

## ***Media representations of the “new” childhoods: from mass media to digital environment \****

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**Summary.** *The representation of children and childhood in the media has always been a topic of great social and political importance, though poorly treated and considered. Mass media and digital media has always contributed to the construction of childhood as it is part of everyday life of children and adolescents who use it more and more frequently, considering it to be a real “living environment”. At the same time, the media “builds” social images of childhood and adolescence that are broadcast, conveyed and progressively legitimized. Without trying to exhaust the depth of this topic, this article intends to provide some examples of the representation of children in the media: the press and tv, the beauty contests for children, the role of new technologies in the new processes of “mediated storytelling”.*

**Key words:** *New childhood, Social representations, Mass media, Digital media, Media education*

### **Childhood, media and social representations**

The way in which childhood has been socially “constructed” has always influenced the role of children and adolescents in our societies, referring both to the cultural debate and to the policies promoted and undertaken.

Today the social construction of childhood and the way in which children grow up depends, largely, on the media. The media system<sup>1</sup>, in

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<sup>1</sup> *With the term “media system” we mean the cross-media integrated system that includes both mass media and digital media.*

fact, is one of the most important sources of information on contemporary times and on our reality. On the one hand, media technologies (both “traditional” media and digital media) are used by institutions, in order to form an idea of childhood on which building policies; they are also used by parents to get an idea of their children and, finally, the media are a tool, for the children themselves, to represent their identities and to provide self-images. On the other hand, the media evolution and the expansion of the possibilities of representation and self-representation of children and adolescents supported by the presence of digital media and in particular of the web 2.0 environment (characterized by dynamism, interaction and greater possibility of users’ participation), opens up new opportunities to produce representations.

In fact, we manage everyday with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about subjects and social issues. The concept of media representation is strictly connected with the idea of social representation. According to Moscovici, social representations are a “network” of different types of collective cognitions, common sense or thought systems of societies or groups of people. They can be defined also as a system of values, ideas, metaphors, images and practices and, finally, they interact with common sense (Lalli, 2000). “They have a twofold function: first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual group history” (Moscovici, 1973, p. XIII).

The concept of representation clearly shows how the images presented by the media, obviously, are never a direct presentation of the world but its re-presentation and rework. According to media theories and, in particular, to the media education perspective, media construct and reconstruct images and definitions of the different social actors. Media representations are the ways in which the media system portrays particular groups, communities, experiences, ideas, or topics from a particular ideological or value perspective.

The topic under examination will be how media representations serve to “re-present” or to actually create a new reality about childhood. This topic could be particularly interesting to investigate for sociology, for media studies and for education research. Children and adolescents, in fact, are a privileged topic of media stories, because their image is proposed and elaborated in many contexts, producing narratives, which are sometimes reassuring, sometimes dramatic. Such narratives are compelling,

entertaining and catchy and have the capacity to capture the attention of different types of audiences.

The purposes of this paper are:

- to describe the twofold relationship between children and media environment. Children are inhabitants of the new digital environment but are also subjects of their representation;
- to give some elements which can demonstrate that the images of childhood offered by media are very distant from the reality and from children's life-worlds. These images don't reflect or mirror "reality". Reality is quite varied and TV or the media generally show resounding cases which are far from daily life. We will try to answer to these questions, proposing some examples.

Finally, we will try to reflect about the possible tools and solutions that could help to change, at least in part, this situation, which has important social consequences.

### **The "New childhood"**

In the modern society the idea of childhood has been developed into a complex yet limited and manageable environment. The traditional agencies of socialization (such as the family, the school and the religion), were intended to promote the growth and integration of the child within a predetermined social structure (*functionalist-integrationist approach*). The functionalist perspective, a top down theory which is embodied by authors such as Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, considers social structure or the organisation of society to be more important than the individual.

From another point of view, the *interactionist-communicative approach* (represented by George Herbert Mead) emphasizes the interactional and relational aspects and, therefore, the horizontal processes of identity construction. In this perspective, these processes are so far limited to a context that includes the peer group or the vital worlds of the subject.

With the advent of the so-called post-modern society (Lyotard, 1984), variously defined by contemporary sociologists, the way to describe the childhood changes is adapting to the new social situation and to the global environment (de Block & Buckingham, 2007).

According to the contemporary Childhood studies, childhood "is an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted" (Prout & James, 1997: 7), *childhood is socially constructed* (Woodhead, 2009), and this field is characterized by the following meeting-points:

- Children development is a social and cultural process, conditioned by the context where children are growing up;

- Childhood is a social phenomenon;
- Childhood is a political issue;
- Cultures of childhood are deeply social;
- Children grow up surrounded by beliefs and representations of different kinds of childhoods in the media;
  - Childhood has been differently institutionalized and regulated in different societies and at different points in history;
  - Childhood is an ambiguous and complex status;
  - Being a child is a personal experience. Particular childhoods are represented publicly through biographies, memoirs and novels;
  - Studying children and childhood is also a social activity, therefore implying a relationship between researcher and researched.

Jens Qvortrup (Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Sgritta, G., & Wintersberger, H, 1994) also analyzes the *new sociology of childhood*, highlighting the eminently relational nature of the concept, which exceeds a purely evolutionary approach, enhancing the set of contexts with which the child interacts daily. William Corsaro, in his book “The Sociology of Childhood” (1997) goes beyond the traditional thinking of childhood, considering *children as agents and participants in society* and *childhood as a social form*.

Within the question of the transformation of childhood, we now address our attention to the specific relationship that develops between children and the media.

### **Childhood and the media: from broadcasting to remixed contents**

In this new perspective, the media system has a great relevance: media is often used by children, and they also contribute to the social construction of childhood, determining, in part, its characteristics.

The use of the media by children and adolescents has always been very significant and is constantly growing. The media is an agent of socialization for young people, today as important as the traditional ones. Through these means pass values, norms, patterns of behavior and attitudes that children and adolescents use to build, day by day, their own identity. According to Strasburger & Wilson (2002: 4), “there is no doubt that today’s youth are confronted with a media environment that is very different from the one faced by their grandparents or even their parents. [...]. Terms such as *digital television*, *gangsta rap*, and World Wide Web did not even exist 20 or 30 years ago” .

A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation survey of American children and their families, *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8 - to 18 - year - old's*, demonstrates that the use of every type of media (in particular mobile and online media use) has increased over the past 10 years, with the exception of reading. The reasons for these quantities are: the continued expansion of high-speed home Internet access, the proliferation of television content available online, and the development of the web 2.0 applications, such as *social media* (social network sites, wikis, blogs).

The use of television has changed as well: new technologies like cable, satellite, CD players, DVD players, PCs, digital cameras, laptops, cell phones, handheld video game players and iPods are changing the nature of more traditional devices and the relationship between children and media, forming a *media content delivery platform*, ever accessible in a multitasking way.

So, the relationship established by the media is more and more important to children and for the social definition of childhood. In the book "After the Death of Childhood" (2000) David Buckingham describes the changes both in childhood and in the media environment. His point of view refutes simplistic moral panics about the negative influence of the media, but, at the same time, the exaggerated optimism about the "electronic generation". He reflects on the fate of childhood in the twenty-first century, discussing the role of new media technologies in children's life. From another point of view, Kathryn Montgomery (2007) underlines the rise in children's spending power and their powerful role in the marketplace, emphasizing the commercialization of children culture, while Dan Tapscott, in "Grown up digital" (2009) defines children and young people as part of the so called "Net generation", the first generation to grow up taking digital technology for granted.

Besides, the emergent digital culture emphasizes the active participation of young people and other social groups. The "old" concept of "consumer" - generally identified with a passive audience - is replaced by a new type of consumer able to distribute media through alternative peer-to-peer networks, to remix, repackage, re-value, and produce original media contents (the so-called *user generated content*).

Mizuko Ito defines "the media mix" as the (industrial) "construction of increasingly pervasive mass-media ecologies that integrate in-home media such as television and game consoles, location-based media such as cinema and special events, and portable media such as trading cards and handheld games" (Ito, 2005: 2). The author also defines the "hypersociality", referring to "peer-to-peer ecologies of cultural production and exchange (of information, objects, and money) pursued among geographically-local peer

groups, among dispersed populations mediated by the Internet, and through national peer-to-peer trade shows” (Ito, 2005: 3). This new set of technologies of the imagination, produce a network of cultural production and exchange, fed by interactive and networked cultural forms.

Another aspect that we want to consider, is the role of the media in the representation of children and childhood.

Neil Postman (1982) and, some years later, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), describe the *disappearance of childhood*, referring to the progressive adultization of children's behavior, favoured by the "unveiling" of the backstage operated by electronic media, TV in particular. In fact this process of adultization is not new, but it is the reproduction of a process which actually hailed from the 1700s. The electronic media (such as radio and television) have a double role: on the one hand, they contribute to socially define the “childhood”; on the other hand, they determine the social representations that are prevalent, which reflect, recursively, the idea of childhood as a whole. Meyrowitz's reflections on the role of electronic media in determining the disappearance of childhood, conceived as a free zone and protected from the adult world, have shown that the role of television and, more generally, of the electronic media, has been decisive in producing changes in the way we live and perceive childhood and in the way of constructing the identities of children and adults. The electronic media have made the lines of demarcation, almost invisible, between childhood and maturity, because they have removed and broken barriers, creating forms of "hybrid" identity, such as the *adultlike* child and the *childlike adult* (Meyrowitz, 1985). At one time, in fact, the “physical location” could also define the “social location”. The electronic media, with their diffusivity and "lightness", exceed the physical barriers, facilitating a kind of "free access" to the flow of information. According to Meyrowitz, electronic media like television and increased access to previously restricted information, determining the blurring of front-stage and back-stage behavior that removes previous barriers of information. This has resulted in the disappearance (or the changing?) of the rites of passage, based on information sharing. In the specific case of children, these processes of “fluidization” of information have the effect of determining an early entry into the adult world, as explained by Meyrowitz.

### **Children representations in the press and on television: victims or stars?**

A Censis<sup>2</sup> study conducted in the late 90's and entitled "Il bambino mediato" (1997), analyzes the mode of representation of children in Italian mass media, taking into consideration two years of press and television. More than 10.000 units of analysis were studied, 593 movies, tv series and cartoons, 269 television shows, 2.717 articles between press and television, 6589 commercials advertising on TV were benchmarked and compared to the publicity in the newspapers.

Research results show that children are used primarily as a tool to illustrate dramatic events, even when they are not directly involved. Children on TV are frequently used to talk about underdevelopment (22.7%), in 18.7% to talk about poverty, in 16% about war. Violence against children is represented in a percentage of 66%, while children involved in acts of violence are present in a percentage of 35.9. Very often, in spite of the Charter of Treviso<sup>3</sup>, children are mentioned by name and surname, encouraging their recognizability. Finally, the positive news about them just reaches 21%.

A latest survey, coordinated by the sociologist Marina D'Amato (2006) and published by the National Center for Documentation and Analysis for Childhood and Adolescence, provides a significant amount of data on the representation of children and childhood on Italian television. In this research the representation of childhood on TV was studied through a content analysis consisting of thirty items, with the aim of identifying the quantitative dimension of the children present on the screen and the qualitative aspects of their presence. In particular, the research analyzed the programs broadcast during the week of May 3-9 2004 on the main national television networks: Rai1, Rai2 Rai3, Canale5, Italia1, Rete4, LA7.

The results show that children in television are mainly protagonists, especially for what they do and for what they evoke (94%). The presence of children is trackable, in most cases, in a form of advert and especially in commercial tv: 73% appear on the screen, in fact, for less than a minute, and only 1% appear for more than an hour; 93% are shown for less than 10

<sup>2</sup> The Censis (Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali) is an independent institute carrying out research on social conditions in Italy.

<sup>3</sup> This is the Treviso Charter, launched October 10, 1990 by the Order of Journalists and the FNSI (Italian National Press Federation) in agreement with Telefono Azzurro and with organizations and institutions of the City of Treviso. The Charter, as supplemented by the 1995 Handbook of Treviso, and was last updated October 26, 2006. (<http://www.odg.it/content/minori>).

minutes. Children are also present in television, particularly in the early morning hours, from 7 to 9.

As far as television genres, the most relevant result of D'Amato's research (but perhaps not so surprising) is that about out of 3.245 images of children, 2.191 are advertising images, accounting for 68% of the total. This significant presence in commercials could be easily explained if we consider the role of children as consumers of various products and privileged mediators of household consumption. In contrast, children are absent in information and cultural programs, and almost entirely absent in edutainment programs. When they appear in the news (11%), they are often proposed in the role of victims and reduced to banality. Children are often present in game shows, talk shows, reality shows and music programs. The child actors on television are, generally, between seven and nine years old, but there are also younger children, aged four to six years. Males predominate over female and the male child, alone, is the absolute star of television programming, confirming a specific gender dimension. The girls, especially in commercials, are almost always represented playing with dolls, cooking, or using beauty products. Kids are represented having fun in sports or creative activities, testing intelligence and cunning when they play with friends. 80% of children appear on TV: with adults, as individuals, as a couple or group, represented, therefore, as "appendages" of the family universe, without their own autonomy and recognizability. The child appears in a mainly sentimental frame and in a primarily urban household and, less often, in an imaginary setting. In addition, on television, children are under-represented in the settings in which they live every day, such as the school (5%). Outside of family, school, sports and entertainment are in minority positions. Most of the children present on TV play or perform daily activities (bathing, dressing, sleeping), in a few cases they speak.

In addition to Italians, who are obviously the largest ethnic group represented, Europeans are prominent, while other geographical areas are under-represented. The only exception are the United States, present in 5% of the programming. In addition, most of represented children belong to the middle class. According to the results of this research, violence does not seem to involve children: around them there are mostly positive situations, childhood appears especially loved and protected. However, when violence is present, it is suffered from childhood in 85% of cases, compared to 15% in which it is acted.

The collected data show that children are often represented as "little adults": generally they are children belonging to the low classes, even forced to work or to fight.



If we think about the representation of childhood and adolescence in TV and public information, today, a few years away from the research published by the National Center, we can trace some stretches of continuity, but also some elements of difference. The “adultlike child” model continues to be widely used. Many television programs, from the classic entertainment programs, until the reality show. Primetime shows as “Ti lascio una canzone” (Rai Uno) and “Io canto” (Channel 5), present children performing in the role of singing stars within contexts strongly influenced by the adult’s presence.

A similar mechanism is activated by the reality shows. The Canale5 program “Amici”, conducted by Maria De Filippi, is based on the participation of about twenty teens who, first of all, try to win a place in the school. The school is perceived as a place that will give them the opportunity to learn from professional teachers the fundamentals and the “tricks” of disciplines such as singing and dancing, and then to learn to perform in order to achieve notoriety and success. The critical aspect of this program is that the classic ingredients of the talent show alongside elements of pure reality, are related, far too much, to gossip and quarrels. Besides, the unveiling of the “backstage” of the “students”, who are regularly shot in situations of relaxation, talking to each other or, even more often, bickering, stages a representation of juvenile values that is not always positive and comforting, but which, however, might be close to reality.

Over and above specific research, some general tendencies can be seen. In the news, children appear more and more often within a frame characterized by dramatic and tragic tones: only in the last two or three years, newspapers and television have been invaded by dramatic stories involving children and adolescents: journalistic programs such as “Chi l’ha visto?” (Rai3), “La vita in diretta” (Rai1), “Pomeriggio Cinque” (Canale5), Porta a Porta (RaiUno), Matrix (Canale5), Quarto Grado (Rete4), are used to contextualize stories of children’s and adolescents who have been murdered, inside strong dramatic frames. These transmissions have described an apparently normal adolescence metamorphosed into nightmares, populated by enemies and murderers. When they are not victims, children and young people in general, are represented as authors and actors of violent conducts, such as in the case of bullying (Tirocchi, 2008).

Besides these, there are, however, alternative models of representation of children and adolescents on TV. Some very positive experiences exist, but they are quantitatively limited and in part already ended. For example, the program “Screensaver”, on RaiTre, was the first television program

which used videos made directly by young people from different Italian schools and cities.

Other programs where children and adolescents appear in “natural” situations, are those broadcasted by the Rai digital channels (Rai Yo Yo and Rai Gulp): these TV contents are characterized by a particular attention to the culture of childhood and adolescence<sup>4</sup>.

### **Plastic tiaras: the child beauty pageants**

Another case of children’s media exposure are the beauty pageants organized specifically for them. The “Child Beauty Pageants” are beauty contest for children up to 18 years of age, and they develop as early as the 20s of the '900. The types of beauty pageants are mainly two: glitz and natural. In the first type it is expected that participants undergo many hours of makeup and hairstyling and wear tailor-made clothes. Whereas, the natural type is based on competitors without any artificial aestheticism. There is, obviously, a problem connected to the age of children. For example, children between six and twelve years old are considered as school aged. In addition, children are divided into age groups.

According to the Giroux analysis, beauty pageants gain legitimacy within what might be called “the myth of innocence” in which children are often portrayed as inhabiting a world that is untainted and utterly protected from the brutality of adult life (Giroux, 2009). They are also a signal of the disconnection between those public values that are essential to a democracy and to the well-being of children and the market-driven commercial values that turn everything into a commodity. The child beauty pageant, in fact, is useful to examine critically the appropriation of children's bodies in a society that increasingly commodifies them, reducing children to objects of pleasure, desire and sexuality. as shown in the Oscar-winning film, “Little Miss Sunshine”.

American tv shows like “Little Miss Perfect”, “Little Beauties” and the reality-based docudrama, “Toddlers & Tiaras”, are based on this phenomenon and seem to attract large viewing audiences. “Toddlers &

<sup>4</sup> Although there is no space in this article to talk about it, even the representation of children in the cinema is a very interesting topic. An article about the representation of children in Italian films (McDonalds Carolan, 2010) demonstrates that most movies in the first decade of the twentieth-first century portray children as victims of torture, trauma and death. In the list of movies discussed in the study we can see Moretti’s *Stanza del figlio* (2001), Salvatore’s *Io non ho paura* (2003), Castellitto’s *Non ti muovere* (2004), Ozpetek’s *Cuore sacro* (2005), Comencini’s *La Bestia nel cuore* (2005), Giordana’s *Quando sei nato non puoi più nasconderti* (2005), Rossi Stuart’s *Anche libero va bene* (2006) and Ozpetek’s *Un giorno perfetto* (2008).

Tiaras”, for example, shows moms (and some dads) who prepare their kids to compete in the pageants. These kids are dressed up like little adults, are tanned, adorned with fake nails and eyelashes, on the base of the excuse that these practices are functional to promote children’s self-esteem. The results from scientific reports and studies indicate that these shows are connected with a premature emphasis on sex and appearance and that can induce sexualization and a lot of mental health problems such as: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression, promoting distorted values.

The diffusion of media has allowed us to discover the socio-emotional aspects of these competitions that would have hardly emerged. In addition to the actual filming of the show where the bidding is presented, the reality incorporates the stages of preparation and the so-called “backstage” of the transmission. The videos show frequent sessions of waxing, hair treatments and hairstyles that would be painful and stressful for children. To this must also be added the hectic pace to which they are subjected: on the transmission day, in fact, the girls are woken up very early in the morning and are immediately expected to endure long sessions of preparation.

The “American baby princess” model is booming in many other countries. Italy is also getting “infected” by the indiscreet charm of the popularity at all costs, but here the beauty contests for children are reduced to a few competitions in the summer beaches of Romagna, with nothing being firmly established. In Italy, however, the fashion industry for children dominates, represented by events such as PittiBimbo, Italian biennial events dedicated to children’s fashion. Here all aspects of this sector converge (and there are many of them, including buyers, photographers, casting directors, organizers, etc.). It is through the fashion brands that the girls (and their parents) are given the opportunity of a dream: shooting, fashion shows and advertising.

PittiBimbo is the precise expression of how the industry and the media, or rather the combination of the two, update the idea of childhood every year.

An emblematic example is “Divine”, a documentary filmed by Chiara Brambilla. It tells the story of three ten-year old models (Emily, Rebecca and Lucrezia), and of their parents who accompany them along their path full of successes, dramas and which is sometimes turned into a game.

The issue of beauty pageants is also connected to the representation of children in advertising. More and more often, in fact, advertising

campaigns show children in alluring poses, that are suitable for adult audiences and certainly disregard their age condition<sup>5</sup>.

### **Self representations in the web 2.0**

The emergence of Internet and, in particular, the spread of Web 2.0 in children's and adolescents' practices of use, determine modes of representation of childhood and adolescence which are completely different from the past. First the new media environments offer the possibility, for the so-called *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001) to represent and to tell stories of themselves and of their peer groups.

Today's media environment originated by Web 2.0 builds a new collaborative space potentially more extensive than television, in which young people enact themselves, opening a frame of visibility that is not precluded even for adults (Tirocchi, 2011). The Web 2.0 has greatly enhanced the ability of these individuals to represent themselves and to get in the scene, resulting in a sort of permanent "vetrization" of their lives (Codeluppi, 2007), which in some cases see them as protagonists or co-starring in deviant episodes, as perpetrators or as victims. The Facebook profiles and the videos posted on Youtube allow young people to get on stage with "homemade movies" that portray them in different situations: from the girls who improvise strip shows in their bedroom, in front of the webcam, to the boys struggling with clandestine speed races, with motorbikes or cars, in order to demonstrate their ability to overcome their limitations.

Hence, the social media allow *user generated personal stories*, produced through social networking sites or personal websites or blogs, ushering in a new model of digital storytelling (Lundby, 2008).

Initially, one of the objectives of this article was to analyze the practices of self-representation of children through social networks, but the task proved more difficult than expected, because of the difficulty in identifying these materials. A large number of blogs written by children younger than 14 can be found through MySpace whose terms of service clearly state that anyone over 14 may start a blog through this service and through other blogging services and software programs like Facebook. LiveJournal is another popular blogging option for kids and teens. These kids simply lie about their age in the registration process.

<sup>5</sup> We can also refer to the little girl featured in the movie "Beautiful" by Luchino Visconti, with Anna Magnani.

Although it is difficult to individualize the virtual environments used by children to express themselves, it is possible, however, to draw some conclusions from an impressionistic analysis:

- Many children mirror themselves assuming the same poses and the same attitudes of adults, posting photographs that express, at times, narcissism and a desire to be looked at;

- Many children use Internet without limitations, participating in groups, and posting content that do not necessarily belong to their world, that is the children's culture. Children ape adults both in beauty and music contests which is what adults want.

### **Conclusions: the importance of Media education**

In recent years, childhood has changed radically, also as a consequence of the transformation of society: this is a postmodern childhood, where children are protagonists of more and more fluid socialization dynamics. While at one time the more important agencies for children's identity were the family, the school, the religion or the peer groups, today they are claiming new environments and new styles of socialization. Moreover, childhood is showing a socially constructed character, in the sense that this concept self-redefines and remodels continuously, interacting with the surrounding environment and especially with the contemporary culture.

This article has attempted to describe the complex relationship that children and adolescents have with the media, with a particular focus on children's media representations. Firstly, the media are a channel of socialization which is becoming increasingly important, because kids spend many hours with the traditional devices (such as television or radio) and, even more with digital ones (pc, I-phone, I-Pad, and so on), as shown by several studies (Livingstone, 2002; Ito et al., 2009; Turkle, 2011; Rheingold, 2012; boyd, 2014).

Secondly, childhood and children are constantly the subject of the media narratives and representations, in ways which are often distorted and ignore their age condition.

Children and adolescents appear in the Italian media (and not only) in different manners and forms that are often unrealistic. In exceptional cases, they appear in the news and information programmes, as protagonists of dramatic and sensational stories and while taking part in TV shows, they are treated as adults and often become subject to the audience's mockery.

A special case that we chose to take into account are the child beauty pageants. These are organized competitions to showcase children, even very young ones, which are challenging especially in terms of physical

appearance, a quite worrying phenomenon. In Italy, this phenomenon is still not widespread but it is certainly linked to the gradual expansion of the “lolita” or “velina” female models (Oliverio Ferraris, 2008).

The spread of digital media and social media has offered children and teenagers the opportunity to represent themselves more easily than in the past. It is enough to open a profile on Facebook or share a video on Youtube to be the subject of attention by a very wide and varied audience.

The representation of children in the media is, therefore, a delicate issue because it is, primarily, a cultural problem. That is a reason why the education on these issues should begin in the family and at school. For this reason, Media education (Buckingham, 2003) could be very useful: Media education, in fact, aims to provide the tools to correctly decode the information conveyed by the media. Media education works on media representations trying to provide the proper tools to understand them and to take them apart, trying to figure out the real meanings they convey.

Unfortunately, at least in Italy, little attention is given to these practices, because mass media has always been interpreted as marketing tools, underestimating their cultural significance.

Therefore, in order to promote a culture of childhood and adolescence in society and in the media, it could be necessary to act in, at least, two directions.

Firstly, it occurs to enforce the provisions introduced by the various codes and statutes adopted (the respect of the protected zone in television programming, the Charter of Treviso etc.), guaranteeing the respect of their basic principles. The promotion of the culture of childhood should, therefore, be supported by appropriate policies, involving in the first instance the school and the family.

Taking into account the expansion of access to television content, programs aimed at children and adolescents should be promoted even more significantly, trying to provide opportunities for expression values, feelings and positive examples.

A *social media education* (Tirocchi, 2013) for the new digital technologies should be encouraged, addressed to the conscious use of social networking sites, environments that are becoming increasingly important and relevant to young people.

Internet and social media, in fact, represent a resource, even before being a source of risk and it is important that their use is not demonized.

Secondly, it should also sensitize media and communication professionals, so that they understand the importance of representing, in line with expectations, the real life-worlds of children and adolescents beyond the sensationalism and entertainment at all costs.

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