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## **Paideia Between Online and Offline: A Netnographic Research on Fan Fiction Communities**

*Diana Salzano*<sup>\*</sup>, *Felice Addeo*, *Antonella Napoli* and *Maria Esposito*

### **Author information**

<sup>\*</sup> Department of Social, Political and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno, Italy (Corresponding Author).

### **Contact author's email address**

<sup>\*</sup> [diana\\_salzano@yahoo.it](mailto:diana_salzano@yahoo.it) (Corresponding Author)

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## **Paideia Between Online and Offline: A Netnographic Research on Fan Fiction Communities**

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*Abstract:* The sociological reflection on education cannot avoid a careful analysis of the opportunities and new needs triggered by the digital turn and the overlapping of the online and offline plans of the experience in which young people are growing up. Starting from the need to understand what are the real competences and skills required by the knowledge society, our paper illustrates the results of a netnographic analysis conducted on an Italian fan fiction community, Erika Fan Page. The analysis has given the opportunity to observe the concrete communicative and relational practices and the progressive development of competences within an important learning community. The observation of these competences, which need to be implemented within the different socializing agencies, seems to be an important starting point to suggest a reflection upon the current educational challenges of the Italian school - that sometimes seems to be still far from completely fulfilling the needs of the society and of the job market and from encouraging the development of a mature digital media literacy.

*Keywords:* fan fiction, media education, digital media literacy, netnography

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\* Department of Social, Political and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno, Italy.  
E-mail: diana\_salzano@yahoo.it

### **Introduction: What kind of society do we educate for?**

An interesting essay of 1962, realized on the basis of notes and transcriptions of lectures that Karl Mannheim dedicated to the theme of sociology of education and which was posthumously published by one of his students, has recently been re-published in Italian (Mannheim & Campbell Stewart, 2017). Over fifty years later this essay is still really current in the reflection on issues that nowadays are central. According to Mannheim, for example, the sociological analysis of education implies questioning about the *essence* of the educational phenomenon: it is not just about evaluating methods or techniques in relation to determined historical-social forms, but it's also important to realise how education is regarded as a multidimensional social phenomenon in which trying to get an answer to the question "what kind of society do we educate for" is a key point (Mannheim & Campbell Stewart, 2017; see also Gili, 2017, p. IV).

This question seems to us even more relevant at a time when the so-called digital turn has somehow exacerbated the distance between the educational project and the real needs of young people of being prepared and stimulated to meet the demands of the contemporary society.

As Brown-Martin (2015) states, "In the future, if you want a job, you must be as unlike a machine as possible: creative, critical and socially skilled. So why are children being taught to behave like machines? [...] We succeed in adulthood through collaboration. So why is collaboration in tests and exams called cheating?" (Brown-Martin, 2015, p. 58).

Often, with the aim of overcoming the gap existing between the educational offering on the one hand, the interests of young generations and the skills required by the job market on the other, the digital media literacy is often called for as a possible solution. Yet, the concept of digital media literacy still remains a controversial concept (Livingstone, 2008) and is often reduced to indicate simple technical skills that young people need to possess - and that are, therefore, sufficient to teach. Indeed, the digital media literacy can be articulated as compliance and/or invention (Collard et al., 2017) to face the surrounding environment.

It encloses - as we will discuss - a set of technical and cognitive skills and competences needed to critically interpret the media, to interact with cultural artifacts, and to be active citizens. As is well-known, in the current dominant public discourse (European Commission, 2009) a competent and

knowledgeable use of the ICT is now regarded as an essential tool for the participation in the knowledge economy and for the overcoming of the second-level digital divide (Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014).

So, *what* competences do young people really need? In order to answer this question, our work project started from the hypothesis that the concrete online conversational practices of young people may be a good context to observe the construction and implementation of digital media literacy and the emergence of skills and competences that are concurrently tested through a learning by doing process. It often happens that online environments are judged by adults on the basis of a moral panic that focuses only on online dangerous aspects, such as hate speech, cyberbullying or the presence of fake news - which are of course real risks to face - without giving the right importance to the potentialities of such social spaces.

Following the suggestions emerged from a previous research on an Italian fansubbing community (Addeo & Esposito, 2015), we think that many of the online communities aggregating young people are interesting immersive learning environments, in which it is possible to observe the emerging of skills and competences which are not only useful within the group in terms of the construction of a reputation but also in the job market. If in the Anglo-Saxon world we already find a series of surveys that observe the possible interrelations between the classroom and the fandom communities (Hellekson & Busse, 2014; Black, 2008), there are no similar studies on Italian fans communities.

This paper therefore illustrates the results emerging from the observation of an online fan fiction community - Erika Fan Page (EFP) - where young people re-elaborate media texts (TV series, Movies, Comics, Novels, and so on) following rules and a complex set of roles and tasks.

In fact, we think that looking directly at the target of the training offering could be the best way to try to get some possible answers to the above-mentioned Mannheim's question.

The first part of the present paper, through a theoretic framework based on fan fiction, focuses on the pedagogical function of participatory cultures which is displayed in the ability of formulating a new kind of knowledge organization. Within the discussion we include the main findings of the observation in order to identify the motivations behind the choice to join

these communities of practices, and the skills and competences that are being developed among them. These abilities, as argued in the last part of the present paper, are, in our view, an important benchmark for media education projects that, on the one hand, should refer more to online practices and, on the other hand, should be fully welcomed within the traditional educational programs.

### **The cosmopedia of the fandom communities**

In his well-known essay on fandom communities, Henry Jenkins (2006) resumes a seductive metaphor introduced by P. Lévy in the 1990s: the cosmopedia<sup>1</sup>, invoked by the French philosopher in times of strong technological enthusiasm, as a pedagogical turning point introduced by the participatory culture of the Internet.

Lévy, in his project of a universal semantics to be realized through the Internet, may now seem to be an absolute apologist for the telematic culture and in many ways an utopian. The information capitalism, in fact, has over time turned to be a tough enemy to defeat, and the strongest counterpart of Lévy's project for a new enlightenment. Yet the collective intelligence - the metaphor of the big ark navigating the sea of knowledge - still remains an epistemological monolithic of the network culture as well as a suggestive mental image. It is possible to breath of cosmopedic knowledge whenever the distributed intelligence produces cognitive surplus (Shirky, 2010), or whenever a community of practices creates new knowledge, by updating the existing one.

The soul of the cosmopedic knowledge lives in the social body when it produces aggregation, cooperation, creative collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> With the term *cosmopedia* Lévy and Authier (1997) intend a “new kind of organization of knowledge, largely based on the possibilities (...) open by the information technology, of representation and dynamic knowledge management (...). Cosmopedic knowledge brings us closer to the lived world rather than moving away from it (...). Cosmopedia dematerializes the separation of knowledge. It dissolves the differences among the disciplines as it is a space where powers are exercised to allow only the existence of certain areas with fluid boundaries, which are structured by variable flow concepts and objects in perpetual redefinition” (Lévy & Authier, 1997, pp. 210-211)

Thus the cosmopedia may now find into the *fandom communities*, one of its most fully accomplished versions or, anyway, its most believable phenomenological approximation.

This is the reason why fan fiction represents an interesting subject to study in the field of the education sociology and a new theoretical challenge. In fact, starting from Jenkins's observations, among the many approaches related to fan studies, a thread which interprets fan fiction practices as a pedagogical tool, has been increasingly important.

In this direction, various studies have been conducted on the different contributions that fan fiction practices can offer within the classroom, from the development of interpretative abilities to the learning of a foreign language (Black, 2008; Larsen & Zubernis, 2010).

As Boccia Artieri (2008) suggests, the membership in fandom culture leads the individual experience to converge into community forms supported by mediated communication; a membership that is not manifested with a mere subscription to a group but it comes out to be an acknowledgment based on the sharing of practices and *weltanschauungen* and a form of co-habitation in online interaction environments. The Media membership turns into media expressivity by means of those one who consume the same products of the cultural industry; expressivity that lives on elaborations and re-elaborations and collective re-writing of contents which are at the basis of the fan fiction practices.

As known, there is no unique definition of the fan fiction phenomenon which can be generically defined as "imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary world" (Hellekson & Busse, 2014, p. 6), nor does it exist convergence of opinions about how to date this practice, since - according to some approaches - both the Iliad and the Odyssey might be tagged as the earliest types of shared fiction if we consider it as a form of collective storytelling.

It is not only the participative and expressive soul to connote pedagogically the fan fiction, but also, and above all, the collaborative *problem solving* that is to say the tension of fans to produce together a development of knowledge and the sharing of media flow through the contents which therein are produced or re-semantized. Within the current contexts of participatory culture - where fan fiction communities may be collocated - it is possible to observe the emergence of learning principles defined as "connected learning": "Connected learning is realized when a

young person pursues a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults and is, in turn, able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career possibilities, or civic engagement” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4). Among the aims of the “connected learning” it is particularly underlined the opportunity to “link a broader and more diverse range of culture, knowledge, and expertise to educational opportunity” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4). According to the scholars, the “connected learning” model can affirm only when the school recognizes the importance of the interest-driven learning within the classrooms (Ito et al., 2013, p. 5).

Among the members of a fan fiction community, information is “increasingly dispensed from contextual connections with the aim to link to forms of meta-textuality that allow them to be permuted and recombined in ever-different and automated configurations” (Boccia Artieri, 2008, p. 15).

There is therefore a continuous exchange between popular cultures and mainstream knowledge. The media industry incorporates the expressive forms and the creativity of users while the last ones cease to be simply audience, fans, textual poachers (Jenkins, 1992) to become textual performers.

The processes of the incorporation of the mainstream textuality and the resistance tactics are enriched with a variety of performative practices: remix, production and content discourse, where, really important in educational terms, the ability of monitoring and criticizing the user generated content and the mainstream culture reaches considerable levels: “New media languages, of the interactivity, of the recombination of shapes and contents, of the cross medial ubiquity, (are) internalized and become part of the media habit of individuals who have learned to *live in* the media, and to concretely shape their territories” (Boccia Artieri, 2008, p. 17). Inevitably, the media industry capitalizes the creativity and performativity of the users by including them in the viral marketing of cultural productions. By this way the ephemeral artifacts, produced within fan communities, become important cultural traces that it is useful to observe (Hellekson & Busse, 2014).

Fans, in turn, through their interpretative and productive tactics decide the extent of their approach and distance from the narrative proposals of mainstream culture, by redrafting them, decoding and re-coding them: “Interpretative communities are communities of practices: individual

experiences intertwine to the forms of the collective imaginary, so that their reflexivity opens to the communitarian and participatory dimension” (Boccia Artieri, 2008, p. 21).

The Lévy’s collective intelligence is perfectly expressed within the knowledge communities which are voluntary, temporary and based on “tactical affiliations” and common emotional investments: “the members of a thinking community search, write, connect, consult, explore (...) Not only does the cosmopedia make available to the collective intellect the whole of the pertinent knowledge available but it also represents as a place of collective discussion, negotiation and re-elaboration” (Lévy, 1997, p. 217).

Fan communities embody the Lévy’s ideal of cosmopedia: they are large communities able to self-organize and focus on collaborative production, on the construction and diffusion of meanings facing, in a continuous dialect, the artifacts of popular culture. The communities of practice are *imagined* and *imagining* communities that existed long before the Internet, which find new life and new lymph by means of it. As Jenkins notes, “under many aspects the cyberspace is not but the widening of the fans world”. There is, however, difference between shared knowledge (the information known by all members of a community) and collective intelligence (knowledge available to all community members): the collective intelligence expands a community’s productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 164). The Lévy’s collective intelligence is therefore far from coinciding with the ‘hive mind’, where individual voices are suppressed and conformity is the rule; it is rather about reciprocal exchanges where individual opinion is valued, where the re-contextualization is a dynamic and continuous process and every information particle increases thanks to social interaction. The new digital environment, Jenkins states, “increases the speed of fan communication, resulting in what Matthew Hills calls ‘just in time fandom’” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 167). The knowledge community establishes common norms, values and common objectives, expressing all its pedagogical potential. According to Lévy, however, there is a perfect harmony between the mechanisms of knowledge production and those that are necessary to support affiliation.

## **The case study**

As previously said, the fan fiction community chosen as case study is the Erika Fan Page (EFP). EFP was born in 2001, thanks to the efforts of its founder and current administrator, Erika. This community had more than 430000 members at the end of 2015<sup>2</sup>. EFP is a well-known reference point for all those passionate about fanfiction production. Other relevant fanfiction sites in Italy are *wattpad.com* and *fanworld.it*, both more recent than EFP.

EFP is a place where people addicted to media can share their passions with other fans, and can add “unexpected and potentially subversive themes to established story lines” (Green, 2010, p. 208), as witnessed by the words of this user:

For the first time I met someone who thinks like me, and, above all, someone with whom I can share my ideas. It is not easy to find someone like that in the daily life. And I immediately felt like being at home.

According to Green: “fan fiction communities do more than get together online to talk about their passion: they produce and consume materials which reinforce aspects of their fan identities, allowing them to enjoy richer, prosumer fan experience” (Green, 2010, p. 147). Since fan fiction, production is a phenomenon that develops and realizes predominantly or almost exclusively online, it is highly suitable to be analyzed through a pure netnography, i.e. a research method exclusively based on online data collection and information generated from CMC technologies.

## **Research Methodology**

### *Research Design*

First step of our netnographic study was to define, and then progressively specify and refine, the research objective, by reviewing the

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<sup>2</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> November 2017, the EFP members are 520447, 191594 of them are registered as authors. Moreover, the EFP site hosts 492249 stories, 1764295 chapters and 6050596 reviews.

main theoretical and empirical researches about the fan fiction production in Italy.

Our literature review showed a gap: very few researches have been made on fan fiction, and, above all, these scientific contributions are mostly based on quantitative methods. Finding this gap in the scientific literature led us to narrow the scope of the research to deeply analyze, using netnography, the fanfiction production of an Italian online community.

Main research goal was further specified and operationally defined in three research questions:

R1) What are the motivations behind fan fiction production?

R2) What is the identity process through which a fan turns into a writer?

R3) What are the practices implemented by fan-writers within dedicated online communities?

The case study was selected using the Google search engine and the following keywords: “fan fiction”, “Italian”, “community” “forum”. The EFP community was the best choice because it showed all the criteria suggested by the netnographic literature (Kozinets, 2010); i.e., the EFP is:

- relevant, because it is highly related to the research questions;
- active, EFP presents recent and regular communications;
- interactive, with active communications between participants;
- heterogeneous, with a high number of different users;
- rich, as EFP has a lot of detailed and descriptive data.

### **Access to the field and data collection**

The access to the field was gained through several steps. First, there was a lurking phase, whose aim was to make us more familiar with the community and its dynamics of functioning. This covert access helped us to gather information about the EFP overall structure, its organization, its rules and netiquette, its most active members, and gatekeepers<sup>3</sup>. The lurking phase was also useful to learn the language and the specialized

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<sup>3</sup> Gatekeepers are “actors with control over key sources and avenues of opportunity. Such gatekeepers exercise control at and during key phases of the youngster’s status passage(s). Such gatekeepers’ functions would actually be carried out by different personnel in the different organizational settings” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 27).

vocabulary<sup>4</sup> used by EFP users; without knowing it would have been impossible to understand the productive and interactive dynamics of the community.

The lurking phase provided enough information about community organization and gatekeepers, so we decided to switch to an overt access, informing the admins of the community about the research process and asking for their consent to continue the observation.

Since it is a netnographic inquiry, the main source of information were interactions and communications between community users. These texts, already available online, have been read, selected in relation to the research goals, copied and pasted into a word file and progressively analyzed.

The observation was conducted using a flexible and adaptive guideline, in which the main research topics and subtopics were listed and used to orient the work of the field. Choosing a flexible data collection technique is crucial, especially during the first few weeks of observation, when the knowledge of community and its practices is limited.

Observation took 6 months (from April to September 2015), and it comprised the following activities:

- reading the fan fictions produced by EFP users;
- analyzing the reviews made by EFP users;
- taking part to forum of the community.

During the observation, we initially preferred not to intervene in the forum discussions, limiting to collect and analyze the spontaneous interactions produced by the community users, thus reducing the risk of altering or contaminating them. After a few weeks of observation, however, we decided to play a more participatory role by interacting with community members, and the observation was integrated with 15 interviews. Interviewees were selected among the most active users of the community, and then contacted privately to explain them the research scope. Each selected user was allowed to choose the preferred tool, date and time be interviewed.

As for the observation, a flexible interview guideline was developed, leaving the interviewees free to express their ideas and opinions in their

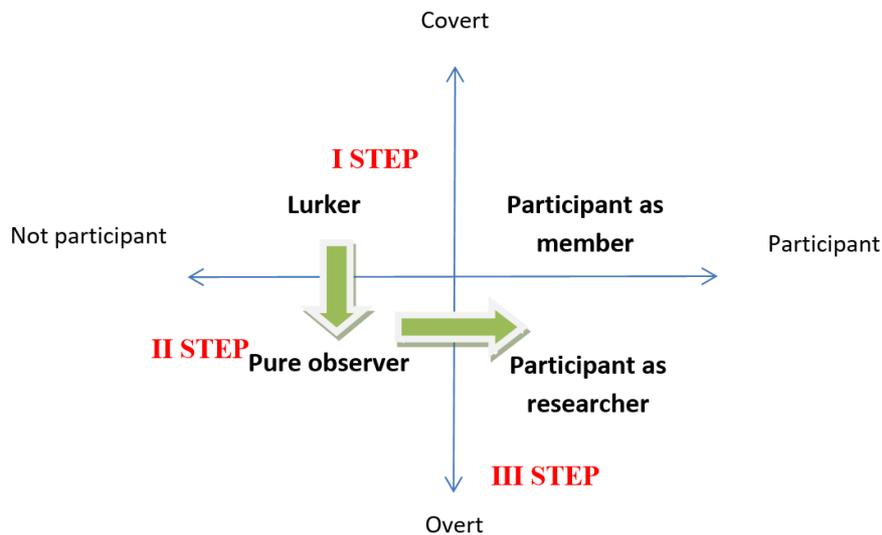
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<sup>4</sup> The language and the specialized vocabulary were learned by studying all the documents produced by the EFP community: regulations, FAQ section and two guides addressed to all users that want to review other users' stories. All documents are downloadable from the EFP site.

own language, and free to share their daily experience as a community members, in accordance with the principle of the “central role of the interviewee” (Montesperelli, 1998). Interviews were conducted in synchronous mode, via skype, or via instant messaging platforms, depending on the preference expressed by the interviewee in the contact phase.

It is interesting to highlight how the researchers’ role within the community evolved from lurker to participant as a researcher (see figure 1), in parallel to the increase in the knowledge of the phenomenon.

*Figure 1. Evolution of the Researchers’ Role in the EFP Community*



Observation and interviews ended when a saturation was reached (Bertaux, 1981; Glaser & Strauss, 1987), i.e. when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation.

## Data Analysis

The empirical basis is made up of these type of data:

- online conversations among EFP users;
- transcriptions of the interviews to the EFP members;
- field notes.

The empirical basis has constantly and progressively underwent to the following procedures: coding, interpretation, abstraction and comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 2002). Data collection and analysis followed a grounded approach: the analysis of the information was carried out during the data collection stage, and not at the end of it. Moreover, as stated by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1987), the information has been analyzed several times according to the circular principle of the interpretative process (Montesperelli, 1998): if new categories of analysis emerged during the collection, the already encoded information is read and rerouted in the light of the new categories.

## Reliability

The research group followed several criteria to check the research reliability:

1) Acquiring familiarity with the EFP culture through a prolonged immersion within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), this was necessary to understand in depth the dynamics of operation and to assimilate its languages, values and norms;

2) *Triangulation*. Observation were supported and integrated with the interviews to the EFP users. this gave us the opportunity to interact directly with community members and to deepen, integrate, and clarify what has emerged from the observation;

3) *Debriefing sessions*. We organized periodic meetings to take stock of the situation, to evaluate the methodological choices and to share ideas and opinions;

4) *Peer scrutiny of the research project*. We discussed our research methodology and findings during conferences in both Italy and abroad, receiving suggestions and insights from the colleagues;

5) *Member check*. Following the adequacy principle (Schütz, 1932), the final research report was disseminated among community members in order to collect feedbacks and comments.

## **Research Results**

This section shows the results of the research. For ethical reasons, the excerpts are reported in a way to guarantee members' anonymity, eliminating any reference to usernames, email contacts or phone numbers.

R1) what are the motivations behind fan fiction production?

The answer to the first research question seems clear: the passion for one or more media products is a binding force that creates a strong link between geographically distant people. Passion is stronger than distance, and it helps to create a "family", as this user pointed out:

You can share your passions with people who share your interests [...] in your everyday life not all of your friends know the saga or the show you like [...] we create a small family.

Users' interactions showed that passion is a recurring motivation behind the decision to create a fan fiction. Usually, a fanfiction is born to show the love for a media product and to pay homage to it:

Fanfiction is, in my opinion, a sign of a strong appreciation for a work [...] Fans activities are a way to keep it alive forever.

However, inspiration could arise from different reasons; for example, the dissatisfaction with the ending of an episode and the desire to rewrite it in a different way:

After an obscene season finale, I decided to write a better one.

Other motivations are the desire to modify a fundamental element of the original plot and to rebuild the facts from that change (the so called "What if?" fan fiction), or to fill the narrative voids left by the author (the so-called "Missing Moments" fan fiction).

Fan stories often arise to give greater emphasis to secondary characters, considered not properly developed by the author of the original work.

Not to be underestimated is the therapeutic power of writing: fan-writers try to fill the psychological vacuum left by the end of a series or, in the case of the end of a season, to try to cheat the time while “waiting for the next one”. As this user wrote:

my biggest obsessions (yes, I need to love things to the utmost insanity to create something good) is Once Upon A Time, and now that the third season is over, I have withdrawal symptoms, so I cure my mental health with writing.

R2) what is the identity process through which a normal fan turns into a writer?

The full EFP user experience is a growth path, marked by passage rites and different roles. An identity development in line with other similar online communities (Addeo & Esposito, 2015). The analysis of the user presentation section shows that they enter the community as readers of other people's stories. EFP members gets free access to a vast fanfiction archive, in which the works are classified according to fandom they come from. This classification allows a reader to identify the fan fictions inspired by the favorite fandom. The reader's identity is built through the progressive definition of his tastes: each user is associated with an identification card, which records favorite stories and authors.

The next step is being a reviewer. EFP promotes review activity as a way to create direct link between writers and readers. Readers express their appreciation for story and, at the same time, gratify the authors:

I love you! Please do not make me wait as last month...I am addicted to you because the characters in your stories really say what I want to read and you know how to express it very well.

Reviews give also precious feedbacks on the work done, suggestions that could be about grammar, syntax, plot or character development.

I liked very much your fiction! and you have described very well the characters and their emotions without falling into the OCC<sup>5</sup>!

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<sup>5</sup> OOC means *Out of Character*, it happens when a fan fiction changes too much the way the characters act, behave and feel with respect to the original work. Source: <http://www.efpfanfic.net>

Review activity is encouraged by the community through a specific promotion program. The EFP user can escalate from the status of the new reviewer to the master reviewer.

After being first a reader and then a reviewer, the typical EFP user may become a writer:

I have just started this “career” [...] Reading was my favorite hobby, I spent hours and hours looking for stories that most resembled my tastes [...] Then one day in my head appeared the idea of a fiction, and so I took my laptop and said: why not try? And I publish it.

Writers present themselves and their own works in the community forum, and usually make meta-reflections and discussions on creative writing and on the most common issues they have to face.

Users that fully cover this process of identity building are more likely to acquire some fundamental skills: the importance of knowing a specialized vocabulary, as it reflects the way an organization is led; the respect of the community rules, such avoiding spoilers when writing a fan fiction or making a product with the right content rating system.

R3) what are the practices implemented by fan-writers within dedicated online communities?

EFP community encourages collaborative practices of various types; for ex-ample, contests promoted by the users are very common. Each organizer specifies contest rules, selection criteria, timing, prizes and, above all, the specific fandom or topics around which the participants will have to focus on their fanfiction.

The community also offers fanfiction on demand: any user can ask for a fan fiction he would like to read.

Hello everyone, I wanted to know if some author of The Walking Dead is interested in writing a story I've been thinking for a long time.

Likewise, writers looking for inspiration can turn to other users asking for suggestions and ideas.

I'm still here! Since I'm in a kind of a “Writer's Block” and I have no ideas, I've decided to offer me to write what you want!

Fan writers can also get in touch with the so-called beta readers, reviewers that are willing to preview a fan fiction in order to evaluate its formal correctness and narrative coherence.

EFP promotes real collaborative writing practices: users who have lost the inspiration, or who no longer have the opportunity to continue their fanfiction, can search for collaborators. A special form of collaboration is the so-called “round robin”, a group of authors alternate in writing paragraph and chapters. It often happens that, interacting in the forum, the writers get inspired for new stories and decide to undertake a collaborative writing project.

With regard to co-written stories, they are spontaneously born, maybe during a chat about imagining what our favorite characters could have done...and here's the fanfiction.

Beyond the specific research questions, a result that emerges clearly from the analysis is that the EFP community can be considered as an emblematic example of a cognitive surplus producer (Shirky, 2010), a community of practice, which, from pre-existing media production, aims to create new knowledge. In fact, the community makes available to its members an extensive fanfiction archive to which each user can freely access to publish their stories and/or to read and review the stories of others. This vast archive is a deposit of artifacts that could be considered ephemeral (Hellekson & Busse, 2014), but at the same time, they are durable: they leave permanent traces in the personal and professional biographies of the users.

Like other participatory cultures, fanfiction communities activate a process of learning by doing; i.e., EFP is also an effective environment for learning and acquiring skills: users not only increase digital media literacy but they also succeed in refining expertise and abilities they have learned in the offline world. EFP users can improve their writing skill. As noted by Lewis (2004), fan fiction writing is a particularly productive training: the fan writer, having a pre-existing and well-articulated plot and characters already developed to get inspiration from, should not take the time to invent something original, but can focus on writing techniques.

As this user confirms:

Thanks to the exercise, I've improved a lot, the basics of my style have remained the same, but I realize that between my first story and the last one...there is a chasm.

Constant practice and real-time feedback from other users help the aspiring writers improving their writing skills and developing a personal and distinctive style.

Reading the things I did at the beginning embarrassed me to death! I think I've matured a lot, I was also told by someone who read something written by me a few years ago and compared it with the latest stories [...] I'd like to be able to publish some-thing serious one day.

For some users, community experience turned out to be a real launch pad to a writer career. Some of the best stories published on EFP have attracted the attention of important publishing houses and have been collected and published in some volumes.

In recent times they have published books containing the best stories of different community authors, which is certainly a great achievement and shows that there are many talents in Italy, it is great that EFP gave them the chance to get...let's say...a little bit famous!

### **Discussion: The cultural heterotopies and the self-managed educational agencies**

Observing the practices of a fan fiction community with the aim to reflect on contemporary educational dynamics may seem a gamble at first glance. However, since youngsters are social actors perfectly aware of their own experiences and can therefore be a valuable source of information, we think it is useful to observe them in their concrete practices. Our research seem to confirm the doubt that the society for which we are currently trying to educate is dense both of cultural heterotopies which are difficult to catalog and of multiple possibilities of 'being social'. The natural asymmetry between educators and learners seems to reinforce itself since the routines and rules on which the education process is based do not appear to meet the social expectations and do not seem to be sufficient to promote the development of independent personalities. The ritual of the

educational process seems to be subverted by the centrifugal movements of young people who take refuge in peer communities: these communities turn into self-managed educational agencies, which are not only diverse and separate from schools, but almost antagonistic to the latter in proposal of a social model which seems to favor more effectively the reflective adaptation to the environment of the Self-as-subject. Also EFP can be seen as an ‘antagonistic’ educational agency. At school and as in this community of practice it is possible to observe the dual nature of the hierarchical relationships and peer relationships. However, unlike the class, this dual nature assumes more sophisticated forms: the online environment enhances the potentialities for connection and meta-reflection; besides, among these communities the organizational, regulatory, hierarchical and, above all, evaluating dimension is not imposed in a top-down movement but emerges independently from communicative and relational practices. In detail, observing the practices implemented within EFP, it is possible to identify some social dynamics that in our opinion should be taken into account to reinvigorate media education projects, in order to ensure its final absorption within ministerial planning.

The dynamics which have been observed are:

- Fan Fiction writing as a collective autobiography
- Fan Fiction communities as a digital media literacy playground

### **Fan fiction writing as collective autobiography**

The narrative acting in the world of fan fiction is a sort of collective tale where the desire of recognition and re-configuration of the centrifugal vital pokes of young people is expressed. Adolescents, in perpetual identity search, can reproduce aspects and fantasies related to their own self in their storytelling practices and in fictional plot in order to show themselves to their publics, including co-authors. Their writing sets the style according to the way they wish to be understood by others. Self-writing, as Demetrio (1996) states, fosters an inner maturation; it means that an individual is ready to get involved, to be seen by others as well, to offer her/himself to the attention of her/his potential readers: not only the page but also the eyes of others are the mirror of self-recognition.

Here lies all the pedagogical value of online writing, which is exponentially enhanced by the sharing attitude, and by the continuous mirroring of the self in the narrative arena along with the online partners. The collaborative construction of the meaning opens up uncharted paths which have a key to pedagogical value: managing multiple tasks all at once, processing operational assessment in a short time, and grasping the essential of phenomena is considered as a crucial competence. Knowledge is structured as “the result of cooperative practices where comparison and exchange are the basic ingredients” (Rivoltella, 2000, p. 50). It no longer opposes the pedagogical Jansenism of school to the media’s cultural hedonism (Jacquinot, 2000, p. 119) since the contiguity between education and communication may occur in the knowledge field as a negotiated activity, socially constructed.

The learning process takes place in an aware symbolic mediation with external world and knowledge development cannot be separated from communication, which is socially connoted. In this *media climate*, education can - and actually should do - provide a framework for the media world, namely the ability to mature ethical and critical awareness by developing a conceptual horizon that increases the sense of social life: the goal is to achieve critical autonomy through collaborative work.

### **Fan Fiction communities as a digital media literacy playground**

Literature about fan studies often subdivides amidst *affirmative* fans and *transformative* fans: “Affirmative fans can range from casual viewers to aficionado, but transformative fans are always strongly emotionally invested” (Hellekson & Busse, 2014, p. 4). In his work about online participation, Carpentier (2011) observes the different forms of engagement “ranging from interaction (where the request for a change is formally expressed) to opinion (potentially containing implicit requests for a change) and information (where no explicit request for change is recognizable)” (Carpentier, 2011, p. 74).

In line with these considerations, also in EFP participation ranges from a minimum engagement level - the *information* one - where users are limited to fulfilling forms and declaring their preferences, to the level of *opinion*, where fans engage in person, by reviewing the fan fiction products of other

users, and finally the *interaction* level where users interact directly throughout the writing process.

The second level is compelling for all members of the community: by writing reviews, in fact, new members begin to be more deeply in touch with others; on the other hand, fan fiction producers feel very grateful to receive a review of their contribution. The review, in fact, is an instrument by which fans' own creativity is rewarded and ratified, and by which their role within the community is established. Commentaries also serve as an incentive for peer production, so that seriality does not break. Finally, this activity is linked to the construction, through well-coded stages, of an online reputation.

The third level suggested by Carpentier can turn into a laboratory where to reach concrete goals: in many circumstances, in fact, originally produced fan fiction texts - elaborated and discussed on the platforms - became best-seller products. The best known is *50 shades of gray* by E.L. James, primarily written as fan fiction about *Twilight*. As for the EFP environment, a fan fiction product on Inuyasha by Lara Manni was later published for Feltrinelli as *Esbat*.

Hence, since EFP works as a social space that promotes and boosts forms of engagement and peer-review practices, it seems to be an excellent environment where to develop and improve the digital media literacy.

Although it still is a disputed concept (Buckingham, 1998; Hobbs, 1998; Potter, 2013), the digital media literacy is anyway valuable because it can be used to promote empowerment, social inclusion, and autonomy of the social subjects (Collard et al., 2017). It is not just about technical skills: digital media literacy is in fact linked to critical evaluation abilities, creative expression, civic and political participation (Livingstone et al., 2012). As Livingstone (2008) emphasizes, on the one hand, it offers the tools to actively participate in democratic processes, and to think autonomously and critically; on the other hand, the digital media literacy makes it easier to face the job market both as a consumer - by being able to choose discerningly - and as a worker - by managing the tools which facilitate the achievement of one's own objectives (van Deursen et al., 2014). Therefore, digital media literacy is not reduced to a set of 'how-to' skills (Buckingham, 2009): it not only allows young people to adapt better to what society demands and expects, but is one of the tools that allows them to also be potential agents of change (Livingstone, 2004, 2008).

In line with Black's research findings (2008), also our research work highlights the literacy that can be acquired by means of the fan fictions practices, suggesting how the manipulation of literary genres and the crossing of narrative lines in search of new development help adolescents in facing the and in measuring with the different 'texts', in developing analytical, interpretative and synthesis abilities, and in reworking the plot through a creative process instantly visible to their audiences. The youngsters, therefore, clearly seem to develop the 'creative skills' discussed by van Deursen and van Dijk (2014). In the passage from the first to the second level of engagement - as described by Carpentier - they learn to familiarize themselves with narrative and interpretative techniques, acquire relational skills and learn that their own identity and reputational construction have some social repercussions. In addition, in order to build effective narratives, young people have also to carry out a context analysis. Alongside an enthusiastic involvement in the manipulation of cultural products, it emerges the development of precise relational and peer-determined strategies. In fact, the skills acquired are, in their development, instantly 'reader-oriented' and 'sense co-production' oriented: both beta-readers and the community of fans actively intervene in the production process, and this translates into a growing awareness.

As Black (2008) points out when she argues that fan fiction platforms are 'affinity spaces' that contrast "with the more rigid structure of the classroom that limits the ability of children to contribute to the functioning of the space", also the observation of the communicative dynamics within EFP shows how in the self-managed spaces young people succeed in developing and respecting precise rules that are however perceived as less rigorous than those of the traditional classroom, enabling them to enhance crucial cognitive and relational skills for the demands of the contemporary society. This circumstance reflects Mannheim's thought that young people are a *latent resource* of social change by favoring the "adaptation to rapid changes or completely new circumstances" (Mannheim, 1951, p. 58). In Mannheim's view, young people are in fact *outsiders*, living on the edge of the pre-established order of society, and therefore being available to "various abilities and openness" (Mannheim, 1951, p. 61).

They "have not yet assumed the social order as *given*. Unlike adults, which have now settled a horizon of habits and ratings that inhibit their ability to open and adapt to the new" (Merico, 2012, p. 120), young people

have the potential to handle the influences that come from the outside in a more appropriate way. This potential can, however, remain unanswered if traditional socialization agencies do not know how to grasp it, by favoring their action “through specific forms of integration” (Mannheim 1951, p. 62). The school therefore - and with it a new form of media education - is called upon to find out how to translate these latent potentials into effective resources with which young people can have a critical and constructive approach to the challenges of contemporaneity. Moreover, a mindful intervention by school institutions, supported by the contribution from the media education program may also help in preventing the negative effects of an intrusion from other stakeholders which could be moved by economical interests only. This is the case of the main influent tech companies such as Facebook, Google or Netflix which are currently involved - in the USA - in experiments in education “with millions of students serving as de facto beta testers for their ideas” (Singer, 2017). In fact, “some technology giants have begun pitching their ideas directly to students, teachers and parents - using social media to rally people behind their ideas” (Singer, 2017). However, as observed by Larry Cuban, emeritus professor of education at Stanford University, this way to taking a role in every step of the education program represents an “almost monopolistic approach to education reform”<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, as an Harvard report states<sup>7</sup>, there are not clear evidence that these kind of intervention may replace the role of the teacher at all.

### **By way of conclusion: some clues for a *new* media education**

According to Soller (2001), the features that distinguish an effective group are participation, social rooting, evaluation of performance and group processing, application of interactive learning abilities, positive interaction (promotive).

A good collaborative group, as Calvani (2005, 2010) notes on the other side, “creates favorable conditions for a fertile mindset of subjective thinking that can help in detecting unusual links between elements and blocks of knowledge” (Calvani, 2010, p. 123). Fan fiction communities are

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<sup>6</sup> <https://larrycuban.wordpress.com>

<sup>7</sup> <http://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/dreambox-key-findings.pdf>

real collaborative groups that ‘learn by doing’ and self-promote themselves by pushing on active learning. What kind of educational contribution can then be supplied to these self-poietic communities which are independent in their management? And, vice versa, which directions for the design of effective training interventions can the observation of these communities of practices suggest? According to Soller (2001), for each indicator of an effective group, appropriate strategies can be proposed to support interaction: brainstorming, changing roles in the group, individual and collective performances evaluation to promote group-processing, assignment to participant of open activities to support the application of active learning conversation skills, and so on.

If well aided, fan fiction communities can then help in training and in the social building of knowledge. On the other hand, the observation of the autonomous and self-organized fan fiction work can be a useful stimulus to organize, in the classroom, some workshops focused on the building of shared narration. These workshops could be useful not only to develop literacy among the youngsters but also to help them to cooperate in order to achieve a common goal. Thus, a well targeted Media Education (ME) intervention could be a valuable ally, since the ME is not only a matter of learning specific media skills likewise the computer-mediated communication rules, the building of narrative plots, etc.. The ME is also a way of implementing reflective and meta-reflective skills, and managerial and motivational abilities, which are teleologically oriented to productive group dynamics. These dynamics can organize the conversational shifts, the time and space of each intervention, can help in avoiding exclusion and overwhelming, so that “applicant, clarifier, mediator, informer, facilitator rotate for each segment of dialogue”<sup>8</sup>.

The ME, in this case, is not an external and ‘extrinsic’ intervention to the dynamics and ‘social reasons’ of the collaborative community but rather it configures itself as a *modus agendi* embedded by the participants in the group, a shared social practice, and a meta-contextual competence that can guide the group to the prefixed goals, producing reflexivity at the individual and collective level. It has to grasp the productive consumption of users as a social practice in the specific context, or as the result of the combination of several factors: the socio-demographic characteristics of the users, their socio-cultural status, the relationships with significant adults

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.nataliavisalli.it/livelloB/modulo10/laboratori/calvani3\\_2.pdf](http://www.nataliavisalli.it/livelloB/modulo10/laboratori/calvani3_2.pdf)

and the peer group, the schooling processes, etc. Rather than “measuring the effects of media attendance, it is necessary to study the ways in which it is intertwined with everyday life practices and the processes of formation, identities and socialization” (Cappello, 2009, p.18).

The socialization process, as Besozzi (2006) remembers, is a “large, continuous and articulated (...) process that brings the subject to ‘take part’ of a social reality in a competent and thoughtful way; thus it is a process that aims at building social bonds, sense of belonging, identity (...) In this process, there are many formal institutions or spaces, as well as informal experiences, and asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships” (Besozzi, 2006, p. 115). Fan fiction communities can therefore be regarded as a social space for informal learning and socialization, for a *media educative* socialization, which helps to understand both the process of identity construction and young people’s everyday life practices. A *media educative* approach enables young people to self-manage (or co-manage with significant adults) their relationship with the media.

In many European countries, the ME is included in school curricula years (Iania & Augaded, 2013); however, in many other countries proposals have not yet been finalized. In Italy, for example, the ME has often been misunderstood and ignored by ministerial programs, or it has been reduced to just teaching some practical skills (Parola & Ranieri, 2011; Farnè, 2010; Tirocchi, 2013) focusing on prevention of the risks associated with cyberbullying or online harassment, or it has been subject to individual teachers’ choices (Aroldi, 2011; Aroldi & Murru, 2014). The biggest mistake was to identify the ME with mere infrastructure and to think that this was sufficient so that strongly consolidated mentalities and habits would automatically renew.

Technological enthusiasm has often affected traditional didactics by transforming it without setting up a pedagogical-cultural horizon that framed practice and transformed it into educational planning. Lastly, it was believed that the training of teachers should be of a technical and instrumental nature: “Overall, a form of *instrumental progressivism* has been widespread (...) which has in fact produced a narrow view of education, increasingly pronounced in the vocational terms of a professionalizing education rather than in the holistic terms of the formation” (Cappello, 2009, p. 25). The ME is also particularly unbalanced

today for Internet and is neglecting in-depth studies on other media, which is definitely an indicator of widespread media panic.

ME often is part of seminar cycles not included in official school curricula (Riva *et al.*, 2016) and is perceived as an intrusion or a diversion. Scarcelli (2017) summarizes the negative perceptions of ME activities by students: “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” (Scarcelli, 2017, p. 111).

Yet, despite a widespread disenchantment, the research findings from a national project by Rivoltella (2006) suggest that young people firmly believe in the importance of the role and contribution of teachers in the ME’s processes. Rivoltella observed that young people at school use very sporadic computer technologies, and in any case it is an instrumental use, without a critical-analytical approach. This issue, says Rivoltella, “is particularly significant in relation to the awareness that the children have about the crucial role that schools and their teachers might have about the new media and technologies” (Rivoltella, 2006, pp. 67-68).

The students do therefore not underestimate the role of the teacher, as long as she/he is able to offer qualified help in understanding the media in all their technical, linguistic and expressive-communicative complexity. The teacher should act as “a counselor of relations and of interactions, but especially of ‘how to do’, and as a ‘processes’ strategist” (Morcellini & Cortoni, 2007, p. 147). According to Rivoltella (2006), “This would be an interesting indication that highlights how the school has to work to qualify its contribution not so much in the direction of a functional digital literacy but rather in that of the creation of a technology culture that encompasses sophisticated uses, both on the creative and critical side” (Rivoltella, 2006, p. 96). It is only “through the creation of this culture that technology can deploy its poietic ability in transforming the real, nurturing the social and human capital of a community, building active citizenship. This is the only way it can become the technology of the Self” (Cappello, 2009, pp. 29-30). The new type of education which overcomes the barriers between school and out of school, it provides for a different role of the teacher, a cooperative learning and a training structure meant as ‘community’ or as ‘a

common space to be shared' where everyone cooperates in respect of one's own and other individuality and where the competences of each individual are recognized and valued (Piromallo Gambardella, 1997). Hence, a deeper attention to communicative socialization is needed, which increasingly requires a formative polycentricism that can capture the dimensions of contemporary change in educational processes and socialization (Salzano, 2000). School institutions should no longer play a role of protection but of *preparation* so that young users can "grow up as citizens actively and critically participating in the modern 'mediated public sphere'" (Cappello, 2009, p. 24).

Education (structurally communicative since it is based on a dialogic interaction) and mediated communication (structurally educational since it can affect the visions of the world and the dimensions of public and private life) may find in ME a point of intersection which is both epistemological and methodological. Communication and education sciences find in ME a conceptual and operational apparatus within which to elaborate educational interventions. Fan fiction communities, combine critical analysis and creative production and thus represent a propitious space for a media educative action where analytical reflection nourishes the and nourishes itself of practice "by giving rise to a kind of critical creativity, and creative criticism. In this sense, production is (...) itself a reflection, through which the youngsters build up their knowledge inductively from their daily life media experience (...); by *creatively thinking* about their media investments (...) they can better understand the macro conditions that make them possible and somehow affect them" (Cappello, 2009, pp. 26-27).

ME, therefore, is not only intended as "education *by means of* the media, to the media and throughout the media" but as a kind of structural coupling among a) the abilities needed to create effective and profitable learning communities, b) a media literacy that serves as a guiding criterion and a productive tool, and c) an increased individual and collective reflexivity implemented by relational and cross-disciplinary modes, and by the meta-competences that the Internet helps in building and settling. Only through a paideia which integrates online and offline training contributions, it will be possible to answer the question posed by Mannheim with whom we started: "What kind of society do we educate for?" It is the society of the present: that one ready to transform itself into the society of the future.

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