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YOUNG DIGIZEN?
New cultural challenges in media education

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Scienze
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by Mario Morcellini

It has become difficult to interpret young people. The task in and of itself is presented as highly pedagogical and adult-centric, but this is a risk that the social sciences have always traversed with ease. There is, however, something radically different from the past, and it consists in the difficulty to link daily experiences to the social horizon.

The condition of those embarking on their lives forces them to pass through the complex, uncertain and traumatic journey of building their own individual and social personality without placing too much importance in the role of institutions and adults. That is why the effort of growth is becoming more acute: the experience of failure is endless and the uncertainties are dominant over the certainties in modernity. Those who are developing seek to redefine their personality in an extremely confusing and contradictory reality that is caused by a deep *crisis of values and norms* that characterise and "mark" it.

But what does the word *young*, so loved by media, mean today? Initially, it appears to be an energetic word, almost a metaphor for the strength and capacity of individuals. What does it imply in terms of *representation* and *communication*? It is necessary to subject this term and all that it entails to scientific research. In the rushed mental system of people today, young means "modern", *radically new*, and only *information* as a last resort. Yet this is precisely its condition in denoting the social status of youth, with evidence of being *in transition*. Adapting the suggestive formula of Pier Giovanni Grasso (1974) – the first one to speak in those times with acute foresight of youth transitionality – the young are in need of protection from time to time and we must therefore address or interpret relevant dimensions of affectivity and protection, emphasising their dimension of autonomy.

Just trying to better scrutinise what is behind the concept of individualism, we can assume that one of its characteristics is *presentism*, the act of *not delaying any satisfaction*, collating and storing experiences, knowledge and relations. This process of accumulation and research from stimulation, as well as abbreviation and sometimes wasted emotional experience, is merely a drug compared to the *dramatic lack of institutions and adults*. It is impossible not to notice an amplified push to individualism from the lack of these inconsistent roles.

It is no coincidence, if fact, that the nomadism of modern youth fluctuates between a desire to be at the centre of attention, closely connected to renewed individualism, and those who experience a *deficiency* of people in their lives to turn to for comfort for which there is no immediate solution. Individuals, above all young people, need to express their *problematic feelings* and reinterpret them in more appropriate ways. It is necessary to offer children a listening area and a place for discussion where they can let their inner conflicts emerge through authentic relationships, while confronting those destructive tendencies that can become *self-destructive* within the dramatic instability of modern times. Communication can adopt, but certainly not alone, a *function of social redemption*. It is urgent to reaffirm strength, developing a sensitive activity of approximation that is also a wordplay on power, towards the feelings of young people and their search for life objectives. Instead, efforts to reduce the gaps between young people and adults often awkwardly transform into being overly protective with an overemphasis on expectations on behalf of parental figures that may not reflect the individual choices of their children. Focus should move towards "giving a voice to young people", to their experiences, while observing their "media" participation; the communication of young generations is a maze of expressions. Even the body becomes a described and textual surface for them, not to mention their styles of language and clothing. But what do young people say (to us)? Their ability to send signals of individualism and influence is extraordinary, and our willingness to read and interpret them should be equally as high.

It is necessary to be able to discern the appearance of *self-distinction*, as a purely expressive and functional exhibition of its own subjectivity, rather than from one that builds *radically new ways of social relationships* and consequently new patterns of relationships and interactions. The communication skills of youth are certainly more intriguing than their strength of verbalisation; why though do modern youth send more signals *of provocation than of communication*? Why do they present them in such *explosive* ways? If it is true that today's children and teenagers use expressive metaphors and have technological willingness, it is equally true that they suc-

ceed in enabling those operations of *socialisation in stages* that characterised the growth processes of their parents.

It is difficult not to admit in theory that the difference of being young today is *more unforgiving than in the past*, so much so that the dynamics and strategies of socialisation have also changed. But what is *radically new* in the condition of youth? What are the impacts and the expressive areas where something "passes" more clearly that is intended to be something *new*? It is necessary to reflect on the *social actions* that the young focus on, complicating the dimension of *time*, looking into the importance of the activities which they passionately *spend time* on.

What is undeniably positive in young people? First of all, their *proactive* attitude that enables them to involve *new forms of sociality* that promise a different society as well as new interactions that are not only self-referential. One of the hazards of modern times is that communication ends up being *excitement of self-referentiality rather than of society;* it is a risk that leads to a bad omen and difficult to give up in the time of individualism which is an unconvincing formula for young people.

What young people do with media is irreparably different from what previous generations did if only because modernity is an ultra-stimulation of technology and communication. From the point of view of media, new generations are certainly interesting and nobody seems to have the courage to say so. Their *multi-tasking* touches and contaminates ways of use that are at a more fascinating point than cultural self-production.

The symptoms of society are of an entirely positive language, apart from the centrality and inflammation of television and surely apart from the reading of newspapers, but matched by a behaviour on the web that is often fascinating, although not disruptive.

We are experiencing, in fact, a gradual "leap forward", that however emerges more expressively if one observes with continuity the world of youngsters. In some respects, the metaphor of a *leap of an era* is valid: technologies mark the boundaries of an extra-territorial area of the house and of a difficult *cognitive access* for parents. However, despite the opportunities for sharing and interaction offered by recent technology, we have also witnessed the rediscovery of forms of use that were called "niche" or "elite" in the past, such as the theatre, classical music, museums, exhibitions and cultural debates. It is as if the habits of new media use are pushing young people to search for new forms of "other" participative consumption besides those practised daily with the mouse or the remote control. The new generations who are active, exploratory and able to read the flow of communication demonstrate the capability of moving on a generalism-personalisation axis with the rich and varied range of media and cultural

inputs. The ability of deciding when, where, why, how and with whom to communicate – above all in new communication and socialisation experiences tied to the Internet and even the mobile phone – allow a glimpse of a blurred image of passers-by that forge their own way combining different forms of consumption (Morcellini, Cortoni, 2007; CENSIS, 2008).

The relationship that people establish on various archipelagos is more important than a single medium, and it is only reflecting on floating paths and networks activated by individuals with respect to processes and cultural products that we can achieve a more accurate representation of the communicative world of new generations. In this sense, the behaviours outlined by relationships among cultural consumers build the tracks of a general pluralism with which subjects tend to construct their own menus.

It is worth reflecting on how, more specifically, the revelation of the centrality of cultural consumption in the context of individual daily life can allow for the development of a more suitable analysis model in explaining the practical use of technology. The fundamental proof is created by the *communicative-relational networks of the subject*, showing how forms and contents of the communicative discourse are to define the behaviours in using media "machines".

Technologically competent and culturally active, children are practically deprived of chances for access to constitutive resources for their real and material identity. If attention on policy, exhaustion of educational efforts by families and precarious labour markets appear discouraging and rigid, communication then presents itself as an elastic and flexible platform for those frustrated by the extra-medial reality. Chat rooms, forums, blogs and social networks are the nervous system and social shock absorber of crises, but certainly not deficient of problems and dangers that must be solved with sensitivity and skill.

If our culture does not take note of the glut of frustrations that is fuelling it, the expansion of the communicative sphere is likely to become the sole figure in this relationship with others, and thus an obstacle for the possibility and willingness to escape from the virtual world.

Communication can act as bridge between generations; it is a factor for development and understanding as well as a resounding element of *alignment for youth culture*. If one wants *to know about young people,* one needs to study communication whose fortune is almost always implemented by a strong component of youthful subjectivity. Those who study the media are more competent in *understanding youth* and in attempting to reconstruct a *new and more robust formative condition.*

Introduction.
Digital codes of the post-modern generation

by Ida Cortoni

"Their idol, speaking in terms of the Simpsons, is not Bart who breaks every skateboard and is irreverent, but Lisa, the nerd of refined language who dissects frogs in science class. They prefer video games and comic books to novels, evenings speaking of software via Skype or Facebook with someone on the other side of the Ocean rather than nights out with schoolmates. They are geeks, fond of new technologies"[1].

Continuing to paraphrase a newspaper article from La Stampa as already mentioned, we are speaking of a real youth counter-culture: "the silent children of parents from '68 have grown up in the era of Web 2.0, sharing content and information that comes from below"; software is the main instrument of expression instead of rock or punk music.

Cultural consumption seems to be the answer of socialisation to evident socio-cultural contradictions of the modern era; the term was born with the advent of the industrial society and has become, first of all, a strategy of identification, a subjective instrument of social recognition and cultural distinction, through which to fulfil socialisation processes and guarantee both integration and development of one's personality (Franchi, 2008). Fabris (2008) attributes a substantive metalanguage to this term, almost as a hypertext with syntax and rules through which to read and interpret modern changes: from identification processes to those of recognition and acceptance within a social group or from expressions of hedonism to a declaration of belonging to a social class or rank.

For a long time, the expression cultural consumption was devoid of epistemological status (Fabris, 2008, Minestroni, 2006) as it was increasingly analysed and used with subordination in respect to the production

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[1] From the article "La mia vita per un software. I nuovi nerd", La Stampa, 13/03/2009.

system, as if it were an independent variable of a functional system to maximise profits from an economic viewpoint.

According to scientific literature, the consumer culture acquires its own value of socialisation when you get away from the utilitarian view of a good, based on the value of its use, in order to become an expression of the other (Fabris, 2008). Specifically, consumption acquires a cultural connotation because it triggers mechanisms in individuals of symbolic significance, reflecting values that are more or less shared and internalised by the social community, directing individual behaviours and attitudes (Codeluppi, 2003). However, even in sociological literature, the category of consumption does not yet possess its own scientific identity of analysis and reflection as reflected in decision-making processes of dominant ideology of the broadcast system and hegemonic power.

According to this first view, the meaning of consumption is still bound to a holistic view of society, the child of the structural-functionalism perspective, and has become a "sign" or rather an expression of the *status quo* and a reflection of the social system according to some that is a symbol of prestige and recognition (Veblen), while according to others merely a manifestation of habitus able to place an individual within a clearly defined role (Bourdieu).

The supersedence of this reading can be attributed to Marx, but it is supported more vigorously by members of the Frankfurt School and by the sociologist of the metropolis, Simmel.

In the first two cases, consumption begins to be read as a negative source of alienation and estrangement of an individual, especially in virtue of its contractual, impersonal and rationalised nature. In other words, modern cultural consumption on the one hand becomes an instrument of social control, an expression of dominant cultural demands of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist society. On the other hand the contractual dimension of social relationships is not perceived as an expression of emancipation but leads to a separation of self-authenticity. Hence, there is the theorisation of a blasè attitude by Simmel as a synonym of indifference, boredom and disinterest of an individual with respect to modern contractual dynamics.

Starting from the '70s and '80s, the inadequacy of past interpretive models with respect to social change have stimulated new theories. The consumption of signs is transformed into language (Di Nallo, 1997): it no longer is a reflection of a socio-cultural expression but the communication and expression of an identity, of a perception in individualistic reality, of a lifestyle or aesthetic taste. It is as if to say that new consumption literature leads to the assertion of the individual as a protagonist of socio-cultural dynamics through forms of action and interaction. Thus, the exaltation of

productive systems becomes one of use; specifically, the consumer acquires centrality because he is recognised as a co-producer of cultural texts and is involved in the semantic design in this act of consumption.

The new consumer seems to reflect and react to characteristics of a post-modern condition, characterised by the refusal of product standardisation which has led to a secularisation of culture in the industrial society. The collapse of modern "metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979) has led to the recognition of individual protagonism, though aggravated by the weight of responsibility for their choices and burdened by the fragmentation of experiences which are often the basis of a "commuting of identity" (Sciolla, 2006) and a fluidisation of consumption (Martyn Lee).

In the post-modern era, two contrasting views seem to emerge regarding consumption. The first one is based on eclecticism and syncretism to indicate the capacity for harmonic hybridisation of signs, codes, expressive languages and content belonging to different realities, whether they are real or virtual. The second view of consumption is a response to the sense of unease and disorientation of individuals in a liquid society (Bauman, 2002) which is a type of reaction to the fear of uncertainty and a sense of inadequacy of its action with proposed stimulation of society.

Individual choices and decisions are increasingly oriented by the here-and-now, where the ties with the past become weaker with less long-term planning (Bauman, 2002). Thus, the activity of consumption becomes instant gratification and fulfilment of a sense of imaginative and hedonistic pleasure, even if it is only mental In the system of cultural production, the treatment of language and expressions progressively exceeds that of meaning (denotation and connotation) implicit in text. The term of post-modern individualism is mainly played on the recovery of aesthetics and meaning instead of the semantic value of a good.

We must not forget the meaning of consumption in the first part as a system of communication and relationships, or as an exchange of bonds that, though celebrating the uniqueness of personalised experience, also recognises the importance of semantic sharing.

The activity of consumption in post-modernity, therefore, can be placed within several contradictions: firstly, one of the individualistic narcissist which forms a competent, critical, autonomous and discreet consumer but is likely to lead to cosmic confusion and loss due to the lack of ethics often obtainable by forms of cultural socialisation and mediation that is not necessarily from media. Secondly, one related to the social relations understood as the response to the need for aggregation and sharing and, at the same time, the fear of being labelled and imprisoned in predefined socio-cultural roles that risk limiting individual creativity.

In post-modernity, consumption can lead to the construction of subjectivity (hence the neologism post-subjectivity) that has certain characteristics:

- self-reference, which means the exaltation of individual centrality,
- narcissism/hedonism as an expression of self,
- the focusing on the here-and-now and pleasure,
- immunisation of rules,
- unfinished socialisation;
- the unpredictability of social action;
- the difficulty of activating subjective selection and interpretation equipped with a sense of external reality.

Hence, there is a need to identify forms of mediation between the social and psychological dimensions and between the subjective self and external reality through relationships within associative nuclei, such as the family and school (Donati, 1998). In other words, there is a need to analyse activities of cultural consumption in more circumscribed frames within which to restore a relationship of continuity and coherence between the public and private sphere and identify forms of mediation able to face the collapse of modern rationalist ideologies and the risk of an excess of post-modern individualism.

The structure of the book

Starting from a theoretical framing on the ethics of consumption and its semantic evolution in the transition to post-modernity, this book intends to discuss some fundamental concepts underlying the sociological reading and interpretation of cultural consumption in order to construct a narrative text that can speak to the behaviours of young people with the digital system. There are also broader sociological issues related to the scientific debate, such as the delicate relationship between media and children, new interpretations of socialisation, methods and research tools often inadequate in restoring the complexity of relationships.

Then, there will be additional questions and scientific insights to update and deepen educational strategies of young generations with the technological world. Thus, the first chapter of the book takes a picture of post-modernism, focusing on some socio-cultural characteristics of which digital technologies arise as devices of socialisation, expressions or reflections of aspects still poorly circumscribable in well-defined theoretical models. Semantic questions arise in the same sociological research on the unexplored but strategical debate for understanding more clearly the relationship of

youth with technology, and questions of methodology, on the validity of traditional tools and methods, that are used but not always able to paint a complete picture of the phenomenon (Chapter 2).

"Having grown up with mobile phones and computers, they communicate with synthetic symbols, signs and abbreviations. It is a generation that has been emancipated thanks to technology and that has extraordinary potential, according to the experts...they live with MMS and web-cams, they do not get lost when watching a video on YouTube, for them the world of the Internet does not have any secrets. They love music, sport, information; trips and air travel for them have no secrets for they know all about them. The seduction of a generation able to get in touch with anyone at any moment in any place, with true original potential"[2].

They are called "Generation Y"[3] and it is one of the many generational portraits that in recent years have coloured the pages of newspapers and have enriched the vocabulary of the scientific community which tries to assign labels to this combination to circumscribe and frame the medial behaviour of youth. *On Air. The European Project on Media Education* is the case study presented in the volume (chapter 3) that tells a new story of teens in 6 European countries (Italy, Belgium, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania) with the digital system. A perspecitve that is a little more different than usual when it comes to Europe, little known and often not considered in public debate, that suggests, however, new stimuli of reflection and reading (often in contrast) on the relationship of youth with media.

Overwhelming differences of styles, behaviours and interests are the first picture presented in the case study at the basis of intergenerational inequality in consumption habits, that are primarily the result of evolutionary change of human beings and rapid socio-cultural transformations.

Youth and adults belong to physiologically different cultural, educational and experiential universes, so much as to exacerbate expressive and behavioural gaps regardless of the historical period. This diversity, according to an anthropological perspective, is a normal condition because it is contained in our DNA of being young or an adult and cultural consumptions which are nothing more than natural reflexes, even if in some cases they are the driving force for further socio-cultural transformations.

"Children wear headphones all day (even when they never open messaging services), they use the slot of the computer as a cup-holder and they even flush the toilet with a widget by pushing a button on their laptop."

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[2] From the article "Cresciuti a telefonini e computer. I nuovi giovani "vivono" sul web", Corriere della Sera, 07/03/2007.

[3] This is the definition of modern youth from research undertaken by IULM and described in an article in the Corriere della Sera from 07/03/2007.

says Alex Zarfari, web editor of the on-line network Isayblog. Perhaps it is a description that is a little exaggerated and more identifiable of a niche of youth between 14 and 30 years old who are called "priests of information technology"and are growing rapidly all over the world[4].

Strong intergenerational gaps are found in the relationship with technology, often arising from the real opportunities of domestication of a medium in *appropriation, incorporation and conversion* (Silverstone, 1995). Structural, cultural and economic factors weigh heavily on the *construction of a dependant relationship* with a medium, intended primarily as an emotional condition that leads to utilisation of technology in the process of construction of subjective and social identity. Thus, the framework of cultural behaviours in chapter 4 highlights the re-dimensioning of the medial diet of youth and adults, emphasising intra and intergenerational gaps, the influence of geographical and socio-cultural contexts in the construction of standard consumption styles and the difficulties in identifying leading media in socialisation processes.

Young people autonomously choose technology for their emotional interests, involvement and needs, while adults are often persuaded by a professional context for an upgrade of skills. The relationship for the former is more active, purposeful, spontaneous, natural and free, while in the latter it is instead certainly caused, less enthralling and dependent upon the role of social structure. Media are viewed with suspicion and for this they are demonised: "I feel that the Internet is shattering my ability to concentrate and observe. My mind is becoming used to collecting information in the same way that the net distributes it", states Nicholas Carr, ex-director of the Harvard Business Review in an interview with Corriere della Sera: "The civility of the web is negatively affecting our mental mechanisms. It affects how we read, select and memorise"[5]. Adults attribute to media weakening their attention, reducing their ability to perceive and memorise, and responsible for the impoverishment of vocabulary.

This portrait is admittedly apocalyptic, typical of those who only hear of the media but who do not use them every day, so as not to understand the incidence of the socio-cultural portrait in the type of use and therefore, in the technological value. "However, if you dig deeper you discover that they can increase intellectual faculties that are important in the learning and development of children, like problem solving, on-line communication, analytical capacity and taking risks prudently", especially in the case of video

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[4] From the article "La mia vita per un software. I nuovi nerd", La Stampa, 13/03/2009

[5] From the article "Generazione web sott'accusa "stupidi e deconcentrati", Corriere della Sera from 17/06/2008.

games[6].

Hence the problem of digital competences of young generations: How can we clearly define and recognise diverse knowledge and ability in multimedia that is continually changing? How can we develop conscious use, the ability of cultural re-contextualisation of media and the capacity of critically analysing messages? Chapter 5 begins a debate just recently uncovered in the field of Sociology in relation to this topic. It attemps to communicate what has already emerged in pedagogical and media education debate and it argues for potential analytical and measurement tools of these competences though the gathering of observable behaviours. The other two issues often overlooked in the research of cultural consumption and addressed within the considered case study relate to the motivations of media use (chapter 6) and the emotional connection made by youth with technology (chapter 7). Both are investigated in *On Air* in the view of the conditioning of technologies on processes of subjective identification, attribution of the degree of importance in the emotional lives of children, in order to detect any specific socialisation links.

Apart from public and scientific debate on the potential and limits of digital media, the heart of the matter is right in the difficult relationship between youth and adults. "We are afraid of them because they are mutants, so different from how we were at their age and we renounce being models. Meanwhile, they badly need teachers, also because they are a very practical generation who are not very ideological: they are not fascinated by great ideas but by experiences of people which have known how to demonstrate their ability from personal history"[7]. Chapter 8 paints a picture of the school, still very foreign to the world of technology: teachers are and say they are largely disconnected from media, attributing responsibility to policy, lack of economic resources, few facilities, difficulties of integrating a culture imprinted on media within this school system. If media, on one hand, are factors which increase the separation from adults by youth while exacerbating the plight of socialisation, they could become on the other hand the glue that binds the two generations and contribute to establishing forms of linguistic relations and content and cultural exchanges so as to align, or simply approach, worlds of values and universes of references that are today quite far apart.

The only hope for Marc Prenskey's "digital immigrants" is "to rapidly acquire words from their children, at least to ensure a modicum of mercy

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[6] From the article "E se i videogame facessero bene?", La Stampa, 01/02/2008.
[7] From the article "Generazione di mutanti tra i nonni e l'ipod", La Stampa, 10/05/2009

for when old age will render their parents unproductive"[8]. These shared communication skills could become inputs for reunification, becoming an instrument for dialogue and exchange.

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[8] From the article "e se i videogame facessero bene?", La Stampa, 01/02/2008.

1. The socialization question in the post era

by Ida Cortoni

Post-modernism (Lyotard, 1979) is the term, by now common in the vocabulary of the classics of sociology, to indicate a new socio-cultural configuration in which the great modern utopias (so-called *metanarratives*) collapse to leave ample room for a progressive fragmentation of experience and perpetual dynamism that destabilises any process of production and consumption (be it cultural or economic). For some scholars (Jameson, 1989), post-modernism is not a cultural style or ideology but rather a precise historical phase of late capitalism characterised by a de-materialisation of social relationships, idealogical demobilisation, a fragmentation of the individual, the loss of a sense of historicity and the rise of aesthetic populism. This reduces the gaps between high and low culture through the recognition and the legitimisation of products of cultural industry as well as the deconstruction of aesthetics by virtue of forms of eclecticism and synchronism which characterise the dynamics of cultural production and the reduction of critical gaps between the sender and the recipient (Morcellini, 2005).

Post-modernism can be understood as the denial of the technicality of early modernity associated with the standardisation of productive dynamics and consumption which have led to a secularisation of culture; in this sense, the production of material goods is supplanted by those of services, the exaltation of productive quantity and connected to the value of use and exchange which give way to the qualitative value of a good or one of symbolic ties and recognition in its ability to express aesthetic tastes of lifestyles and possible imaginary worlds based on the identification processes and individual recognition (Rullani, 2005, Fabris, 2008). Therefore, the good is no longer exalted for its functional performance, but rather for the opportunity of semantic meaning and construction of itself.

Economy of knowledge (Rullani, 2005, Ranieri, 2006) is the term that