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Introduction to the Special Section. Media Literacy for Social Inclusion and Personal Well-Being

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Introduction to the Special Section. Media Literacy for Social Inclusion and Personal Well-Being

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As the guest editors of this special number of the Italian Journal of Sociology of education, we are glad to give here an account of the process that brought us to such an exciting issue. In our call for papers, published in January 2016, we considered that since digitalization, media has become more and more pervasive in the daily lives of individuals, especially of young people. As a reader of IJSE probably immediately notices, this special section represents another contribution to the debate around media and education dealt so well by the colleagues that took part in the special session edited by [Maddalena Colombo and Marco Pitzalis \(2016\)](#). With this new special issue, we tried to move the attention from the use of media in educational contexts to everyday life, in order to enrich our understanding of the complex media system that surrounds our life. Daily use of digital devices, especially by adolescents, constitutes one of the main areas of concern for teachers and parents (Giusti et al., 2015). Skills connected to information awareness, digital safety and peers connections are more and more important for young people's well-being. Indeed, the overabundance of choices, the specific characteristics of digital relationships, the economic interests behind many mass-diffused platforms and the convergence of different activities in the same devices constitute for users – young users in particular – a serious challenge for the exploitation of the entire beneficial potential of new media in their lives. Recent developments in the media

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landscape, together with the co-existence of different disciplinary perspectives on it, have shown the need to expand the notion of media literacy to include all those media competences that are developing in both formal and informal settings, in both professional and educational contexts, not only among children and young people, but also among working people and marginalized individuals, such as immigrants and the elderly.

While struggles over conceptual definition and assessment of media literacy still persist, a general trend is emerging in considering media literacy as a broad notion encompassing various competencies based on media and ICT skills but also broadly and significantly connected to the capacities of critical evaluation, creative expression and civic and political participation (Livingstone et al., 2012). In this fast changing context, we argue that the traditional definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts (Aufderheide, 1993) still has the capacity to circumscribe the research area and to point at its further developments. However, a wider work of translating its substantial meaning into the complexities of the current media landscape constitutes both a necessary and a constant task. Considering the intrinsic multidisciplinary vocation of media literacy research, we called for contributions that could draw on specific fields of expertise, such as sociology, media research, communication studies, cultural studies, social studies of technology, and for contributions that develop interdisciplinary perspectives. The questions we wanted to explore were: how is the concept of media literacy changing? What social issues emerge as media literacy becomes more and more vital for participation in society? What are the policies to promote it? What is the relationship between new media literacy and digital equality? As expected, contributions submitted to the call have been numerous and diverse in their geographical origins, theoretical backgrounds and empirical analyses. The papers selected for this issue cover a wide range of different problems and approaches to media literacy, social inclusion and personal well-being. The first two papers written by Catalina Iordache, Ilse Mariën and Dorien Baelden and by Gianna Cappello are aimed to frame the issue of media literacy in the current literature. The first piece, by Iordache et al., offers a precious and comprehensive literature review on what the category of “digital skills” means today for researchers. Thirteen among the most influential frameworks are analysed and compared in the paper, offering a broad picture of the dimensions of this concept. It should

be noted that the review also outlines interesting trends throughout the years, so that some dimensions have emerged in the last few years together with technological and socio-cultural changes. For example, knowing how to manage a digital identity, the awareness of audience's characteristics when we publish on social media and the ability to protect personal data are acquiring a growing importance as "digital skills".

The second contribution by Gianna Cappello offers a critical analysis of the concept of media literacy. After a short historical overview of the scientific debate developed in the last fifty years around the expanding notion of literacy, she questions the techno-utopist and instrumentalist rhetoric that has often inspired the adoption of media technologies in educational contexts. According to Cappello, there is an urgent need to shift the focus of the debate from instrumental access to qualified access in terms of the critical, creative and cultural competence needed for a full and active involvement in contemporary media-saturated societies. She concludes suggesting that the design and implementation of both research and policies on media literacy should take into account three intertwined processes: the historical development of technologies, the socially stratified ways in which individuals adopt and adapt technologies in their daily lives, the commitment of public institutions.

The third and fourth papers (written respectively by Annalisa Buffardi and Gabriella Taddeo, and by Luis Pereira, Ana Jorge and Maria José Brites) more directly deal with media literacy in the life of adolescents and youngsters in general. Annalisa Buffardi and Gabriella Taddeo show data gathered by INDIRE (National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Research in Education) in 2015. The authors outline different "digital styles" and connect them with school achievement and motivation. They also show how participation in advanced online activities in classrooms can be beneficial for a conscious use of technology by students outside the school. Luis Pereira, Ana Jorge and Maria José Brites present results from research in Portugal about competitions in schools with the aim of discussing their effectiveness as a strategy for developing Media Education. The sample of competitions analysed has shown the capacity to cover dimensions of Media Education which are usually not embedded in the curriculum (especially media production) and which allow students to develop diverse media skills through learning by doing. However, the lack of evaluation does not allow one to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives. The authors conclude their

contribution by recommending the introduction of assessment processes as a way to enhance critical thinking, connection to the curriculum and a deeper involvement of the participants in these actions.

In the fifth article, following the approach of new childhood studies, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli starts from adolescents' own words about media education. Through youths' experiences, expectations, desires and critiques, the paper wants 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. The author shows that the direct involvement of adolescents can bring about more dynamic and dialogical media-educational actions. The final result is a strategy of media education that breaks the normative point of view to allow a critical discussion of everyday practices and to enhance the participative capability implied in the use of media.

The sixth paper by Anne-Sophie Collard, Thierry De Smedt, Marie Dufrasne, Pierre Fastrez, Valèria Ligurgo, Geoffroy Patriarche and Thibault Philippette deals with the relevant issue of media literacy in the workplace. The authors introduce a conceptual framework that articulates two models of digital media literacy at work: one based on functional-operational skills that defines the worker as compliant, and the other based on critical-creative competences that defines the worker as inventive. Through ethnography and critical discourse analysis, they show how digital media literacy is performed and articulated in practices and discourses.

The seventh and last paper, by Marco Gui, Marco Fasoli and Roberto Carradore, offers a theoretical proposal for the future of media literacy studies. The authors show how the massive diffusion of smartphones and mobile connectivity and of the consequent availability of an overabundant number of information and social relationship options throughout the day open new needs of competence for digital media users. Users more and more feel the need to avoid excessive multitasking, fragmentation of daily time and overconsumption of new media, not only to perform well in study or work, but also to live well. The notion of "digital well-being" opens up a reflection on a new set of individual skills but also on socially constructed discourses of what is "good" in life with digital media.

It seems to us that these pieces show a fruitful convergence by identifying a number of emerging issues for media literacy research. First, the authors bring more evidence of a clear shift from a technical and access-related

notion of media literacy to critical analysis of media that could improve the quality of the use of communication technology (Pereira et al.). In particular, advanced digital literacy dimensions such as producing a message for specific audiences or carrying out privacy related strategic decisions are receiving a growing attention by scholars (see Iordache et al.). What we still need are updated and efficient assessment tools through which to evaluate the effectiveness of media education practices (see Pereira et al.). Moreover, from several articles a need emerges to move from an individualistic to a socially constructed understanding of media literacy. Although the relevance assigned by the literature to individual skills and competence is justified by the need to evaluate the diffusion of key competences, the papers in our special issue also show that a full and balanced exploitation of digital media cannot be restricted to individual skills. As Cappello convincingly writes, the responsibility of a full exploitation of digital media is “too much of a burden to be borne by single individuals”. On the one hand, individuals need social norms and values as guidelines to behave in digital environments. On the other hand, institutions need to accompany individuals’ efforts to find their fine living and participation style online (Cappello, Buffardi and Taddeo). For researchers, it means continuously moving between the individual and the socio-cultural dimension in the observation of everyday media practices (see Scarcelli) and in the assessment of the skills necessary to reach a “digital well-being” (see Gui et al.). For all these reasons, we do believe that this issue can be an important contribution to media literacy literature.

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