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## **Children and Adolescents in the Media: the Veneto Region Case Study** *Claudio Riva\* and Ruggero Cefalo\*\**

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## Children and Adolescents in the Media: the Veneto Region Case Study

Claudio Riva\* and Ruggero Cefalo\*\*

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*Abstract:* In our paper, we investigate the role of the media, specifically local television stations, in producing a *shared culture of infancy and adolescence*. We pursue this inquiry by analysing the varying representations of the under-aged, disseminated by local TV channels in the Veneto Region. We discuss the ways in which the television stations portray the under-aged, the presence and the role of children and adolescents in the local news and broadcasting, the status accredited to them and their role in the narrations that relate to them. We pursue this inquiry by analysing the varying representations of the under-aged, disseminated by local TV channels in the Veneto Region. The research was conducted within a Convention among the Regional Committee for Communications (Co.Re.Com.) of the Veneto region and the Interdepartmental Centre of Research on the North-East ‘Giorgio Lago’ of the University of Padua. In greater detail, we monitored the local news and the programmes transmitted during the *restricted* time-slot scheduling (reserved for minors, 4 p.m. – 7 p.m.) of 7 regional TV stations during the week of Monday 24th February to Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014.

*Keywords:* media sociology, childhood sociology, local televisions, children’s rights

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### **Introduction: children and the media**

The relationship between minors and the media has long been a topic of discussion and debate amongst adults, particularly among institutional and educational figures and representatives of worldwide associations, research, and communication (Zemmels, 2012; Pattaro, 2015; Stella, Riva, Scarcelli, & Drusian, 2014; Drusian & Riva, 2010). Recent debate observes a growing sense of anxiety and panic, fuelled by extremes such as the fear of the *death of infancy* or, to the other extreme, an optimism about the *empowerment of minors* (Caronia, 2002). There are those who believe that the media, especially television and the Internet, are the main perpetrators of the depleting boundaries between childhood and adulthood. They argue that this depletion is leading to the gradual erosion of childhood, in a world which is becoming more accessible and, as a consequence, the needs of the under-aged are forgotten. Others believe that there is an increasing generation gap, which coincides with the use of the media, especially digital media, and a growing divide between youth and adult culture. Rather than decrease the gap, the media has served to reinforce and widen it, to the point that parents and educators are left powerless to its development (Belotti & Ruggiero, 2008). Each of these perspectives discuss the meaning and the status of infancy and adolescence and, together with it, the role of the media.

Other scholars try instead to position themselves outside of this polarised debate. They assert that research should focus on the communication capacities of the under-aged (such as *media* and *digital literacy*, see Van Dijk, 2005; Hargittai, 2002). These scholars acknowledge the crucial role of educational figures in helping young people to develop their abilities to interpret, criticize, and create media texts. In addition, Silverstone (1999) states that it is necessary to understand the social, economic, and historical contexts in which texts are produced, distributed and furthermore consumed by the public. In this essay, we intend to elaborate upon the part of the debate that relates to the role of the media in constructing *images of the under-aged* and the double role the media play within it. It is known that the media *reflect* the anxieties raised by recent social changes, related to children and adolescents (Gambardella, Paci, & Salzano, 2005; Stella, 2008; Carlo, Gasparini & Aroldi, 2008). By disseminating these changes, the media contribute to spreading a sense of panic and fear. The media also *produce* the same anxieties by endorsing

behaviour that worries adults, such as processes of premature *adultisation*, *commodification* of the under-aged, and the transformation of children and adolescents into gullible consumers, easily seduced by advertising (McNeal, 1987, 1999; Postman, 1993; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004; Cook, 2004; Setiffi, 2013).

Moreover, the media bring the minor to the forefront, creating heroes but also dramas, victims and other forms of protagonism. On one hand, children and adolescents are depicted as being in *danger*, vulnerable to violence inflicted by adults or by society as a whole. On the other hand, they are depicted as a threat to other people, as violent, aggressive, irresponsible, unruly, anti-social and prematurely sexualised. Therefore, a request has been made, with regards to the media, for greater attention and discipline within the family, at school and, generally, in legislation.

We consider the media as a source of *social distribution of knowledge* (Morcellini 1997; Rivoltella & Morcellini, 2007; Caronia 2002; Riva 2012), which offers cognitive elements, concepts, values, descriptions of reality, and summaries of experiences to individuals. This highlights the relevance of analysing methods of representing social categories, subjectivities or behaviours influencing the public opinion. Parents, educators, and, more generally, the *adult common sense* can find narratives and images of the under-aged in the media, which can cause confrontation with the younger generation. Therefore, media narrations with children and adolescents as a subject should move within perspectives of education and social responsibility. The media represents a relevant social agent, with which children and young people, but also teachers and educators, tend to relate to in an often complex and problematic way. Moreover, starting from the International Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, a meaningful reflection developed, both on the normative side (Aroldi, 2003) and on the side of scientific knowledge and infancy sociology (Qvortrup et al., 1994). This has as its subject the responsibility assumed (or not assumed) by the media in building a shared culture of infancy and adolescence. This complex matter involves not only the passive rights of protection of minors, but also the demands of *active participation* of children and adolescents in the society they belong to.

Within this *framework*, which we will refer to in the following section, we investigate the role of the media, specifically local television stations, in producing a *shared culture of infancy and adolescence*. We pursue this inquiry by analysing the varying representations of the under-aged,

disseminated by local TV channels in the Veneto Region. The research was conducted within a Convention among the Regional Committee for Communications (Co.Re.Com.) of the Veneto region and the Interdepartmental Centre of Research on the North-East 'Giorgio Lago' of the University of Padua. In greater detail, we monitored the local news of 7 regional TV stations during the week of Monday 24th February to Sunday 2nd March 2014. This week was characterized by the absence of significant events which could otherwise modify broadcasting schedules as well as audience's consumption habits. Channels were selected according to principles of coherent territorial coverage and ratings. Our research looked at transmissions during prime and lunch time and during the restricted time-slot scheduling (4 p.m. – 7 p.m.).

In addition to checking the compliance of the media with current regulations safeguarding the under-aged, our analysis sought to examine:

- a) the methods used by local television news to create images and narratives of children and adolescents;
- b) the attention that local television stations give to children and adolescents during the restricted time-slot, when there are broadcasting restrictions to safeguard the under-aged.

Who are children and adolescents, according to the news on television? What does the news concerning them talk about? Do the under-aged have an effective voice about facts involving them, or do only the adults speak for them? Do local TV schedules provide for content specifically targeting young people? In our analysis of the local news, we began by monitoring 156 newscasts (programmes broadcasting and commenting the news) and 1,703 news items (single pieces of information reported or commented within the newscast). From these monitored news items we selected a further 223, which carried some form of representation of infancy or adolescence. These items were subsequently processed by content analysis, following the principles of 'content analysis as investigation' (Casetti, Di Chio, 1997). As for the analysis of the schedule for the restricted time-slot, we used a quali-quantitative analytic tool (Montanari, 2007), in order to retrace the TV channel schedule and to examine the contents of the programmes transmitted within the 147 hours monitored. We distinguished among different categories of programmes, especially focusing on those contents directed at or involving children and adolescents.

**Communication, protection, participation**

The development of policies aimed at acknowledging the subjectivity of children and adolescents have made the under-aged even more objects of discussion and concern, with respect to the past (Pollock, 1983). Nowadays, the under-aged have an institutionalised place in society, within the education and welfare structure. This tendency allows them to acquire an ever more relevant role in the sphere of social perception (Belotti & Ruggiero, 2008). Within the media, however, children seem to be assimilated with a collective discourse, made by narratives and definitions regarding them, according to methods of 'symbolic submission'. Such narrations tend to relegate children and adolescents within marginal roles, where they are overlooked and, above all, are not given a voice. This is a matter of discursive practice, which is not analysed in-depth, but rather assumed. It is connected to a mono-causal way of depicting the relationship between minors and media. According to these views, minors can only be victims of media communication or, conversely, expert and skilled consumers, so much so that they need no filter or support in the relationship with the media. For researchers, operators and guaranteeing authority, such polarisation in the portrayal of the relationship between media and minors risks losing sight of complex social change dynamics, involving not only the minors but also their relationship with new or traditional media.

These processes were already analysed and included in many articles of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (Casas, 2008; Freeman, 2000; Le Fosse, 2004; Verhellen, 1994, 2008). These articles stress the necessity of a full recognition of children and adolescents, as autonomous actors and, therefore, subjects entitled to passive and active rights. A child's passive rights include being protected from exploitation, abandonment and abuse, whilst their active rights include those concerning education, privacy and freedom of expression. Article 13 of the United Nations Convention states the minors' right of free expression. Article 17 declares their right to access the media. Article 31 identifies general rights relating to their leisure time and the participation to the cultural life of the community. It is nowadays widespread that these rights are not fully implemented within news communication. Respect for the dignity of minors as subjects entitled to active citizenship doesn't merely affect the needs and necessities immediately connected to their biological and social survival, but also affects how they are perceived by the adult public.

According to Cantwell (2008), the rights set by the Convention can be traced to three different dimensions (the '3P's'). *Protection* concerns the right of children to be protected from all forms of abandonment, exploitation and abuse in various areas of daily life. *Provision* concerns the right to access resources, such as education and welfare, with the aims of ensuring and promoting the material, psychological, relation and social well-being of the child. *Participation* includes the rights of listening, expression and participation in individual and collective decisions that directly or indirectly concern the lives of children and the society in which they live. In addition to the rights of children to be protected and to receive ad hoc services, the Act established for the first time the right of minors to play an active role in terms of listening and decision-making about their lives and the society in which they live.

The child should be considered as an active and autonomous subject, who is able to give meaning and sense to the world around them and to take part in it as a protagonist. As a consequence, it is not enough for adults and institutions to focus solely on the protection of the under-aged from daily dangers. The effective promotion of the rights of children and young people requires the adoption of their own point of view, through the establishment of inclusive and effective fields of participation within the community they belong to. This also applies to the relationship of the under-aged with the media, through the adoption of pathways that could help the child to develop a critical mind towards communication (Buckingham, 2007; Livingstone, 2009, 2010; Rivoltella & Morcellini, 2007; Ito et al., 2008). Moreover, their right of *voice* should be recognised. The visibility and participation of the under-aged should start with their own specific way of communicating, with the influences they are exposed to, the codes and their own languages.

However, since the stipulation of the Convention, the attention towards the rights of children within their relationship with the media often turned to the idea of the minors as essentially vulnerable, immature, inclined to imitate what they see and not able to elaborate a critical perspective about the media and their contents. This led to the adoption of regulation codes by several European countries, with the explicit goal of protecting and safeguarding minors by impeding or limiting the presence of inappropriate media content. In Italy, this happened by way of trying to regulate the access of minors to media messages which could harm their physical or

mental development, in particular those coming from television (Contaldo, 2006).

Together with ministerial regulations, from the Law of 6th August 1990, n. 223, known as ‘Law Mammi’ to the law of 3rd May 2004, n.112, ‘Law Gasparri’, the regulatory framework saw the development of a multitude of often uncoordinated self-regulation codes and acts, subscribed by the media itself. Among these, the most meaningful were the *Treviso Chart* (‘Carta di Treviso’), signed in 1990 and modified in 1997, and the *Self-ruling code of the relationship between television and minors* (‘Codice di Autoregolamentazione Tv e minori’) of 1997, then ratified by the ‘Law Gasparri’ (Montanari, 2007). Through these acts, Italian journalists engage in deontologically correct behaviour towards the under-aged, by granting them with the anonymity and the non-involvement in communicative situations that may hamper the balanced growth process of a child or adolescent. Previous analysis and research (Belotti, 2005; Riva, 2007; Cortoni, 2011; Cefalo, 2013; Riva & Cefalo, 2014a) show that communication about children and adolescents covers a relevant share of the local and national news, with the majority of news items covering deviant actions. Only secondly are themes relating to daily life the subject of the news narratives. These themes include culture, leisure time, sport, school and education, family relationships, all of which are closer to the experiences of minors.

A positive effect of the present regulation system is surely the substantial respect of the privacy of minors directly involved in news items. This respect follows the Self-Regulation Acts and, in particular, the principles stated by the *Treviso Chart*. However, features of narrations about the under-aged that are usually stigmatized still remain. These features include sensationalistic registers, the emphasis and dramatization of events involving children, the use of inopportune and salacious tones in the narration, and the use of de-contextualized and misleading documents or data about sensitive issues and facts, which recall inappropriate images of the under-aged. Among the most widespread of these data are of early school-leaving rates and the number of disappeared children, suicides or victims of accidents. The existing framework has seen the development of a progressive, and at least formal, respect for minors. However, the aim of a more general culture of attention and sensitivity towards the under-aged is yet to be achieved. Within the framework of the relationship with the media and the authorities ruling the media system, children and adolescents



express a specific demand. They seek to have the chance to speak for and about themselves and to have the opportunity to be heard. In one word, they seek to participate.

This is the line we followed in our investigation. In the next sections, we will illustrate the outcomes of the research.

### **Present but not protagonist**

Our research focuses on forms of childhood and adolescence representation, disseminated by local TV channels in the Veneto region of Italy. We selected 7 channels (Rete Veneta, Telebelluno, TVA Vicenza, Antenna 3, TV7 Triveneto, 7 Gold e Telenuovo Verona) according to principles of coherent territorial coverage, ratings, and broadcasting significance in terms of news broadcasting. The research involved the week of Monday 24<sup>th</sup> February to Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014 and considered transmitted contents from 11a.m. to 9p.m. This particular week lacked significant events, which may have otherwise modified broadcasting schedules as well as audience consumption habits.

Our research began by monitoring 156 newscasts, i.e. TV programmes broadcasting and commenting the news, and 1703 news items, i.e. single pieces of information reported or commented within a newscast. Thanks to the use of a signalling system, from this generic corpus of monitored news items, we selected a further 223, which carried some form of representation of infancy or adolescence. These items were subsequently processed by content analysis, in order to analyse the most typified modalities in images and narratives concerning minors. The survey form was built following the principles of the so-called 'content analysis as investigation' (Casetti & Di Chio, 1997). This technique aims to analyse cultural products and symbolic representations spread by mass media through the reevaluation of the interpretative moment. However, on the whole, the technique remains within the quantitative approach (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Altheide, 2000). The survey form was composed of three different sections, progressively focusing on two types of content: 'manifest content' and 'latent content'. Manifest content analysis observes the role and position of the minor in the analysed news about the under-aged. It catalogues news items according to several structural data, such as the broadcaster, the length of the report, the presence of specific references to minors, and the

interviewed subjects. Latent content analysis focuses on the representations of children and young people emerging from the narrated events. It refers to all aspects that rely on an interpretative evaluation carried out by the researcher and aims to present the main features of childhood and adolescence in social representations disseminated by the media, like the main themes covered by the different news, the minor's role within the media narration, the narrative registers used by journalists, the dramatization of the events involving children and adolescents. (Riff, Lacy, & Fico, 2014; Belotti, 2005).

Methodological choices also respond to comparative goals with former studies (Riva, 2007; Riva & Cefalo, 2014a). The evidence we gathered supports, therefore, longitudinal reflections, relating to possible changes and persistent trends found in local media communication concerning childhood and adolescence. The recognition of minors in monitored newscasts, or themes connected to them, allows some general reflection on the information structure of local television; this is thanks to the contextualization of media spaces devoted to infancy and adolescence within the wider frame constituted by news programmes broadcasted by the different television networks considered. As previously mentioned, 223 news items out of 1703 (13.1%) represented childhood and adolescence. However, due to the different news formats utilised by the channels i.e. structure and number of newscasts, length of the single news item etc., forms of representation varied between the different networks.

Table 1 shows that Rete Veneta and Antenna 3 were the major sources of news concerning minors, broadcasting respectively 67 and 55 items (30% and 24.7% of the total amount of news processed to content analysis) about infancy and adolescence. These channels transmit a high number of newscasts, usually divided by the province of reference. In addition, they tend to reduce the length of the single news item, as the duration of the reports is often less than 40 seconds. Telebelluno's representation of minors is not so high in absolute terms (41 news, 18.4% of the total corpus). However, these figures are significant when one considers that this television schedules only a limited number of newscasts, which comprise news items of quite long duration (usually more than one minute).

With reference to the 223 news items representing images of minors, nearly 36% included a gender specification, with a certain imbalance favouring males to females (23.8% against 12.6%); 36.8% of the news

items refer to minors of both genders, and the remaining 26.9% of the cases provided no information about the gender of the minors.

*Table 1. Number of news concerning minors (24<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014)*

Television Channel	Number of news	%
Rete Veneta	67	30.0
Telebelluno	41	18.4
TvA Vicenza	17	7.6
Antenna 3	55	24.7
Tv7 Triveneta	8	3.6
7 Gold	16	7.2
Telenuovo VR	19	8.5
Total	223	100.0%

Adolescents between 15 and 18 years old represent the largest group (44.8%), followed by children aged 6-10 (25%). Children from 0 to 2 years have only a marginal role in the local news (1.7% of the total). Therefore, local newscasts appear to show a prevalent interest in themes related to males and adolescents.

We also examined where the minor featured in these news items – whether as the primary protagonist or secondary. The role of children and adolescents in the local news is a crucial issue in understanding which kind of culture is created and disseminated by the media. Children and adolescents play a primary role in 45.3% of the news, while in 27.8% of cases, they are only a marginal element ('only quoted in the report'). In the first case, we have reports about classes of pupils visiting museums or giving life to initiative of solidarity, like selling handmade products in local street markets. In the second case, as an example, we noticed several news items on social manifestations or local festivities showing images of children with mothers or of groups of adolescents, without any explanation or interview.

The percentage of news items in which minors hold a secondary position is 26.5%, i.e. they play a role which is not prominent within the narration. For example, in several news items about accidents and injuries regarding adults, their sons and daughters are also mentioned in the reporting and stories about them are briefly told (the school they attend, where they were at the moment of the accident), even if they are not directly involved. This could be further evidence that, for the medium,

children and young people are more appealing when they are somehow connected with accidents or dangerous/violent situations, due to their ability to produce emotional reactions amongst an adult public.

*Table 2. Number of news concerning minors per role of children and adolescent, percentages (24<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014)*

Role of the minor	%
Primary position	45.3
Secondary position	26.5
Only quoted in the report	27.8
Not pertinent	0.4
Total	100.0
(number of news)	223

If we compare our data with previous research on the Veneto region made in 2011 (Riva & Cefalo, 2014a), we see a relatively stable situation. When the local media speak about minors, they are not featured as the main protagonist within the news items; the news in which they do not hold a primary role remain, in fact, prevalent (if we combine the categories ‘secondary position’ and ‘only quoted in the report’, they amount to more than 50% of cases).

### **Narrations of everyday life**

As in former research, the thematic focus of the news was classified using a broad spectrum of voices (specific thematic areas), in order to keep the richness of the original information to allow subsequent aggregation when analysing (Belotti, 2005). Table 3 shows that media communication about children and adolescents is characterized by a complex combination of different topics: 24.7% of the total news analysed centres around school and the field of education.

Other issues frequently represented relate to injuries and accidents (18.8%), followed by politics-related and institutional subjects (9.4%), acts of violence and deviance (9%) and news about leisure time, festivities, games and sport (8.1%).

*Table 3. Number of news concerning minors per main theme (24<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014)*

Main theme	Number of news	%
School and education	55	24.7
Injuries and accidents	42	18.8
Politics and institutions	21	9.4
Violence acts and deviant behaviours	20	9.0
Leisure time	18	8.1
Culture and development	15	6.7
Work-related	15	6.7
Health and environment	10	4.5
Social and sanitary services	8	3.6
Participation	7	3.1
Foreigners	4	1.8
Family relationships	3	1.3
Other themes	5	2.2
Total	223	100.0

By the multiform local information landscape emerges the relevance of the everyday life context, where children normally interact with their peers and with adults. In fact, the collected data reveals a certain tendency to generally attribute importance to themes of education (schooling, culture, and sociality) and themes of sport and leisure time (recreation, games and sporting activities). During the specific week when the analysis took place, where children and young people appeared in local news, these themes played a significant role. Altogether, news items relating to education, culture and leisure time covered almost 40% of the total news coverage concerning minors. These news items were positive narrations, calling for a culture where infancy and adolescence are presented within normal circumstances, rather than in exceptional or dramatic news features. It is the case of news items about sports and youth, where playgrounds and play areas also become places of aggregation and community life; as well as reports about joint efforts by school and local administrations giving life to cultural experiences like theatrical representations or scientific exhibits. In some cases, local networks Antenna 3 or Telebelluno even devoted brief but specific sections of their newscasts to such activities.

However, the tendency to refer to minors in a negative or dramatic way still appears to be widespread. Associating minors with danger is a persistent element of local news, which depicts the under-aged as passive

and needy of protection. Observing the table, the sum of percentage values relating to violent acts and deviant behaviours (both suffered and inflicted by minors), injuries and accidents, reaches a remarkable 27.8% of the total. Therefore, considering the overall amount of reports that refer to childhood and adolescence, almost one out of three concern negative situations: acts of violence, accidents or other behaviours connected with the sphere of deviance, such as alcoholism or drug consumption.

As an example, we monitored news items about bullying or street-crimes, strongly indulging in images and narrations of children as helpless victims in the face of the risk of an ever growing violence. These themes are strongly susceptible to over-dramatization, because of the emotional 'pull' that these events can have on an audience. As shown by previous research (Riva, 2007; Cortoni, 2011; Cefalo, 2013), such narrations are aimed at attracting adult audiences, in order to induce worry, anxiety or social alarm. Consequently, children are usually considered as weak and vulnerable subjects, in need of protection from the constant threats they experience.

It should be noted that the active participation of children and teenagers within the world around them has received a certain, although still marginal, level of attention (3.1%). This could signify a change of emphasis within informative communication, which is characterised by a growing awareness about forces for cultural and social change inherent in such participation. In the local news, there are meaningful examples of children and adolescents giving voice to their opinions and views: it is worth to cite the initiative 'Young Reporter' organized by tv channel Rete Veneta in collaboration with local institutions, that aimed at providing some classes of adolescents with skills in the fields of local information and newsmaking. As a result, the young people involved also realised reports that were transmitted by the network during its regular newscasts, expressing their points of view about local community issues.

However, we argue that, even if there are news items about the participation of minors, this is not a sign of promotion but only the residual practice of skilled journalists. We argue that this is not an established good practice, firmly entrenched in the typical productive 'routines' of television, information and communication.

### Routine factors in local newsmaking

Local newscasts often draw upon typical tools, such as interviews and quotations of data taken from studies and research made by non-journalistic sources. In the news we analysed, which carried representations of childhood and adolescence, interviews were largely used (109 news items out of 223). However, interviews still seem to be a communicative format reserved for adults (33.8% of the cases, see table 4) and hardly ever directly involve children and young people, either alone (2.7% of the cases) or alongside adults (3.6% of the cases).

*Table 4. Number of news concerning minors per presence of interviews (percentages)*

Interviews	%
Only adults interviewed	42.6
Only minors interviewed	2.7
Minors and adults interviewed	3.6
No interviews	51.1
Total	100.0
(number of news)	223

Even considering the necessary and normative precautions needed to interview an under-aged subject, this data confirms a lack of commitment to the active participation of children and adolescents. There appears to be no compunction to represent the minor by adopting their point of view, recognising their opinions and promoting their demands about issues relevant to their everyday life.

As a consequence, adult actors are delegated to recount the demands, peculiarities and abilities of the under-aged. Even in news items about actions of social solidarity involving directly children (local markets, activities of environmental safeguard like the rolling out of parks), the main role in the narration was played by institutional actors illustrating the initiative and highlighting the engagement of young people in the realisation. However, even if well-intentioned, these adults persist in legitimising images of complete dependence of the under-aged on others, whether they be relatives, local administrators, associations or information operators. Moreover, if events or issues involving minors are depicted in the news through an adults' perspective, direct references to specialised and

scientific knowledge are very rare. Only 3 news items out of 223 referred to official data, reports, or research, while the number of experts interviewed was negligible.

*Table 5. Number of interviews with adults according to role of the interviewee (percentages)*

Category of adult interviewed	%
Policy makers and local administrators	18.8
Common people	15.5
Parents or relatives	14.5
Police officers	11.6
Operators of associations and social/sanitary services	9.6
Teachers and school principals	6.3
Priests	4.8
Friends, neighbours	1.9
Experts	1.4
Coaches, sport trainers	1.0
Other categories (less than 1%)	14.6
Total	100.0
(Number of interviews)	109

Greater coverage is instead granted to categories of ideological or political representation (as we said before), or to the views of the general public. As shown by table 5, interviews with adults mainly comprised policy-makers or local administrators (18.8%), common people (15.5%), who are not necessarily involved in the narrated facts, minors' parents or relatives (14.5%), and police officers (11.6%). It should be noted that routine factors play a notable role in building the news and conducting interviews (Schudson, 2003; Stella, 2008). Newsmaking is constrained by rules, such as time-saving in making the report and urgency in finding interview subjects (Zelizer, 1993; Murialdi, 2006).

In short, local TV channels produce a popularly accepted adult conception of childhood and adolescence, with no in-depth scientific analysis. These factors make it suitable for effective, quick and easy communication, with the purpose of maximising public appeal. Therefore, communication about minors in the Veneto newscasts is projected through an adult perspective to a primarily adult audience, who require news to have an emotional appeal.



### Protection and time-slots in local television

In this section of the paper, we focus our study on the role of local media in producing and conveying a shared culture of childhood and adolescence. In particular, we analyse TV schedules and programmes broadcasted by the selection of 7 local channels. This is carried out during a time-slot subjected to specific restrictions, aimed at safeguarding children and adolescents from unsuitable media content. In Italy, this time-slot is known as 'fascia protetta', whereas in the UK, it is commonly known as 'the watershed'.

Our goal is to understand if children and adolescents are regarded as active subjects, with proper needs and demands, and if it is therefore possible to identify a series of transmissions specifically devoted to the under-aged. Research on the relationship between minors and mass media (especially television) has been extensive; traditional debate has often focused on the impact of violence and sexually explicit or misleading commercial content on children and young people, considered as not fully autonomous actors. However, recent debate has stressed the complex relationship between the under-aged and their cultural and social context (see Belotti & Ruggiero, 2008; Caronia, 2002). It is argued that the cognitive skills of the under-aged are important, in allowing their age group to interpret the media communications they receive. In response to the most recent and comprehensive law ruling this field (the *Self-ruling code of the relationship between television and minors*, known as 'Codice di autoregolamentazione tv e minori'), Italian regulations have aimed at reducing the potential negative effects that uncontrolled exposure to media messages might have on a child or an adolescent (Mirabelli, 2004; Montanari, 2007). Established time-slots were implemented, characterised by different levels of protection in terms of scheduling restrictions. Within these slots, it is forbidden to broadcast sensitive content, which could be considered harmful to the socio-cultural and psycho-physical development of children and adolescents. The recent Consolidation Act distinguishes between two different time-slots: *television for all* (from 7am to 10.30pm) and *television for minors* (from 4pm to 7pm). During the second time-slot, broadcasters must take special care when scheduling programmes that might be unsuitable for children or adolescents. This restriction identifies a time-slot when the scheduled media content should be, although not necessarily directed at them, suitable for children and adolescents. Specific

control upon sensitive news items, advertisements, promos and trailers must also be applied (Stella, 2007).

Besides general protection against images or situations which could harm the physical, psychological and moral wellbeing of minors (Metastasio, 2002), this protection has four specific dimensions:

- control against the transmission of scenes containing violence or sexual content, within programmes of fiction and non-fiction;
- control against content that could generate dangerous effects of imitation;
- control against misleading advertisements or commercial communication, regarding smoking, alcohol or paid phone services;
- control against the diffusion of negative models of behaviour (alcohol or cigarette consumption) or against discrimination towards specific social groups (people with disabilities, immigrants, religious groups, etc.)

Within the context of protection for children and adolescents, our research verified how the ‘restricted time-slot’ of transmission respected normative regulations. Moreover, we carried out a content analysis of the programmes broadcasted by the seven local television channels, from 4pm to 7pm.

*Table 6: Categories of programmes during the restricted time-slot (24<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014)*

Category of programmes within the protected time slot	%
Telesales	46.5
Information and in-depths	21.8
Entertainment	13.2
Advertisement	8.0
Films	4.5
Documentaries	2.7
Fiction	2.5
Other categories	0.8
Total	100.0
(Number of programmes)	394

As a result, we found that almost half of the schedule was covered by telesales of various products, ranging from fitness items to home furnishings (46.5%). After this, a relevant space was dedicated to

information, and programmes dealing with in-depth analysis of various matters, such as politics and current themes (including newscasts). This space covered 22% of the time considered. The category to follow was entertainment, mostly cartoons, (13%) while the category of documentaries, educational and didactic, covered only 3% of what was transmitted, a much lower value if compared to the 8% covered by advertisements. Films and telefilms also had a really limited room in local TV scheduling: respectively 3% and 4% of the total.

Data shows that local TV channels build their schedules paying very low attention to the preferences and needs of children and adolescents. Moreover, they do not seem to consider the potentially negative impact and the low educational value of programmes such as telesales and advertisements.

There seems to be a recurring structure in the TV scheduling that we analysed. The same combination of different types of programmes is repeated day by day within the same channel. In particular, commercial communications (advertisements and telesales) represent a common and distinctive feature of local television offerings, even if the relative space they cover varies depending on the specific channel. In five television stations out of seven, telesales are the most widespread category within the everyday schedule. In four cases, they cover more than 50% of the transmission time that we monitored, with a peak of 84% in the case of Antenna 3. Telesales can be mixed, as they combine features of entertainment with a commercial goal. However, their education content is negligible, as these kinds of programme are not oriented towards the needs and demands of children and adolescents.

However, two local channels seem to contradict this trend. Telesales covered only 10% of the media content offered by TvA Vicenza, while there was a total absence of telesales on Telebelluno, and a very residual space covered by other commercial communications. This channel represents a unique case in what is offered by local media, with a diverse range of programmes directed at different audiences. As for children and adolescents, there is a commitment to producing entertainment transmissions and documentaries, with a view to their educational content. Moreover, this channel often transmits talk shows with subtle yet in-depth analysis on themes relevant to the world of minors, such as the relationship with parents and the education system. However, the images conveyed are

not necessarily positive or comforting, but confront controversial themes, such as alcohol consumption or bullying amongst young people.

Even if almost residual, categories of programmes, such as 'information' or 'entertainment', highlight the existence of some sort of media content directed at childhood and adolescence. These may be cartoons, musical video clips, and informative or didactic programmes, dealing with local initiative of solidarity, environmental protection, health, and promotion of everyday activities, such as sport and open-air games. Cinema trailers were also quite common, as neither a dedicated programme for young people, nor an advertisement.

All in all, we can state that local TV stations have a uniform approach to their schedules for the under-aged. In spite of what is recommended by the *Self-Ruling Code of the relationship between television and minors*, little is offered by stations in the way of transmissions adhering to childhood and adolescence requirements. This trend both limits and depletes the options for young people, belittling the major issue of the protection and promotion of the minors.

We argue that local television stations are not able to focus on children and adolescents, because they do not have the resources to compete with national channels, which produce high-quality programmes and build a high quality schedule appealing to younger audiences. Due essentially to budget limitations, local networks opt for more affordable solutions, utilising the benefits of commercial communications (advertisements and telesales) or cheaper and often dated low-quality programmes (Feltrin & Moretto, 2010). This greatly reduces the time given specifically to target young people, with a composite offering of entertainment and educational content. Consequently, except for rare and isolated cases, the transmissions do not violate the regulations, which protect minors and monitor the media content within the restricted time-slot. However, there is still a widespread indifference towards minors, towards their needs, demands, vulnerabilities and skills.

### **Is there any media content focusing on childhood and adolescence?**

So far, our analysis demonstrates that local channels do not usually consider minors as their main audience when writing schedules for the restricted time-slot, 4pm to 7pm. Conversely, this time is mostly covered

by programmes that do not target the demands and perspective of minors. The schedule has a more prominent commercial goal (telesales, advertisements) or a much broader and undifferentiated target-audience (newscasts or entertainment programmes dealing with themes like economics or politics).

This preliminary conclusion is also confirmed by table 7, which looks at programmes specifically directed at minors. In this table, advertisements are not considered. From our observations, our findings show that, in five television stations out of seven (just one programme for 7 Gold and Tv7 Triveneta; no one for Antenna 3, Telenuovo VR, Rete Veneta), there is no regular schedule dedicated to children and adolescents. Moreover, only 13 programmes out of 394 (3%), transmitted within the restricted time-slot, were oriented at childhood or adolescence-related themes. Telebelluno scheduled 7 programmes dedicated to minors, while TvA Vicenza transmitted 4 programmes centred on childhood or youth.

*Table 7: Programmes directed at minors or minor-related during the protected time slot (24<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2014)*

Local television	Programmes directed at minors	Programmes dealing with minor-related themes	Total of programmes
7 Gold	1	2	43
Antenna 3	0	7	62
Rete Veneta	0	7	54
Telebelluno	7	11	65
Telenuovo VR	0	3	51
Tv7 Triveneta	1	3	38
TvA Vicenza	4	6	81
Total	13	39	394

We also looked at whether the programmes transmitted, if not specifically dedicated, dealt with themes or issues related to children or adolescents. In this case, programmes specifically targeting minors, such as cartoons etc., are excluded. For example, talk shows often discussed infancy-related themes, although minors are not the main theme. All channels monitored gave modest space to minor-related themes (39 programmes out of 394, 9.9%), mostly within newscasts and entertainment programmes. Again, Telebelluno showed itself to be more focused on these

issues with 11 programmes, followed by Antenna 3 and Rete Veneta with 7 programmes, and TvA Vicenza with 6.

However, the representation of young people is usually given from an adult perspective, giving minors a secondary place in the representation. The same narrative frame depicted in previous sections, which focus on newscasts, also holds true for other categories of programmes. This was the case for one talk show, where the main theme was the increase of alcohol consumption among young people. The programme was presented by an adult, while interviews were mostly conducted with worried parents or police officers. There was only a brief statement from a psychologist. Nevertheless, even when the subjects were related to positive situations of everyday life, the role of the adult perspective was prominent and the minors were not elevated to the position of protagonist. However, Telebelluno represents the only exception to this structure, where the talk shows we monitored targeted minors, in which the audience and the majority of the interviewees were made up by children or adolescents. In our opinion, this represents a good practice, aimed at the promotion of the active participation of minors. Although this is a quite isolated case in the local media landscape, they were given a central stage within the representations and images of the world they belong to.

### **Conclusions: quality of media and the rights of the under-aged**

From research carried out by Faustini, Porro & Falvo (1993), Belotti (2005), D'Amato (2006), Riva (2007), Cortoni (2011), Cefalo (2013), and Riva & Cefalo (2014a; 2014b), conclusions have been drawn about images and representations of childhood and adolescence in the Italian media. They all agree on a common feature. From the *Treviso Chart* to the *Unique Text of media services* ('Testo unico dei servizi di media audiovisivi e radiofonici'), the development of regulatory frameworks has made possible a *respect* of the under-aged within media communication. However, this respect seems to be more formal than substantive. This kind of respect is not always met with attention and sensitivity, neither towards themes involving the under-aged, nor towards a shared culture of childhood and adolescence. Such a shared culture might suggest a greater inclusion within the narrations. Within media studies, these considerations may be encompassed within the framework of news analysis and *newsmaking*,

which stresses the problematic role of information and communication in projecting events through the media (Schudson, 2003; Sorrentino, 2002; Berkowitz, 1997).

In particular, the newsworthiness of facts involving subjects considered as marginal, such as migrants, women, the young and the elderly, the unemployed, and criminals, is determined by processes of selection and packaging. This can often lead to distortions, bias and stereotypical images. These act as lenses that influence the way in which certain social groups are depicted and conveyed. As for children and adolescents, the news continues to follow a trend of showing 'extreme situations', such as abuse and violence, either suffered or inflicted. These 'extreme situations' are then dramatized, in order to emotionally overcharge narrations. This is a strong trend, although it is not the strongest. As a matter of fact, the news frequently depict the daily lives of children and adolescents. However, despite the high number of news items about their daily life and activities, children and adolescents are rarely given a relevant role in the process of information building. They are often represented by the news, either as passive objects within the events which involve them, or as minor participators within adult narrations. Such narrations use the under-aged to arouse emotions in the audience; they are often depicted alone or with adults – parents, relatives, teachers, institutional figures - but the children and adolescents very rarely give their own account. Adults speak on the behalf of children and adolescents in interviews and reports, without necessarily having specific knowledge. These figures speak from an adult perspective, which is often made up by preconceived beliefs about what they believe children and adolescents are and should be.

All in all, when the everyday lives of children and adolescents are considered newsworthy, they translate into the discourse *by adults to adults*. Events are narrated by methods of 'familiar' representation, in the sense that they respond to the expectations of an adult audience which possesses its own interpretations and preconceived beliefs regarding the under-aged. As a consequence, the image of the child undergoes a transformative process of *decontextualization* and *translation* into a foreign frame of meaning, where adults speak for the views, opinions and demands of children and adolescents.

Shifting our focus from the news to the editors and owners of local channels, we have observed that there is no change in the restricted time-slot reserved for the under-aged. The regulations intended to safeguard the

under-aged are indeed observed, but due to technical and economic reasons, there is no indication that local channels are recognising the needs of such an audience, who require a specific schedule. Arguably, if the economic climate was more favourable, it might be possible to make changes to the restricted time-slot schedule.

However, despite explicit regulatory guidelines and rhetoric claims coming from Acts, such as the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, issues of inclusion and active participation are still poorly developed by local television news. As envisaged by the Regional Establishing Law of the Veneto Co.Re.Com, L.R. 10th August 2001, n. 18, supervisory bodies, such as Agcom and Co.Re.Com, intervene only in extreme situations that contravene regulations and must therefore be reported to the designated authorities. The Veneto Co.Re.Com receives responses from the public and then verifies the propriety of the specific transmission, relating to the schedule time-slot. Contents that could be potentially harmful to the physical, psychological, or moral development of the under-aged viewer, due to the presence of pornography or brutal violence, are forbidden by law. This could be termed as *residual protection*, only considering the under-aged when directly threatened. This safeguard is demanding due to the implication on resources. However, it does not appreciate the potential of institutions to stimulate the quality of communication affecting minors, as bodies fully entitled to effective intervention in the media system. Even if difficult to define, this concept of *quality of media* does not merely equal to the absence of violations (Stella, 2008; Gatti, 2008; Cortoni, 2011; Diodato & Somaini 2011). Where minors are involved, transmission quality is measured by the content, in its potential to stimulate the development of younger audiences by promoting active listening, expression of opinions, and the diffusion of images that value the participation of children and adolescents. This should be an *active safeguard*, combining the monitoring of local TV schedules and the promotion of *good practices*. Such practices may be acknowledged by certifications of quality, and by incentives that favour the diffusion of a shared culture of childhood and adolescence and promote their *active rights*.

The media and all participating adults are challenged to open a discussion, with the aim of considering children and adolescents as subjects fully entitled to representation in both normal and extreme circumstances. Although, from a journalistic perspective, this approach may be



unappealing, it may be facilitated by effective safeguarding policies and by the engagement of the general public. However, censorship, control and self-regulation are only some of the strategies used to address the issue of the relationship between mass media and the under-aged. Furthermore, codes and conventions are not the only actions sufficient enough to confront the highly complex and ever-changing sphere of identity and actions of childhood and adolescence.

In other fields, social issues regarding minors have finally been faced and attempts to resolve such issues have been implemented, by the creation of public spaces, recreation areas, and pedestrianised roads and squares etc. Therefore, minors should also be granted the conditions and opportunities they need to become an active and participating subject within the media system. Such a change would bring about a degree of cultural enrichment. This goal can be achieved by ‘giving a voice’ to the under-aged, starting with the effective recognition of their specific ways of communication, of the various influences they are exposed to, and of their own codes and languages.

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