



Youth and Communications

58% of the children between the ages of 2 and 5 play with videogames, know how to maneuver the iPad, but don't know how to ride a bike. 11% of them don't know how to tie their shoes or to answer correctly when asked their home address. This is the situation of the screen generation, who from the first months of life learn how to interact with computer monitors, videogames, cell phones, touch screens and smartphones even before they learn the skills for everyday life. This is the latest data in a research project monitoring how the interaction between children and technology has changed.

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The Y Generation

The digital age is characterized by a generation of young people who were born with the new technologies, are shaped by them and use them with great self-assurance and, unfortunately, also with great indifference and unawareness of the profound mechanisms that rule them, since they use this technology in a simply opportunistic and functional way. Ways of communicating, the perception of time and space, the concept of reality, even the way of having children, raising them, and teaching them are all changing.

It is hard to describe young people today because we must make the effort to understand the [technological] languages they use and their unique ways of expressing themselves. Young people today live in multiple, interconnected, decentralized and ambivalent spheres. All the "longitudes, latitudes" and environments that they frequent are becoming spaces in which time and the consumption of good – both real and virtual – fuse together more and more.

Young people's cosmovision (view of the cosmos) starts with a worldwide interexchange of communications. Youth feel like they are present everywhere, moving virtually through different cultures and geographical areas, entering into relation with people of other languages and cultures, becoming lead players in a hybrid learning experience.

These young people are modern communications: they were born into the media, they love it, they use it and they produce it.

The Y Generation is becoming more and more sensitive to the cognitive processes, beginning with the imagination. This generation is accustomed to pooling experiences, to comparing ideas directly, to giving advice and dialoguing simultaneously. Young people spend their days moving from one keyboard to another: from cell phones to computers to iPods, experiencing many things by multitasking. They are able to simultaneously study, chat, listen to music, answer their cell phones and watch TV (on the Web, naturally).

Society has by now been split into two large cultural groups: the digital natives, that is to say, those who were born in the digital age, and the digital immigrants, that is, everyone else, who leaped (or were thrust) into this arena as adults.

The split is caused by an alteration in neural connections in the brains of the younger generations, which is changing and transforming the generation gap into something new: what scientists call a brain gap. Cerebral connections develop differently in children who learn to use television and computers at a very young age than they do in persons who read and write and carry out physical activities. Particularly in schools today (but not only in this sphere), teachers are interacting with students who, as a result of their different cognitive experiences, have a different brain structure and thus teacher-student dialogue is difficult.

In young people, this anthropological mutation is translated into a need for lateralization—the need to be continually connected to the fluid information context.

Centrality of the Social Network

Web 2.0 marks the transition from the first form of the Internet (Web 1.0 with its static web pages, search engines, etc.) to today's social network (SN) (Wikipedia, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), characterized by socializing, interactivity, multimedia, hypertexts, the sharing of knowledge, easy use and user-generated content.

The platforms for socializing online take up a great deal of space in the young person's daily life and their services are becoming more and more essential inasmuch as they are tied to an always more accelerated and complex "contemporaneity" that requires instruments that simplify and stabilize time and relationships, augmenting the multiplication of the real and opportunities for interaction.

Young people use these platforms to monitor the movements of their friends and acquaintances, creating a friendship circle that is in continual flux between online and offline. Through SN, young people "take care" of their friends, setting up groups according to common interests and goals as a way of feeling close to one another. SN activates and cultivates the desire to keep communication perpetually open with one's friends by remaining always connected and reachable to them for large parts of the day.

It is a way of "never feeling alone," of being continually in the thoughts of one's friends. And last but not least, through the SN, young people become the "authors" of communication, producers of audio, video and textual material that are then circulated among those who have similar interests as a way of reinforcing relationships. An example of this is the distribution of music through portable digital supports like the iPod and then listening to this music as a group.

Young people today communicate via the Internet in a continuous way: online and offline are not "parallel states of being" but a single space of experience, subdivided in different ways and united by use and relationships. The centrality of relationships comes into play in the dynamics of mutual recognition and trust – the key that opens the door to social circles, which build stable relationships, safeguard memories and unveil future potentials. This helps to create a genuine condition of being with, of sharing and of mutual accompaniment not only at important times in a young person's life but also in his/her daily activities. Here, written and spoken words are valued as instruments that help to shape a common space and create the conditions for freely giving, receiving and revealing oneself with trust, building, from the ground up, an environment in which the personal dimension is placed in common.

Risks and Uncertainties

But in spite of these positive points, it is important not to underestimate the risks and uncertainties of the social network, which derive above all from the speed of interaction, from the rapidity with which information is circulated, and from the construction of online communications that suppress the temporal dimension, nullify the past and potentially flatten the present.

The multiplication of online friendships can be at the expense of their depth because those relationships are based on weak ties. Measuring oneself against one or more digital identities, which on the one hand reveals the extreme versatility of youth in establishing contacts, on the other hand runs the risk that the young person's identity, above all in the pre-adolescent and adolescent stages, might become pluralized in a myriad of virtual communities, which in their turn are pluralized. The purpose of these virtual communities is collaboration and social interaction, but one consequence of this is confusion between one's private and public life.

Other negative points: in these communities, banalization abounds as a way of avoiding conflict or of blending more fully into the group. One dares not express a position different from the common one. Expressions of intimacy are in keeping with the models drawn up by the group or else are expressed in an indirect or mediated way (at least most of the time). The purely-stated word prevails, which impoverishes the exchange of ideas, making any contact beyond the simple "being with" impossible. Friendships are constructed on the basis of similarity and affinity, ignoring the "otherness" of each individual with regard to age, different personal histories, points of view, etc. But it is hard to genuinely communicate with another person without being open to the ways in which he/she is different from oneself.

The disinclination to reveal oneself as a distinct individual tends to inhibit the person's sense of responsibility and witness. The inability to connect one's private and public life poses an obstacle to living in a digital civil society.

A Time for Teachers and for Communicator-Witnesses

The human being is and remains a creature of communication which, as Mounier said, is "less frequent than happiness and more fragile than beauty: the least thing can block or sever communication between people." Communication is therefore a complex blend of natural and conventional, syntactic and semantic, pragmatic and emotional elements. Its processes and activities are interwoven with metaphors, meanings, codes, interactions, projects, goals, hopes and the desire of the participants to collaborate and become involved with one another. All this makes communication one of the most beautiful and at the same time one of the most

tiring dimensions of human life. Communication leads the participants to continually monitor and adjust the way they interact and share themselves with others.

Consequently, if our ability to communicate does not evolve, then sooner or later we will find ourselves “out of the game” or “sitting on the bench” in the digital age. We will no longer have anything to say because we will not know how to say it!

Today we need teachers and communicators who witness to the thrill and interior resolve to take on the turbulent seas of change. They must be, in the first place, adventurous people, humble and determined explorers who are focused on the terrain ahead of them; persons who do not have all the answers but who know some practical secrets for living fearlessly and for allowing themselves to be guided through the night not by a safe and secure compass but by the North Star alone.

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