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Comment on Elena Giomi and Fabrizio Tonello/3

“Moral Panic” or “Cultural Suasion?”

by Fiorenza Deriu

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The article by Elisa Giomi and Fabrizio Tonello is decidedly intriguing and will undoubtedly foster future debates. The authors start from the definition of “moral panic” and the process on which the definition given by Stanley Cohen is rooted [Cohen 1980]. Hence, when a new threat happens, public concern can be magnified by the widespread of news that call for action and draw the majority of the public to accept the threat as real; the public becomes extremely hostile to the group identified as responsible of the event and the politicians respond through political, administrative and legal procedures. On the basis of these premises, the authors address the problem of “proportionality” and try to explain when the attention given by the media to a social issue is disproportionate to its real diffusion and to the real threat it represents.

The findings of the study, however, are not convincing and do not provide adequate arguments to answer the starting question.

To start with, the perimeter of the study shows some ambiguities. It is not clear whether the issue of proportionality is addressed with regard to the phenomenon of violence against women or to the more generic topic of crimes in which immigrants seem to be involved. At the beginning, the study seems to move on showing that violence against women (that is well known being acted almost exclusively by partners in domestic context), is represented by media as a crime perpetrated by strangers and ethnic minorities. But when the fragments of the corpus are selected for the critical discourse analysis, the authors coherently choose only those news who received

most coverage in the evening edition of the six most popular newscasts during the observation period (2006), and among these newsworthy there are only three out of seven cases clearly configuring a form of violence against women (Hina Salem, Jennifer Zacconi and Luciana Biggi). Three out of seven cases are family's carnages and the case of Elena Lonati is a murder that is not connected to a will of rape by the author (and this is also the only case where actually a foreign young man is the author of the violence). Looking at the period 2005-2010 the authors find that there are only three out of ten cases clearly configuring a form of violence against women (M. Kercher, Chiara Poggi, Elisa Klaps) among the news most covered by the television newscasts. Five cases involved children and the last two had a mixed *facies*. Giovanna Reggiani's homicide, cited in the introduction of the study and considered a decisive turning-point for the adoption of the decree 181/2007, is not included in the list of the news at a high coverage. Hence, the perimeter of the study is quite smaller than that expected to argue about the impact of these news on both public opinion and the response given by politicians and governments, especially if the focus is on violence against women.

Secondly, as a matter of fact, the problem of proportionality can be addressed by comparing the news coverage with official figures on crimes just in the case of femicide, because in this case we actually have an effective measure of the facts that happened. Thus, the authors can correctly state that a few cases receive an inflated and fuzzy attention by the media. But looking at violence against women we have to take into consideration that there is a very low percentage of women who report an assault, whatever is the type of violence they experienced. Only 7% of women victims of violence by partner report it to police, in Italy; a figure that decreases to 4% when the author is unknown [Istat 2008]. In this case the real spread of the phenomenon is much wider than that reported by statistics and there would not be a disproportion between the news and the events transmitted by media. We know, and it is true, that partner or ex-partner in domestic context acts a high percentage of these types of violence but also in this case how to fix the threshold that states the limit of under or over reporting?

A different case comes into evidence if we consider crimes in general. In this case we could put the accent on the overestimation of almost non-existent phenomenon such as crimes made by foreign men. Also in this case it would be needed a threshold to distinguish what is a low or a high frequency event.

Anyway, even if one accept the authors' thesis of disproportionality between news casting and measure of the events, their results meet only a couple of points considered in the process described by Cohen. Interesting and fascinating arguments are presented by the authors with regard to the threat publicised by the media as

well as to the response given by politicians through political, administrative and legal procedure. But no evidence is given on the impact that the threat presented by the media has on public concern, on the collective response given by the audience, on significant associations between the message, the public opinion and the political action.

All in all, the authors look at just one “face of the medal.” They analyse in depth the contents of the message but not its impact on the audience. Furthermore, the method used to analyse the message – the critical discourse analysis – is arguable. The limit of this method is that no inference of results is possible at a more general level. For this reason, in this case too, it would be worth adopting a *mixed*, quali-quantitative approach [Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Morse 1991], to analyse the corpus of the most newsworthy through more advanced techniques of textual analysis, based on statistical indicators. The French school of L. Lebart and A. Salem [2011] as well as the Italian school of S. Bolasco and T. De Mauro [2013] are emblematic of how such kind of techniques can offer an added value to studies of textual corpora. It is also well worth noting that textual analysis is not a mere statistical treatment of words but it involves the connections among different parts of the discourse. Automatic textual analysis is comprehensive of both content and discourse analysis. In fact, it enables scholars to capture latent syntagms, to build models for sense making, to find lessical universes and semantic relationships, through the representation of the paradigmatic dimension of a vocabulary and the syntagmatic dimension of a text (discourse analysis). Hence, the automatic analysis of texts is not only a linguistic analysis but an in depth study of the structure of a corpus accompanied by the possibility to make inference of the results starting from corpora of at least 50.000 token, according to the nature of the text.

Thirdly, even if one would consider valid the corpus analysed by the authors, the effects registered are not directly associated to the “moral panic” spread through the networks news. The effects discussed in the paper concern events that would have drawn “moral panic” in the public opinion and created the condition for a consequent response by politicians as they were presented as a threat by the media. The panic spread among people would have favoured the adoption of measures directed against the groups identified as a threat. But how can the authors demonstrate the direct effect between these events and the response of public and politicians?

Even if the discourse analysis of the news at the highest coverage sustains the thesis of “moral panic” it does not mean that “moral panic” is perceived as well among the public.

If the authors wished to demonstrate that public opinion had been overwhelmed by “moral panic” they should have tried to investigate their reac-

tion through adequate techniques. There are many useful data sources accessible on the web concerning people opinions, such as Twitter, Facebook, blog, thematic forum, and so forth. The statistical analysis of the texts that are written in these virtual spaces are currently a widespread field of research and they would be very useful to address the issue of “proportionality” between an almost non-existent phenomenon and the reactions of media, people and politicians.

Had the authors investigated this “side of the medal,” they would have a valid empirical argument to afford the issue of “proportionality” and to make their conclusions credible. In fact, contrary to what they maintain, to address the issue of proportionality it is not sufficient to compare the figures on specific type of crimes and the “bombastic rhetoric” used by the media. In other words, it is not sufficient to state that the representation of the crime is amplified by the television news casting to conclude that “moral panic” is spreading among the audience and that some political decisions are the direct effect of such a phenomenon.

What is necessary is to demonstrate that the over-representation of the threat has generated such responses. So the terms of comparison are the network messages and the sound that they have had on those virtual places where the discourse on social issues was shaping. Then, if we wished to study the impact of the public opinion on political decisions, hence we would put these results in the context of the decision-making at that time.

For all these reasons, it would be worth using a different analytical concept other than “moral panic” to describe the relationship between news casting, audience behaviour and political responses; a concept that I would call “cultural suasion,” a latent influence, that media are managing day by day, transmitting interpretative codes that are increasingly rooting in the audience, contributing to shaping not merely the public opinion but the dominant culture. A culture that looks at differences as a threat; a culture that slowly tend to neutralize rather than capitalise the value coming from different experiences and cultures.

Hence, what are the dimensions of “cultural suasion?” According to the authors, the news casting channels selected in this study have a wide and heterogeneous audience. This is the first point to consider: the dimension of the public that the messages can reach.

Anyway, there are a number of other factors to be considered. First of all, the criterion for choosing what is a news and what is not. There is a sort of “run-up to sensationalism” to increase the audience, to beat the competitors on the free market [D. B. Sachsman and D. W. Bulla 2013; W. Francke 1985] that is increasingly dominating the scene of the opinion making. In my opinion, the market is the first agent

of a distorted vision of what is news and what is not. To reach the largest audience possible, it is needed to shock the public, to offer exiting news and entertainment. Sensationalism drives the treatment of the news even if truth might be swept under the rug, even if inaccuracy risks prevailing. Networks have to solve a dilemma: choosing between reporting objectively and reporting what sells. So, “cultural suasion” is decidedly driven by sensationalism.

Sensationalism is also connected to a dangerous homologation process, due to an emulative run-up to capture the audience, where contents vanish and the formal dimension prevails [Barbano 2003]. “Cultural suasion” is sustained by the homogeneity of the message; by the concordance of the news. As an example, in the discussion of the case of Biggi’s murder, the authors have observed that even the TG3, “after reporting that the main suspect was her Italian boyfriend, felt the need to ‘reassure’ its audience by saying that Moroccan drug-dealers were also taken into consideration” (TG3 April 30th). Hence, if a network well known for its capacity to give a more progressive view of the facts shape the news in accordance to the predominant vision of the other network, there is clearly an effect of homologation overcoming whatever good sense.

Those report or inquiry programmes focused on chronicle news increasingly involving the murders of women or young girls also drive “cultural suasion.” In these television programmes the sensationalism in the presentation of the crimes, the details in the scene investigation, the grotesque and almost obsessive description of the dynamic of the assault, are the protagonist of a spectacular representation that often forgets the victim and make celebrities out of criminals. In these programmes the time dedicated to the presentation and the discussion of the cases is longer than that reserved in a TG news casting. Opinion leader are also invited to give their view of the fact and probably this is a very relevant factor of “cultural suasion;” they attract people more by fascination than by conviction.

Pictures, images and videos that accompany the TG news then enforce sensationalism. A large part of the effects of these messages is due to the images chosen for their representation to the public. It would be interesting to integrate the analysis of the authors by a visual analysis of the videos that accompanied the news casting of the high-profile cases studied.

In my opinion, these factors enabling “cultural suasion” through the run-up to sensationalism rather than support the diffusion of a sense of uncertainty and unsafety tend to sustain the prejudice that those who are different, not only for their national origin but also for any other kind of reason are to be looked at with diffidence. This is a challenge that is still open, ongoing and dangerously spreading and that would call the attention of a major number of scholars.

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Keywords: Sensationalism, proportionality, textual analysis, homologation process, cultural suasion.

Fiorenza Deriu is Assistant Professor at the Department of Statistics at “Sapienza” - University of Rome. Among her research interests, the analysis of the factors affecting women life and more specifically the violence against women represent important fields of study. She is author of two books: *Discriminazione e Violenza Contro le Donne: Conoscenza e Prevenzione*, 2007 in co-authorship with Giovanni B. Sgritta and *Contro la Violenza. I Rapporto dell'Osservatorio sulle Vittime di Violenza e i Loro Bambini della Provincia di Roma*, 2011. She is teaching courses on both Research Design and Methodology and on Multivariate Data Analysis.