

Words that shape worlds: decolonial media and AI literacy as a tool for liberation pedagogy

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Abstract: This article explores the role of media literacy and *AI literacy* as pedagogical tools for the primary prevention of symbolic and structural *gender-based violence* through the deconstruction of gender stereotypes in the media. Drawing on a theoretical analysis based on studies in gender linguistics, communication sociology and liberation pedagogy, as well as through the analysis of empirical data from workshop experiences involving different types of users, it shows how teaching practices highlight that *media and AI literacy*, when designed from an intersectional and transformative perspective, can act as a lever for 'awareness-raising' and the development of critical thinking. The experiences have highlighted the need to systematically integrate these practices into school curricula and teacher training courses in order to build educational communities capable of promoting equity, respect and social justice.

Keywords: media and AI literacy, gender stereotypes, journalism

1. Introduction

'Words are actions' (Wittgenstein, 1945): they do not merely describe the world, but contribute to constructing it, defining its symbolic boundaries, and determining its hierarchies and exclusions. From this perspective, language – especially media language – is not an accessory element but a device of power (Foucault, 1971; Spivak, 1988; Bourdieu, 1982/1991); capable of shaping the collective imagination (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1994b/2022) and influencing social behaviour (Butler, 1997; van Dijk, 1993). The choice of words is therefore the expression of a 'view' of reality: language, including images and sounds, can be a tool for situated education, a cultural and political act for civic education that nurtures democratic participation (De Mauro, 2003) in order to form critical, responsible and agentic subjectivities. Gender stereotypes, conveyed and reinforced daily by newspapers, advertising, music, digital platforms and audiovisual content, are not just distorted representations: they are tools through which asymmetrical roles are legitimised,



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violence is normalised and a hierarchical view of relations between men and women is consolidated.

In this scenario, *media and AI literacy* – understood as critical education about and through media and AI – represents one of the most promising pedagogical responses with transformative potential. It is not just a matter of providing technical or literacy skills, but of helping students to decode implicit messages, recognise the *frames* that regulate public gender narratives, recognise internalised *biases* and imagine new languages and new worldviews.

This essay lies at the intersection of the sociology of cultural processes, critical pedagogy, media studies, and gender studies. Through a dual approach – theoretical and applied – it attempts to explore the mechanisms through which the media contribute to the construction and reproduction of gender stereotypes, and to document educational practices that, on the contrary, seek to deconstruct them through the lenses of decoloniality (Spivak, 1988) and intersectionality (hooks, 1981; 1994b/2022, Crenshaw, 1991). Particular attention will be given to the role of words and images, the responsibility of journalistic information, and experiences of *media literacy* in contextslifelong learning, with specific reference to the Venice Manifesto (Giulia giornaliste, 2017).

The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to contribute to scientific reflection on media, education and gender justice; on the other, to offer operational tools and concrete guidelines for transformative teaching, capable of forming critical, responsible and agentic subjectivities. Because, as Paulo Freire teaches, 'No one educates anyone else, no one educates themselves, people educate each other, with the mediation of the world' (Freire, 1968/2011, p.89).

2. Materials and Methods: The mechanisms of power between music and words

Stereotypes, as socially shared and culturally transmitted representations that attribute distinct and rigidly regulated characteristics, roles and behaviours to individuals based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, social status (and more), do not reflect the complexity of social reality but are rather its crystallised simplification, often serving to maintain consolidated and asymmetrical power structures (Butler, 1990; Ridgeway, 2011) and may concern. Stereotypes are assimilated from early childhood and paradoxically become powerful pedagogical devices for learning through the early internalisation of symbolic and cultural mechanisms capable of conditioning gender identity, professional aspirations, relational behaviours and perceptions of self. Schools can symbolically transmit social inequalities through habitus and symbolic violence, which can be internalised from early childhood

(Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970/1972), just as collective representations (including those related to gender) are socially internalised through education, which acts as a form of moral socialisation at an early age (Durkheim, 1922), when is a learning process triggered in a social and linguistic context that structures the child's mind, making cultural norms part of their development cognitive (Vygotsky, 1934). In this sense, stereotypes are social constructs internalised (de Beauvoir, 1949) through education and culture, as children internalise cognitive gender patterns early in life, when are perceptions and behaviours oriented (Bem, 1981), introjecting educational models that produce different modes of moral judgement and relationship, based on gender stereotypes (Gilligan, 1982), including linguistic ones. The repetitiveness of learned acts and languages contributes to the formation of a 'performative' gender identity (Butler, 1990) on a basis cultural, in that 'gender is a repeated act, a social ritual that produces the illusion of substance' (Butler, 1990, p. 191). Stereotypes act therefore as semiotic devices that naturalise social and gender hierarchies (Hall, 1997) and, within social discourses and practices, produce 'subjectivity', operating as pedagogical devices of power (Foucault, 1975). But while educational mechanisms transmit cultural models hegemonic, they can also be instruments of liberation by activating processes of 'conscientisation' of models oppressive (Freire, 1968/2011). In short, to quote bell hooks (1994) who looks to Freire and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2011), education can (or must?) be the place where the transmission of internalised stereotypes is subverted, transforming the classroom into a space of resistance (hooks, 1994). In educational and training contexts, gender stereotypes can be reflected in school practices, teaching materials and adult expectations, so that language is reinforced in its 'power' to constitute the main device for transmitting and legitimising gender stereotypes (). The approach to linguistic sexism, as systematised by Alma Sabatini (1987), reveals how semantic asymmetry between genders is inscribed in the grammatical structures of the Italian language. Masculine terms, used as 'universal neutrals', actually conceal an androcentric point of view that makes women linguistically invisible or subordinate (Sabatini, 1987; Giulia giornaliste, 2014). On the contrary, a conscious and inclusive use of language can contribute to the redefinition of gender relations and the symbolic visibility of women in the public sphere. The media, in their implicit educational function, operate as powerful agents of socialisation, constructing and consolidating the collective imagination. Through journalistic texts, television programmes, advertising, music videos and digital content, they convey stereotypical representations that affect the formation of identity and gender relations. But if we previously thought that language as a device of power was expressed in words and images, not simply reflecting reality but producing it, through the definition of what is true, normal or deviant, right or

wrong, visible or invisible (Foucault, 1969; 1972; 1976) we now know that is not the case, at least not entirely.

Research by Queen Mary University (Marinelli et al., 2024) shows how the soundtracks of television commercials for toys are structured according to gendered sound codes: aggressive and distorted music for males, sweet and harmonious for females, thus contributing to the early sedimentation of gender norms (Marinelli et al., 2024). Music also as a language can therefore contribute to constructing a 'discourse' (Foucault, 1969; 1972; 1976) on social roles and identity postures based on gender. The aesthetic-discursive dimension of the media is central to perpetuating or, conversely, deconstructing dominant models, which can be perpetuated or deconstructed through pedagogical action. In the workshops referred to in this work, we tried to transform the classroom into a 'space of resistance' (hooks, 1994), 'unmasking' together with the students those internalised symbolic patterns that act as powerful pedagogical devices of normalisation.

2.1 What 'discourses' on gender-based violence: the case of Giulia Cecchettin and the Venice Manifesto as a pedagogical device

Gender-based violence is one of the most serious violations of human rights, with profound implications at both the individual and social levels. In Italy, the phenomenon of femicide continues to cause concern due to the decreasing age of both victims and perpetrators (recent incidents have also in the 12-18 age group been recorded). According to data from the Ministry of the Interior, in 2024 there were 120 cases of murder of women, 90 of which were committed within the family or in a relationship. These figures highlight the persistence of a patriarchal culture that legitimises violence as a means of control and domination over women (Ministry of the Interior, 2024). The media representation of such events plays a crucial role in the public perception of the problem. Often, the media tend to minimise or justify acts of violence through narratives that emphasise 'rage' or 'jealousy', distorting the reality of the facts and contributing to the normalisation of gender-based violence (Gi.U.Li.A. Giornaliste, 2017). Through music and advertising content, the media often perpetuate gender stereotypes that contribute to symbolic violence against women. In music, particularly in the trap genre, lyrics frequently objectify women, presenting them as mere sexual objects or status symbols, thus reinforcing a macho

and sexist culture¹. Similarly, advertising uses images and messages that reinforce traditional gender roles. Women are often portrayed in subordinate roles or as objects of male desire, while men are associated with strength, power and success. These representations contribute to maintaining gender inequalities and limiting women's aspirations (Santonniccolo et al., 2023)². The tragic case of Giulia Cecchettin, a young woman who was the victim of femicide in 2024, had a significant impact on Italian public opinion. Extensive media coverage³ of the event led to a 50% increase in calls to the anti-violence helpline 1522 in the following weeks, highlighting how careful and respectful media representation can raise awareness and encourage victims to seek help (Ministry of the Interior, 2024). The news was initially treated by the media in a neutral manner, as a case of a couple's disappearance or 'elopement'⁴, but when it became clear that it was a case of femicide, the media polarised their narrative, drawing on gender stereotypes and activating a mechanism of double victimisation against the victim, empathising with the murderer, whose version of events was amplified and legitimised by the mass media⁵, in contrast to the provisions of the 'Venice Manifesto' (fig. 1).

¹ One of the exercises proposed to teachers and students who participated in the workshops referred to in this paper involved the linguistic analysis of the lyrics of songs Italianin charts Spotify's Top 10 and Top 50 on a given day, in order to identify gender stereotypes conveyed through the words in the music.

² Another exercise conducted during the workshops focused on advertising language to recognise gender stereotypes conveyed by marketing tools.

³ The exercise involved collecting articles from newspapers Italianrelating to femicide, covering the period from the victim's disappearance to the convictionmurderer's.

⁴ Emblematic of this category is the article: Treviso today, 13 November 2023, <https://www.trevisotoday.it/cronaca/ex-fidanzati-scomparsi-venezia-treviso-13-novembre-2023.html> last accessed 3-6-2025

⁵ Emblematic of this category is the article: Il Mattino, 3 December 2023, https://www.ilmattino.it/primopiano/cronaca/filippo_turetta_incontra_genitori_cosa_sappiamo-7794517.html last accessed 3-6-2025

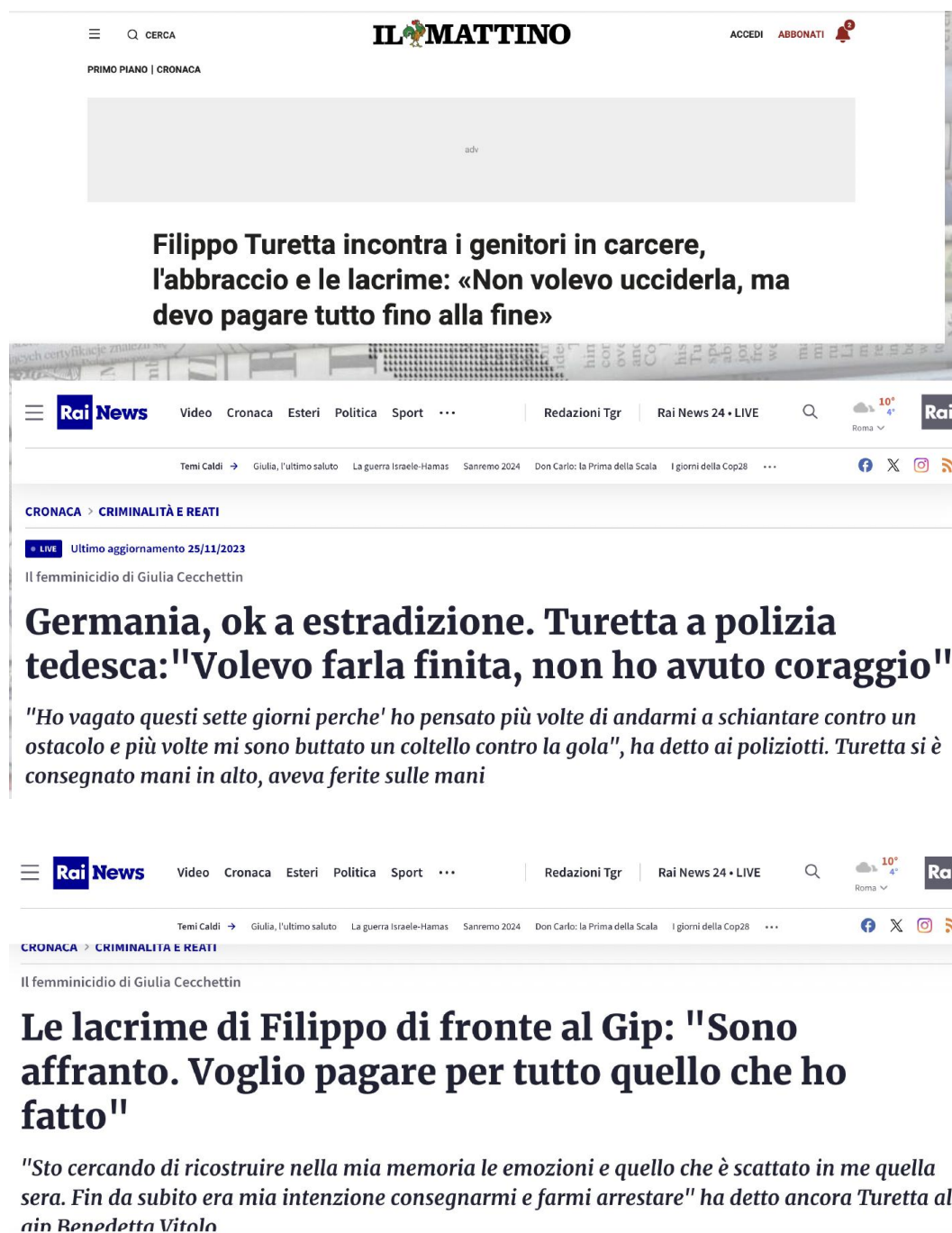


Fig. 1. The headlines of Il Mattino and Rainews empathise with the murderer.

The front page of Il Manifesto the day after the victim's funeral is exemplary: taking up the feminist slogan "The personal is political" (Hanish, 1969), replacing the verbal lemma with a conjunction, accompanied by an image of the funeral, it creates in the

reader's mind a reference to both the collective feminist imagination that places women's personal experiences (and, by extension, that of everyone) with social action, where action becomes collective testimony and political proposal, creating a direct reference to the speech by the victim's sister and father, who proposed a discourse on gender-based violence in a 'stubborn and contrary direction' to that of blaming the victim and women and acquitting the perpetrator, as proposed by the mainstream media.



Fig. 2 The front page of Il Manifesto on 6 December 2023.

Educational experiences such as those promoted in some workshops⁶ carried out in 2024 show how the conscious use of *the Venice Manifesto* allows boys and girls to become agents of change, redefining the representation of themselves and others in

⁶ As part of the project 'Intrecci di Comunità educanti' (Intertwining Educating Communities), in response to the 2020 Public Notice of the Department of Family Policies 'Educare in Comune' (Educating Together). Authorised in 2024. Municipalities involved: Uggiano La Chiesa, Giurdignano, Otranto. Comprehensive Institute of Uggiano La Chiesa and offices in Otranto and Giurdignano. Implementing body APS CREIS – European Research Centre for Sustainable Innovation - ETS Activity title: Beyond stereotypes: educating about difference. Goal 5 ASVIS - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Carried out by the author on 12 and 14 November 2024.

the public sphere (GiULiA Giornaliste, 2017). The experiences conducted with secondary school teachers⁷ and in the Children's City Council of Lecce are a relevant example of such transformative approaches. The approach adopted in the workshops with teachers and children from the Lecce City Council is *inquiry-based learning* (Ernst, Hodge & Yoshinobu, 2017), which stimulates active participation, divergent thinking and the ability to ask critical questions about social reality and consumer culture (Freire, 1970; Lewison et al., 2002). Teachers and children were invited to analyse advertisements, song lyrics, Amazon content, Disney films, music videos and trap music lyrics. Each activity was aimed at deconstructing gender representations through generative questions such as: 'Who is speaking?', 'Who is represented and how?', 'What are the possible alternatives?'. Significant use was made of examples taken from sexist toy advertisements and trap songs featured in Spotify's Top 10 and Top 50 charts, such as those by Sfera Ebbasta and Anna Pepe. In these contents, teachers were able to identify implicit messages of female objectification and othering, possessive jealousy, sexism and the naturalisation of relational violence.

2.2. Co-creation of content for ethical information

One of the most effective teaching practices was the co-creation of alternative media content. The same approach was followed in two workshops aimed at different users⁸: in line with the *Venice Manifesto* (2017) and the Deontological Code for Journalists⁹, the working groups produced articles, graphics, photos and video reports in accordance with the ten points of the document, thus exercising a process of symbolic reappropriation of language and public imagery in an intersectional key. Furthermore, through the use of simulated editorial practices, such as writing news articles on femicide using respectful and non-sensationalist language, students were able to confront the ethical dilemmas of the journalism profession, developing an awareness of the importance of language in representing reality and determining how it is perceived. Finally, the use of gender-sensitive language in school and institutional communication was encouraged, in accordance with the recommendations of Alma Sabatini (1987) and the guidelines of linguist Cecilia Robustelli (2012), in order to make visible in language the cultural changes necessary

⁷ See note no. 1

⁸ 1. 'Journalism Workshop' (20 hours; aimed at 250 second-year students) of the three-year degree course in Communication; 2. 'Multimedia Investigative Journalism' workshop (25 hours, aimed at 10 trainee journalists) of the two-year Master's degree in Journalism at the ALDO MORO University of Bari, academic year 2024-2025.

⁹ <https://www.odg.it/codice-deontologico-delle-giornaliste-e-dei-giornalisti/59465>

for a truly inclusive school. In schools, the use of the Venice Manifesto in *media and AI literacy* workshops proved extremely effective in raising awareness of linguistic responsibility among the younger generation and teachers. It provided a critical framework for analysing articles, television reports and social media comments, showing how language can fuel or counteract the culture of violence.

3. Discussion and results: practices of liberation

The results that emerged¹⁰ from the workshops highlighted a greater awareness among participants of the influence of the media in shaping gender roles and relationship models. Girls, in particular, expressed discomfort and a desire to rebel against the aesthetic and behavioural codes imposed by digital patriarchal culture. The boys, on the other hand, initially showed resistance but, in the discussion, significantly reworked concepts related to toxic masculinity, jealousy and the performativity of strength. The teacher training highlighted the need to revise school textbooks with an intersectional approach and to introduce gender-sensitive language in institutional communication as the most obvious effect of a transformative and generative learning process according to the approach suggested by liberation pedagogy (hooks, 194b/2020). The insufficient integration of the intersectional approach is one of the limitations that emerged. Although the workshops addressed emblematic cases of multiple discrimination – such as in the case of women of African descent or trans victims – there is still a lack of pedagogical systematisation that addresses the intersections between gender, race, class, sexual orientation and ableism (Creenshaw, 1991; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Intersectionality cannot be treated as an accessory or occasional element, but must constitute the epistemological framework of critical education in media and AI. As bell hooks (2000) points out, every emancipatory educational process must start from the embodied experience of individuals, recognising their specific material, symbolic and emotional conditions. Despite the challenges, the results of the workshops show that it is possible to transform schools into places of resistance and cultural regeneration, if adequately supported by public policies and continuous training. With this in mind, some lines of action for the future can be outlined:

- Curricularisation of media and AI literacy by gender;
- Compulsory training for teaching staff;

¹⁰ An ex ante and ex post survey was administered to reveal the unconscious internalisation of gender stereotypes, with an ex post emergence rate of 95%.

- Participation of students in the production of counter-narratives;
- Systemic integration between schools, journalism and institutions.

4. Conclusions

¹¹ 's quantitative and qualitative data converge in indicating the urgent need for systematic educational action capable of profoundly influencing the symbolic imaginaries and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that shape gender identity from early childhood. Advertising, music, social media, as well as traditional journalism, convey narratives structured around hegemonic male models, often characterised by control, possession and strength as validated and validating traits, to the detriment of affective, egalitarian and relational alternatives.

The educational experiences analysed show that it is possible to defuse these mechanisms through teaching practices based on participation, the production of alternative content, and the comparison of dominant models and conscious counter-narratives. However, structural change is needed, involving:

- public policies;
- newspaper editorial offices;
- educating communities.

Ultimately, *media and AI literacy* – if guided by an intersectional, linguistic and cultural approach – can be a political practice that gives new generations the tools to understand and change the world, and to take preventive action against the cultural roots of gender-based violence, which is first and foremost epistemic, linguistic and symbolic violence.

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¹¹ Ministry of the Interior, 2024

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