Generational belonging and mediascape in Europe

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Contents:

Abstract:

„Web generation", „Nintendo generation", „e-generation" and so forth, are just a few among the popular generational definitions often mentioned not only in journalistic simplifications but also in scientific publications. This paper presents a theoretical examination of the implications and the limits of the generational approaches to audience research, in order to show under what conditions they can in fact be both relevant and useful. Refusing the simplifying attitude that dominates in popularization just quoted, the analysis develops the sociological tradition, drawn on the work of Mannheim, that studies the generations as a collective subject bound by a shared *historical semantics*, a resource of models of interpretation and linguistic devices by means of which experiences are thematicized and crystallized in a common „we-sense". On the basis of a certain body of empirical evidences, the authors outline some significant aspects and mechanisms of the mutually reinforcing relationship between media diet and generational semantics, pointing out the capacity of certain specific products to unite the generations in shared cultural legacy. The article concludes with a look to European framework, suggesting that a common European culture must be promoted by institutional strategies that look at the media as means for its dissemination, and that take stock both of local construction of identities and of cultural diversification between generations.

„Web generation", „Nintendo generation", „e-generation" sont définitions générationales presentés pas seulement par les journaux, mais aussi par la literature scientifique. Cet essay veuy analyser d'un point de vu sociologique les implications et les limites des approches générationaux à l'étude du public des media, pour comprendre les conditions auxquelles ils sont utiles.

L'analyse se develope à partir de la pensée de Mannheim, qui étude les générations comme subjets collectives fondés sur la condivision d'une specifique sémantique historique. Cette sémantique constitue une resource de modèles interpretatifs et de dispositifs linguistiques qui aident à lier les experiences dans un « sens commun » partagé.

Sur la base des résultats de leur recherche, les auteurs soulignent quelques important aspects des rélations entre la reception des média et les sématiques générationales, qui rendent possible la condivision de products culturel à partir d'une vraie culture générationelle.

L'essay se termine avec l'idée que une culture européenne doit être promotée à travers des strategies institutionnelles, qui utilisent les média comme instruments de dissémination, mais qui aussi respectent les différences culturelles des différents pays et des différent générations.

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Introduction

The momentary crisis in the process of construction of the European Union, followed by the failures of the referenda on the Constitution Project, has been interpreted in politics as due to a major failure in communication. In particular, „it has been stressed that the connection between the diplomatic laboratories that hammered out the project for a Charter and the idea (or the absence of an idea) of Europe that circulates in the homes of citizens has been missing". Something similar happened, in the nineteenth century, during the processes of unification of nation states, including Italy. In particular, in the case of Italy, when the wars of independence came to an end, an important intellectual and politician declared: „We have made Italy. Now we must make the Italians", the ruling class employed education on a massive scale as a tool for the construction of the national identity. We might suppose that today media have been given the same role in the construction of a European awareness (we have made Europe, now we have to make the Europeans).

However, this project entails some difficulties, in the light of certain scientific perceptions, and we need to bear them in mind if we want to find a solution to the problem. In particular, it is worth assuming that people's prior identities exert a sort of resistance to change. And their identities are not only ethnic or geographical, but also, for example, generational. The fact that the media address different generations, which have different expectations, is a very important consideration if we are to understand what contents and what channels can be planned for the European citizens in their different countries. The case study we would like to discuss investigates the relationship between mass media and generations: the first section analyses the generational identity; the second section examines the evidence for these identities approaching to media audiences; a third section seeks to demonstrate the importance of the factors previously discussed in the process of communicating a European identity.

1. Defining the category of generation

As is well-known, the tradition of Audience Studies and on field research of media audiences have brought out the existence of different modes of reception of the cultural products which are determined by a series of variables dependent on socio-demographic factors such as, for example, class, gender, age, socio-cultural group, and the features of the contexts of consumption (in the family, among friends, etc.).

The theoretical premise of the research underpinning the observations we wish to present here[1] is whether it is possible to study media audiences – with a special concern for television – in the light of the variable of generational belonging. This means determining whether membership of a certain generation constitutes a constraint on identity capable of functioning as a sort of subculture in the definition of media diets, the activation of common frames of interpretation of media texts and a predisposition to processes of domestication of communication technologies.

An approach of this kind boasts at least two different traditions. The first, which dates back to the fundamental essay by Mannheim on *The Problems of Generations* (1927) and, through it, to the German historicist tradition, studies the generations as a collective subject responsible for social change. To this line belong, in more recent times and to cite only a few examples, the work of Elder on the generation that grew up during the Great Depression, defined in terms of a traumatic event or a catastrophe that unites a particular cohort of individuals in a conscious social stratification based on age (Elder 1974); Bourdieu's research into professional-artistic or academic fields, and the emergence of cultural fashions in terms of conflict between successive generations of intellectuals (Bourdieu 1988); Wyatt's studies of the American generation of the sixties, interpreted as a social group particularly active in determining, through the affirmation of a true generational subculture, an unexpected acceleration in the transformation of American society (Wyatt 1993).

The second tradition has a more recent and certainly less academic history: it is the contribution made by generational marketing, namely that approach to the market that classifies consumers on the basis of their membership of a particular cohort. Developed by the Jankelovich Institute as a way of understanding changes in patterns of consumption introduced by the 1960s generation compared with those practised by the previous generation, this approach is responsible for certain schematic social categories that have become widely accepted and used, such as the terms „mature" (for those born before 1945), „baby boomers" (born between 1946 and 1964), and „Generation X" (born after 1964: Smith and Clurman 1997). To these generations, as is well-known, has more recently been added „Generation Y" to indicate those born after 1980.

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[1]   The research projects drawn on were conducted by the Observatory on Communication of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, for which the authors of this paper are in various ways responsible. The full results of the research have been published in two recent volumes: P. Aroldi, F. Colombo 2003 and F. Pasquali, B. Scifo 2004. A third volume, is forthcoming, also edited by P. Aroldi and F. Colombo 2007. The volumes also constitute the references of the deeper methodological analyses and bibliographical studies, and for these reasons we may be permitted to refer the reader to them here.

While from the start this second approach has been market-oriented, the broadest sociological category of „generation", developed mainly in the first tradition of studies, lends itself almost naturally to reflection on the processes of socialization and on the functions of the age groups in the definition of the social structure (for a representative work see Eisenstadt 1956). The passage „from generation to generation" of knowledge, theoretical and practical information, ways of doing things and value systems is one of the aspects of the process of formation, whether it is entrusted to institutions like the family – where the term „generation" indicates the relationship between parents and children – and schools, or conducted by the thousands of forms of the culture industry and the media. As will be seen, the special centrality of childhood and adolescence in the constitution of the distinctive features of a generation's identity remains unaltered in both formative horizons.

Interpreting the category of the „generation" within an educational perspective is especially useful to avoid both the risks of an excessively rigid interpretation of the generational identity as the deterministic product of historical and demographic events or as the fruit of an autonomous and self-referential process of self-positioning, lacking connection with the other generations that precede and follow. As the following pages will seek to show, phenomena of an intra-generational character are flanked by inter-generational phenomena, the privileged locus of a comparison, now dialogical, now more conflictual, with both the generation of the parents and with those of the older siblings or younger siblings with whom each person coexists.

A such multi-dimensional category seems also especially useful within a theoretical paradigm and model of research for which the different segmentations that traverse the body of consumers (in our case, of audiences or publics) cannot be reduced to the individual characteristics of a socio-demographic nature (age, gender, educational level, occupation, etc.) or their respective lifestyles (as codified, for example, in marketing), but need rather to be closely related to various different factors simultaneously, such as positioning in the lifespan, media biography, the environment provided by the networks of family and friends as ambits of elaboration of the media experience, identification with a set of values shared with other members of the same generation, the historical development of the media system, the different phases of technological innovation, processes of domestication and incorporation of technologies and media products, and the broader changes of a structural nature that affect the social and cultural system. In the wake of Pilcher (1994), we propose to use the term „social generation" to indicate this multi-dimensional category.

In our approach, therefore, the age of the subjects is not relevant in itself (according to classic oppositions like that between young people and adults, which are significant but static). It is significant dynamically as a guide to the membership of a generational cohort that shares, in a given historical phase, the fact of having the same age and having to confront the same cultural panorama, as well as in terms of the media system available and the media products they have used. This approach interprets generational belonging as a form of subculture modelled by the convergence of objective factors (such as historical events and socio-cultural conditions, educational systems and contents, phases of development of the media system, panorama of cultural provision), and subjective factors (such as their experience of this context during the same adolescent phase of their lives, the sharing of a given age, the sedimentation of a collective memory and a common sense of belonging).

As indicated, the starting point is a paper by Mannheim (1927) that distinguishes *generation status* (a potential sharing of the same historic-social space based on the age at which one experiences the same events, the same cultural conditions, the same obstacles and advantages), the *generation as an actuality* (which constitutes a concrete nexus, „*a participation in the common destiny* of this historical and social unit", in „the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period" (Mannheim, 303), understood as the actualization of the potential represented by the simple *status*), and true *generation units* that can take on the form of concrete groups. In Mannheim's own summation:

„*youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different topic ways, constitute separate generation units*" (id., 304, author's italics).

The affinity between individuals belonging to the same generation unit therefore appears in their sharing of the same contents that constitute the consciousness of the individual members and act as factors of socialization within the group. „The data as such, however," notes Mannheim, „are not the primary factor producing a group – this function belongs to a far greater extent to those formative forces which shape the data and give them character and direction" (id., 305). In a word, this is the *Gestalt*, which constitutes the special way of perceiving, interpreting and appraising individual, social, historical and cultural phenomena. Belonging to a generation unit means sharing a particular „unified view";

„it involves the ability to see things from its particular 'aspect', to endow concepts with its particular shade of meaning and to experience psycological and intellectual impulses in the configuration characteristic of the group […] to absorb those interpretive formative principles *which enable the*

individual to deal with new impressions and events in a fashion broadly pre-determined by the group." (id., 306, our italics).

Now, the specific generation units are manifested in concrete groups that form the core of broader groupings, not necessarily physically adjacent, characterized by the fact that they share of a context of events experienced, perceived, appraised and elaborated reactively within the same *Gestalt*, „an identity of responses, a certain affinity in the way in which all move with and are formed by their common experience." (id., 306).

Michael Corsten (1999) develops his comment on Mannheim by focusing on the sense of generational belonging: the members of a generation share not only a common background of experiences, but above all they share the consciousness that also the other members of the same generation share the same background. As Corsten says, „they do not only have something in common, they have also a (common) sense" – in the twofold sense of *shared* and *taken for granted* – „for the fact that they have something in common." (id., 258). Corsten borrows from Heinz Bude the term *We-Sense* to describe this shared consciousness, this generational consciousness. The problem then becomes the origin of this consciousness: what is it founded on? How is developed and maintained?

To answer this question Corsten refers to the concept of *historical semantics* (Luhmann 1980; Koselleck 1969), namely the idea that a generation recognizes itself as such if and when it is able to produce a dominant order of meanings continually fostered by means of the discourse practices realized between the members of the same generation. *Generational semantics* is, in other words, a resource of subjects, of models of interpretation, principles of evaluation, linguistic devices by means of which the shared experience is thematicized and translated into speech within the forms of everyday interaction. We can interpret it as a process of crystallization of the encyclopaedia of a generation and of the *linguistic rules* by which to refer to it, which produces a form of cultural identity and also a social contraction. The cultural circle of a generation is not a real and concrete group of individuals that grew up together, it is not a *generation unit* but an *actuality*, in the sense attributed to these terms by contemporaries who „spontaneously observe that other people use certain criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in a manner similar to themselves" (Corsten 1999, 262).

Edmunds and Turner (2002 and 2005) again recently studied the category of generation proposed by Mannheim and Bourdieu in order to maintain the hypothesis of the birth of a new generation, whose common experience at an early age is characterized by two complementary factors and by a contingent emergency. The complementary factors are the progressive globalization of cultural phenomena and the increasing availability of communication technologies, which bring together the members of a generation within an especially solid network of possible relationships. It is not a question, that is to say, just of sharing on the global level the experience of using the same cultural products (a state of affairs which began back in the sixties/ seventies and became increasingly marked in the transition from the old to the new millennium), but also of being able, in their daily practices, to make use of a series of technologies (in their turn traversed by these same global cultural products and capable of re-mediating them) that intensify the capacity of the members of what, significantly, has also been called the Internet Generation, to reflect collectively on their common condition, to develop a semantics of their own in real time, [2] to emphasize their shared „we-sense". Following the lines of an interpretation of the genetic processes of the generations as depending on a trauma or an accentuated social crisis, the contingency is identified by Edmunds and Turner in a traumatic event that, thanks to the media, has acquired an unprecedented global scope: the attack on the World Trade Center of 11 September 2001. So here we have the birth of the first global generation.

If, for the time being, this hypothesis seems more a provocation than an empirically verifiable fact, the interpretative picture of Edmunds and Turner is useful as a way of reasoning on the possibility that Europe may constitute, in the present period, a common framework, sufficient to define the „we-sense" of a new generation of EU citizens.

On the one hand, in fact, the process itself of European integration constitutes one of the elements that shape the generational semantics, as it is built up through school, university and professional education. In this respect, an older generation (the European generation corresponding to that of the baby American boomers[3]), which can be can be considered more Europeist „de jure" and less „de facto", by virtue of the socio-cultural context in which their socialization took place in the sixties and seventies, has been followed by several „younger" generations made up of those who were born in the seventies and eighties and – more radically still – after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union or the adoption of the single currency. These generations are more Europeist „de facto" and less „de jure".

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[2]   Take blogs, for instance.

[3]   In Italy think of those between forty and fifty/fifty five years old.

On the other hand, the processes of globalization of experience (communicative flows, material and symbolic goods, shared lifestyles and patterns of consumption) have entered into a dialectic with more local forms of construction of the generational „we-sense". From this point of view the European framework constitutes an intermediate level, whose real scope obviously constitutes a problematic object.

2. Generations and media

The above observations are especially important in dealing with a fairly hot topic in the media.

Many popularizing commentators, as a matter of fact, constantly introduce generational definitions based on the correspondence between people's childhood and the metaphorical childhood of an emerging technology. Such custom, however, is not only found in journalistic simplifications, but also in scientific publications and documents: „web generation", „net generation", „bit generation", „Nintendo generation", „e-generation" and so forth, are just a few among the popular definitions one constantly runs into.[4]

In this paper, we would like to address the implications, and the limits, of a „generation" key to audience research, in order to show under what conditions such key can in fact be both relevant and useful. In particular, we mean to illustrate the difference between a sociological approach such as the one we gave in the first part of this essay and the simplifying attitude that dominates the popularizations we just mentioned.

Popular definitions, like the broad example of „web generation", are based on an assumption worth considering in some detail: younger subjects are supposed to be more naturally inclined to get accustomed to new technologies than elder subjects. Such inclination seems to be due to their greater psychological „malleability". On these premises some commentators, especially within the pedagogical and educational fields, ground the imperative to protect children from the alleged dangers of technology, for technology is taken to mould the very forms of experience and reasoning.[5] These premises often go in concert with two other assumptions:

a) generation is primarily taken as a purely biological variable (age)[6];

b) technological innovations can be analyzed in a „single-thread" way; in other words, each innovation could be analyzed apart from the system of relations it establishes with the whole technological and social system.[7]

The sociological perspective that we here draw on invites us rather to look at the relationship between the various generations and the media in a new way, which we deal with below and which can be briefly summed up as follows:

a) the various media and their products, like the cultural landscapes within which the various generations are formed (as well as the experiences of schooling and consumption), form part of the different generational semantics;

b) in the different generations we can find different media diets, on the one hand conditioned by the different semantics and on the other capable of reinforcing or limiting them;

c) apart from the differences, however, the generations in their continuous contacts and exchanges share the experience of the media in two very precise forms: on the one hand a shared rituality, in which the simultaneous use of the same medium conceals perceptions and attributions with different significances; on the other through cultural sharing of certain cultural objects transmitted by the media, and considered to be part of the common present in which the various generations find themselves coexisting.

We will now try to illustrate these observations on the basis of a certain body of empirical evidence produced by research carried out by the Observatory on Communication at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, which we direct, over the last five years.

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4   On this matter see M. Hartmann 2003.

5   On these issues see D. Buckingham 2002.

6   Such assumption informs, for instance, the ground-breaking volume by S. Turkle 1984. See also L. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone 2002. A critique to the purely biological variable can be found in B. Scifo 2002.

7   This is a rather complex and highly debated issue. I just remark here the greater and greater difficulty to account for the diffusion of new media within the context of an increasingly media-centred social environment.

2.1. Differences in the generational semantics of the media

The point of departure of this discourse is naturally the mechanism by which the media form part of the generational semantics. We can here draw on certain studies that we have conducted into the role and significance attributed to Italian television and the use of Internet by four generations of viewers/users in Italy.

These studies revealed the importance of the first phase of socialization to the use of medium: subjects who during their formative period (childhood, adolescence, early adulthood) saw the birth of a medium that then became widespread tend to consider this medium – in the nascent form in which they experienced it – as an integral part of their cultural landscape and retain a certain inertia in its definition also in the subsequent phases. So, for the Italian generation of baby-boomers (born between the mid-fifties and mid-sixties), television was the medium that more than any other, with its birth, accompanied their formative phase (teaching, amusing, spreading a standard form of the Italian language and conveying certain shared cultural contents).

This means that the kind of television that these Italians use as a frame of reference to appraise the transformations of the television system remains the model of television with which they grew up: offering only a few channels and not many commercials, in black and white, educational and a great family ritual. For those who grew up in the eighties, however, with the arrival of colour and the mixed public-private system, rich in new contents but also flooded with commercials, television is mainly associated with a model of major youth entertainment, with less significance attached to culture and information. And for those who grew up with television in the nineties, the television medium has ceased to be an instrument of fundamental importance, since it suffers from competition with the new media like the Web and the mobile phone.

As for the Web, the differences are similarly substantial, above all in the values attached to the medium. For the older generations they are associated with the challenge of an innovation (a challenge that has to be accepted in order to avoid being old-fashioned and behind the times); but for the generations that saw the birth of the Web during their formative years they are associated with a kind of pioneering pride („we were the first"); and for the youngest generations they are associated with the everyday nature of an experience now introjected and firmly established (a technology „already available").

As can be seen, the differences appear quite marked. And yet there is also common ground: in fact the exchange between the generations also takes place through the sharing of these different semantics. How and where are these shared social semantics formed? The phenomenon can be explained in part by the fact that the birth of a medium is first of all the appearance of a new technology.

Now, as we know, technologies do not arise in some pre-technological or pseudo-natural world. They in fact have to create their own (technological and economical) niche within a technological universe that already exists. And the only way to achieve this is a hard process of identities construction, producing identities (researchers, technicians, marketing experts, retailers) that are able to mediate between social conservativeness and the brisk turn of innovation.[8]

Secondly, it is necessary to remind that technologies take place within social discourses, which always come before, along with and after technologies. During the first phases of diffusion of a new medium (such as the Internet) the dominant discourses concern what we might call the preliminary condition. Many definitions of emerging media highlight connections with previous media (just think of the definition of television as „pictured radio" or „small screen", which accompanied its diffusion and referred to other media as semantic points of reference). These discourses come from institutional and informal agencies, such as mass media or the simple circulation among social groups. They thus build a public definition, some kind of instruction guidebook offered to the public and to potential users. This process is not due to homogeneous factors: political and cultural reasons (leading to progress) concur with economical ones (launching a market) and educational ones (promoting new educational technologies), and so forth. On the other hand, it is not easy to locate this definition: it could be found in advertising campaigns as well as in lawmaking, in non specialized as well as specialized information, and even in everyday „passing the word". The result anyway – if temporary – helps to build a first, necessary, shared „public definition", within which the first uses occur. The context of use is precisely the field in which the first uses take place[9]. Identity belongings: class, „cultural capital", generational preferences, family habits and customs, ethnocultural aptitudes, and so forth. The specific use acts, and the various styles of use, create

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8   B. Sanguanini showed for instance that the introduction of computer science and ICT in Italy could be marked through a recognition of different levels of professionalization of retailers (B. Sanguanini 2002). For a survey on this issue see also L. Facchinotti, F. Pasquali, M. Stefanelli (forthcoming).

9   Advertising, for instance, belongs to this (more or less homogeneous and complex in itself) social definition, being itself subject to a dynamic transformation process. The Italian case is discussed in F. Pasquali 2003; see in particular Chapter 5: „Un case study. Nuovi media e immaginario: la costruzione sociale di Internet in Italia".

forms of incorporation shared by groups, classes and generations. On one side such incorporation takes place among cultures and collective identities; on the other side, it reflects on technologies and on social discourses. The outcome is thus what we might call „social definitions", for they are born out of a socialization process investing the media, and modifying their very structures, and their symbolic value.

Table 1: The process of social definition of a new communication technology (or medium)
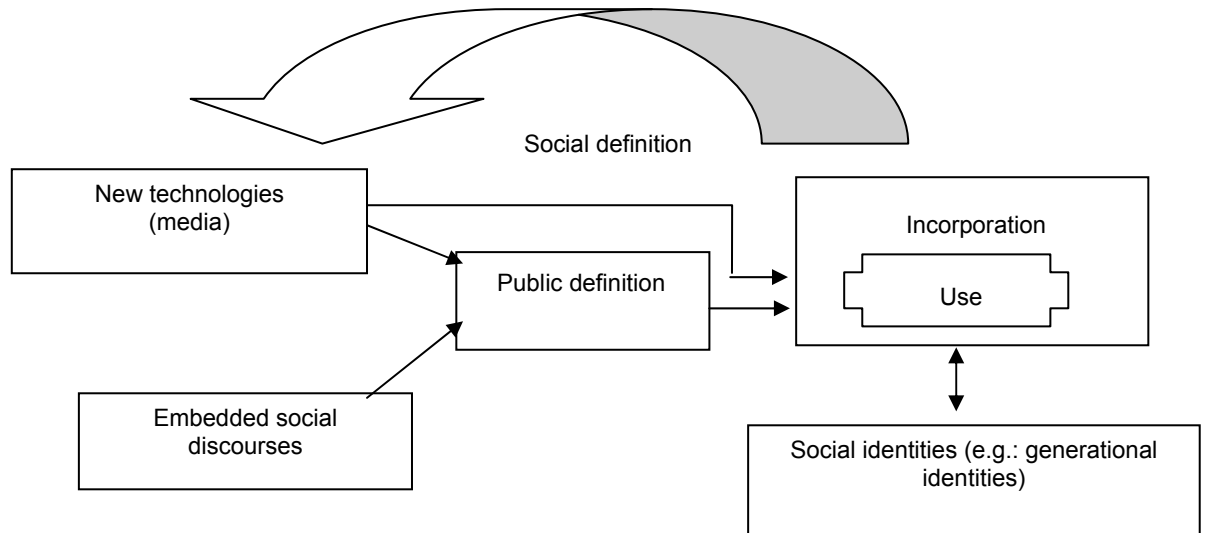
The framework we are suggesting enables us to appreciate the meaningfulness of the „generation approach" to media: it accounts for a certain technological generation on one side, and for the representation and use by certain generations of users on the other. Neither the former nor the latter exist apart from the social context, from trends and discourses circulating in it. A technological generation does not exist outside the whole technological system, and outside the discourses produced on it; a human generation does not exist apart from the unbroken exchange with other generations, and from the social environment it lives in.

2.2. Media diets

We now come to the problem of the differences between the various generations in their media diets. The results of our research shows that each generation seems to be distinguished by a specific diet in its media consumption. For example, between the baby boomers and their children there are marked differences in the amounts time and significance devoted to television (decreasing in the transition from older to younger) and in the time and significance devoted to the Web (increasing). This means, superficially, that the hierarchy of the media in the diet changes, but also – more deeply – that there is a change in attitude towards the different media.

In this phase of the technological development of the media as a result of digitalization, we can say that the diversification of media diets is highly significant. Many important observers have pointed out the tendency of the media to converge in terms of technology, economics, and organization of production.

But we have to underline that the possible forthcoming convergence between media is still bound to the different socialising approaches of different age groups/generations, even when technology will provide us with one single interface instead of many different media sources. Hence we could be witness of technological convergence, but divergence within consumption habits.

Here it appears important to reflect on the role that Europe assigns to technological development, and also on its great confidence in the opportunity offered by the potential for technological standardization. European media policies often take it for granted that the homogeneous spread of media resources (or at least of their technological infrastructures) will almost automatically iron out differences and foster equality of cultural opportunities. With respect to this confidence, it may be important to stress that generational differences in media diets seem to reveal a need to pay close attention to diversified media diets. The insistence on the new media to the detriment of the most traditional media could have the effect – if not regulated by adequate cultural policies – of deepening a Europe-wide rift between parents and children and even more between old and young, with not entirely predictable consequences. For the first time in history, there might be a need for a

radical policy to train the older generations in the use of digital media, with a special concern to prevent the formation of a cultural divide.

2.3. Media competences

Generational belonging seems to be a significant variable also as far as media skills are concerned. On the one hand it is obvious that domesticating a communication technology or a medium in the familial context of primary socialization, or experiencing it first in other contexts (at school or work or in occupational training) and in later phases of one's life (as an adult or even the third age) entails the development of very different media skills. On the other, belonging to different generations means, as we seen, socializing the same media in different phases of one's development, and therefore in different conditions (technological, linguistic, and in terms of privileged contents) that influence the degree of competence required by the medium itself, as well as the skills and competences it supplies. Paradigmatic in both respects are, for example, the processes of domestication of ICT by generations of adults in the course of two decades marked by the rapid computerization of advanced countries and in particular the experience of that generation of workers lived the entrance of personal computers into their established professional routine, with the consequent demand for rapid acquisition of new abilities.

In this respect, a generational approach is pertinent to some of the subjects dealt with in the scientific debate and in the definition of European policies relevant both to ICT and to broadcasting media such as, for example, the questions of digital citizenship and digital divide or the forms of co-regulation to protect minors introduced by the Television Without Frontiers Directive.

In certain ways, it is perhaps the extremes of the generational chain that prove most interesting in this respect: on the one hand there is a generation of elderly people who in the course of their lives have developed media skills which have been partly made obsolete by the development of the media themselves and who have not always been able to acquire (if not very laboriously) the necessary skills to cope with the new instruments of communication. While this generation also has access to ICT in terms of economic and temporal capital, often lacks the social and cultural capital (the technical-linguistic skills and the network of relationships within which to retrieve the lacking know-how) to really take advantage of the resources made available by ICT. On the other hand, we have a generation of young people who were „born with the computer", who have abundantly naturalized both access to and use of ICT, to the point where they make it a resource in their role definition compared with the older generations[10].

Moreover, the stratification and differentiation of media skills is accompanied not only by the processes of stratification and social differentiation based on age but also those based on territorial heterogeneity: just think of the different styles of Internet use developed by young contemporaries in the different EU countries[11], or how the different levels of development of technological infrastructure, above all between Western and Eastern Europe, is easily translated into a difference of competences within the same generations.

2.4. Exchanges and contacts between the generations

Here our research reveals some highly interesting points. In the first place, it is observable that the family continues to play a very important part in socialization and intergenerational exchanges with regard to the media. During the processes of negotiation of selection and choice of TV programs, for example, and above all during the shared viewing of them, whether accompanied or followed by discussions and comments, the various subjects have an opportunity to compare their perceptions of individual programs and of the medium in general with other members of the family (whether parents or children or older or younger siblings). In the family, in the first place, strictly generational viewing is subjected to a relativization that triggers a self-reflexive process.

This process essentially takes two forms:

a) In the first place it manifests itself as an occasional, or at most ritual, sharing of products and contents. For the Italian baby-boomer generation, for example, viewing television in the family is one of the most widely shared memories of childhood. For their children, who grew up in homes containing more than one television set and with a greater choice of channels and programs, viewing is most often an individual experience. All the same there are programs that cut across generational and individual tastes and often provide opportunities for shared viewing, as in the case of some TV series. In these cases subjects discover (or rather rediscover) a community of experiences and find themselves sharing certain contents.

b) In the second place, there exist cases of cultural products that have proved particularly successful and as such create highly favourable conditions for intergenerational exchanges. In recent research devoted to the mechanisms underlying the spread of certain examples of

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10   On these issues see Rivoltella 2006.

11   On these issues see Mediappro 2006.

strikingly successful cultural products in Italy, we were able to establish that all these successes had in common the potential to supersede the niche public constituted by their original readers/viewers/users and reach other publics. One of the boundaries between the various publics that was superseded with particular facility was generational belonging. In some cases (like that of the last, highly successful tour by the rock singer Vasco Rossi), the spread began with the older generations, long-standing admirers of the singer, and then expanded to take in the younger generations. In other cases precisely the opposite has happened. This is true, for example, of the Harry Potter books, rapidly transformed from children's reading to true transgenerational best-sellers; or iPod, Apple's MP3, a must for technologically sophisticated young people all round the world and soon common also among young-adults and even adults.

In these cases the most interesting phenomenon is the mechanism by which it is spread, often mainly by word of mouth and supported by the urge to share the same cultural product. The first reader, listener or user, exhilarated by the experience of a cultural object, seeks to share it with others, including people belonging to other generations, socializing it or even giving it as a present.

In-depth analysis has enabled us to observe another significant factor: by their favourable accounts of a product, its fans can prolong its success, tending to perpetuate a particular shared temporality: as long as a series lasts and is watched, as long as a technological object is shared, as long as a singer whose fans identify with her is on the crest of the wave, a certain social milieu feels it exists in a shared present, in which differences are weakened and their fear of the future is diminished.

In these cases, in short, the different generations feel united by a temporality that enfolds them and brings them together. Despite their differences, they feel closer.

3. The contribution of a generational perspective to the construction of Europe

At this point we can sum up the central themes of our work. Firstly we note that a generational approach, above one that draws on the work of Mannheim, which has also underpinned recent work by other scholars, can offer excellent pointers for audience studies. Secondly we have seen, on the basis of empirical research conducted in recent years, that the generational approach to the media reveals certain significant aspects, such as:

- the different generational semantics, which attribute to the media and the contents they transmit different values, embedded in broader cultural diversifications;

- the different generational diets and competences, which see the members of each generation using the instruments available in different ways, acting with greater or lesser familiarity with one or other of the media, felt as more or less close;

- the exchanges and the social discourses between the generations with respect to the media and their contents: on the level of rituality these exchanges compare, in the common use of a medium, different generational perspectives, enabling them to be relativized; on the level of contents, we record the capacity of certain specific products to unite the generations in a shared cultural legacy.

In what way is the generational perspective in media studies relevant to Europe? What pointers does it suggest?

Firstly, note that with respect to the generation at present in its formative phase (the tweens and teens of today), the European Union is a fact, a natural environment of growth, while for the earlier generations it is still associated with the memory of its construction. This raises the problem of how to make the most of the freshness and naturalness of this approach to European unity partly through the development of media contents that take this new outlook as their frame of reference. The essential difficulty, on this level, is that the European perspective many authors reflect the history of the EU's formation, since they obviously do not belong to the newer generations. It may therefore be useful to think about ways of achieving an authentic project that will mediate the European contents in ways tailored to suit the new generations.

As for the media in particular, we can present some observations, certain of which have been anticipated above.

With respect to certain kinds of rhetoric that aim at the spread of the platforms themselves (the Web, broadband, digital television…) as the cement for a common European culture, we need to confirm the importance of cultural differences, embodied both in the choice of media and in acceptance of the contents. This again raises the question not just of economic-technological plans for European unity but far more of how to foster exchanges and a sharing of differences. This need becomes all the more pressing if we think that quite strong national traditions lead to clashes among the older generations, but they are far less common among the younger generations, as we have just confirmed. This means that young Europeans resemble each other in terms of diets and cultures much more than they resemble their parents.

Another and separate question is whether and how to develop contents that will further the construction of a European identity, for which the media could be valuable vehicles. Returning to our initial reference to the processes of national unification, we have to remember that the ruling classes fostered a body of information and literature which had the merit of gradually creating a body of collective imagery. Fiction proved to be an extraordinary tool in the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm-Ranger 1992), drawing on what has often been defined as the bardic function of the media.

In the case of the modern media, it would be a serious error to be over-optimistic about the system of information. Instead we need to foster all forms of fiction about the genesis and identity of Europe, consciously running the risk of the invention of tradition and exploiting all the possible relevant factors. Think, for example, of the importance that television series and movies have played in commemorating the holocaust, World War II and the struggle against the various forms of totalitarianism, and how small a part these themes have played in a vision of Europe.

We might, for example, encourage and promote the training of journalists, TV writers of series and entertainment programs and editorial staff in publishing companies so that they have a special sensibility and gift for creating contents in a European key. This would also mean fostering competence about the specificity of each culture and identity, including an understanding of generational factors, with the development of a special concern for the vehicles and the styles of communication best suited to the various subjects.

Finally, as far as cultural exchanges are concerned, it appears very clear that the cultural process of formation cannot be entrusted simply to the market. The European institutions, on the contrary, should think and plan for a formative strategy that looks at the media as the means for its dissemination, and that takes stock also of the new nature of the relationships between the generations.

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