

GENERATIONS, DIGITAL USES AND COMPETENCES: TRENDS AND GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

Special Issue Editors

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Historically, media were mostly considered as a means of reinforcement of the generational gap, commonly in a family context. However, the intergenerational gap has been diminishing over time (Bolin and Skogerbø, 2013), and the digital era is contributing to bridge the generational divide. Antonija Čuvalo and Zrinjka Peruško (2017) discern media repertoires shared among the youngest (the so-called digital generation or digital natives), and the older generation of digital immigrants. In this sense, there is a need to work closely on life course perspectives as a possible explanation of the weakening or perpetuating of the generational gap (Amaral and Daniel, 2018). The context of digital literacy has reinforced activities by civil society and schools, and can shed some light on the discussion of this need (Brites, 2017). Furthermore, a generational perspective in family and school environments can empower this discussion. In this special issue, we aim to discuss some of the above-mentioned considerations. We ponder the view that that the field is currently driven by three trends and also by some persistent gaps that need to be addressed.

The first trend is related to *isolations and media generations*. The concept of 'generation' seems promising for an explanation of economic, social, political and cultural changes. Although original Karl Mannheim's social theory of generations from the late 1920s was concerned with the political dimension as the most relevant for explaining different generational identities, today's media affordances, forms and uses could be more important even for the way young people relate to politics (Corsten, 1999; Edmunds and Turner, 2005).

The rapid development and spread of media and communication technologies that have been occurring since the 1980s – and especially from the first decade of 21st century due to the rise of social media - have aroused interest for generational differences in media use among media and communication scholars. The focus has been on the role of youth in domestication, shaping and construction of digital media and on the effects of the 'new media' on the young people's culture(s) and minds (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998). The main narrative has referred to the unique 'global digital generation' (Aroldi and Colombo, 2013; Edmunds and Turner, 2005) born with the proliferation of the Internet and mobile media. Piermarco Aroldi and Fausto Colombo (2013, see also Bennet *et al.*, 2008) criticize monolithic, historically and geographically decontextualized dominant narrative, pointing to the complexities of the definition of generations and the role of "inter-generational interaction in shaping of collective identities" (2013: 175). The dominant narrative on 'digital generation'" (Internet generation, digital natives, Generation Y, Millennials) usually deals with the pure fact that a certain cohort was born together with the rise of digital and mobile media as a sufficient condition for disruptive, unique and unambiguous generational effects of these technologies (Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

Such a linear narrative often neglects (i) diverse geographies with their histories, different media landscapes and the way in which these differences constitute specific cultural identities (Edmunds and Turner, 2005); (ii) different socio-economic positions; (iii) intergenerational continuities and practices (of previous generations) which make possible and are integrated in new ones; (iv) generation and also intergenerational dynamics as

an active force in shaping media and communication technologies. Furthermore, Göran Bolin and Oscar Westlund (2009) point out that technology does not only make distinctive generations, but that technology per se also determines the ways of its use. Their basic argument is that those who "have grown up with different mediated experiences during their formative years will relate to the mobile technology in a variety of ways" (Bolin and Westlund, 2009: 108).

The second trend is *the digital and the will of media nostalgia*. Media experiences can shape the social construction of a 'generational identity' that stems from media and digital media appropriations. 'Generational contexts' and 'generational identities' flow in unmediated media experiences, in a logic of individualizing communication (Amaral and Brites, 2019). Considering the hybridity that characterizes the current media ecosystem, the consumptions are not necessarily generational but rather intergenerational (Amaral and Brites, 2019).

In the context of media experiences, several generations intersect with the notion of 'memory'. Kerwin Lee Klein argues that "memory can come to the fore in an age of historiographic crisis precisely because it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse" (2000: 145). There are expressions of nostalgia in aesthetics, lifestyles, objects and media content (Niemeyer, 2014). In fact, "nostalgia is not only a fashion or a trend. Rather, it very often expresses or hints at something more profound, as it deals with positive or negative relations to time and space. It is related to a way of living, imagining and sometimes exploiting or (re)inventing the past, present and future" (Niemeyer, 2014: 2).

Media may disrupt memory (Nora, 1972), which leads to a reinvention of history through a crisis of representation, promoting what Jameson describes as 'historical amnesia' (1998: 20). Therefore, "nostalgia is related to the concept of memory, since it recalls times and places that [there] are no more, or are out of reach" (Niemeyer, 2014: 5).

The emergence of nostalgia implies a crisis of temporality (Niemeyer, 2014). The nostalgia wave can indicate two social phenomena: a resistance to fast technologies despite their use and the creation of a wanderlust state as an escape from reality (Niemeyer, 2014).

Concerning media generations, Ryan Lizardi (2017) claims that there are transgenerational audiences. Furthermore, media industries "create a surrogate nostalgic identity for younger generations by continually feeding them the content of their elders" (Lizardi, 2017: 1). Madison Magladry sustains that "mainstream nostalgia is invested in intertwining individual and group identities together, effectively guiding subjects to conflate their personal identities with their own specific cultural and social contexts, and vice versa" (2016: 269).

The media obsession with nostalgia (Hutcheon, 1998) encourages the dominant trend of reproducing the old as good (Lizardi, 2014). Commercial nostalgic representations are static and uncritical (Lizardi, 2014; Magladry, 2016) arising from a 'retrotopia' (Bauman,

2017). The media, as retro industries, are producers and mediators of the past (Kay et al., 2016). Therefore, "the increasing trend is to make rehashed texts and characters consistently available and appealing to all generations in an attempt to ensure their perpetual cultural relevance" (Lizardi, 2017: 1).

'Mass-mediated nostalgia' (Menke, 2017) is a created mediatic landscape that shows a past that does not refer to historical time but to "media creations, personalities, and allusions" (Davis, 1979: 125). Manuel Menke (2017) distinguishes 'mediated nostalgia' from 'media nostalgia'. The first term refers to the media as mediators of past experiences. Media nostalgia refers to the fact that "media culture, technology, or content are at the centre of the nostalgic longing" (Menke, 2017: 630).

In the age of 'social acceleration' (Niemeyer, 2014) through technology, nostalgia arises in apparent contradiction as its opposite as retro-cultures contradict the traditional obsolescence of digital devices and gadgets. The trend of 'retromania' (Reynolds, 2011) exploits individual and collective nostalgias, continuing marketing that uses the perspective of the past as idyllic or as a break with current fast-forward consumption. The commoditization of nostalgia (Grainge, 2000) relies on the use of terms such as 'vintage' and 'retro' to delimit the return of products, fashions and trends of the past, a process that is easily recognizable in the market packed with nostalgia of discourse (Castellano and Meimaridis, 2017). There are many examples of media nostalgia from television series to retro-gaming, or analogic photography to online communities that share media experiences from their childhood (Menke, 2017).

Thirdly, we point to *the revitalisation of the emergence of media literacy*. The study of generations with respect to digital uses and competences is relatively recent, compared with the broader field of generations and media. Even so, one could say that this is a very active and specific field of study. It can be said that this is a trend nowadays.

At present, working with teenagers and older students is one of the main fields of research all over Europe (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016). One of the major developments regarding generations and media literacy is the connection between children and/or youth and digital competences. This can be related to different descriptions, terms and implications, such as 'digital skills', '21st century learning and skills', 'digital natives', 'digital generation', 'net generation' (Erstad, 2015; Jenson and Droumeva, 2017; Kopic, 2018; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998, 2009). At the same time, there is often an interrelation of media, and particularly of new media, with civic topics (Kim and Yang, 2016). A recent sub-trend in research refers to dealing with specific platforms and young people, such as *YouTube* experiences, and also young children and touchscreens. The 'latest new technology' has always provided dynamic research. The main difference nowadays is that technology is ever-changing, which also means that the theoretical conception on literacies, technologies and skills needs to gain another strength in research.

Recently, intergenerational research has expanded, mostly into two inter-directions: very young children/young people and parents and, at the same time, very young

children/young people and elders/grandparents. These intergenerational groups are visible throughout civil society projects (such as *AGE-Platform Europe*, 2019; *Hive NYC Learning Network*, 2019; *Media Literacy Council*, 2019) and in research and theoretical approaches (Livingstone *et al.*, 2015; Mascheroni *et al.*, 2016; Meimaris, 2017; Marsh *et al.*, 2018). Within these approaches, game activities also constitute a relevant narrative of research (Ouellet *et al.*, 2017).

Media literacy is often pondered as a channel to bridge the intergenerational digital divide (Meimaris, 2017). Intergenerational perspectives also include research in the context of family-driven appreciations. In this regard, and following a tradition that has its roots in television (Aroldi, 2004), there is an intergenerational/family context-based perspective, as an interface that gives rise to preoccupations in the context of family.

There is also an agenda on the relationship between teachers/students. In this regard, adults are often reflected in the role of being parents, as we have already identified, and also as being teachers: from the perspective of creating the conditions for teachers to understand students (Saul, 2016), to the perspective of being responsible for teaching under the umbrella of media literacy (Fernández-Cruz and Fernández-Díaz, 2016; García-Ruiz *et al.*, 2016; Scheibe, 2009), in an interactive form (Hobbs, 2011), as well as in terms of challenging teachers' authority (Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer, 2016).

Another increasing line of work is the look at digital literacy and inclusion of digital immigrants. When referring to older people, we can see that there is a reinforcing of the idea of inclusion and digital literacy, and also of active ageing (Abad Alcalá, 2014; Loureiro and Barbas, 2014; Schäffer, 2007). Perhaps with low commercial interest, this age group is now receiving more attention (Amaral and Daniel, 2018). Yet, it was not always like that (Schäffer, 2007), in spite of all the difficulties regarding the skills to use digital media.

These research contexts lead us also to identify the gaps that could be addressed in a research agenda for the near future. Theoretical research and comparative research (for example, within the framework of media systems) are among the missing gaps identified. During the radio and television times, research considered adults as adults (further than acting as parents or teachers). In a sense, geography can have considerable relevance for neglected memories: missing histories and neglected geographies, such as, in the case of Balkan, African and Asian media generations, differences and shared identities across the region, post- socialist countries, postcolonial trajectories, to name a few.

Concerning audiences and media and digital competencies, the media industries also get less attention, *e.g.*, the topic of the industry of retro-culture, its audiences and media nostalgia, in relation to, for example, the rise and normalization of populism. Generational and intergenerational research on journalist practices, newsrooms and media organizations are also of decisive relevance (Brites and Pinto, 2017). Nevertheless, these topics are not often covered by research.

The aim of this special issue is to focus on some of these discussions and trends and also on some of the gaps that were identified. This special issue opens with an article by Daniel Calderón Gómez who attempts to reconstruct, by means of a Bourdieuan approach, young people's biographies of socialization in the use of ICTs in the area of Madrid. By using a robust sample of thirty in-depth interviews (structured by gender, age, education and type of digital accessibility), the author presents a typology of four techno-biographical trajectories: 'pro-technology users', 'practical users', 'mobile users' and 'professional users'. Sebastian Ivasović and Ivan Burić identify motives, patterns and frequency of smartphone uses in the context of face-to-face interaction among Generation Z which is defined as a cohort of those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Their study combines qualitative and quantitative data with a view to exploring how young people deal with the "fear of missing out" (FOMO), which is correlated with the need for constant connection. Patrícia Gil analyses the results of a qualitative study in a multi-platform writing training for Journalism students. The research focuses on the understanding and appropriation of professional journalistic practices by Generation Z, people who have experienced the context of media convergence and narrative hybridization since birth. The results show that Generation Z has greater flexibility in decision making and is more oriented towards a multi-platform production that reaches an audience scattered across many channels.

The article by Christiane Monteiro Machado and Jorge Pedro Sousa analyses stereotyped portrayals of older people in Brazilian advertising from a sample of advertising posts published on *Facebook* and *YouTube*. They show positive and negative stereotypes related to elders. While positive stereotyping correlates age with long-life experiences, negative stereotypes are more nuanced and imply difficulties with technology, a lost sense of reality, physical impairments and an old fashioned style.

Rebekka Haubold prepared a theoretical discussion that covers ageism through the fixation of age in German media pedagogy research and practice. The author also discusses the implications of fostering media pedagogical research and practice on target age groups. She considers the provision of impulses for rethinking and reflecting on the dominant focus on age in media pedagogy and at the same time presents a view of neglected contexts beneath age.

Dina Vozab's article aims to test the effects of socioeconomic status and generational effect on the formation of different news media repertoires in Croatia. Furthermore, the interplay between the socio-demographic factors and political interest in the formation of generational news media repertoires is discussed. The results are based on the Latent Class Analysis carried out on the Croatian sample from *Reuters 2018 Digital News Survey*. The article by Delali Dovie and colleagues studies digital literacy among different generations in Ghana. The authors present a framework of digital literacy in the country, taking into account socioeconomic specificities. A survey of individuals aged 18-59 years and 60+ years, supplemented with qualitative interviews, reveals a digital divide between generations, reduced intergenerational use of social media platforms, and a high generational gap in digital literacy.

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