings that are circulating throughout society at a particular moment in history, mainly dealing with issues that break from the “order of discourse” (Foucault, 1971) and dispute meanings that are crystallized socially and culturally. It is within this action of awareness of this space of interaction that journalism will be able to continue building, in a critical dialogue with citizenship and its readers, as an instrument to combat violence and inequalities.

NOTES

- 1 *Think Olga* is a feminist Non-Governmental Organization created in 2013 to address important issues of feminism and promote public debates on these issues. “Chega de Fiu Fiu” is one of the NGOs projects, a wide campaign fighting sexual harassment in public spaces. Retrieved from: < <https://thinkolga.com/>>.
- 2 The National High School Exam (ENEM) is a yearly exam applied by the Brazilian federal government to assess high school grad students performances. The results of the exam are used to select new students to enter dozens of higher learning institutions. According to government data, more than six million candidates registered in 2017.
- 3 Why do we talk about a culture of rape? UN Women. Retrieved from <https://nacoesunidas.org/por-que-falamos-de-cultura-do-estupro>
- 4 Founded 127 years ago, the Anchieta College is a private

schooling institution located in Porto Alegre (RS). It is supported by the Antônio Vieira Association, of Jesuit origin, and offers early childcare, fundamental and secondary schooling for around three thousand students. In February, 2016, students between the ages of 13 and 17 protested against one of the school's dress codes prohibiting them from wearing shorts at school. An online petition called "We will wear shorts" was created to obtain support for the movement that had a large following on the internet.

- 5 In May 2016, a 16-year-old girl was raped by at least five men in a western community of Rio de Janeiro (RS). Images of the girl, naked and unconscious, were leaked across the internet, with the person who shot the video saying that there were more than 30 aggressors; the backlash of this case provoked a riot against the criminals as well as insults and swears directed at the violated girl, who was placed under protective custody by the federal government's Protection Program for Children and Adolescents Threatened with Death.
- 6 Data from the RBS is retrieved from <http://comercial.gruporbs.com.br/veiculos/diario-gaucha/> Characterized as a newspaper directed towards a popular segment, the *Diário Gaúcho*, belongs to the RBS Group and was founded in April 2000 to serve the public classes C, D and E from Porto Alegre and the metropolitan area.
- 7 The Rede Brasil Sul Group, RBS, was created in 1957, and is one of the five biggest media companies in Brazil. It has a television broadcaster (RBS TV, the biggest affiliate of Rede Globo television), three paper presses and five radio broadcasters which are leaders in the media market of Rio Grande Sul. Besides the area of communication, RBS also acts in the mobile, digital media and technology and e-commerce sectors.
- 8 Rio Grande do Sul is the largest state in the South of Brazil with a population of 11.2 million, according to the last census from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The capital of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, is the 10th most-populated city in the country with 1.4 million inhabitants, according to IBGE.
- 9 Por que "secar" uma mulher na rua transforma uma simples caminhada em constrangimento. *Diário Gaúcho*. Porto Alegre: June 002, 2016. Retrieved from <http://diariogaucha.clicrbs.com.br/rs/dia-a-dia/noticia/2016/06/por-que-secar->

uma-mulher-na-rua-transforma-uma-simples-caminhada-emconstrangimento-5824351.html

- 10 Comentários dos leitores mostram por que é importante falar sobre a cultura do assédio. *Diário Gaúcho*. Porto Alegre: June 3, 2016. Retrieved from <http://diariogaicho.clicrbs.com.br/rs/dia-a-dia/noticia/2016/06/comentarios-dos-leitores-mostramporque-e-importante-falar-sobre-a-cultura-do-assedio-5825516.html>
- 11 Saffioti, H. & Almeida, S. (1995). *Violência de Gênero: poder e impotência*. Rio de Janeiro: Revinter.

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