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# Media(ting) between Generations: Common Sense and Perceptions of New Media by Young People and Teachers

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## **Media(ting) between Generations: Common Sense and Perceptions of New Media by Young People and Teachers**

*Claudio Riva<sup>\*</sup>, Chiara Tosolini<sup>\*\*</sup> and Chiara Pattaro<sup>\*\*\*</sup>*

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*Abstract:* The wide spread of mobile communication devices, the expansion of social media and participatory media platforms, the ease to edit, share and produce media content, indicate a trend of change in the media system that influences the production and consumption of knowledge and generates new paths for the young's identity construction. This raises necessary questions about the ways not only young, but also the education agencies – school in particular – relate to these transformations, starting from taking into account the production of common sense on the use, risks and opportunities of the media. Based on these considerations, in this paper, we will discuss the results of a qualitative case study carried out in the Veneto Region (Italy) on upper secondary school students and teachers in order to detect and compare the perception that young and educators have of the media, trying to identify boundaries or land on which to build exchange opportunities for dialogue between the generations.

*Keywords:* new media, education, youth, teachers

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### Introduction: Youth, adults and media

Younger generations are usually the first to experience the novelties of modern communication technologies. They are faced with changes in the means of access to culture, relationships and affection caused by new digital resources. There is however an emerging debate on new generations – way too often conducted between adults – that, rather than considering the dimension of opportunities, focuses on the risks that young people, and especially children, might face when using media. The relationship between youth and media has often been trivialised and simplified by readings that have, time after time, described the use of media through an alarmist lens or, by contrast, from an uncritically celebratory perspective. Both points of view have rarely been backed by satisfactory empirical evidence (Selwyn, 2009).

The widespread distribution of mobile communication devices and the possibility of easily modifying and sharing multimedia content, the expansion of social media and participative platforms, which increase opportunities for expressions of identity, the more general and open-ended processes of change (of both production and consumption) pertaining to the system of media and the increasingly articulated shapes of appropriation and domestication of ICT – all require a constant growth of skills relating to media usage. These skills are not exclusive to the hardware upon which the technological items are built; rather, they concern social and cultural procedures connected to the ability to access information, analysis and critical evaluations of given content, with the possibility of entering the medial system, not just as consumers but also as producers – skills that young people especially must obtain; more than others, they experience an everyday life filled with the presence of digital media (Buckingham, 2007; Livingstone, 2009). As demonstrated in various examples of empirical research (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2008; Hargittai, 2010; Helsper & Eynon, 2010), it is necessary to go beyond the celebratory rhetoric that characterises adolescents as almost *naturally* predisposed to the use of new information and communication technologies. To set apart the new generations from others, starting from their familiarity with digital media, various labels are used: *net generation* (Tapscott & Williams, 2008); *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001); *born digital* (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008); *cyberkids* (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), *homo zappiens* (Veen & Vrakking, 2006), *new millennium learners* (Pedrò, 2007) etc.. The aforementioned labels, however, do not consider those variables that, besides age, intervene in the different uses of digital media. Some of these variables are the traditional

factors of social stratification such as gender, cultural capital and socio-economic status, but also the experience and incorporation level of the internet in everyday life (De Haan, 2003; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009; Mascheroni, 2012; Pattaro & Setiffi, 2016).

Digital media and internet usage fit in a multidimensional context made relevant by the questions raised regarding the circulation of knowledge, media socialisation and the role of agencies such as training and education in media, in particular, school. In this paper, we conduct an in-depth examination of the frequency with which the relationship between young people and adults runs along a clear border that tends to highlight the separation of the two dimensions. We will observe the conflict whereby a group – the adults – strong in its *legitimate culture*, looks down upon the other group, not unlike a multitude of *uneducated barbarians*. In addition, we will consider by means of empirical research how the aforementioned border and separation must be rearranged in the place where, more than anywhere else, young people and adults face one another: the school.

### Adult anxiety over youth media usage

The relationship between youth and media is a complex one. It involves tools, contents and diversified practices, all rich in meaning – for young people – but not always entirely understood – by adults. As we are reminded by Bettlheim (1999) and Livingstone (2009), the introduction and development of every new technology has come about with both great promise of growth and knowledge as well as great concerns, especially regarding the possible exposure of younger people to content deemed dangerous or unsuitable for their development<sup>1</sup>. It is a debate that primarily revolves around a *pedagogical concern* that often sees children as being distanced from the positive influence of traditional socialisation agencies, such as the school and family, and suffering the rampant conditioning of commercial and antisocial interests.

In media studies, there are well-known models and theorisations that focus on the functions of media, for instance, in turning their audiences into *passive* beings, in particular, children and adolescents; these functions clearly escalated with the introduction of television. Somewhere between

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the introduction of his epistolary novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), writer/philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: “never did a chaste maiden read novels [...] she who, despite this title, dares to read a single page of it, is a maiden undone”.

scientific knowledge and common sense, concerns about the role of television in the development of young people have over time focused on its negative – and regressive – influence on language, physical activity, predisposition to reading and active use of fantasy; the induced desensitisation, amoral and asocial, to spectacularised violence or sex, with an excessive inclination towards aggression and immoderate habits and social isolation; television's contribution to the loss of relevance of parental and scholastic authority or to the diffusion of unruly behaviours (from the spread of smoking and alcohol to suicide as imitative induced behaviours). A pedagogical concern that, in relation to new media (internet, chat rooms, smartphones, video games, etc.), steers even closer to a form of *moral panic*, which prefigures, thanks to digital technologies, is the growth in number of criminal activities, in the dangers of a sexual, commercial and ideological nature and in painting the internet as the worst menace to have ever impacted the integrity of minors (Pira & Marrali, 2007). As Carr (2010) would say: *internet is making us stupid*. Such are the fears that turn into headlines and slogans, which then shape the public debate, and are easily adopted by adults and, sometimes, by young people themselves.

Every young generation faces the age in which they live, taking for granted the existing technological level; they do not problematise the relationship with technology; they make it their own instrument to adequately move in that particular context (Drusian & Riva, 2010; Riva & Scarcelli, 2015). If it were easy to compose a list of risks that can be incurred in using the internet, not intuitively but just as important, one would recall the opportunities that the information society offers to children and young people: ranging from information to entertainment, from *social networking* to *user generated content*, from *fandom* to the chance of widening ones technological skills and knowledge, from obtaining advice on one's health and sex life to educational and scholastic uses or as support for adult activities. Acknowledging the educative, participative and expressive opportunities granted by the use of media means being able to enter a state of dialogue with young people for whom, as a necessary condition of self-realisation and as a mean of intellectual, emotive and social development, *they must*, obviously without excess, *take some risks* in order to test their limits and challenge themselves to expand their skills. Policing strictly and applying restrictions to media use to reduce exposure to danger hinder adolescents in developing their skills in the use of new media, which remain inadequate in the face of the demands of the contemporary globalised information society. However, active mediation forms, policies aimed at increasing *literacy* (Warschauer, 2003; Van Dijk,

2005), promoting the responsible use of the internet and the sharing of on-line practices between young people and adults prove to be not only more effective in terms of possible damage control but, most of all, more useful in promoting awareness and responsibility for young internet users.

If the most recent transformations in the system of digital media (new TV genres and serials, streaming and *on-demand*, the diffusion of smartphone devices, e-readers, smartwatches and the ever-widening availability of *apps* etc.) seemed unavoidable in terms of the diffusion of different inclinations and habits in different generations, which show obvious gaps and digital inequality, the outcome of such generational confrontations is not easily predictable. New technologies are indeed the battleground of conflict between young people and adults, of claims about independence and the need for control, but also constitute the place to produce a level cooperation that would result much more complicated anywhere else. Regarding the uses of the PC and the internet, for example, the intergenerational bonds in the family are negotiated and often built upon explicit forms of reciprocity: adults provide the economic resources while the younger members of the family provide the skills – the perspective of *reverse socialisation* (Robertson, 1987) – whereby the new generations impart cultural knowledge to previous generations. In times of swift social change, vast parts of the knowledge of the elderly become obsolete while younger people *can have* information and skills to share with their parents, grandparents and teachers.

What role can be played by education agencies, the family and *most of all*, school, considering the responsibility that these institutional actors must take in the development processes? What roles and responsibilities does the *adult society* generally have in the all but linear process of development and implementation of new media? Despite the widespread confusion in the face of the dangers of the internet we are more or less consciously participating in an episode of *technological fever* in which individuals and institutions are heading increasingly quickly, just as disorderly, towards the *network society*, with the internet as its undeniable *raison d'être*. The market offers – and sometimes *dictates* – technological innovations that outpace the speed with which consumers can absorb novelty; the usage of professionalisms and skills connected to the web and companies investing in technology are increasingly widespread, and so are the increasingly topical opportunities relating to *e-democracy*, which, considering the opportunities for citizen participation in decision-making processes, push decisively towards evolved, even though often untidy and inefficient, forms of administrative management. Importantly also are the

school and university, where the employment of new technologies in *digital learning* (e.g. *Lim*, *MOOC*, distance e-learning etc.) has become increasingly common. These are experiences that, when juxtaposed with the constant inclination towards moral panic, show the existence of a duality in the development and implementation of media in our societies. Amidst this ambivalence – the space that lies between the relentless development of communication technologies and the fears of the possible consequences of this development – there are children and adolescents trying to find direction and to adapt to change, starting from one main awareness: media, all media, constitute a relevant component of the environment where the adventure of growing up takes place. For adults, there is also the responsibility of accompanying these children on such an adventure.

### **Methodology: A project incorporating students and teachers**

Our research aims to observe the way in which young people and teachers perceive new media. It highlights borders and debate spaces on which opportunities for communication between different generations are built. We proceeded in two ways. First, we employed a participatory action research process with two upper secondary school<sup>2</sup> classes in Veneto (Italy), with the objective of reconstructing the self-image that boys and girls have of themselves and the relationship between this self-image and the adult narrations on young people. Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with upper secondary school teachers in order to explore their opinions about new media and how adolescents use them.

It is a case study whose results cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, we used a categorical logic (that governs what is commonly referred as *qualitative research* or, according to more recent epistemological approaches, *non-standard research*) (Nigris, 2010, 2012), and these results can still offer useful directions and unveil some emergent themes, which we will use as starting points to face the adults' world and the habits of the

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<sup>2</sup> Compulsory education in Italy involves children between the ages of six and sixteen. "Primary school takes 5 years (for children 6-10 years old), while secondary school is divided in lower secondary school (3 years, 11-13 years old pupils) and upper secondary school (5 years, 14-19 years old students). In upper secondary school students can choose between: general/academic (lyceums), technical or vocational secondary education. They can also attend in alternative three/four years vocational training courses" (Santagati, 2015, p. 300).

young barbarians appearing in the main studies, especially those from Italy and Europe.

The first stage of the study took place in the school years 2013/14 and 2014/15 and involved 30 third-grade students. A project designed to discover young people's self-representation of their use and relationship with digital media was undertaken over a period of two months in both schools, in which the teacher would read and discuss, with the students, the book *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture* by the Italian writer Alessandro Baricco. The first step was to read the book with the students, leaving room not just for their impressions and thoughts, but also their doubts and questions. This was followed by the teacher's commentary and related discussions and considerations. Part of the book was occasionally assigned as homework and would then be discussed in class to push the pupils towards a more autonomous and critical approach to reading. The work was finally concluded with a final test, which consisted of a written assignment, starting from a text excerpt. The students could browse the book during the test, with the specific instructions of writing about certain themes present in the work. After being corrected and marked, the students' work underwent critical content analysis to answer the questions raised by our research.

The second stage focused on the teachers and employed semi-structured interviews, an interview style that allows the adaptation of both the questions and the order in which they are asked to the interviewee, following his/her genuine speech flow (Zammuner, 1998; Corbetta, 1999; Bichi 2007). The aim of the interview was to explore five core themes:

- *Adolescents' fruition style of new media*: the questions explored teachers' views of the role that new media plays in young people's everyday lives;
- *Positive features of new media*: the aim was to observe the representation of new media with a specific focus on the benefits that the use of new media can guarantee to teenagers;
- *Negative features and possible risks*: this part was about the dark side of new media and the risks that boys and girls might encounter while using them.
- *Strategies and options for risk reduction*: this concerned the dangers and perceived negative aspects of new media. The teachers were asked to point out possible solutions to prevent or solve the problems that they had highlighted.

- *Reduction strategies for generational gap*: One of the core foci of the interview concerned teachers' opinions regarding a possible solution to reduce the distance between young people and adults in the face of media.

The interviews were submitted to 50 upper secondary school teachers (25 men and 25 women between 27 and 61 years old) working in various schools in Veneto. These teachers taught almost every subject taught in Italian public schools: Italian literature, history and philosophy, foreign languages, mathematics and physics, law and economics, human sciences, physical education, music, biology and other technical subjects. Reflections on part of the preliminary data laid the foundations for the analysis of the results (see Tosolini, Pattaro, & Riva, 2016).

### **The mutation of culture<sup>3</sup>: Fine line between barbarians and civilisation**

The complexity of the world and of the relationships among individuals are part of everyone's everyday life and experience, irrespective of age, sex, religion, socio-cultural origins, etc. Inside these differences, we try to produce sense and meaning; we try to understand, and we try to understand ourselves. There are nonetheless borders, moats and walls built not much for the concern of being conquered but, rather, because of the fear of contagion, that is, the fear of being changed or in some way corrupted. And then the walls are raised, as concluded by Alessandro Baricco (2013) in his essay on *Barbarians*, or better, *on the mutation of culture*, not to defend ourselves from armies but to avoid the encounter with the other, to avoid being changed from the alterity. It is the invention of barbarians because in order to build and maintain its own identity, each generation needs a group of barbarians from which to seek protection. The adults, civilised, must face situations and share spaces with boys and girls, the barbarians: at home, at school, on the internet, etc. The chance of a clash-encounter is ever-present and unavoidable.

Nonetheless, a shift of borders becomes clear in Baricco's essay: the closer one gets to the end of the book, the more blurred and unclear they seem to be. The author begins from what the biggest part of the people believe to be true and, through a process of acquisition, findings and

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<sup>3</sup> *The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture* was written by Alessandro Baricco in 2006 in Italy, previously published in thirty episodes in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. It analyses changes in society, the state of global culture and how connectivity is changing the way we experience it.

considerations, leads the reader to a change of perspective in which the vision of the world is more complex, unsafe and open-ended.

Young people are the barbarians attacking adult civilisation, who *surf* on the surface of what is real, never plunging deep, unable to understand labour or the pleasure that it can produce, but who live in a family with adults dictating the rules, who socialise them into the values of the civilisation; they attend organisations spawned from that same adult culture they disagree with, such as the schools where they receive their education. It comes from this place, then, the mutants' schizophrenia: how can they live in this constant schism that goes from the internet to the classroom, from speed to reflection? It is then interesting and fitting to question the side on which the socialisation and education agencies, such as schools and media, stand. In attempting an answer, one must be aware that the playground is overly complex and, most of all, uncertain. The easiest response would be to identify the school as *civilisation* and media as *barbarisation*, but such an answer would not be accurate. Even a single teacher can capture the attention of the mutants, learning to love their world and how to surf with them, using their typical multi-tasking approach. The teacher's new role as facilitator, in Baricco's language, means to grow some brand new gills. Furthermore, the media themselves, the internet in particular, can become places of learning, debate and exchange, in other words, instruments of education and development, not unlike a classroom.

However, all too often, adolescents, because of the representation of their world that parents, teachers and educators provide them with, tend to perceive change such as something that is wrong and deviant. Think, as a possible example, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*: it is May 7, 1824, and this symphony, the last written by the great composer, carries in itself the soul of romanticism to a point where, today, we consider it a representative token of that time. In those days, however, a Londoner critic who wrote for a very influential periodical – *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* – commented on Beethoven's work as follows:

The truth is, that elegance, purity, and propriety, as principles of our art, have been gradually yielding with the altered manners of the times to multifarious and superficial accomplishments, with frivolous and affected manners. Minds that from education and habit can think of little else than dress, fashion, intrigue, novel reading, and dissipation, are not likely to feel the elaborate and less feverish pleasures of science and art. He [Beethoven] writes to suit the present mania, and if this be so, he has succeeded in his purpose, for every where I hear the praises of this his last work (Baricco, 2013, p. 16).

Each age is marked by adult judgement on the new approaching world, composed of the values, attitudes and thoughts of young barbarians. Often, the adult perspective becomes what boys and girls think of themselves, to the point that, paradoxically, they do not feel like they belong to the barbarians at all, and they take the opinion that the adults have about them as their own. This sometimes leads to a further separation between behaviour and thought: they do their homework listening to music, texting on WhatsApp, writing on Facebook or posting pictures on Instagram, but they might tell you that this is wrong, that it is not a serious way of doing their assignments and that it is true that they are utterly superficial. Maybe though, even in the adults' world, something is shifting because we all live in the same world, and we are all dragged by the flowing change where what we know we call *civilisation* and what we do not know we call *barbarity* (Baricco, 2006).

### **Comparing *barbarians* and *the civilised ones* at school**

School as a place of education, development of values, personal and cultural growth – not just for students but also for their families and teachers – is certainly one of the most adequate places to find a bridge or pathway connecting the barbarian and civilised worlds as a way of understanding the mutation. This is especially so when the different educative contexts clash with one another (Damiano, 1994). This part of the research then needed to take place in school, in two third-year secondary school classes of two different high schools. It consisted of reading, commenting and discussion on Baricco's work, followed by the related final written assignment: starting from an extract of the essay, the students had to express their considerations of the central idea around which the text revolved, focusing on the relationship between young people, adults and the media, more specifically, on adult narratives of young people. The following is an excerpt from one student's assignment:

Boys and girls surf on the surface and never plunge in the depths; they restrict themselves to what is trivial. Now, everything is very superficial (classwork 3, female, 16 years old).

In this study, it was then observed that most students have an opinion of themselves that reflects the judgements and points of view usually

expressed by the adult world on the reality of adolescence. Another student's paper reads:

Us barbarians didn't just lose mediation; we lost our love for literature as well. Now, we only read the books written by the author we find nice or sexy on television, rather than reading Flaubert (classwork 15, female, 16 years old).

Noteworthy is the negative thinking weighing on the generation they belong to, but even more obvious is the underlying model in the students' productions – that model that sees in young people the anti-culture, the incapability of in-depth analysis and labour. So continues one another of her peers, once more voicing the opinions of those who believe that young people are nothing more than lackadaisical layabouts, ready to subvert orders and destroy values.

We are so daunted by labour and effort that we are always looking for a shortcut (classwork 7, female, 16 years old).

The research focused especially on young people's reflexivity on the internet and its usage and encouraged the students to question their use of the web, smartphones, etc. The young people's narration of themselves often shows contrasting, if not antithetical, conclusions and considerations. We find two groups: who perceive the use of new media as an additional opportunity to connect, communicate and experience, and who, just like adults, linger more on the negative effects and dynamics, such as the solitude ingrained in the use of digital media, predatory dangers, pornography and child pornography, scams, addiction, etc., living them like means of distractions from duty and study even when they recognise their greatness:

We face, then, a huge invention, which surely changed many people's lives. Media became a barrier for the barbarians to hide behind, a barrier that makes them different or that protects them; just consider the many episodes of cyberbullying. Additionally, media like computers, television, telephones, etc. became the barbarians' headquarters: a realm of advertisement, pornography, corruption, etc. And yet it is a magnificent and huge system (just think of Google) (classwork 14, female, 16 years old).

Positive aspects succumb to prejudice and stereotype so that even being *multitaskers* is negatively perceived because it looks impossible to do something properly while also doing others:

Multitasking, or being able to do more things at the same time, is a practical example, the question, though, when talking about this phenomenon, is if it's a positive thing or not. Finally multitasking means being less concentrated while doing more things (classwork 22, female, 16 years old).

The nature of the barbarian is to be connected, surfing on knowledge rather than going deep. What turns out to be very difficult is the moment when the barbarians are expected to approach learning with traditional systems or to adapt and model themselves on adult habits, reading and studying phenomena that are undoubtedly far from their real life experience, which often happens in school.

How can we barbarians, after doing an infinite amount of things at the same time, switch to sitting at a desk for many consecutive hours, without moving, squeezing our brain to the last drop, holding our breath to survive this daily visit to the ocean depths and anxiously awaiting the ring of the last bell to finally go back to the surface and breathe. We are indeed quite the strange animal. Us barbarians, we have gills but live on the surface. We pillage, destroy and transform the course of things; there is no way to stop us (classwork 8, female, 16 years old).

One can talk about the *split between educational fields*, between school hours and free time. This schizophrenic situation is the daily experience of young people. Moreover, this distance between school and *everything else* risks to rip apart these young barbarians, who understand their vulnerability but do not understand the sense of living in two worlds that are so distant from each other. Here emerges their demand for *dialogue*, which the adults also feel and share, since every individual, mutant or not, needs to listen, share and shelter. According to Bruner (1996), the aim of education is, more than anything else, to amplify the sense of possibility and prepare the minds to understand, feel and take action in the world. An intergenerational dialogue must be achieved to allow everybody to build relationships and knowledge, even if in different ways. Moreover, it does not appear overly impossible, as the following student acknowledges:

The educational system, which functions as the barbarians' education, helped educate those who today look at us barbarians as one would look at

UFOs landing on Earth, with a mixture of scepticism and fear, unsure of where we might end up with something like that (classwork 11, male, 16 years old).

The *Barbarians* aims to be an easy read for everybody, but in reality, throughout the unfolding of the project, it became clear that the students struggled to understand the structure of the text and were unable to see it in its entirety, unable to perceive its purpose. Therefore, they needed the intervention of the teacher as a mediator, explicitly asking for explanations of meaning, because they could not grasp the general sense. The research started verifying the level of self-awareness that young people have in their relationship with media and with the world of the adults and, more specifically, how much the adults' perception of young people interfered with the representation that young boys and girls have of themselves. It revealed the limit and vagueness of the book as a research instrument. Writing favouring the barbarians, by someone who declares himself to be mutating, sometimes proved to be a struggle for the young people reading it. Its flowing writing might have been misleading as it is, in reality, an essay imbued with content and deep meaning, its directions not always linear. For this reason, it is often the case, such as during this project, that the barbarians did not feel like they personally *identify as barbarians* or did not understand that the term had a positive connotation in the text.

The students often struggled when describing themselves as barbarians and, when they used the term, it was almost always negatively rather than to describe the change from the generation of their parents and teachers. Confused, because they were still uncertain about assuming an identity, they made the thoughts and viewpoints of the adults their own and harshly criticised their habits and those of their peers. There were, though, some excerpts in Baricco's essay on barbarians that the boys and girls could relate to, which highlighted their new way of thinking and experiencing life. Baricco's text, which emerges as a brilliant critique on the evolution of today's society, has proved to be an efficient tool, allowing both young people and adults to reflect on change and on the different points of views of all the actors taking part in the mutation. The study has therefore highlighted the amount of work that still has to be undertaken and how much still needs to be unveiled when we juxtapose adult thoughts with those of young thinkers.

### Adolescents in the 2.0 age: Risks and opportunities from the teacher's perspective

With all their differences and ambiguities, new media are a fundamental mediation tool for young participation in society (Livingstone, 2009). Inside this context, school retains its *old* role of preparing young people for life in contemporary society, granting them the necessary tools to face the discontinuous and fragmentary nature of the experience (Besozzi, 2006), which the young *barbarians* highlighted so clearly. Adults/teachers are demanded, when facing media, to explore new methods and new languages to accurately identify current educational needs, promoting the new available means as an ordinary cultural resource (Rivoltella et al., 2013). To achieve that, they are required to strive for comprehension of those media that are not just tools, but components of the same culture in which young people live, building and exchanging meaning (Tosolini, Pattaro & Riva, 2016). The few available empirical studies in the aforementioned field show how the teachers exhibit the most relevant discomforts in this dimension (Argentin, Gui, & Tamanini, 2013).

The second part of this research offers a cross-section of the teachers' representations about the said discomforts, trying to understand not just their opinions, but also their fears and doubts regarding the relationship between young people and media.

#### *Benefits and opportunities: an ambivalent representation*

The image outlined by what the teachers said is the picture of an *always online* generation, for which new media occupy a vital, persistent, dominating position, and are "...an appendix" (Interview 4, female, 59 years old, economics). The positive traits of the new digital environment in which young people live seem to lead mainly to two different points of view from the teachers.

First, there is a strong emphasis on the value of a quick and easy access to information, which allows one to make use of an immense virtual library. In second place, there is a reference to *ubiquitous connectivity* (Mascheroni, 2010) as the chance of living in a communication environment in which contact and relationship channels are always open (full time and anywhere). In both interpretations, though, a strong duality is always present.

On one side, the teachers recognise a huge opportunity in the access (as well as production) of a considerable amount of multimedia content and information sources: "(young people) are one touch away from the entirety

of human knowledge” (Interview 9, male, 42 years old, chemistry). At the same time, they affirm that adolescents do not make use of that opportunity, and when they do, their ability to discern between information and to determine the authority of what they read is worryingly lacking. There are indeed recurring comments about “the risk of a disposable culture” (Interview 20, female, 52 years old, english language) in which students risk resorting to *cut and paste* as their main research strategy rather than developing critical information skills.

The risk is related to the fact that being potentially exposed to any information, adolescents tend to avoid expanding their knowledge of the contents [...] It is a superficial research, often useless [...] it is copied and pasted (Interview 34, female, 47 years old, economics).

Even the communication potential, perceived as a positive trait, may swallow up, according to the teachers, other features of life and other activities, becoming “...a waste of time for its own sake” (Interview 8, male, 30 years old, italian literature).

Much of their time is sucked up by social networks [...] looks like they truly are always on those! (Interview 11, female, 42 years old, german language).

However, the image emerging from a number of Italian and European studies demonstrates that adolescents carry out numerous activities associated with daily life, using the internet in a consultative, recreational and social way, which seems more complex and structured than the interviewed teachers tend to think.

In the European context, the EU Kids Online data (Livingstone et al., 2011) and The Net Children Go Mobile project (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2013) have shown that social networking tops the list of online activities, among other free-time activities such as listening to music, watching videos and using instant messaging. At the same time, other activities such as completing school assignments and searching for information are an important part of the daily media diet of teenagers. This large variety of online activities contributes to the acquisition of tools that allow adolescents to use the web with greater awareness and safety, reinforcing their digital expertise and digital literacy (Mascheroni, 2012). Challenging the common sense idea of young people’s *natural familiarity* with ICT, empirical research on digital skills shows a certain lack of critical awareness in the use of new media among adolescents. On top of that, the

pivotal role played by the family's socio-cultural context in the development of young people's digital skills becomes clear (Argentin, Gui, & Tamanini, 2013).

#### *Teachers and the dark side of the new media*

Already clear in the reflections on the activities that young people engage in through new media and on their potential, the teachers' argumentation showed the duality characterising digital communication tools: on one hand, they are relational and informational instruments which foster interchange and communication; on the other, possessing technological competencies does not always mean to be able to manage the relational potential characterising social media, which may be used by young people to varying degrees of adequacy (Segatto & Dal Ben, 2013).

When asked to consider the possible risks, the caution that the teachers showed in their reasoning on the positive aspects of new media left room for more articulate discussion, with many elements being highlighted.

The main concern from the majority of the interviewed teachers deals with the theme of communication. The need for young people to express themselves and communicate through the ubiquitous and perpetual accessibility with one another unleashes in the teachers the fear that, especially the use of social networks, might somehow substitute face-to-face communication, with the risk of depersonalising relationships. In this case, the teachers describe new media between the lines as a substitute for relationships, a surrogate reality, a representation that leans towards slightly oversimplified interpretative schemes, such as the opposition between real and virtual, between analogue and digital (Qualizza, 2013).

They lose sight of the interpersonal relationship because they hide behind a monitor (Interview 50, female, 48 years old, Italian literature).

There is the risk that the virtual relationship becomes a substitute for the real one (Interview 38, female, 27 years old, musical education).

Another reason for concern partially connected to the aforementioned risks is related, sometimes more clearly than others, to concepts such as excessive use, obsession and abuse.

One of the major risks is that most adolescents tend to be completely absorbed by these tools, hence losing contact with true reality, bonding more and more with what is virtual reality (Interview 26, male, 52 years old, religion).

Moreover, even if not widespread, references to addiction are not absent, depicting adult representations reflecting a growing concern from public opinion (Tosolini, Pattaro & Riva, 2016). In fact, as was once the case for the television and the PC, in the last decade, the increasing popularity and frequency of internet use has been accompanied by public anxiety over its potential dominance of youth time and attention (Livingstone et al., 2011), leading to increasing apprehensiveness about the potential negative consequences of overuse and internet addiction.

It is a given fact that there might be a psychological addiction and a distortion of personality (Interview 11, female, 42 years old, german language).

Because of this constant and excessive use, connected mainly to social networks, the teachers perceive a danger, especially in relation to privacy and the risk of a spectacularisation of one's own private life, besides indelibly publishing inappropriate comments and pictures.

Girls and boys don't realise that when they write something on social networks it is not unlike writing it on the walls in a square (Interview 49, female, 39 years old, italian literature).

Facebook... I call it 'emotional trash can' [...] everybody tells everybody how they are, where they are, who they are with [...] they put themselves under everyone's eyes and within everyone's reach. And for boys and girls, is not always easy to understand the dangers. (Interview 34, female, 47 years old, economics).

As such, adults develop a fear of contact involving *unknown* people who may pose a serious threat, escalating in unpleasant, traumatic or even devastating situations. The reference to mass media here appears clear; headlines and news on paedophiles and *internet monsters* tend to dominate over positive stories on the educational, civic and expressive dimensions of the internet (Livingstone, 2009).

I think that the greater risk lies in meeting online people who might hurt them [...] Many news reports say that young people are enticed online and might be molested by older people who are disguised as kids (Interview 30, male, 61 years old, construction).

If online harassment and paedophilia represent the threat coming from unknown adults, bullying is instead that carried out by known peers; the first is a dangerous but sporadic risk; the latter is instead far more common and indefinite (Livingstone, 2009).

The interviewed teachers highlight that cyberbullying is one of the most insidious internet-related dangers, which can jeopardise the psychological well-being of students. They are aware that bullying is nothing new and that it is not an emergency that came out with the development of new media. Still, what worries them most are the dimensions that, given the visibility allowed by technology, this phenomenon can reach.

Cyberbullying is a great risk because what could have once been mockery is now amplified, and it can have far more devastating effects on the bullied (Interview 10, male, 47 years old, english language).

### **Real risk and risking moral panic: What teachers say vs. the extant research**

Summarizing, the teachers' representation of the risks and dangers of the web seems to be linked to two main categories:

- On one hand, we see risks associated with new contexts and new possibilities offered by technology (a change in the way we live social relationships, new addictions and privacy-related problems).
- On the other hand, we see the dangers of all times, which wear new clothes supplied by technology: grooming becomes online grooming and bullying becomes cyberbullying.

Even on the subject of risks, Italian and European research data show a situation that only partially justifies the concerns of the interviewed adults. On the subject of relational skills, several studies suggest that online communication can support identity development during adolescence (Davis, 2012) and can have a positive effect on adolescents' social competence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Furthermore, communication and technologically-mediated relationships tend to interact in synergy with offline life, incorporating traditional social behaviour rather than increasing or decreasing it (Livingstone, 2008; Giaccardi, 2010; Baiocco et al., 2011; Boccia Artieri, 2015). Yet, the outcomes of internet use are likely to vary depending on the youths' existing interpersonal skills and context (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010): adolescents, already competent on a relational level, with good self-esteem and cognitive

capability, can maximise the positive aspects of social media – affirming the well-known richer-gets-richer hypothesis (Baiocco et al., 2011). The same tools can act instead as an escape towards an illusory and gratifying world for young people who experiment relational difficulties or other forms of discomfort in their offline social life (Couyoumdjian, Baiocco & Del Miglio, 2006).

This partially connects with the second concern voiced by the teachers: the question of addiction (whether the internet is addictive in the same sense as alcohol or drugs). Even though this question remains contested (Livingstone et al., 2011), and research in this area still lacks univocal data, more recent studies show that this type of addiction among adolescents, contrary to what the interviewed teachers seem to believe, is not a widespread social risk (Poli & Agrimi, 2012; Kuss & Others., 2014). Instead, spending increasing amounts of time online (certainly not a disorder) "for a small number of young people may be a slippery slope when combined with psychological and environmental variables that increase the risk for addictive behaviour" (Wallace, 2014, p. 16).

Regarding privacy, the anxieties of the interviewed teachers, even if partially grounded, are not able to capture the complexity of the subject. If it is the case that there is a tendency among young people to be less concerned than adults about privacy issues (Miltgen & Peyrat-Guillard, 2014), this does not mean that adolescents do not have their own understanding of the problem. As the data from recent studies highlight, for adolescents, the matter lies not much in publishing or not certain information, but rather in deciding what, how and to whom to reveal personal information, drawing their own boundaries about what they want to be public and visible to everyone or just to some (Livingstone, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2013). Furthermore, the possibility of managing their own online profiles, including in terms of protecting their personal privacy, tends to develop with age and media use (Cuman & Locatelli, 2012).

In conclusion, more than the *unawareness* that is much feared by the adults, we could talk about an awareness *in the making*, which hides many contradictions and seems to proceed by trial and error (Drusian, 2010).

In the teachers' narrations, the risks associated with privacy are often related to *dangerous encounters*, which can lead to harassment and abuse. However, according to data from the EU Kids Online research (Livingstone et al., 2011), meeting online contacts offline (hence unknown and potentially dangerous) is not among the most frequent risky behaviours of young Europeans and is even less so among Italian adolescents. Indeed, minors use the internet mainly to strengthen relationships with their offline friends or to

keep in contact with distant ones. People who meet online, even if present, are generally connected to pre-existing relational references (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mascheroni, 2012). Recognising that the possibility of offline encounters with unknown people may not be a widespread experience does not mean underestimating its relevance from a risk assessment perspective. The words of the interviewed teachers highlight the ambivalence and the thin border dividing on one hand the responsible realisation of risks, hence the need for adult control, and, on the other, a fear that rather risks to give rise to episodes of moral panic, which is also influenced by mass media (Livingstone, 2009). The teachers' concerns about cyberbullying are instead closer to that highlighted by empirical research. Even though the existing research shows that traditional bullying (face-to-face) is more widespread than the online variant (Livingstone & Smith, 2014), the teachers seem to pick up on the need to pay focus on the latter for at least two reasons. On one hand, despite the somewhat contained magnitude of the phenomenon, cyberbullying is very likely bound to increase. On the other hand, because of its peculiar traits – such as the extreme powerlessness of the victim, the fact that it can reach the victim anywhere and the embarrassment caused by exposure to a potentially unlimited audience (Slonje & Smith, 2008) – its results are far more dangerous, painful and difficult to overcome, provoking more severe and lasting damage than traditional bullying (Introini & Pasqualini, 2012).

### **Conclusions: A work in progress towards a meeting ground**

As we have seen, the basic problem of common sense concerning the relationship between the internet and minors emerges in both adults and teenagers. In adults, it emerges from the separation between imagined, feared risks and real ones – as well as the distance between different cultural worlds – that prevent them from knowing what young actually do online and that propel them to attribute partial, ambivalent or even distorted meanings to such activities.

Importantly, what emerges from the adults/teachers' accounts is their tendency to *remain stuck* on a representation of media that seems not to take into account what they mean to teenagers, even when it considers their positive aspects: media are not ends in themselves – they do help teenagers build a relational universe that is embedded in everyday life. Only a few teachers mention the fact that media are also the means through which teenagers express forms of creative adaptation to an environment by

shaping their own digital space (Giaccardi, 2010) and by experiencing the web as a way of expanding their own relational possibilities (Vittadini, 2010) and experimenting with their identity (Pattaro, 2015).

However, the problem of common sense also comes out in some of the students who reflected on Baricco's essay. The same stereotypes about teenagers emerging from the world of adults occasionally surface in the teenagers' accounts, with the paradoxical consequence of increasing the split and fragmentation, not only between the youth and the adults, but also among the adolescents themselves.

At this point, the educational question comes into play: how is it possible to find a way to maximise opportunities and reduce risks and, most importantly, to reduce the distance between teenage culture and adult culture and to make them communicate in school, a key institution of the public sphere (Buckingham, 2013), which belongs to both adults and youth and to which both adults and youth belong. Such communication represents a desire by both teenagers and adults, although there is still a great deal of misunderstanding and ambivalence. The teachers' answers, when asked about this, are rich in ideas on how to prevent risk and reduce the distance between the two worlds.

In the communication-control dichotomy, only a minority of those interviewed asks for restrictions on the use of media, which may have stemmed from a feeling of bewilderment arising from not knowing what to do and could project the fear of being inadequate in the face of the tool. Conversely, the majority of those interviewed reflect upon how a meeting ground could be reached. In their words, the desire to find new strategies of rapprochement emerges, all of which imply the acknowledgement that adults have to be more open and flexible. These adults perceive a large generational gap and experience technology in a contradictory way, yet they assume responsibility to initiate communication because:

it is a deontological duty for an educator to know what teenagers use [...] in order to understand them better (Interview 10, male, 47 years old, english language).

As far as risk prevention is concerned, many strategies are proposed. One common denominator is the need to educate and inform not only teenagers, but also adults. The adults acknowledge being insufficiently prepared in this field and, consequently, admit that they need to become more informed about the matter. They thus assume an educational role and responsibility for the creation of an atmosphere that fosters confrontation

between them and both teenagers and their parents, which guarantees a school-family synergy.

The ways in which this kind of education can be realised primarily involve, as privileged channels, school courses held by experts for students, teachers and parents as well as educational interventions for students in the form of peer education. Although the proposed methods vary, each one mentioned the need for adults to assume responsibility:

The adult plays an even more important role [...] he/she already had it, and now he/she has to assume it even more (Interview 6, female, 52 years old, chemistry).

In addition, some interviewees hint at the possibility of investing in a form of mutual socialisation (Tosolini, Pattaro & Riva, 2016) in which everyone – teenager or adult, barbarian or civilised – can learn from one another and offer their skills in exchange. Through this exchange, different skills and abilities can communicate to reach a meeting ground. On one hand, teenagers are more familiar with online activities – they can use media and develop new modalities and styles of socialising and communicating. On the other hand, adults are sources of broader experiences in how to manage relationships as well as of knowledge that can help teenagers use medial languages more consciously, critically and independently (Colombo, 2015).

From these proposals emerges an attitude that mirrors the three fundamental cornerstones of media education (Rivoltella, 2006), and which more generally recalls the essential goal of education (Maccarini, 2014): *debating* with students about media-related issues as part of citizenship education; helping them *develop critical understanding and consciousness*; and *educating them about responsibility*, which is an ethical, deontological duty, and which is necessary in encouraging responsible participation by the young in the society – the meeting ground – they are building together with adults.

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teachers; Chiara Tosolini wrote sections - *The mutation of culture: Fine line between barbarians and civilisation* - *Comparing barbarians and the civilised ones at school*; Chiara Pattaro wrote sections - *Adolescents in the 2.0 age: Risks and opportunities from the teacher's perspective* - *Real risk and risking moral panic: What teachers say vs. the extant research* - *Conclusions: A work in progress towards a meeting ground*.

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