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## **Telling, Doing, (Media)Educating. Adolescents' Experiences, Expectations, Suggestions Concerning Media Education**

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## **Telling, Doing, (Media)Educating. Adolescents' Experiences, Expectations, Suggestions Concerning Media Education**

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*Abstract:* Frequently the relation between young people and the technologies of communication is trivialized by describing adolescents as naturally predisposed to digital technology or as incautious users. Media education goes beyond this oversimplification in trying to help adolescents to improve their digital and media literacy. Many debates have taken place around media education but only a small number of them take into consideration what adolescents think about their experiences with media education and what they expect from it. In this paper, I will discuss the results of a qualitative study carried out in the Veneto Region (Italy) on upper secondary school students. The article aims to explore media-educational activities through adolescents' own words. The objective is to bring out what interviewees define as the strengths and weaknesses of media education as they have experienced it. The paper seeks to be a point of reflection about media-educational activities, which frequently in Italy continues to be crystallized around technical aspects and sometimes maintains an old approach that could be incapable of listening to girls and boys or of comprehending their lives and needs.

*Keywords:* media education, adolescents, digital media, media educator

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## **Introduction**

A great portion of the adult world usually takes a simplistic approach to the relationship between adolescents and digital media. This approach is based on fear (of digital media, sexualisation, online predators etc.) and frequently trivialises a world that, on the contrary, is important to analyse, considering the different shades that colour it (boyd, 2014; Ito et al., 2009).

Adolescents in the popular media (Selwyn, 2009; Haddon & Stald, 2009), and in common sense are frequently described using dichotomous labels that represent them on the one hand as naturally able to use digital media and, on the other hand, as subjects who are incautious and unaware of the internet's risks (Drotner & Livingston, 2008). In relation to young generations, technology is regarded as the creator of novelty for participatory and civic engagement and as important for the subjects' empowerment, but also as a vector of dangers connected to privacy, to the increase of social inequality, to dependence etc. (Buckingham, 2008).

This kind of (simplistic) view entails a deterministic vision of technology and its role in society. From this point of view media are interpreted as something that mechanically cause social and psychological changes. An analysis that oversimplifies reality and wrongly perceives the relation between technology and society that, instead, is strongly connected to social processes and to the context in which it evolves. The approach that could help us to better observe and analyse the context is what Boccia Artieri (2012) defines as the 'medialogic approach'. It permits us to think about media as a space for the construction of individual and collective sense paths. From this point of view, the media can be understood as place of contemporary experience. It represents tools and spaces that permit people to experiment with cognitive instruments useful for empowering integration, participation and forming relationships with reality.

As demonstrated in various examples of empirical research (Bennet et al., 2008; Van Doursem & Van Dijk, 2008; Hargittati, 2010; Helsper & Enyon, 2010; Gui & Argentin, 2011) it is necessary to consider, besides age, other variables such as gender, cultural capital and socio-economic status, along with the experience of and incorporation level of the internet in everyday life (De Haan, 2003; Liff e Shepherd, 2004; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009; Mascheroni, 2012; Pattaro & Setiffi, 2016; Heinz, 2016). Optimistic ideas that young people are naturally predisposed to the use of the internet and digital media just because they are young lead to the de-legitimation of

political and educational acts used to help youth cope with the risks that are presented by the internet and to better understand the opportunities of new technologies of communication.

The necessary abilities that users nowadays must have to avoid inequality in the network society become a set of skills: cognitive, informational, creative, cultural, ethic, social (Buckingham, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). In order to respond to this wide and composite combination of abilities, skills and resources, is useful the concept of media literacy that Aufderheide (1993) defined as the ability to gain access, analyse, evaluate and produce a message through different forms of multimedia communication. Starting from this definition, many scholars have followed a path that shades the concept of literacy, making it more complex and able to read the reality.

Among the different readings of the phenomena, we can recall Van Dijk (2005), Warschauer (2003), Hargittai (2010) and Frau-Meigs (2012), who systematized the set of necessary skills, showing us the complexity of a system that more and more creates a continuum between online and offline space and between everyday mediated and unmediated practices. Literacy is not only connected to technical and neutral skills, but is a set of abilities obtained socially and culturally, producing a legitimacy and illegitimacy of knowledge content as well.

This paper abandons the idea of young people as subject naturally able to use technology (such as Prensky, 2001; Tappscott & William, 2008), and considering adolescents as Bricoleur (Drusian & Riva, 2010) with their own agency in the use of the different media (Riva & Scarcelli, 2016). This article aims to problematize the relationship between adolescents and digital media in relation to the media-educative activities addressed to young people during their school career. The objective is to combine youths' experiences and expectations with what the literature says about this field and what different interventions (in the school) propose. The article seeks to offer to teachers, scholars, educators and everyone who works with media and adolescents new points of view that could permit them to plan and actualize more incisive media-educational activities that start from adolescents' needs for the world that they live in (Baraldi, 2008; Belotti 2010). The goal is to give teachers, educators and adults in general useful ideas in order to create with young people (and not just for young people) discourses and practices able to position the uses of technologies within everyday activity, as more recent approaches to Media Education (Gonnet, 2001; Rivoltella, 2001; Buckingham, 2006; Tirocchi, 2013) suggest.

## Media education

Media education “as an educational process, is needed to improve media literacy, as a result” (Jacquinot-Delaunay, Carlsson, Taye & Pérez Tornero, 200, p. 23). It is defined as an activity whose goal is “knowledge and domestication of the media universe and as a meta-cognitive experience on the process of construction of the communicative message [...] So, it is research and responsibilities, but also education, interpreted as the development of the critical sense necessary for the reading of communication without apocalyptic prejudice and capable of consciousness evaluation” (Morcellini, 2004, p. 23).

According to this definition, in Media Education the media do not represent simple channels of transmission for the message. Rather, they are an “integral resource for formative intervention” (Rivoltella, 2001, p. 65). It means that the statutes of Media Education intrinsically rally a double educational action *to* media and *with* media. The technology in the pedagogical path, on the one hand, is seen as a set of instruments that help to transmit traditional culture and, on the other hand, as object and subject of culture.

Following the suggestions of Buckingham (2006), we can describe an evolution of Media Education from the 1930s to today that in the process has assumed different forms in relation to how media and culture have been considered by prevailing scientific orientations (Aroldi, 2011). In the first phase, from 1930 to the 1950s, the predominant approach was the critical and protectionist one. The focus on media stressed the media’s effect, underlining the manipulative influence. From this point of view it was necessary to teach young people to distinguish and to resist the commercial coercion that the media spread. In other words, Media Education was a sort of vaccine against media infection.

In the 1950s the attention shifted to cinema. The teacher’s work consisted in helping students to undertake a critical analysis of film. There was a sort of discrimination between media (Giannattelli, 2002): if at the centre of discourse cinema was very present, other media, closer to youths’ own consumption (music, comics etc.) were ignored. As Giannattelli (2002) remembers, in the Seventies it was the turn of screen education and demystification of media, stimulated also by Barthes’s opus *Mythologies* (1957). Media Education’s goal concerned the lack of transparency of the

media. According to this vision, people need instruments to unveil the ideology subtended in media messages and that is functional to the cultural hegemony of dominant groups. The active role of the audience (Hall, 1980) has to be improved by teacher and media educator through the tools proper to the semiotic and linguistic or to the ethnographic approach (Rivoltella, 2001). With the introduction of digital media in the 1990s there is an important change. From a vision of suspicion, there is a turn to sympathy and welcome for the media. It is what Buckingham (2007) called the preparatory phase, a period during which Media Education's task seems to be to play mainly the role of facilitator and spreader of the use of new media.

According to Calvani (2010), we can highlight some common characteristics of contemporary approaches to media education: the consideration of the media as fundamental instruments of the regulation and maintenance of a democratic system; focus on the subject considered as media producer; a great relevance of studies on behaviours connected to the use of the media; the vision of integrated use of the media as a fundamental factor for new generations.

Even if encountering resistances and being considered as a term that projects futuristic and sometimes worrisome images, over the years Media Education has come a long way. International organizations and institutions such as Unesco, the European Union, Ofcom etc. insert it in a relevant way into their agendas (Celot & Tornero, 2008; Ranieri, 2010). Furthermore, didactical practices based on the technology of communication have come to be widespread in school. Unfortunately, this kind of change does not come with an adequate training for teachers or a shared consciousness into an institution that could have a central role in the mediation of the media (Ottaviano, 2001).

According to Iania and Augaded (2013) for many years in some European countries (such as UK, Ireland, Germany, France, Sweden, Hungary, Malt) media education has been an important part of the scholastic curriculum. In other countries, however, only sporadic initiatives (and sometimes nothing) have been enacted in the schools. In the UK, for example, all teachers, independent of the specific courses they teach, are also responsible for teaching media literacy. In Sweden, media education is a part of the primary school curriculum, and in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, media education is part of school programmes as a specific class. The important thing to keep in mind is that, in these countries, there is also a strong connection between regulatory authorities and the media industry.

In European countries “the gap between school culture and media environment widens, the majority of teachers feel that they are not trained well-enough and the technological equipment is insufficient. The problem, how the school should integrate media youth-conformably to its students and in the same time still follow traditional goals, remains unsolved” (Hart & Suss, 2002, p. 8).

According to Farné (2010), in the Italian school, the approach in relation to communication technology has followed two different trajectories. In some cases, there is a certain indifference towards an aspect considered as secondary on the cultural level and seen, sometimes, as negative for youth’s learning. In other cases, there is a more inclusive approach that sees media as instruments with which and on which one can do education. In this perspective, media are considered as technologies that have an important role in youth’s everyday life, instead of as objects that are distant from schoolrooms. In Italy, as Parola and Ranieri (2011) affirm, frequently schools have neutralized communication technology into its educational practices, transforming media into simple channels that transport messages, rather than considering them as complex cultural instruments. Even if teachers express the necessity to integrate digital and media culture into their toolbox, “the Italian school, in the majority of cases, is still not prepared and remote from these models, also because of what prevails in an ‘offline’ condition [...] the challenge that the Italian school has to cope with is very hard” (Calvani, 2010, p. 32). The process of institutionalization of Media Education seems nowadays to be based on the interests of single teachers or a school’s principal, on local initiative rather than on a real strategy of implementation (Farné, 2010; Aroldi & Murru, 2014).

To define media as an important resource for education, considering the complexity of the media system, means also to speak about who could accompany young people on the path of maturation of their media and digital literacy. The media educator is an important subject from whom begins the entire discourse around Media Education: from approaches that are oriented to a discipline to a methodology of intervention in the schools.

In relation to the competences that are requested of the media educator, it is difficult to define borders for these abilities. This is also because there does not exist, as we have seen, only one approach to Media Education. Following Rivoltella’s suggestions (2001; 2005) it is possible to define basic characteristics of the tools that a media educator needs for his/her work: methods for lecturing on the contexts; competence related to planning a

formative intervention; techniques of management of groups; competence related to tutoring, supervision and evaluation; knowledge about media languages and processes; didactical methodologies and practices. According to Rivoltella (2005), a media educator is whoever works in Media Education and has a specific prerogative of knowing how to work with media and new technology, activating and managing educational processes. Until now the most important field for Media Education has been the school.

In Italy the first group of media educators was founded around two important subjects that worked in the new-born Institute of Communication of UPS in Rome and Milan: Roberto Giannatelli and Pier Cesare Rivoltella. These two scholars formalized their work in 1994 and 1995 with some publications interested in the field of education and communication studies. In 1996 a group of pioneers founded the association MED-Media Education, which started to work systematically on Media Education in Italy.

This kind of interest, over the years, solidified and saw the birth of specific courses. “The prevailing orientation has been that the achievement of distributed competences could be implemented through Media Education courses included in the “laurea degree courses” of Communication Sciences and Education Sciences. The training of a focused professional role of media educator has been assumed by dedicated post-graduate courses (Laurea specialistica) or Masters” (Aroldi & Murru, 2014)<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, the figure of media educator seems not to be completely institutionalized (there were some tentative moves in this direction that, however, have been translated into such figures as ‘digital animator’, something different from what we mean by media educator) and there are some questions that, some years after Rivoltella’s observation in 2001, remain open, such as: who is the media educator? What kind of competences does he or she need? How could she/he apply Media Education?

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<sup>1</sup> As Aroldi and Murru (2014) remember, we can list degree programs that includes a degree course in “Theory and methodology of e-learning and media education” (LM93). Since 2000/2001, Masters in Media Education were activated by Università Cattolica, Università Sapienza di Roma, Università degli Studi Suor Orsola Benincasa Napoli, Università di Padova, Università di Bari, Università Pontificia Salesiana. A dedicated “Laurea Magistrale” in Media Education was activated by Università della Calabria and Università di Padova but from March 2014 they are no longer available. In the academic year 2013/14, Università della Calabria has introduced a post graduate course (Laurea Magistrale) in Education Sciences for Interculturality and Media Education (LM85)."

In addition, until now, who activates media-educational practices has been the teacher who within the curriculum of their class has decided to insert some reference to media according to their own knowledge. An alternative to this model, mainly recently with the diffusion of digital media (Rivoltella & Marazzi, 2001), has been the request to an expert external to the school. A specialist (psychologist, engineer, educator, sociologist, doctor, policeman and so on) is called on to make an intervention on a specific topic for a determined number of hours that the school is able to pay for or the specialist and/or his/her institution are able to offer.

During this first part of the paper I have drawn a quick picture that tries to simplify and to describe a complex panorama where adults' fears and enthusiasms intertwine themselves with educational pathways and the necessity to improve youths' media and digital literacies through the instruments of media education and its 'operative branch': the media educator. But in this picture one part is missing; here as in the specialist literature, I can define it as the colours. We constantly speak about education forgetting its principal actors: youth. Youths' voices could be the colours that help us to better understand the picture that describes literacy, media education and the other characters of a tale that cannot be based only on the voices of adults and experts. In the following pages, I present the results of a research study on the idea and expectations that youth have about media education, media-educational practices and the media educator.

### **Methodology: an adolescent-centric approach**

In Italy, the institutional educational career is divided into Primary school (5 years, starting from 6 years old), Lower Secondary school (3 years) and Upper Secondary school (5 years, more or less from 14 to 19 years old students). "In Upper Secondary school students can choose between: general/academic (lyceum), technical and vocational secondary education. They can also attend alternative three/four years vocational training courses" (Santagati, 2015, p. 300).

My research focuses on students in the first three years of upper secondary school and aims to understand what they think about their past media-education experience; what are their expectations about media-educational activity and, so, what are the topics connected to digital media that they care about most; how they expect a media educator to be and what

kind of competence he/she must have to work with them; what kind of stereotypes surround the adolescent's use of technology in everyday life.

The idea is not to simply describe the ideal media-education in adolescents' minds. The research seeks to start from youths' voices in order to better disentangle what adults are offering at the moment (usually starting from their preoccupations more than from adolescents' requests) and what young people need.

The data that I am going to comment on in this article comes from a study made during the period between September 2015 and April 2016 that was connected to a media education project founded by Comune di Padova and University of Padova and dedicated to twelve high school institutes of the Veneto region. The goal of the entire project was to better understand the adolescents' use of digital media in everyday life, and to plan new and more incisive media-education actions able to involve adolescents in a co-construction process of development of critical tools to use digital media. The data used for this article comes from the last section of the interview, dedicated to media education experiences and expectations.

I chose a qualitative methodological approach to study the phenomena and the experiences of girls and boys from their own viewpoints (Lobe et al. 2008; Flick 1998). The ambition of qualitative studies is to explain and illuminate the character of a phenomenon and its meaning, which is relevant to exploring young people's experiences, opinions and expectations about media education.

I used an adolescent-centric approach where "methodologically and conceptually [adolescents] must be free from the process of containment that produces them as 'other' and continues to silence them" (Caputo 1995, p. 33). Theoretically and methodologically, the research draws its inspiration from the consideration that children and youths (taking into account positions in specific relational networks), are subjects able to elaborate their own vision of the world and cultural construction (Belotti, 2010; Corsaro 1997; Corsaro 2009; Molinari, 2007). This kind of perspective pushes the scholars to refuse the essentialist vision of adolescents as vulnerable and incompetent subjects, defining a "dialogue that recognises commonality but also honours differences" (Christiansen & Prout 2002, p. 480). It means to recognize that youth are social actors conscious of their own experiences (James & James, 2004; Alanen, 2009) and so subjects that could offer unique contributions. The approach that I want to embrace comes from New Childhood Studies, which more than twenty years ago opposed dominant

paradigms about childhood and adolescence (Baraldi, 2008; Adler & Adler, 1998; Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 1997; James & James, 2004; Qvortup, 1994). This kind of approach seeks to stress what youth are and not only what they will become. In other words, in this article interviewees are considered as active producers of culture in the complex negotiation of social life and the construction of a social world (Best, 2000; Corsaro, 1985; Corsaro, 2003; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Hey, 1997; McRobbie, 1991; Skelton & Velentine, 1998): adolescents are the subject of the study more than the object of it (Raby, 2007).

These kinds of discourse bring with them another important consideration related to the position that adolescents occupy within society and within the contexts that they inhabit, mainly in an age-segregated society like ours. To speak about adolescents starting from their own voices and instances means to try to give them more voices through research, to put on the stage their own ideas, expectations and requests for something, such as media education, that touches them in the first person. So, what I am discussing here is not only something relating to media education, but also the politics of representation and the slips that may occur between research and advocacy when the subject that we are researching has less power than us (James, 2007).

#### *The sample*

The research involved sixty adolescents, both boys and girls, between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, selected by a theoretical sampling. The schools that participated were in total 10 (of 12 that took part in the media education project; 3 lyceums, 4 technical schools and 3 vocational schools). Table 1 summarises the composition of the sample. Adolescents have been selected by a theoretical sampling approach that considered age, gender and type of school frequented.

*Table 1: Composition of the sample*

Type of school	15 years old		16 years old		17 years old		Total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
Lyceum	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
Technical School	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
Vocational School	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
Total	10	10	10	10	10	10	60

*Interviews, data analysis and ethics*

Empirical material was obtained thanks to in-depth interviews. Through the interviews I attempted to investigate specific elements such as: what media education is according to the interviewees; the experiences that adolescents had with media education and their evaluation of what we did; what the strong and weak points were in the media-educational activity that they were used to following; who managed the media-educational-activity and how adolescents evaluated the encounter/encounters; what adolescents expect from a media educator and a media education course (topics, interaction modality, role of media educator, etc.); what the risks are that they care about and how, in their opinion, media education could help them to cope with these; how they would conduct a hypothetical media education encounter.

Each interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes (for the part relating to media education. If we consider the entire interview, it lasted from 80 to 120 minutes).

The interviews were audio-taped and were transcribed verbatim. Everything was analysed using thematic analysis, as a specific model of narrative analysis aimed at finding common thematic elements across participants and the experiences they report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2002).

The study was conducted in accordance with Silverman's (2013) ethical suggestions. According to this author, research has to follow four ethical objectives: to ensure the voluntary participation of the people involved, to keep confidential the content of what emerges from the research, to protect from harm anyone who takes part in the research, and to ensure mutual trust between researchers and participants. The research involved adolescents who were under eighteen years of age, so I needed parental consent. First, I

explained to every adolescent the structure and the goals of the research, and then I asked them to help me in the research. Finally, I sent a letter to their parents asking for their consent.

### **Adolescents' past experiences of Media Education in the school**

Interviewees never referred to media-educational activities with the label “media education” or something near to this kind of definition. They preferred to use terms like “encounters”, “someone that spoke about the Internet”, “when someone came in our school and spoke about the internet’s problems”, “that time we discussed the smartphone with the teachers”, “the stage show about bullying”, etc.

These kind of definitions show us that adolescents did not perceive the media educative activities (when they are proposed by the school) as an organic activity in the school curriculum. They consider the different activities as isolated appointments that the school offered them.

As noticed also by teachers (Riva et al., 2016; Scarcelli, forthcoming), the discussion of the media and media educative activities remain separated from the rest of the school’s program and restricted to a single appointment or a single speech by a teacher. According to interviewees, the discussion around media is limited to commenting on some current news report or something that happened in the class and that could be connected to digital media usage.

We never speak about media at school. I mean it is not usual. It happened when that girl committed suicide after insults on ask.fm. Otherwise, we never speak about it. Sometimes some teacher says “be careful with smartphones” or “turn off that smartphone” [laugh]. That’s all (Boy, 15 years old, L.).

Some years ago, it happened that a girl near here killed herself because people bullied her. Our teacher spoke with us about that stuff. Another time we went all together to the theatre to see a stage show about cyberbullying. [Interviewer Did you speak about it with your professor before or after?] Mmm... the teacher asked us to do an essay. But after that we stopped speaking about it (Girl, 16 years old, T.)

When I attended lower secondary school a policeman came to speak about internet problems. During classes we never speak about it. Sometimes if

something negative happens, maybe the teacher says “did you see what happened to...” (Boy, 16 years old, P.).

Media-educational activities are centred only on digital media and the internet, the other media are ignored. As we underline when speaking about media education, it is a classical approach that tends to concentrate the attention only on what is considered the educative emergency of the moment.

The different educative actions generally focus on cyberbullying and risks on the internet, mainly connected to sexual predators (such as fake profiles, online child molesters, etc.). Another topic that interviewees mentioned sometimes was the illegal downloading of film, music and videogames. It happens because often media educative activities are delegated to a special unit of the Police (the telecommunications task force) that has within its remit the education of adolescents through school encounters. Sometimes this kind of activity is requested by a teacher or school principal to prevent or to fight deviant behaviours and so is strictly connected to adult fears (Stella, 2012; Scarcelli, 2012). Only a small proportion of interviewees cited an activity connected to improving tools to take advantage of the internet’s opportunities.

The people that manage the media-educational activities are usually, as I have just described, police officers or, alternatively, teachers, sometimes psychologists and rarely other professionals (educators, sociologists, etc.). Analysing the interviews, I can affirm that more than media education we can speak about specific activity to prevent sexual predators or cyberbullies. It tends to protect youths more than try to create with them a critical approach to (digital) media.

The activities tend to become rarer after lower secondary school and to totally disappear after the third year of upper secondary school. The interviewees maintain that what they did in the past was distant from their own everyday life, because often the focus of the discourse was social network sites that they did not use at that time or practices that they did not do at that age.

I did it when I was 12 I suppose. He was a policeman and started to speak about lots of sites, dangers, etc. But no one used to go to ask.fm or other stuff. I started when I came in this school. (Girl, 15 years old, L.).

I remember that someone, I do not remember who. It was a man, but I do not remember more. This man spoke to us about internet and social media. But... and so what? No one was interested because we did not use Facebook when we were thirteen years old. (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

When I was at lower secondary school everyone seemed afraid about the internet and they explained to us lots of things that I did not use... Facebook... I did not have an account [laugh]. Now the teacher tries but she says what we know... So, it is not useful... or... it is useful if we can skip a test [laugh]. (Boy, 15 years old, P.).

Another negative aspect that interviewees underline relates to the encounter's management. Frequently the activity assumes the form of a speech direct to a group composed of a large number of students. It is a sort of plenary session where the speaker limits the discourse on what to do or not to do with digital media and what are the normative effects of some behaviour such as to download illegally or to offend someone using the internet. Frequently fear seems to be the keyword of encounters.

I did something... a policeman comes to our school. There were 3-4 different classes. They say what we must not do because if we do that stuff... downloading music for example, it could be dangerous, also for our parents. He told us that the dad of a boy like us is in prison because his son downloaded a film, but under a normal title there was a paedophilia video. So, they arrested the father because the telephone line is assigned to him. (Boy, 16 years old, L.).

I think that it was something to scare us about some risks. But I did not like it. Because they treated us as stupid. I know, they everyday see negative stuff, but... I mean... our life is just not like this. I love to use Instagram with my friend. This man said that we cannot put our photo in a swimsuit in our profile photo... Why? If I did a normal photo on the beach with my friend I want to share it. There is nothing bad. I do not mean a naked photo, of course. A normal photo. If you go to the sea you can see a million people like that. That man said: "if you put your photo on Facebook, it is normal that someone will bother you. It is like putting a steak in front of a Rottweiler. Sincerely, I did not feel comfortable... I am not a steak. (Girl, 16 years old, L.).

Also when we went to the theatre for that stuff about cyberbullying. It was interesting. At the end they asked us to intervene and make a comment about the show... How can you say something in front of lots of people? A friend of mine has been bullied. She wanted to say something, but she was afraid that someone would judge her. I suggested to her to shut up and to speak with us, her friends. We are able to understand her... Maybe in the class... but not there. Too many people, how could someone take care of you there? (Girl, 15 years old, T.).

The encounters pointed to the single class approach and stimulated youths' participation being more appreciated. Unfortunately, this kind of approach seems to be rarer.

In general, interviews analysis shows a diffused youth discontent with media-educational activities they have experienced. Youths define this kind of experience as fundamental but they criticize what they did in the past, defining them as too normative, "boring", "cold", "without novelty", "not useful", and "far from their experiences".

I think it is important to learn about media. They surround us, and sometimes could be dangerous. I am able to use them, but I recognize that I have to improve lots of things. And I want to discover those things. But, not in that way. It was boring: a person that speaks for 2 hours about how it is dangerous. Ok, I understood that it is dangerous and so what? You cannot just say to us not to download a videogame. Give me money to buy it! [laugh] I mean... let me understand how to protect myself. Otherwise you repeat what teachers, parents, and so on say. And I am tired of listening to the same things (Boy, 16 years old, L.).

There was no humanity... you know? A list of things to pay attention to and then... I want to better understand how the world changes. Ok, I do not have to know people on the internet. But why not speak also about how we feel when we use the internet? (Girl, 15 years old, T.).

Do not drink alcohol, do not download music, do not smoke, do not do this or that. This is my experience with these kind of encounters. And then? I like to smoke and I do it... I want to listen to music and I download it from Youtube. Then, sometimes they speak about... mmm... for example Facebook. Ok, we have it but I do not use it so much. We do lots of things, not only use Facebook. (Boy, 15 years old, P.).

There are some interviewees (a small group) who defined the media-educational encounters further as “something we had to do” describing them as a school’s imposition not useful from their point of view.

I did it because I had to. It was during school, how could I say “I do not care”? I did it and then everything was like before but I skipped a couple of Italian hours (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

### **Adolescents’ expectations and suggestions**

#### *Topics*

Interviewees maintain that it is very important to know more about media, especially digital media. They affirm that they feel the necessity to better understand the world that surrounds them, also using in a different way the new technologies of communication. Usually they define themselves as competent users that know how to move across digital platforms but they declare they need some help to use technology in a more aware way. According to the interviews, the school seems to be the institution that must give them the tools to ensure a more careful use of digital media.

The school must teach how to use internet, smartphone, and so on. But I don’t know if teachers are able to do it [laugh]. By the way, our... I mean, my parents can’t help me, they don’t know lots of things. We need someone expert (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

I think that as they teach us history, math, physical education, they could teach us new technology. Speaking about our life. Because if I heard someone that explains something to me maybe I can use the app better. Could be interesting to have one hour of new technology (Girl, 15 years old, L.).

If concerning where to improve the tools to use digital media the interviewees agree on the same solution (the school), it is different when we asked what they regard as important to learn. In this case, some differences appear and show a heterogeneous corpus of student’s examples.

According to the analysis we can connect the different answers to gender and type of school. Girls at lyceums usually are more inclined to ask for activities that insist on the presence of the digital media in their social interactions and so with themes such as love, intimacy and cyberbullying.

They request to better understand how (digital) media could influence their identity, the relationship with a potential partner or with friends. Privacy is another important point for these students. What they ask for is to help them to manage what in the literature is defined as the “privacy paradox” (Barnes, 2006).

In my opinion the most important thing that they could teach us is how to live with social [media]. [Interviewer: can you help me to better understand what you mean, please?] I use my smartphone everyday, sharing photos or, for example, chatting with friends or a boy [laugh]. I need someone that helps me to understand how to avoid problems, but not only when I send a message, I know that it is dangerous to send photos where I am naked, for example. I mean, more how social [media] influence how I stay with others. Do you understand? I send a message, one sees it and does not respond. Why? (Girl, 15 years old, L.).

If you want to be... mmm... popular you have to put your photo on social [media]. Or... you want to share with your friend something. But it could be risky. Everyone says it to us... but no one helps us to do it in the right way. It is not only a problem about to do it or not to do it... it is different. It is what I need (Girl, 15 years old, L.).

Girls that attend professional schools seem to be more interested in how to prevent sexual assault from sexual predators. Privacy is for this group as well an important topic but they are especially inclined to avoiding situations where “strange people bother me” (Girl, 15 years old, P.).

I need to understand how to protect myself from people that bother me on the internet. Ok, they say not to put a photo with bikini or something like that... But it is different. What happens if I block someone for example? (Girl, 14 years old, P.).

You know, today if you are not on the social [media] it is difficult for someone to find you. I mean, it is normal. You can know a boy and he asks you for your Instagram and after for your WhatsApp contact. You need to be present in social media and you need to know how to not let them call you... by a strange label... you understand... or call you frigid. So, if someone could help me with how to appear in social media it could be interesting (Girl, 16 years old, P.).

In the last part of interview the girl is not asking how to appear hotter to find more admirers, but for something more elaborated. The adults' world and the peer culture judge in a negative way some ways to appear for a girl (Scarcelli 2015) and they want to better understand how to cope with this kind of obstacle. Girls' discourses, both when we focus on lyceum students and on technical and professional school students, are filled with gender stereotypes that describe women as more fragile and more in danger from sexual predators. Girls ask for the help of someone that could help them, on the one hand, to not permit someone to violate their intimacy and, on the other hand, to better manage the relationship without suffering.

If we focus on boys' answers we find other kind of requests, connected more to technological aspects. In this case the answers seem rather similar between lyceum, technical and professional schools' students. They ask for information that permits them to protect themselves from external attack, of a hacker for instance, to keep safe their own data: bank accounts, credit cards and photos/video they have stored in their computer or their smartphone. What interviewees are demanding is some instruction on how technically to protect themselves.

Mmm... lots of companies that work on computer security pay hackers to help them. Could be something like that. Someone that really knows how it works and could help us to avoid problems with, for example, people that steal credit cards data (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

Someone that shows us how to defend ourselves from people that wants to steal our data or money. [Interviewer: in what way?] Showing us programs, settings, etc. hence, what to do. Do not only say there is a danger (Boy, 17 years old, L.).

Just a small number of girls and boys, all from lyceums, told us that media education could be important to permit them to distinguish between real news and fake and that this is very important nowadays. Another small group composed of boys who attend technical and professional schools asked to know more about the 'deep web' and what one can find in it.

#### *Media education activities*

According to interviewees one of the problems with the media-educational activity they have experienced in the past has been the structure

of the intervention. Summarising the negativity that boys and girls found, we can list: a too short duration of the activities; a normative approach by those who manage the encounters; scarce opportunities to participate; a static structure of the encounters; a distance from everyday experiences; an unsatisfactory quality/quantity of information useful to solve the problems that adolescents have to cope with during their experiences with media; boring encounters.

In relation to what adolescents defined as weak points the interviewees give us some suggestions on how to improve media-educational activities. According to a previous study that I did with students in lower secondary school (Scarcelli, 2016), normativity in the speaker's discourse seems to be one of the more criticized characteristics of encounters. What adolescents ask for is more space for participation, to construct together a sense of what could be wrong or right for them.

They spoke and we listened. That's all... I did not like it. I need to feel that people in front of me care about me or us. I want to have the possibility to participate (Girl, 16 years old, L.).

That man said what not to do. And what we did? We want to speak about it. You can't smoke but you smoke. Tell me not to smoke and I will continue... maybe it is more important if you listen to me... So if I could give a suggestion, let us take part in discussion (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

Speaking about the interventions of the telecommunication police, one suggestion from students is not to go into the school wearing the uniform (police officers are obligated to do so) because, according to interviewees, it creates a big separation between the speaker and them.

The request for more interactive encounters is connected to a non-normative approach and to another weak point: interviewees maintain that lots of activities they have experienced were boring. Students appreciated videos and games that could help them to start a discussion or to think about their behaviour in a different way from what they usually do. Another suggestion is to start from their experience to comment and to construct together solutions and awareness. It could also help to not speak about something too distant from students' everyday life.

It is important to let us have fun. You laugh but it doesn't mean that you are not serious. If the encounter is boring, after five minutes I start to think of other stuff... like during maths lessons [laugh]. If my friend spoke about her experience it is more interesting. We can discuss and maybe I change my idea about some stuff (Girl, 14 years old, L.).

We did a very interesting encounter with an educator that read our minds... I mean it was a trick... but it was funny and interesting. Then he explained to us that he found our information on the internet. It is the way I like (Boy, 17 years old, P.).

What interviewees frequently underline is the usefulness of activity that, in their mind, needs to be useful to understand how to cope with problems rather than merely list them. Adolescents frequently ask for the guidance of an educator able to help them to find a solution to different problems that they could find in their path.

For example, cyberbullying. Ok. Do not offend, do not do it, bla bla bla. But.. what can we do if it happens? We want solutions. How to avoid something and fix other things. Not just rules.  
(Girl, 14 y.o., T)

If someone helps us to do... Explaining and let us try. It could be better. Otherwise it's theory. If I have a problem what can I do. Or... how can I avoid that fake news circulating or how can I understand that it is fake? Let me show, please. Do you understand what I mean?  
(Boy, 15, L)

A more interactive encounter could expect the use of digital media to permit students to use their favourite platforms, asking advice of a media educator, or also to use media as a narrative support that could help them better to tell the story they want to share with the rest of the class.

### *Media educator*

The last indications that adolescents left during the interviews are connected to the description of what the person who manages the media-educational activities should be like.

Interviewees did not care about the professional background of the potential media educator and insist more on the ability to create a good

interaction with the audience. About the hypothetical characteristics of media educators, the majority of interviewees describe a stereotypical figure of a young man as the most indicated to help them to improve their digital literacy. Both in girls' and boys' words young people are more appreciated because of their ability to better understand adolescents' world and culture.

Someone like our teacher could not understand everything. It is better to have someone young that... lives what he explains. And he could understand us. (Girl, 15 years old, T.).

How can old people understand what we do... or why, or... they are too distant. The educator must be at least 30 years old, maybe it is too old. (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

Then, usually interviewees define a young educator as more competent in relation to media, showing that they have incorporated the rhetoric of 'digital natives' that I criticized at the start of this paper, from this point of view the competences they refer to are strictly technical.

Could be young... if he is an old man, not my grandfather [laugh], but a man like my father for example, I will not pay attention. You know, they ignore lots of things (Boy, 15 years old, L.).

It's obvious... young people know this stuff. Old people don't (Boy, 16 years old, T.).

Another desirable characteristic of the media educator shared by interviewees is their gender. There is an essentialist point of view and stereotypes that identify men as better in this field (Mainardi et al. 2013, Bimber, 2000). It happens even if, as we observed, what adolescents demand is not only connected to technology in the strict sense. The presence of the mediation of a technological artefact seems, however, to push interviewees to prefer someone that in their mind could be more inclined to use technology.

A man knows this stuff better. [Interviewer: can you help me to better understand what you mean?] Yes... men are better with computer, internet, etc. They know more about that world. Did you ever see a female hacker? (Boy, 17 years old, T.).

I think that a man could be better. Because he knows well how it works. (Girl, 17 years old, P.).

In the end interviewees spoke about some characteristics that they maintain are fundamental for those who could have an interaction with them for media-educational activities. First, they ask to have fun. The media educator they look for is funny, able to involve them also by jokes. More than an adult that explains to them how to live their life, youths ask for someone that “smiling helps us to protect ourselves” (Girl, 16 years old, L.).

A media educator could use terms that are present in the youths’ thesaurus. Adolescents need to feel that he/she is closer than their teachers or their parents. Someone able to interact with them and make them feel part of the discussion, listening to them and playing also with his/her own experiences, because “he is a human like us, so probably he does or did something wrong, but he was able to get out of it” (Boy, 17 years old, T.).

Lots of times they speak with their words... and we think “whaaaat?”. Not because they are difficult words, but because you understand that they live in another world [laugh]. They have to speak with us and let us speak with them... but with our words (Boy, 17 years old, L.).

He must be human. [By which you mean?] A person that lives and makes mistakes. Because it is simple to say do not do it! And then they did it. I prefer someone that speaks about his mistake and how he fixed it. It is more authentic (Boy, 17 years old, T.).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The path that I have outlined in this paper starts from the adults’ vision of adolescents and children as subjects who are considered on the one hand as naturally predisposed to digital technology or, on the other hand, as incautious users of new technologies of communication. As we have seen, this simplistic analysis of the relation between adolescents and media has been criticized by a large number of studies that have underlined the importance of media and digital literacy. One of the instruments to improve these kind of literacies is media education, which in Italy, after a great development between 1980 and 1990, has decreased in the successive period. This decrease was accompanied by a sort of crystallization, in the policy

framework also, of media education into projects that are mostly focused on the technological part of the education in media (Aroldi & Murru, 2014; Tirocchi, 2013). The last step of our path is the one related to what adolescents think about the media-educational actions that they have experienced and what their expectations and suggestions are for future encounters that they might have.

According to the analysis of the interviews, media-educational actions until now have maintained two different tracks. On the one hand the teaching about how technically to use the media and the computer in particular; on the other hand encounters dedicated to how to protect oneself from the digital media's risks. The interviewees during the research spoke more about the latter, defining that as important, but considering the way in which adults usually did it as paternalistic, normative, boring and unnecessary.

This article aims to summarise the adolescents' position and to make some suggestions to those who want to start or to project media-educational activities. I will define some guidelines for the media educator and I will use adolescents' words to bring out some 'hot' point that it is necessary to discuss.

What the interviews reveal is that a great deal of work has to be done. Not only to protect adolescents from risks, but also to help them to construct a critical point of view about media and to sew up the gap between online and offline activities that too frequently adults and youth continue to regard as separated. Insisting only on the technical part of digital media reinforces the borders between two spheres (online and offline) that in adolescents' lives are part of the same continuum (Livingstone & Helsper 2007). One of the media education goals could be permitting adolescents to better understand this continuum and working on online and offline dimensions and relationships in a way that recognises that they are combined (Raine & Wellman, 2014).

The culture matters, peer culture matters. The time of vertical transmission of knowledge is over (Scarcelli & Riva, 2016). Adolescents need someone close to them who is able to listen and to speak with them using their language and recognising that digital media are part of their culture (Ito et al., 2009). Because of this, during the interviews they ask for someone young who can help them to construct awareness. They are tired of people that simply impose on them roles that they did not construct. In this sense the media educator should be the guarantor of a new form of generational pact founded on the co-construction of the rules. Adults'

response is frequently more concentrated on protection and forbidding rather than on constructing instruments. Adolescents are asking to construct that with adults. A top-down approach where the adults transmit information from their own point of view without comprehension of adolescents' understanding of the meaning of their behaviour is a losing game.

In media-educational activities we need to start from what youths know, from their points of view, their interests. Beginning from the adolescents' pleasure in using media and from what they maintain as necessary to cope with technology means to teach them to reflect on the use of media and the economic and social factors connected to them. In this way, critical analysis is seen as a dialogic process more than a mandatory necessity to arrive at a predefined position (Buckingham, 2010).

Adolescents perceive media-educational activities as something that stands alone. It is necessary to better connect such activities to the rest of the school's syllabus. The convergence of media and culture (Jenkins, 2006) should not be resolved into a series of different appointments during which to speak about technology and other topics. For example it is too limited to speak about cyberbullying focusing only on digital media and without a path that takes into consideration racism, gender issues, etc. Interviewees' suggestions push through in this direction: a better integration of topics relating to media with other portions of everyday life. It could help also adolescents to go beyond gender stereotypes about communication and technology.

Because media and digital media are an important part of adolescents' life, media education could be inflected in two different ways. On the one hand, it could be represented by activity dedicated to the topic with a media educator. On the other hand, it could be "melted" into the rest of school activity by a teacher who with their own tools could remember how the world changes also as a function of the social use of technology. Media are part of everyday life and the adults tend still to forget it. In other words, teacher in the multimedia cultural context could be a "mediator of mediated experiences" (Besozzi, 2002, p.26). Approaches like this could eliminate the tendency to treat media education like an appendix of health education or the prevention of deviant behaviour and so as the mere translation of adult fear. Bringing back media education to everyday life means to recognize the presence of the media not only as a negative aspect, but to help adolescents to better understand the importance of a critical approach. It could also

permit a better connection of what educators want to discuss with youth to their experiences, as they requested during the interviews.

Finally, as we saw from the interviews, it is necessary to remember that an incisive media-educational action does not ignore some important variables such as socio-economic background, age and effective experience with media. Activities that do not give sufficient consideration to these factors risk being useless and enlarging the gap between adults and youth in the field of media and digital media, as interviewees told us.

To conclude, the path that media educator and teacher could sweep has to break down limits and symbolic controls created by adults to construct together with adolescents the necessary safety tools. It means to look at media practices from a different point of view, one able to keep in mind youths' needs, making liberty and protection converge. Youths consider and use media as symbolic resources from which to take images, fantasy and opportunity for auto-expression (Cappello 2010; Livingstone & Haddon, 2008; Buckingham, 2003). So, media construction is strictly connected to social, identity and emotive motivations. In media-educational activities, to create and to use media has to become a motivation for discussions on and redefinition of the taken for granted. Teachers and media educators have to accompany youth along this path without excessive normative rigidity and while supporting them to evaluate and reflect on their decisions to create contemporary creativity and reflectivity.

In the convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) Media education must “adopt the idea of media culture, a convergence culture in which meanings circulate along unforeseen paths, contaminating each other, undergoing discontinuous processes of validation, consolidating only temporarily and subject to constant re-elaboration” (Aroldi, 2011, p.23).

The media education that the analysis suggests is dynamic, dialogical, able to emerge from the rigid technical shell to repossess the social factors. It has to be able to proceed through youths' experiences and to model itself around adolescents' needs. A media education like this could be a discovery and problematizing of the taken for granted, a critical discussion of everyday practices and an empowering of the participative and inclusive capability of the media by the direct participation of young people (Frau-Meigs, 2008).

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