

Outlooks, gaps or boundaries. Adults' and young people's relationship with the media

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Abstract. Young people daily use the media and the new media - social networks and TV series, music and videogames, cinema and comic strips, etc. - to find the resources they need in their everyday life. Adults, instead, tend to view technological change with anxiety as, not being part of their culture, they are unable to fully understand it. *The outlook of young people*, who take media presence for granted, is opposed to *that of adults* on those media which, despite being deeply-rooted in social life, are more often seen as risks than opportunities. Furthermore, they can sometimes become scapegoats for deviant behaviour or social problems. These outlooks are *differently competent*, they highlight the existence of a *generation gap*, which too often becomes a *boundary* between adults and young people, produced and reiterated by the media but made deeper by the simplifications of common sense.

Keywords: media use, adults, adolescents, competence, technological changes

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Introduction: practices and discourse on the media

In the last few years, new media have become founding elements of our sociality, filling spaces and dictating the pace of our everyday life, invading most of our communicative, cognitive and creative experiences in the *network society* (Castells, 1996; Boyd, 2014).

Government policies, company strategies, school and the family itself impose an increasingly frequent and widespread use of new technologies for work, study or leisure organisation. The market proposes – sometimes imposes – technological innovations at a much faster pace than would be needed to allow consumers to master them. Companies are increasingly investing in technology and seeking web competences and skills. *E-democracy* and *e-government* technologies offer citizens new opportunities to take part in decision-making and administrative management of communities. *Internet of things* (Greengard, 2015) allows us to imagine a world made up of integrated, pervasive technologies: *wearable* devices and *cloud* apps, *smart building* and *smart home*, *smart city*, *smart mobility* and *connected car*, *eHealth*, etc. (Cipolla, & Maturo, 2014; Riva, 2017). Geolocalisation systems, RFID technologies, sensors for tracking and location awareness of merchandise and people, *Big Data* used in production and consumption processes are only a few examples of a tendency towards convergence and connection, which seems increasingly less like the future and more and more like the present.

However, these innovations inevitably lead to alarmist views on unresolved issues regarding privacy and the introduction of minimum safety standards to prevent the violation of data and cyber-crimes (telematics fraud, spying, cyber-attacks, etc.). If you consider what a child can find on the web, you could easily draw up a long, dramatic list of risks (Livingstone, 2010; Segatto, 2012) which underlie deep-seated *pedagogical concerns*. Tools, contents and use practices of the media are nonetheless highly significant for children and young people, who grow up in a social and cultural environment where the media are essential for sociality, game and even learning experiences (Riva & Scarcelli, 2016). This is how children and young people experience the web at home and at school, with friends, teachers or parents. Nevertheless, this can sometimes be ignored or misunderstood by adults.

As we will see in the next paragraphs, this is not a new phenomenon. The introduction and development of every new medium, technology, communication modality or style, has often brought with it great promise of development and knowledge, but also serious concern, especially regarding the possible exposure of children to content that could be

dangerous or at any rate unsuitable for their development. Bettlheim (1999) points out that fantastic literature was prohibited in Plato's *Ideal State*, because it was thought to corrupt young people, and that Goethe, due to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, was directly accused of being responsible for a surge in suicides in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, today there seems to be greater ambivalence between *the practices* of ICT use, which are now so deep-rooted that they are taken for granted by the younger generation in their everyday lives, and *adult discourse*, which is more focused on the risk of ICTs than on the opportunities they offer. Nowadays, press reports constantly present an alarming, sometimes even emergency depiction of the use of digital technologies. Technologies that take on the role of scapegoats for alleged social problems, or deviant, criminal or uncontrolled behaviour (Riva, 2007). Discourse that observes contemporary change with exaggerated anxiety but that suddenly becomes *celebratory* when it minimises the risk of technologies for the so-called *digital natives*, portrayed as naturally capable of using the media when they would, on the contrary, need to be supported by adults, who do not always have the necessary competence.

Adult rhetoric on young people's use of the media

Over the last few decades many descriptions have given voice and form to the relationship that children and young people have established with the new media. These descriptions are at times *utopian* and uncritically celebratory, at other times *dystopian* and unjustifiably *alarmist* (Stella, Riva, Scarcelli, & Drusian, 2018). The new media and the Internet can be considered as sources of great innovation and improvement for modern societies, *empowerment* and individual participation: electronic voting, e-care or e-medicine, energy, housing, smart logistics, etc. Critics otherwise stress the negative effects of the new media on inequality systems, ways of exercising power and the dangers stemming from an incautious and uncontrolled use of the web: privacy and copyright violations, telematics fraud, pedopornography and grooming, etc. *Cyber-optimistic* and *cyber-sceptical* outlooks that are rarely supported by an adequate empirical basis (Selwyn, 2009), and when they consider the relationship between the new media and children and young people, they mention either general emancipation, participation and social integration opportunities or, on the contrary, long lists of risks and dangers which the younger generations would not be able to face alone.

The internet, social networks, television and digital music, cinema, videogames, comic strips, to mention only some of the *devices* and

channels that are most used by young people (Pattaro & Setiffi, 2016), are at the heart of discourse and debates which can be traced back to two diametrically opposed stances. On the one hand, some people propose an apocalyptic theory of the *death of childhood and adolescence*, brought about by the erosion of the boundaries between minor age and adulthood, exposing children and teenagers to the world of adults before they have reached the right biological age. Other people define children and young people who are more capable of overcoming modern age challenges thanks to tools and contents made available by the digital media as *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001).

Far too often, children and young people are polarised in descriptions that portray them as *naturally competent* or *extremely vulnerable* (Drotner, & Livingstone, 2008; Buckingham, 2008), depending on the approach to what is considered at the heart of the debate by both schools of thought, i.e. the generation gap between adults and young people. The former, for demographic, social and cultural reasons have grown up with the typical language and tools of the new digital culture and because of this, for the simple fact of being young, they are considered to be in a better position to exploit the possibilities offered by new technologies. The latter, parents, educators, teachers who grew up in an analogical culture that is gradually disappearing, are those who have greatest difficulty in understanding this new *networked* society (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). A society where offline and online relationships are constantly intertwined and where not only people, PCs or smartphones can connect to the internet, but also fitness devices, parking metres, thermostats, traffic cameras, tires, etc.

Apart from the ability or the interest of sharing the specific contents the younger generation consumes through TV, cinema, music, comic strips, etc., many adults are able to use these traditional media, have access to them and benefit from the communication that they convey. However, the web, the use of social networks, tablets, downloadable apps for smartphones, require specific skills which leave adults out and therefore widen the generation gap (Livingstone, 2010). Lacking both *operational* and *critical* expertise, many parents are actual *immigrants* within the information society where their children live as *natives*. It is a generation gap that apocalyptic reports describe in terms such as social isolation, apathy, premature adulthood, exploitation of young consumers, seduced by the traps of publicity. Nevertheless, this is a gap that the digital native rhetoric risks turning into a *boundary* between young people and adults. This is not only produced and reiterated by the digital media, it is also supported by the implicit idea that these new technologies almost entirely deprive parents and educators of the necessary tools and authority to play a

role in their children's upbringing. So-called digital natives, according to the media that focus on them and adult common sense which is afraid of them, are the result of a *cognitive modelling* effect induced by the diffusion of new technologies that allegedly lead to new ways of thinking, learning and communicating.

Digital natives is an effective label which has been very successful not only in academic essays but also in journalism. However, as Mascheroni remarks (2012), it has two important limits.

On the one hand, studies and empirical research on the use of new technologies show that it is not the difference in age that determines exposure, use modalities, perception and interpretation of digital contents. Rather, they depend on traditional stratification factors - gender, socio-economic status, culture, etc. (De Haan, 2004; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009) -on experience of use and the integration of the digital media in everyday life (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Helsper & Eynon, 2010). Many children and young people do not even know what the Internet is, others are very low-skilled or do not know how to solve the slightest problem. Being young does not guarantee automatic familiarity with new technologies: the use of the web requires practice, experience and knowledge that cannot be taken for granted. To be more precise, digital natives are all those who have been using the web competently for a long time, for many hours at a time. Therefore, *not only* young people and *not all* young people automatically.

On the other hand, the idea according to which young people are naturally Internet experts only because they are young, could delegitimise interventions aimed at educating children and young people for an informed, critical and competent use of the web. This is simply because if young people are anthropologically different from adult generations what methodologies, pedagogy and authority can adults use to support them and accompany them towards an informed use of the web and help them to effectively face any risks derived from the web (Livingstone, 2010).

Apart from the digital native theory, academic literature has many other *utopian* and *dystopian* theories. Expressions such as *cyberkids* (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), *digital childhoods* (Vandewater, Rideout, Wartella, Huang, Lee, & Shim, 2007), *born digital* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), *net generation* (Tapscott & Williams, 2008), *iGeneration* (Rosen, 2010) highlight the greater familiarity of younger people with new media use and new learning modalities and abilities that the habit of *multitasking* has allowed them to develop. However, from a technosceptical, critical point of view, several authors (Morozov, 2011; Schirrmacher, 2009; Wolf, 2009; Carr, 2010; Spitzer, 2012), to mention only a few, stress the negative

influence of the Internet on our way of thinking and our intellectual abilities: multitasking, supported by the use of the web and modern technological *devices*, makes work faster and leisure more stimulating. However, they believe that it makes individuals - especially young people - increasingly superficial and unable to focus.

These two approaches are both part of a more general attempt at understanding the complexity of change in modern societies. Nonetheless, they stoke anxiety, fears, dreams, desires and attention which are then evoked by administrators and politicians, educators, third-sector operators, communication professionals, who do not always have the required competence. One of the most useful concepts that could describe this phenomenon is *moral panic*, as we will see in the next paragraph.

The media and adult moral panic

The expression *moral panic* was coined by Cohen (1972) as a reference to a wave of alarmism in Great Britain in the sixties due to violent clashes between the two *mods* and *rockers* youth subcultures and to the myth of *young people as the public enemy* created by the English press. The media wrote about how these two groups would ravage the quiet towns of honest English citizens by night, on their motorcycles and scooters. These were acts of delinquency, which, however, were often exaggerated in tales of brutal violence, where negative stereotypes and war metaphors were used, conjuring up a *turf war* scenario (Melossi, 2003). Actually, according to the information gathered by Cohen, there had never been any organised gangs involved and among those who joined in the riots, few had motorbikes. Furthermore, before these articles appeared there hadn't even been any clear rivalry between the two subcultures. Actually, it only emerged following the chaos created by the media. The turf war between mods and rockers was, as we would say today, *fake news* which made it possible to define an enemy within - young criminals, their fashions and musical tastes - that were incompatible with civilisation and its interests and values. Since then, *moral panic* defines the emotional waves triggered by a situation, an event, a person or a group of people, described through stereotypes that begin to be identified as a threat to society. Moral panic waves are characterised by a mixed emotional reaction of fear, indignation and rage, which is usually disproportionate to the actual importance of the problems. These are often social issues that have existed for decades and are depicted by the media and politicians as a new trend, or as the consequence of an alleged recent dramatic upsurge. This leads to a spiral induced by the media, which amplify a threat and use a person or a group as scapegoats,

thus playing on the fears of the public and a sense of risk. The focus is often on vulnerable people: ethnic or cultural minorities, migrants, people who live in or endure different kinds of marginalisation (*non-persons*, according to Dal Lago, 2009). As a result, there is a growing sense of danger, although objective risk factors have not actually increased. This is sometimes the case as far as common discourse on the relationship between young people and the media is concerned.

Very often, when the media, from the point of view of an *adult*, analyses how young people use the media (Cortoni, 2011; Riva, & Cefalo, 2015), the contents that are shared on the web, the effects of the Internet, it treats these issues as if they were experienced actively or passively by non-people, thus feeding into a public discourse that is riddled with moral panic (or *media panic*: Drotner, 1999). Daily newspapers are full of moral panic waves, which predict an increase in crime, sexual, commercial and ideological dangers, threats to the psychological, moral and physical integrity of minors, cyber bullying, online child grooming and paedophilia (Ponte, Bauwens, & Mascheroni, 2009). Stories that stress and overestimate some possible risks (Rivoltella, 2010) while minimising or totally ignoring the profound meaning of the digital media for young people.

As Di Marco & Ortoleva (2005) and Livingstone (2010) remind us, the production of social anxiety connected with the media does not only concern current communication technologies but has accompanied, to some extent, all great cultural and communication innovations, since the dawn of the modern media system. From its birth (Cavallo & Chartier, 1998), the novel was believed to be a potential corrupter of young minds or the cause of personality disorders, hysteria for girls or effeminacy for boys. Plebani (2001) and Von Tippelskirch (2011) point to the restrictions on the distribution of *bad books* among the growing public of women readers who, between the Late Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, were becoming increasingly aware of the usefulness of being able to read. However they were hindered and monitored by church authorities that wanted to control and guide women so as to defend them from the dangers of reading. Women had to be protected because they were allegedly unable to deal with what they read and were therefore more exposed to the dangers of seductive books, capable of leading them to vice (Fraguito, 2005). In the first half of the nineteenth century, with the circulation of daily press articles, sensational journalism and popular fiction published on a weekly basis (Ortoleva, 2003), people started to fear that *the new media of the time*, which were inexpensive and targeted young readers, could convey socially dangerous ideas and have a negative impact on the working classes. In the

first half of the twentieth century, it was the cinema that became the source of most concern: while Forman (1933) predicted epilepsy in children and teenagers due to moving images, films were believed to over stimulate the imagination, by prematurely exposing younger spectators to unsuitable topics, especially sexuality. Furthermore, cinemas, in the sense of places where films were viewed, were criticised for attracting an exclusively young public (*gangs*: Addams, 1909) with the connotation of a hostile separation from the adult world.

Subsequently, some of the typical elements of mass culture, such as music, films, radio programmes, which were also connected with the birth of star-worshipping (Morin, 1963), led to pedagogical concerns. Children and young people, lured away from the positive influence of school and family, were viewed as victims of the uncontrolled flow of commercial and anti-social interests conveyed by the media. The act of listening to music through earphones is still used as a symbol of young people's apathy and social isolation (Chambers, 1990). Today's mistrust of videogames - considered inappropriate, responsible for anti-social behaviour, dangerous for integrity and the psychic development of the players - dates back to the introduction of the flipper and other *coin-ops* (coin operated machines) in the United States in the thirties.

Up to the eighties, when TV addiction was still a hot topic (McQuail, 2005), people discussed the negative - and regressive - influence it had on young people's language, physical exercise, willingness to read and active use of imagination. Television, due to the contents it conveys, has been and currently is accused of causing addiction, of stimulating anti-social and anti-moral attitudes, aggressiveness, uncontrolled behaviour and social isolation. Television is still considered responsible for the loss of parent and school authority, or the spread of unhealthy behaviour, from smoking to alcohol consumption and suicide, which are viewed as an imitation of attitudes seen on television.

Basically the media have always been accused of being behind *social diseases*, as Buckingham (2008) would define them. In the past, it was novels, cinema and TV; today it is some musical genres, smartphones, videogames and social media that raise a certain kind of concern and *moral panic*. The latter is halfway between common sense and scientific knowledge and is still based on an alarmist model that describes children and teenagers as incomplete adults, devoid of experience, awareness and critical sense (Riva, 2007). This kind of scaremongering has an easy grasp on public opinion and is now focusing on young people's use of the web and social networks, without giving any consideration to the nature and meaning of communication technologies for young people.

The media for young people: to share and participate

Some general trends emerge when considering the younger generation's consumption patterns and relationship with the media: young people are more frequently connected to the web on a daily basis, use smartphones more often, communicate with instant messaging apps, have a profile on one or more social networks and make more online purchases (Censis-UCSI, 2018). They watch television programmes, especially entertainment, TV series, reality and talent shows, but they hardly ever use a television set, thus avoiding the strict schedules of traditional broadcasters and creating their own personal schedule which combines television, YouTube, streaming, online websites of transmitters, etc. (Scaglioni, 2011). Young people keep up with the news in a *puzzle*-like way: they use different channels, such as particularly marginalised press, TV news in the background, and they prefer information websites, social networks and search engines, which are also used for school research material (Pattaro, Riva, & Tosolini, 2017). Compared to adults, who use these media to solve problems involved in organising their everyday life, young girls and boys use them in a more recreational, sociable way: to listen to music, watch films, download contents, make friends on the social media, chat, etc. These activities are often considered frivolous and meaningless by adults (La Ferle, Edwards & Lee, 2002; Drusian & Riva, 2010).

On the whole, when young people use new communication technologies, they take part in a continuous experience building process, which enriches their knowledge and allows them to have an active role in the world. Sharing photos and stories on Instagram, videos on YouTube, comments on forums, thoughts and feelings on Facebook or other social networking websites, contributing to wikis and other kinds of *User Generated Content* (Gauntlett, 2011), as well as simply browsing through other people's profiles and social pages, etc., allows young girls and boys to live experiences and feelings that have become an important part of their growth process (Boyd, 2014).

The media are *identity markers* (Roberti, 2017), capable of offering a sense of belonging, interpretation models and shared meaning contexts. From the perspective of *media studies*, *sharing* itself and *participating* seem to be the main key to understanding the relationship dynamics of the *always on* generation with the media (Livingstone, 2010). Through messaging systems, comments or reactions to posts, the possibility to choose what content to post and when, which post or pictures to delete retroactively, who to become friends with and who to unfriend, what groups and pages to join or to leave, young people communicate within

full-time connected friend communities, that is groups of friends connected by constant online and offline conversation flows which define one another (Boccia Artieri, Gemini, Pasquali, Carlo, Farci, & Pedroni, 2017). A shared use of communication where the younger generations are less passive than common sense would imagine, capable of developing forms of eye-catching *productivity* (Fiske, 1987). This is *fandom* and *fan culture* (Jenkins, 2006), contemporary cultural phenomena that regard consumers who are particularly passionate about certain forms of media entertainment - music bands, film stars, TV shows, literary sagas, films, authors, etc. - and establish a strong emotional connection with that media product. Fans are strong and loyal consumers. They are experts on their own cult objects and able to critically analyse media contents, actively interact and share with other fans. They are an *adoring audience* (Lewis, 1992) that does not only enjoy media products but actually produces them (Fanchi, 2014; Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

Fan groups create communities which set up active clubs or conventions, where fans share informative material, hand out products that are difficult to find on mainstream channels, organise competitions for specific practices, such as costuming (dressing up as media characters). They use fanzines, amateur magazines where they publish reviews, letters and secondary texts as an addition to series, like videos (*fanvid*), artistic creations such as *fanart*, stories or strip comics such as *fan fiction* (or *fanfic*). These are all produced by fans and consist in a reworked version of the narration or material of the text they are fans of (films, TV series, comic strips, etc.). These are all extensions of the official work, invented by fans to fulfil their own narrative dreams - make two friends become lovers, give secondary characters a main role, etc. - and founded on *mash-up* (creative combinations of existing texts), *remix* (the change of elements such as sound), *fan-dub* (re-dubbing, generally for ironical reasons). Not to mention video-reviews on YouTube, wikis, debates on social networks, etc., where spectator-fan-critics (*fan-critics*) analyse and review trendy media products.

These are *performative* (Hills, 2002), spectatorial phenomena which include cultural trends such as *fansubbing* or *spoiling*. The former, a contraction of fan and subtitling, is the practice of translating and subtitling the episodes of films, Japanese *anime* or TV series in a few days, soon after they are broadcast on official channels in their original language, in order to share them on the internet as subtitle files. On the other hand, *spoilers* are previews of plots, clues that make it possible to predict the plot development or reveal the ending of TV series, films, cinema sagas and videogames. As Boccia Artieri (2012) highlights, TV series storytelling is built around a narrative complexity including several lines of development:

looking for spoilers on specialised websites and online aficionado communities is often an essential part of the consumption process as it anticipates and amplifies the pleasure of fruition itself (Chirchiano, 2017).

Fandom is an example of *participatory culture* (Jenkins, 2006) that functions through experience sharing mechanisms within fan communities and does not only concern the sharing of passions but also the re-elaboration and reinterpretation of media texts. A type of relationship with the media that shows, once again, how young people can be key players in communication, and not only passive recipients.

Conclusion: outlooks and boundaries

In contemporary media society young girls and boys are *participants* and *protagonists* of communication and they find in the new media privileged resources to experience relationships, emotions, culture and to participate (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017; Pattaro et al., 2017). They are endowed with *agency* and are an active part of a social, cultural and economic resource structure, on which web-derived risks and opportunities depend. Naturally, young people are constantly exposed to potentially risky situations: unintentionally downloading potentially traumatic material, with violent, pornographic or pedo-pornographic content; accessing networks that encourage self-harm (websites encouraging anorexia or bulimia, suicide, self-harm, etc.), glorify violence and racism or encourage compulsive spending ; trusting strangers who hide bad intentions behind a friendly attitude; receiving sexual offers, being actively involved in or being a victim of bullying, harassment, stalking, etc.

The list of risks is long and needs to be constantly updated but there is also a very long list of opportunities that the network society offers children and young people: from information to entertainment, from social networking to *User Generated Content* and fandom, as far as the appropriation modalities of culture industry products are concerned, up to the possibility of increasing one's technological skills and abilities, finding advice on one's health and sex life, as well as school and pedagogical material.

Obviously, the aim of highlighting the opportunities offered by the web is to counter the alarmism with which adults tend to view the younger generation's communication practices. Adults mistrust the kind of relationship that young people have with the Internet, web and the social media and tend to view technological change with anxiety as, not being part of their culture, they are unable to fully understand it. For many of today's adults Internet is what television, music, cinema or fiction were for

those who were adults when the younger generations of the time started to use and integrate into their daily *predictable* lives what were considered *new* technologies.

Similarly to what has happened with other types of media, changes in communication systems have often led to tensions, anxiety and fear, pedagogical concerns and moral panic between the older generation and the younger one which, as it is more directly involved in the media change, can master practices and knowledge of use more rapidly. Every young generation lives in its era taking the existing technological level for granted, not considering it a problem, but rather a tool and opportunity to *shape a generation* (Aroldi, 2016), that's to say a potential well of resources that can be shared in order to establish generation bonds (Riva & Scarcelli, 2016).

As pointed out by *childhood sociology* (Corsaro, 1997), adult, parent, school and institutional figures have difficulty in listening to young people's point of view. On the contrary, their approach is ever more inflexibly that of adults, who consider more the risks than the opportunities of technologies, thus showing a need to have control that seems to derive from the anxiety of not knowing how to cope with change.

At a time of fast social change, however, much of the knowledge of the older generation becomes obsolete, while young people can obtain information and competences to share with adults, parents, educators, teachers, etc. For example, the relationship that young people develop within the social space of *connected families* (Boccia Artieri, 2012) constantly negotiates the boundary between generations according to some explicit forms of reciprocity: adults have the financial resources while the young generations provide competences, in the context of a so-called *reverse socialization*, where the new generations hand down cultural knowledge to the older ones.

Recognising media-derived educational, participatory and expressive opportunities means being able to relate to young people who, as a necessary condition to succeed and develop intellectually, emotionally and socially, have to face risks, test limits, prove themselves, without of course exaggerating, in order to increase their competences. Strictly controlling and restrictively limiting the use of the media so to minimise exposure to dangers, as many prevention policies claim to do, results in a limited acquisition of new media competences. On the other hand, active mediation, *literacy* (Warschauer, 2003; Bentivegna, 2009; Van Dijk, 2005) increase policies, the promotion of a responsible use of the web and the sharing of online content between adults and young people have been proven to be not only more efficient in terms of reducing any negative

repercussions, but, especially, more useful for the promotion of an informed and responsible use of the web by the younger generations.

This is an indispensable requisite for the current globalised and *networked* information societies.

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Note

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