

## ***Images of childhood in the television framing.\****

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**Summary.** *This paper's aim is to enhance and increase the debate that's related to the recognition of the rights of the child connected to the relationship with the media which, besides mere respect for confidentiality and privacy of minors involved in news items, is rarely translated in policies of effective participation. In the wake of previous studies (Crespi, 2002; Belotti, 2005; Riva, 2007), we'll illustrate the outcomes of research, conducted in collaboration with the Regional Committee for Communications (Co.Re.Com.) of the Veneto Italian Region, about the forms of childhood representation disseminated by local TV channels in the Veneto Region, that examined a total number of 218 news programmes and 2548 news items, transmitted by seven local television channels during one week (from the 28th of February to the 6th of March 2011), from which we selected a total number of 260 news items containing some form of representation of childhood or adolescence, subsequently processed to content analysis.*

**Key words:** *childhood, media sociology, childhood sociology, children's rights, television channels*

\* Received: 14.07.2013 - Revision: 01/03/2014 – Accepted:14/04/2014

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### **Children as objects and children as subjects: preliminary remarks for this research**

The relationship between media and minors has been, for a long time, at the center of a debate whose main protagonists are the representatives of almost all the categories that, for different reasons, are involved in this process: institutions and associations, communication professionals and the scientific research world. At its center, there are some reflections and some research works that nevertheless, vulgarized rather than valorized, have produced a level of common sense discursiveness, constantly fueling several polarizations, especially the apocalyptic idea of the "death of infancy" and, on the contrary, the optimism about minors' "empowerment" in the relationship with the media. In Italy, the concept of infancy as a phase of the life course implied by the codes of "vulnerability" and "immaturity" has produced an entire and often incoherent series of normative dispositions and self-regulation codes. This one classically sees the imitation of behavior models suggested by television as the only possible answer to the fruition, uncritical and passive, of media messages. Such regulations had mainly pursued a specific and perhaps unique purpose: to protect and safeguard children from contents that are considered to be unsuitable or inappropriate. Since the drafting of the "Carta di Treviso" in 1990 (a code of ethics that draws its inspiration from the Convention on the Rights of the Child and sets out the duty of journalists, in their reporting, to protect the rights of children and minors in the media), the development of legislative structures defined a progressive, even if often just formal, respect for minors which, nevertheless, has still not been fully followed by the diffusion of that more general "culture of infancy and adolescence" that should point towards greater attention and sensitivity to the themes in which minors are considered as protagonists, and not simply as passive beings.

Mass media spread social reality representations, images of the world we live in, which become part of that repertoire of cognitive resources through which individuals attribute sense to the reality surrounding them. If some people fear the presumed and ill-defined manipulative abilities of the media system, it is nevertheless undeniable that the continual production and diffusion of mediated representations influence our way of thinking inside culturally defined contexts, both imposing determined themes to the collective attention, and furnishing frames of common sense through which the single individual will tend to interpret the events happening around him (Boni, 2004; Livingstone, 2007, 2009; Mastronardi, 2003; McQuail, 2001; Riva, 2012; Talbot, 2007). It becomes interesting to investigate how the mass media carry out their role as social builders of reality with regard to

under-ages, by investigating media representations of children and young people disseminated, for instance, by the television.

Former analyses and research (Falvo, Faustini & Porro, 1993; Belotti, 2005; Riva, 2007) showed that, in Italy, communication about infancy and adolescence characterizes a considerable slice of journalistic information, both national and local. Such news and journalistic analyses have as their main object deviant behaviors, only subsequently looking to the spheres of everyday life – culture and leisure time, sport, school, domestic and educational circles – which are closer to the experience of children and young people. Most notably, what emerges is the medium's attempt to get a greater involvement with the public, either exploiting sensitive themes at the level of common sense about children (for instance the violence "suffered" or "acted" by minors), or emotionally emphasizing a certain kind of news thanks to a "strategic" use of the "youth", believing in the fact that it constitutes a continuous source of worry and alarm among adult people.

Most recent studies, even if stressing the diminished incidence of episodes of minor's image dramatization and instrumentalization, confirm nevertheless the persistence of the semiotic use of youth with the aim of meaning something that is extraneous to their world. The construction modalities of images and representations concerning them respond in fact to the goals of adult communication and recall the idea of the child as passive object of the adult's attentions and emotions, especially when the medium aims to stir them in order to achieve a bigger audience.

This paper has as its object the outcomes of a research on forms of childhood and adolescence representations disseminated by local TV channels of the Veneto Italian Region, conducted in collaboration with Co.Re.Com Veneto (Cefalo, 2013; Durante, Riva, Tuzzi, 2013), a regional organization that carries out functions both proper and delegated by the Italian Authority for Guarantees in Communications (AGCOM). The analysis' goal is the understanding of the most frequent construction modalities of under-age's images.

Taken as a whole, the research concerned a total number of 218 newscasts by six from the Veneto Region local television channels (Antenna3 Nordest, Telenuovo, Televenezia, TVA Vicenza, Telebelluno, Rete Veneta) and from the regional newscast of the national channel Rai3. Channels were selected according to principles of coherent territorial coverage, ratings, broadcasting significance in terms of news broadcasting. The research involved the week of February 28th to March 6th, 2011, a week characterized by the absence of significant events which could otherwise modify broadcasting schedules as well as audience's consumption habits. Thanks to the use of a signaling system designed to

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detect news which carried some form of representation of infancy or adolescence, we were able to select from the generic corpus of 2548 monitored news a total number of 260 news items subsequently processed to content analysis through a purpose made survey.

The analysis tool was built following the principles of the so called "content analysis as investigation" (Casetti, Di Chio, 1997), a technique that aims to analyze cultural products and symbolic representations spread by mass media, through the revaluation of the interpretative moment, although it remains positioned, on the whole, within the quantitative approach (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf 2002). The survey form was composed of three different sections, progressively focusing the attention on the "manifest content", i.e. minor's role and position in the analyzed news about under-age, and the "latent content", i.e. children and young people representations emerging from the narrated events. Manifest content analysis catalogs news items according to several structural data, such as the broadcaster, the report's length, the presence of specific references to minors, the interviewed subjects. The latent content analysis refers instead to all those aspects that rely on an interpretative evaluation carried out by the researcher, and it aims to bring out the main features of childhood and adolescence social representations, that are disseminated by the medium (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2014; Belotti, 2005). To the latter belong the evaluation of the main themes covered by the different news, the minor's role within the mediatic narration, the narrative register used by journalists and the possibly related dramatization of the events involving children and adolescents.

Methodological choices respond also to the goal of comparison with former studies and research (particularly: Belotti, 2005; Riva, 2007): the collected data legitimate therefore longitudinal reflections related to possible changes and persistences in the production of local media communication on childhood and adolescence.

### **Childhood and adolescence in local newscasts**

The recognition of the presence of minors or themes connected to them in the monitored newscasts allows some general reflections on local television's information structure, thanks to the contextualization of media spaces devoted to infancy and adolescence within the wider frame constituted by news programmes broadcasted by the different television networks considered.

Table 1 shows that Antenna 3 and Rete Veneta were the major sources of news concerning minors, broadcasting respectively 63 and 60 items about infancy and adolescence. The average length of the analyzed news item was almost one minute and a half although it is associated with a high level of variability (standard deviation: 0.00.50 h.mm.ss) not only among different networks but also within the same television channel.

This lack of homogeneity is explainable by the discrepancy in the forms and the length of the news items.

**Table 1. Number and length of news concerning minors (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

Television Channel	Length of news (h.mm.ss)	Number of news	Average length (h.mm.ss)
Antenna 3	1.40.49	63	0.01.36
RAI 3	0.31.43	19	0.01.40
Rete Veneta	1.08.20	60	0.01.08
Telebelluno	0.38.45	23	0.01.41
Telenuovo	0.44.49	20	0.02.14
Televenezia	0.34.14	25	0.01.22
TVA Vicenza	0.52.31	50	0.01.03
<i>Total</i>	<i>6.11.11</i>	<i>260</i>	<i>0.01.26</i>

Focusing the attention on the 260 news items spreading representations and images of minors, it is opportune to dwell on the question of the identification of children and teenagers that become news objects. First of all, nearly 64% of the analyzed journalistic reports provide no information about the number of minors involved in the narrated events, while 48,5% of the news items (Table 2) do not contain a reference about gender. On the other hand, when gender specification is included, news items more frequently concern males rather than females, showing a difference with respect to the former research: 22,7% against 9,6%, while the remaining 19,2% of the cases refers to minors of both genders.

**Table 2. Number of news concerning minors per gender and year of survey (percentages) - (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

Gender	2007	2011
Female	10,1	9,6
Male	10,1	22,7
Both	21,5	19,2
Not mentioned	58,3	48,5
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>
<i>(number of news)</i>	<i>483</i>	<i>260</i>

With regards to the age of children and young people involved, the group of children between 6 and 10 years old represents the largest group (25,8%), but the three groups are in fact equal, i.e. pre-adolescents group (11-14 years, 21,3%) and the adolescent one (15-18 years, 23,1%). Also, children from 0 to 2 years represent 14,7% of the news items and children from 3 to 5, 8,0%. Finally, 7,1% do not specify the age.

Local newscasts do not seem therefore to produce unbalanced representations in their reporting, as they show a similar interest both in childhood and adolescence related themes.

Information and minors: when children and teenagers become objects of news

The purpose of a detailed treatment of the spread of news items about minors requires of necessity a thematic classification. As in former research, themes were classified using a broad spectrum of voices (specific thematic areas) in order not to lose the richness of the original information but also to allow subsequent aggregation when analyzing (Belotti, 2005). Table 3 shows that 41% of the total analyzed news centers around the two principal themes, leisure time and education. Other frequently represented issues relate to injuries and accidents, and acts of violence or deviance, respectively attested on values equal to 16,2% and 14,3%.

**Table 3. Number of news concerning minors per principal treated themes and year of survey (percentages) - (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

Principal themes	2007	2011
Leisure time	9,1	21,5
Education and culture	18	19,5
Injuries and accidents	9,7	16,2
Violence acts and deviant behaviors	16,8	14,3
Social and sanitary services	12,4	9,2
Health and environment	13,4	7,6
Participation	1,2	3,5
Foreigners	4,3	2,3
Family relationships	2,5	1,9
Other themes (with % less than 1% in 2011)	12,6	4,0
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>
<i>(number of news)</i>	<i>483</i>	<i>260</i>

Observing the table, the tendency to refer to minors in a negative or dramatic way appears to be very common. In fact the sum of percentage values related to violence and deviant behaviors, injuries and accidents, reaches a remarkable 30,5% of the total. Therefore, considering the overall amount of reports that refer to childhood and adolescence, almost one out of three concerns acts of violence, both received and perpetrated by minors, or accidents or other behaviors connected with the sphere of deviance (for instance alcoholism or drug consumption). Such themes are strongly susceptible to over-dramatization, because these events can have an emotional “pull” on the audience. However, not only violence, death and deviance catalyze the attention of local media. As mentioned above, news items related to leisure time (recreation, games and sporting activities) represent more than the 20% of the total number of local information about minors. Moreover, items in the educational sphere (school, culture etc.), account for 20%, while social and health service issues account for a still significant 9%.

We can see, therefore, that problematic or violent situations dominate, through exceptional, negative stories rather than stories of everyday life, which the media use to associate minors with danger, in order to arouse the public’s emotions. This tendency reinforces the link between youth and anxiety and worry. As a result, people usually consider children as weak and vulnerable subjects that necessarily have to be protected from the constant threats they experience. On the other hand, however, from the multiform local information landscape emerges the existence of a different

infancy, which lives in everyday social life, where children interact with their own peers and with adults in contexts far removed from danger or abuse. In fact, the collected data reveal a certain propensity to generally attribute importance to the education themes (a wide issue including education, schooling, culture, sociality), and to sport and leisure time. These themes have held a top role, during the analyzed week, in the local information devoted to children and young people.

In addition, it should be noted that the issue of the active participation of children and teenagers in the world that surrounds them has received a certain attention (3,5%), setting a possible landmark for the development of forms of informative communication characterized by a growing awareness about forces for cultural and social change inherent in such participation. This latest theme has been however largely marginal, consisting more of a sort of curiosity left to the initiative of some particularly skillful journalist, rather than good practice firmly entrenched in the typical productive "routines" of television information and communication (Altheide, 2000; Sorrentino, 2002).

### **Dramatization in news items**

The use of a narrative register tending to dramatize news items involving children and adolescents represented a cause of the mobilization that brought, for example, to the establishment of the "Carta di Treviso", signed in 1990 by the Press Federation and by the Journalists' Order, and of the Journalistic Code of Ethics, signed in 1998, which relates to the treatment of personal data in the exercise of journalistic activity. The first level of protection provided by these agreements is the safeguard of minors' privacy and anonymity in cases where there is a conflict between a journalist's right to information and a minor's right to fundamental human rights. From this point of view, as already seen (Riva, 2007), violations from mass media affect only relatively few cases: even during our observation we didn't find out any cases of law infringement.

However, if prohibiting the disclosure of a minor's detail still raises some unanswered questions, (e.g. the naming of a deceased minor is legal but is it moral?), this does not prevent the over-dramatization in the media report. All this influences the emotive language used, sometimes emphasizing grisly or scabrous details, instead of reporting, describing and analyzing from different viewpoints the events in which children or adolescents are involved.

As an element of substantial coherence with the research of 2007, the data show a trend of absence of narrative register's dramatization within



news items reporting facts and events related to the under-age person. In fact, with respect to 84,6% of the analyzed news that follows the canons of a punctual presentation of the treated matters, just 15,4% of the observed information is characterized by a dramatizing style. Dramatization however still holds significance when reports concern specifically news items involving children or teen-agers (for instance, accidents or case of violence): in fact, 38 out of 78 reports so characterized (41%) show ways of packaging of the event-news that reveal a wish to dramatize the narrated fact in order to make it more attractive for an adult public, appealing to its anxieties and emotions. Conversely, considering the amount of 182 reports, which deal not only with specific events and news items, but also present thematizations on various issues, over-dramatization proves to be a marginal phenomenon, resulting absent in 95,6% of such cases.

Apart from the tone of the narrative register, we examined if the minor was the main or the secondary protagonist in the news items. Compared with the research of 2007, news items where minors are not of primary interest ("only quoted in the service") remain substantially similar, passing from 26,5% to 27,3%, but in report where children play a primary role in the news there was an increase from 38,3% (in 2007) to 46,9%. Finally, the percentage of news items where minors hold a secondary position, decreased from 35,2% in 2007 to 25,8%.

Children's and teenagers' role within communications concerning them appears to be more frequently relevant and central in connection with reports which deal with specific facts and news items. As a matter of fact, minors represent the report's main object in 69,2% of cases (54 out of 78) regarding news items. This is more evidence that, for the medium, children and young people have become more appealing when they are involved in accidents, dangerous or violent situations: once again this attraction is mostly due to minors' ability to produce emotional reactions in an adult public.

### **Features of represented minors**

The notion of "agency" of the minor, emerged from the principles enacted by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, implies the recognition of a subject's autonomy, even though proportional to age and development. According to this perspective, children and teenagers would have both the ability to develop ways of understanding and interpreting the world that surrounds them, and therefore to act contributing to the change of their own socio - cultural environment (Qvortrup, 2008; Reynaert, 2009; Verhellen, 2008). Survey results seem however to confirm

a different view of the minor, which appears more as a sort of satellite gravitating around the adult world, rather than an exponent of an autonomous world, carrying its own specific demands and points of view.

As above explained, the survey form aimed to discover the latent content and emergent representations of the under-age person through some specific schemes of interpretation dependent on the evaluation of the researcher. The most significant among these concerned the position of the children and adolescents involved in the news: an active position refers to minors represented as actors, who behave in an active way in situations they are involved in, whilst a passive position refers to minors who are victims of the actions of others and indicates how they are manipulated by others.

First of all, it must be said that the dichotomy ‘active / passive’, was generally effective in describing infancy and adolescence images spread by local Veneto television channels: 20,4% of the news items were not pertinent to this active / passive polarity (Table 4). For what concerns the rest of the news, the collected data draw a balanced scenery: the image of children and young people as passive subjects turns out to be preeminent (36,5%), but its mirror image, representing minors as active subjects and protagonists, shows nevertheless rather elevated percentages too (32,3%).

**Table 4. Number of news concerning minors per prevailing representation (polarity active / passive) and year of survey (percentages) - (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

Prevailing representation	2007	2011
Active	23,4	32,3
Passive	46,0	36,5
Both active and passive	1,4	10,8
Not pertinent	29,2	20,4
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>
<i>(number of news)</i>	<i>483</i>	<i>260</i>

In comparison with the research of 2007, the divide between minors’ passivity and activity results to be strongly diminished. It passes from 22,6% to 3,2%, as a consequence of the increase of news items giving an active image of childhood (from 23,4% to 32,3%) and of the concomitant diminution of reports spreading a passive image instead (from 46% to 36,5%). Despite the caution with which such comparisons must be handled, because of the different extension of the analysis corpus (483 news in 2007

against 260 in 2012) and because of uncontrollable variability related to the different periods and broadcasting channels considered, we believe that this decreasing trend could represent the evidence of a new conception of the minor age, which is however not yet established and whose diffusion seems to proceed slowly and not without ambiguities. According to this perspective, the child is perhaps not a main actor, but at least a subject who is able to plan and pursue its aims by autonomous acting. Such thoughts still remain a minority in comparison with the more widespread representation of children as the weak objects of other people's care, permanently in need of protection, as they would be too much exposed to negative influences coming from adults and media messages.

In short, the collected data appear to consolidate the tendency, already emerging from former surveys, which sees the mass media moving partially away from their constant insistence on the association between minors and danger. Values related to the emergent representation of the minor age provide evidence for the strengthening of a media trend which implies producing communication about children and young people not only when they are in danger or when they are victims of violence. This means that children become object of news also when they act within uncontroverial contexts, such as sport, education, culture and leisure. Once more however, the following step is completely missing, that is journalists and mass media engagement in promoting minors' active citizenship as well as in raising society awareness about the abilities of understanding, planning and acting that are characteristic for minor age subjects. From this last and more ambitious angle, the principles proclaimed by the Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and by the national agreements referring to it, seem to remain largely unheeded.

### **Children are shown, adults comment**

The structure of reports transmitted by local newscasts often features typical tools as interviews and quotations of data coming from studies and researches realized by non-journalistic sources. If we consider the use of interviews within communication about childhood and adolescence (Table 5), the collected data show continuity with 2007 values: the interview communicative format, affecting 48,8% of the analyzed news, seems still to be primarily reserved to the adult world (33,8% of the cases) and hardly ever implies a direct involvement of children and young people alone (1,6% of the cases) or in the presence of adults (13,4% of the cases).

**Table 5. Number of news concerning minors per presence of interviews and year of survey (percentages) - (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

Interviews	2007	2011
Only adults interviewed	37,1	33,8
Only minors interviewed	0,2	1,6
Minors and adults interviewed	3,5	13,4
No interviews	59,2	51,2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100,0</i>	<i>100,0</i>
<i>(number of news)</i>	<i>483</i>	<i>260</i>

The narration of minors' demands, peculiarities and abilities is therefore delegated to adult actors who, even if well intentioned, persist in legitimating the image of the minor as completely dependent on other subjects' direction, whether they are relatives, local administrators, associations or information operators. In addition, if the description and the account of events involving children or the examination of thematic concerning them take place primarily through the lenses of the adults' perspective, such dynamics rarely contemplate the recourse to specialized and scientific knowledge. A prevailing space is instead granted to ideological or political representations, or to the expression of common sense beliefs (by the large use of interviews to local administrators, religious and everyday people). In this regard, it should be noted that routine factors play a remarkable role in building the news and conducting interviews. The information production is bound to rules such as time-saving in realizing the report and urgency in finding interview subjects. Moreover, bringing evidence for representations strongly soaked with common sense more than with specialist knowledge, the survey stresses the really limited reference to researches and studies in building the news that address infancy and adolescence connected themes.

In short, mass media tend to reproduce a common sense knowledge about minor age, which is marked by absence of problematization, apparent naturalness and simplicity. These properties make it proper for the demands of synthesis and communicative facility imposed by the purpose of public consent maximization that pervade the media system. Childhood and youth communication in the Veneto TV channels seems therefore to pursue eminently adults' finalities, as it essentially consists in producing messages directed towards an adult audience that has to be stimulated and attracted.

As a consequence, the hope for mass media engagement in the modification social representations on infancy and adolescence through interventions that should be more educational than spectacular, results to be isolated and ignored.

The news format transmitted by newscasts does not only include the use of verbal language and sounds: a significant role is played by images too. In fact, children and teenagers who are shown in the reports could be real protagonists of the narrated event or, on the contrary, they could not be directly involved in it, being used with "substitutive pertinence" (Belotti, 2005). In this last case, the report construction entails the use of visual elements in a separate way with respect to the verbal ones, with the double purpose to furnish a complete idea of the narrated story but also to stimulate emotional reactions in the audience. Thus, images of minors not directly concerning the treated facts may respond to a communicative strategy that leverages a spectacular and dramatized representation of the minor age in order to connote and make concrete ideas of uneasiness, danger or insecurity.

With the aim of understanding the role that television images play in building representations of the minor age, we analyzed the spheres of iconic and oral language separately. A special section of the survey form has therefore been prepared, in order to describe the single report as a sequence of scenes changing with the change of setting and pictured subjects. Every single scene/image has been analyzed as an object to itself, dissociated from the oral language.

Table 6 represent an attempt to clarify the question whether the rhetorical use of children and teenagers in circumstances extraneous to them is still a widespread practice in local television information. The intersection between pictured subjects categories and pertinence of the same with respect to the narrated facts describes a rather defined situation: when the scene was occupied only by adults, these subjects are almost always directly involved in the event-news and therefore the function of substitutive pertinence results residual. In fact, among the 134 images showing only adults, 124 concern pertinent subjects connected with the described facts, while only 10 out of 134 are archive images. When pictures show minors, instead, the amount of archive images increases notably: if a child or a group of minors appears isolated (127 images), once out of 3 they are not directly involved in the described facts (43 cases out of 127).

**Table 6. Number of images per pictured subjects and pertinence of pictured subjects (February 28<sup>th</sup> - March 6<sup>th</sup> 2011)**

<b>Pictured Subjects</b>	<b>Pertinence</b>		<i>Number of images</i>
	Involved subjects	Archive images	
Only minors	84	43	127
Minor with adults	49	19	68
Only adults	124	10	134
Absence of human subjects	21	42	63
<i>Number of images</i>	278	114	392

Excluding images which show no human subject, the amount of archive images within the different case groups results more remarkable when the pictured subjects are children or adolescents. On the other hand, the recourse to the archive is marginal when adults occupy the scene. In conclusion, the use of children and young people with substitutive and connotative pertinence continues to represent a common practice in the production and construction of local television information. Such dynamics imply the decontextualization of a fact or event and its following re-contextualization within formats and standards typical for the mass media, through the wide recourse to productive routines that are certainly bound to the available resources (for instance time limitations in realizing a report), but are, first of all, directed to the attainment of audience and consent goals.

### **Conclusive considerations: how to build a new culture of childhood and adolescence**

The survey results form a complex picture, full of ambivalence, in which prevailing models of childhood representation are combined with less well-defined trends, still involved in a process of stabilization. First, the data show a substantial compliance with the privacy of the children directly involved in news stories, in accordance with the codes of self regulation and, in particular, with the principles of the Treviso Charter. This result can therefore definitely be considered a positive effect generated by the control systems currently in force.

Few things to stigmatize still remain in the portrayal of childhood: sensational registers, the dramatization of events involving children or

teenagers, often accompanied by an inappropriate emphatic, and scabrous tone. The image of the child undergoes a sort of decontextualization and translation into a foreign frame of meaning, in which it plays an exploitable role designed to create anxiety, tenderness or emotion in the adult viewer. Children are therefore still too often placed within a communicative mechanism that does not concern their needs or circumstances of everyday life and become, instead, a mere object of communication "by adults and between adults".

The dramatization of the condition of children and adolescents, as it emerges from the survey presented, placing in the background those events and settings of "normal" everyday life, fosters the maintenance of an adult culture that views childhood as a condition of life that is characterized by protection and separation from the adult world instead of a proper element promoting promotes full participation of children and young people in public life as citizens.

However, the analysis also revealed the existence of different stories of childhood and adolescence. In a significant number of news items the children were not represented in negative or exceptional situations, but in everyday contexts: a remarkable number of issues related to education, free time and sports were frequently shown. It seems that a new *modus operandi* is emerging, showing different ways to spotlight the community life of children and adolescents as well as issues most dear to them: a great number of news items talk about school, games, parties and initiatives strictly connected to that part of the population that has not yet reached the legal adult age. The positive rights and the promotion of being underage have occupied an important part of local communication news, thus contributing to the diffusion of representations of children and adolescents as active actors, who are aware of and able to relate to the outside world and to act autonomously. Even in these situations, however, the local media protagonists have seemed unwilling to assume a correct perspective of childhood. Despite giving voice to the opinions and considerations of children and young people, it is assumed that the privileged interpreters of their needs are the exponents of the adult world (members of local institutions, ordinary people, teachers). To them is assigned the recognition of both the skills and the abilities of children. Although it is difficult to involve children with direct interviews (due to regulations intended to protect the identity and privacy of young people) the perception is that the local media are not so active in changing the paradigm, preferring instead to build on the traditional methods to construct the news.

The everyday life of children is not the object of media's reporting; even when it is possible and relevant, news items are not "at child's height", at childhood level. The world of childhood and adolescence, as it appears from a journalistic framework, is placed in an exceptional dimension, often dangerous, sometimes deviant, which is independent of the specific characterizations of the social reality experienced by children and adolescents. By preventing minors from establish themselves as subjects of communication, they are relegated to the role of a mere "object" of an information that is primarily functional in the adult world, coded in according to the needs of a specific public that prefers to understand young people from its own symbolic universe and its interpretative framework of childhood. The "child as a subject", increasingly as an object of attention and care compared to the past (Pollock, 1983), is gaining more space in the sphere of social perception (Belotti & Ruggiero, 2008), in the media's universe it is still rather too often subjected to a collective speech made by narrations and definitions that look at childhood with symbolic subjection, relegating the minors to a marginal role, not problematized and, above all, closed to the self-representations. These are discursive rituals that are not always investigated, that are granted, or connected to a monocausal vision between media and minors in which the latter can only be targets of the former's communication or possibly the opposite and thus they do not need any support or filter element in their relationship with the media.

This polarization about the forms of understanding in the relation between media and childhood is dangerous to translate. Academics, researchers and authorities might lose sight of the overall dynamics of social change concerning not only children but, above all, their relationship with the mass-communication media, be they traditional or new. In a sense, these dynamics had already taken a prominent role in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (Casas, 2008; Freeman, 2000; Le Fosse, 2004; Mirabelli, 2004; Verhellen, 1994) which emphasizes and stresses the need for a full recognition of children and young people as persons to act autonomously and having both passive and active rights.

Cantwell (2008) underlines that the rights set by the Convention can be traced to three different dimensions (the "3p"): the "protection" concerns the right of children to be protected from all forms of abandonment, abuse and exploitation in various areas of daily life; the "provision" concerns the right of access to resources (among others: the education services and welfare) with the aims of ensuring and promoting the material, psychological, relational and social well-being of the child; the



"participation" includes the rights of listening, expression and participation in individual and collective decisions that directly or indirectly concern the lives of children and the society in which they live. In addition to the rights of children to be protected and to receive ad hoc services, the right to play an active role in terms of listening and decision-making on their lives and the society in which they live is formulated for the first time.

The child must be considered as an active and autonomous social entity, a protagonist able to take part and to give meaning and sense to the world around him. In the relation with the media this necessarily passes through the adoption of ways and rules of approach to the theme that, on the one hand, leads adults to deal with images that correspond mainly to the reality experienced by children and, on the other hand, allowing children to develop a real critical sense of communication (Kirsh, 2010). Adults and institutions shouldn't be limited to the simple protection, however difficult and important, of children from the dangers of everyday life: the effective promotion of the rights of children and young people is inevitably connected to the concrete acceptance of their point of view, through the establishment of real inclusive opportunities for participation in the community of belonging. This ensures that childhood is not only an incomplete and unfinished object of an adult's project; using Cantwell's words protection takes priority over participation, so that the protective attitude with paternalistic shades does not continue to remain in the foreground compared with the promotion of childhood as a real and active social subject.

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