

## SAGGI – ESSAYS

### EDUCATION IN THE WEB 4.0 AGE. HOW MEDIA EDUCATION CAN CONTRIBUTE TO AC- TIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Nel mondo contemporaneo può accadere di pensare che le ambiguità e le manipolazioni che presiedono alla formazione di un'opinione collettiva nelle nostre società democratiche si siano determinate solo di recente, e solo in funzione delle ultime innovazioni tecnologiche. Non è esattamente così. La questione della formazione di un'opinione pubblica – che certo si è fatta più complessa e intricata nel mondo globalizzato di Internet – ha origini ben più lontane. È infatti dagli inizi del XX secolo che un nuovo concetto, quello della “democrazia dello spettatore” si fa avanti, ovvero, «si assiste a una rivoluzione nell'arte della democrazia che può essere usata per costruire il consenso sfruttando le moderne tecniche della propaganda» (Lippmann, 1922, p. 62). «Il ruolo dei media nella società e nella politica contemporanea, ci obbliga quindi a chiederci in quale tipo di mondo e di società vogliamo vivere e in particolare in quali termini vogliamo che la nostra società sia democratica» (Chomsky, 1994, p. 58). Una società può infatti essere definita democratica se l'opinione pubblica ha i mezzi per partecipare in modo attivo alla gestione dei propri interessi, e i mezzi d'informazione sono aperti e liberi. Tutto questo si è realizzato? Con l'avvento poi della televisione (Eco, 2001) e oggi dei nuovi media (Rete, social network) quale scenario si prospetta per la formazione dei cittadini? Dove si pone il confine tra condizionamento e libertà di pensiero e di scelta? Quale ruolo ha l'educazione nella sua tripartizione: educazione con i media, ai media, per i media (Rivoltella, 2015)? Si può andare oltre una visione contrassegnata dal bipolarismo “apocalittici” versus “inte-

grati” (Eco, 2001)? L’articolo muovendo dal quadro teorico esplicitato affronta il tema complesso di come l’educazione, in particolare la media education, illustrando i suoi più recenti orientamenti (dalla *social network analysis* – SNA, alla *sentiment analysis*) possa aiutare i soggetti in formazione a esercitare un pensiero critico rispetto all’*overload* di informazioni recepite, a gestire e controllare le fonti e a esercitare un consapevole ruolo di cittadinanza attiva (Censis, 2016).

In the contemporary age, it may seem that ambiguities and manipulations preceding the formation of a collective opinion in democratic societies are a recent phenomenon, mostly due to technological innovations. However, it is not so. Although it has become more complicated in the Internet globalized world, the formation of a public opinion has past origins. At the beginning of the XX century the new concept of the “democracy of the spectator” was born: «the art of democracy showed how to build consensus by using modern propaganda techniques» (Lippmann, 1922, p. 62). «Considering the role of media in contemporary societies and politics, we should wonder in what kind of democratic society we would like to live» (Chomsky, 1994, p. 58). Indeed, in a democratic society public opinion is able to actively participate in managing its own interests, and mass media are open and free. Is this our reality? With the introduction of television first (Eco, 2001) and of the new media then (web, social network), what is the possible scenario for the education of citizens? Where is the border between conditioning and freedom of thought and choices? What is the role of education in its threefold declination: education with media, to media and for media (Rivoltella, 2015)? Is it possible to go beyond a vision characterised by the “apocalyptic” versus “integrated” bipolarity (Eco, 2001)? Starting from this theoretical framework, this article tries to demonstrate how media education, with its most recent orientations (e.g. social network analysis – SNA, sentiment analysis), can foster critical thinking in

order to help people manage information overload, check information sources and be active citizens (Censis, 2016).

### *1. Media and propaganda, when representations become reality: a new problem?*

The role of media in contemporary politics invites us to ask ourselves what kind of world and society we want to live in and what kind of democratic society (Chomsky, 1994). Indeed, two different concepts of democracy co-exist today: a democratic society in which the public opinion can actively participate in managing its own interests, and where mass media are open and free; and a democratic society in which the public opinion is prevented from managing its own interests, and mass media are rigidly controlled (Chomsky & Herman, 2014) (a distorted model, though prevailing). A diachronic analysis can show what is meant by public opinion. The concept rose in Europe after the crisis of totalitarian regimes and the advent of national states (between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) characterized by centralized structures, strong bureaucratic, administrative and military organization. In such modern and complex societies, citizens were allowed to express collective judgements not only on political aspects, but also on cultural, religious and social facts. In each country, the process developed together with economic and social transformations, widespread education, growth of political and cultural circles, diffusion of newspapers. With the rise of the middle class, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new theoretical debate was started on the limits of state powers and the rights of the citizens. The relationship between private and public sphere, with all its implications as a crucial point between morality and politics, became a central theme. The British philosopher Locke, in his *An essay concerning human understanding* (2018), was one of the first to state that public opinion had a control function in society, thus establishing a clear distinction between the moral law expressed by the public opinion itself, and the civil law, expressed by the political power. The same dis-

tion was then used by Kant (2005), when he remarked the «public use of reason in all matters» (p. 47).

Publicity, intended as political involvement and citizens control of the state power, became more and more important (Chomsky & Barsamian, 2018). This theme was deeply debated in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England and France by philosophers such as, Bentham (2006), Constant (2008), who pointed on the relationship between public opinion and state power, between information and freedom of press. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal thought began to show how the public opinion, developed within the rise of a democratic state, could also have negative effects. Scholars such as de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* (2016) or Mill in *On Liberty* (2001) had already shown how public opinion could affect people's autonomy. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of public opinion evolved and changed according to economic and political transformations and to the greater and greater influence of mass media on the society.

Although the theme of the rise of public opinion has become complex in the globalized Internet age, it is much older. The concept of “democracy of spectators” dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the art of democracy developed into a way to build consensus through propaganda (Lippmann, 1922). In 1922, the American sociologist Lippmann published *Public Opinion*, an essay focusing on the relationship, in modern societies, between an always more heterogeneous public and mass media. On this he observed that «what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, but on pictures made by himself or given to him» (p. 25). Mass media – at that time mainly newspapers – could have a prevailing role in informing but also manipulating people. As representative of economic, political, religious etc. forces, mass media could strongly influence the society. In the same essay, he illustrates how people get to know facts that are not directly experienced, and analyses the problems of modern democratic societies and how they are affected by newspapers. In one of the first pages he states that «now in any society that is not

completely self-contained in its interests and so small that everyone can know all about everything that happens, ideas deal with events that are out of sight and hard to grasp» (p. 12). In other words, since men cannot have direct knowledge of everything, there can be no exact connection between the real world and people's images of the world; the need for representing the world produces pseudo-environments where people behave in response to the real environment (Cristante, 2004, p. 58). Lippmann discussed three important concepts: how democratic governments and institutions hinder knowledge of some facts of public interest; how socio-economic and cultural barriers prevent citizens from having access to information; and how psychology allows understanding of people's motivation to be interested in what happens beyond their own life.

As for the first point, Lippmann analysed how during the war censorship and privacy were often necessary in order not to alarm and generate anxiety or to encourage people to endure. The author makes a list of some of the most frequent obstacles to information in wartime: income, available time, educational level, no possibility to travel; beside all this, pieces of news might be deprived of details and be communicated in a synthetical, journalistic style, thus affecting comprehension of the news itself. Here Lippmann introduces a reflection on the models, that become a point of reference for those who write news. Between observation and facts, he places stereotypes: created within one's own cultural background and reinforced by mass media, stereotypes are said to be a cognitive basis for interpreting the reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1997) existing in the pseudo-environment created by propaganda and press (Cristante, 2004, p. 60). Finally, he paid attention to persuasion and to the symbolic language used to persuade. In order to be effective, the language must be open to several interpretations, provoke different reactions and emotions in the largest number of recipients, and offer several elements so that those who listen can adhere to the stereotype. On the one side, Lippmann insists on the authorities' responsibility for the formation of individual opinions; on the other side, he casts light

on the influence of mass media when they can stress symbols and stereotypes that are already active in the minds of the spectators (Lippmann, 1922). So, how does propaganda work? According to the American sociologist, the art of democracy is based on building consensus; indeed, the industry of public relations is currently defined as “engineering of consensus”, thus evoking thought control (Chomsky, 1994). Lippmann’s idea was that since in a democratic state citizens could not be controlled by force, thought control was necessary. And what about education? In fact, the school did a little to protect people from manipulation, because it was part of the apparatus of disinformation and as such, responsible for the indoctrination of the youth (a concept that will return in Italy during Fascism and in Germany during Nazism) (Chomsky, 1994). Schools were used for indoctrination, for imposing obedience, for hindering independent thought. In the Seventies, the German philosopher Habermas, took up the pioneer study by Lippmann in a social context deeply characterized by dynamic competition among mass media. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1991) analysed the transformation of the public sphere, from the point of view of the social state and of the changes in the communication structures, under the influence of mass media (press, radio, cinema and television). In his opinion, in the modern industrial societies the border between public and private sphere was becoming thinner and thinner, and the public opinion was growingly losing its democratic value due to the strong influence of media. Therefore, influence and persuasion techniques through media are not modern since they date back to the period immediately preceding or following the Second World War. An example is Lasswell’s “hypodermic needle model”, also known as “bullet theory” (2020), which established that mass media have a strong persuading power acting on a passive and inert mass, made of undifferentiated individuals, isolated, atomized, anonymous and ignorant, with no organization or leadership, easy to influence and characterized by uniform and collective behaviour. The concept of target, here introduced for the first time, is still used in the field of

communication and commerce to indicate that a stimulus sent through media is followed by a precise response by the audience. Two variables were then added to the theory, psychological traits and social factors of relation and difference within the collectivity, thus including the new “resistance” factor in the stimulus-response model. Between the forties and the fifties, Tolman (1958) produced his theory of persuasion, which stated that persuasive propaganda through media could make the collectivity change attitudes (in the sense of innate disposition) and behaviour, for example in the choice of goods to purchase or voting preferences. Research in the field were addressed to the audience and to the message, especially with a view to the aspects of interest, selective exposure (sharing), selective perception (assimilation) and selective memorization. The aim was to identify the Bartlett effect based on the message length and on the latent effect due to how long exposure to the message lasted.

## *2. New media: when power seduction travels behind a screen*

Undoubtedly, information is highly important in our lives. It provides us with the references through which we read the surrounding world, it contributes to creating our opinions and leads us to choose how to behave. We cannot underestimate the power information exerts over us: whenever we instinctively judge something or somebody, are we really convinced to be the real source of that judgement? Maybe the source is in the ideas, dogmas, and beliefs transmitted by media; they decide if and how to represent news and events, with a basic imperative imposing readers and spectators to passively and uncritically assimilate all that is proposed (Colombo, 2013). The influence exerted on the collectivity, with all its related effects, is a worrying phenomenon, often encouraged – knowingly or unknowingly – by journalists. When information is the combined outcome of communication and psychological techniques, it results into a real weapon, able to manipulate people, and with devastating effects on short-term

truth; while in the long run, it generates ideas, preconceptions, stereotypes, dogmas and thoughts that will not be easy to extirpate (Chomsky, 1994).

The whole elements acquired in the long term are the basis for our perception of the world and, above all, our beliefs and actions. Ideas lead our actions, preconceptions limit our relationships, stereotypes induce us to see and stigmatise differences, dogmas trap our mind in an invisible cage and finally, forms of thought heavily affect the way in which we envisage our future.

This proves that information has a relevant impact in the creation of the present and future society. Hopefully, with the advent of the web, persuasion by media has been reduced by the rise of the number of people that hardly believe in official information because they can detect attempts of persuasion and deviation. We live in a society led by a frame (Goffman, 1974), a strong and important concept referring to a sort of psychosociological frame containing mass values and generated according to the perception built through the influence of media. Once this dynamic has been started, all that is included in the frame supports and strengthens the perception of the world by the individuals, obviously reassuringly, whereas all that is not included, as truthful as it might be, is likely to be discarded, minimized, teased or ignored (Bateson, 1977). Any news affecting the frame causes a reflex response of refusal and feelings of uncertainty and fear, because that news casts doubt on the beliefs, assumptions and dogmas at the basis of the frame itself. The analysis of long-term effects reveals interesting (and worrying) clues, especially on the cumulative effects and on the power of media. According to the agenda setting theory (Shaw, 1979), media focus on a set of problems within a given context, thus providing frames for receiving and interpreting such problems in an economic, political or geopolitical perspective. As a result, the audience is convinced that only what is told by the radio, television and newspaper is worth being told. And even more important, that everything happens exactly the way it is told. Hence, the concept of daily agenda setting for establishing, preparing and proposing topics on which



people are invited to think and discuss. In other words, people are led to pay heed only to the topics, facts and events brought to their attention. People understand and interpret reality through mass media: indeed, the gap between the bulk of information, knowledge and representation of the social reality they learn through media, and the portion of reality they experience is enormously widening. Due to the central role of media, people have everyday access to sections of reality only through mass media, that provide not only news, but also ad-hoc instructions on semantic understanding, thus generating a sort of metacommunication. According to the knowledge gap theory (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970), mass media are able to construct a common universe of symbols and a related cultural identity, although people with a higher socio-economic and cultural status have quite a lot of other opportunities to acquire information. As a consequence, the increase of information in contemporary society does not generate a generalised increase of knowledge; on the contrary, this theory states that existing social and cultural differences are amplified and new ones are generated by mass media. Finally, following the media-system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1995), in contemporary society the individual sphere of experience is restricted if compared to the portion of social reality we get to know through mass media. Between the audience and the media system, a dependency is then created because the latter collects, creates, processes and spreads information, thus controlling the resources through which the individuals reach their goals. Today, with the advent of the Internet and social networks, one wonders if such dynamics have changed. In the last decades, thousands of scientific articles have tried enthusiastically to exalt the web as an inescapable tool for the development of the society. Only recently, has the web been questioned, due to the critical issues related to surfing the web and to the disillusionment generated by the paradigm of communication. There is no intention, here, to solve the controversy between the apocalypics and the supporters (Eco, 2001) of the alleged advantages of technologies; but it is clear that in the processes of

identity building, in learning processes, in the perception of the reality, events, or values, digital technologies play a crucial role (Ventura, 2003). As the kind of language preferred by the digital natives, new technologies can support (or deceive) the youth in transmitting values and representations, also through critical analysis of the dangers that can be met while surfing the web (a metaphor of a unifying dimension, but that can also entangle). The new digital revolution has disrupted the traditional categories of information. We should avoid two extreme and opposite temptations: on the one side, a useless and silly technophobia (Soro, 2016), the escape from innovation, the apocalyptic idea that the Web is guilty of all the evils of modernity; on the other side, the renunciation to oppose the biases of the system, to look for some regulation of the global processes governing electronic communication and, in general, to live responsibly. It is a complex issue: the need for regulating the web in order to reconcile freedom and responsibility in such a wide public space is an issue that moves and at the same time divides public opinions from all sides of the world. And although knowing the mechanisms and the power of the web and of innovations, young people are not yet able to fully estimate the consequences of their actions, thus being vulnerable (Tapscott, 1998). Since the internet and digital technologies have become important in the social contemporary scenario, many experts have started to think of how to restructure the concept of democracy. Actually, if talking of democracy means to analyse how political systems offer opportunities for citizens to take part in decision-making processes, it seems obvious that the web can be a significant tool. In this sense, the possibilities for online interactions, communication and participation benefit from a structural improvement. Sometimes, the web has been thought of as a medium enlarging the sphere of political debate, and it seems clear that the ways of communicating through social networks and digital spaces are crucial in involving the public opinion and setting the agenda. Let's think of how often politicians communicate via Twitter, with those short and immediate messages that are typical of online news, but that soon become the starting

point for debates and discussions. This aspect suggests that young people may have an always wider space in participatory processes (Loiodice, 2018). An increasing number of politicians try to adapt to those digital ways of interaction young generations are more familiar with. Beyond all these suppositions, however, many filters and variables intervene on the forms and ways through which young people become digital citizens.

According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), the web is not a political or democratic tool in itself, but it works as a very important social glue for the young, with effects on the sphere of democracy and being citizens. Several forms of sociality can be found in the web concerning active participation in the democratic life of one's own community. Such encounters, sometimes occasional, sometimes searched for, can give rise to communities of practices on public or political themes. An interaction that can also allow users to reset the agenda and cast attention to different themes from those imposed by politicians in a top-down communication approach. Sonia Livingstone, whose research mainly focuses on such themes with a view to the American population, has noticed that raising awareness on public or ethical wide-ranging themes is often useful in order to involve young people. The advent of the web and of social networks has initiated new forms of democratic participation and information, that however need responsible participation (going beyond the acquisition of digital skills): in this sense, organizing and improving media education processes both inside and outside school is crucial (Buckingham, 2006).

### *3. The role of education in the 4.0 era*

New generations and new media: this seems to be the binomial unequivocally characterizing contemporary studies, analyses, scientific reflections on young people. The web is one of the main cultural and socio-economic innovations of recent years, affecting the social, behavioural and cognitive habits of those gen-

erations for whom “the internet is like oxygen” (Ventura, 2003). Research has shown that the biggest difficulties in the relationship between the web and the young concern the identification of fixed categories to analyse in order to establish this relationship (De Kerckove, 2016). Indeed, in the past, studies on young people’s cultures were able to detect sound and lasting connections between behavioural patterns and ways of affirming the sense of belonging to a given generation. However, due to their being flexible, new technologies often affect young people in a fluid and changing way (Flew, 2014). At the same time, however, adolescence is influenced by the surrounding socio-cultural context, and every boy or girl acquires ways of interacting based on the tools, spaces, and chances offered by the macrosystem. To the new generations, new media are a unifying and socialising everyday tool, sometimes used in a spontaneous way (Fornasari, 2017). In this perspective, the web can be seen as a space and tool for constructing and exchanging meaning, especially for younger people, who have grown up in contact with the web and the digital world since their childhood. Ongoing processes of world comprehension, once regarding only material aspects, now take place also in 3.0 environments, and 3.0 web is above all sociality and involvement. A decisive difference is then introduced between the cohorts born in the Nineties and Prensky’s “digital natives” (2001), bearers of social cognitive habits developed in a pre-digital cultural context. Currently, the fundamental issue for the cultural education of new generations is how to deal with and orientate in the magmatic information circulating in the web. A proper digital literacy is necessary to develop adequate critical thinking (Limone, 2008). Going through the steps that have marked the long relation between media and education is beyond the scope of this analysis. Undoubtedly, after Skinner’s behaviourist approach (2006) that considered computers as mere machines assessing students’ works in a stimulus/response approach, many different scientific positions have followed. Currently, the socio-constructivist paradigm is probably the most common one in media education. Therefore, the web is considered by teachers

and educators as a space where knowledge is co-constructed and learning and practices are shared. An up-to-date approach to mediatic teaching must be able to take advantage of these opportunities by considering the cognitive profiles characterizing digital natives. There have been educational approaches going the opposite way and affecting some aspects of media education. For instance, in his books, Postman (1985), a well-known mass media theorist, supports the importance of learning in a linear pattern, at least at school, rather than adopting educational styles borrowed from mass media. Different media education paradigms have been developed in recent years (Trincherò & Felini, 2015), aiming at facing issues concerning the use of technologies in school and education. Media Education (ME) is a teaching and educational activity through which young people are expected to develop critical understanding of the nature and categories of media, of the techniques used to construct messages, meaning, genres and specific languages (Limone, 2020). ME is structured into: education with media, considered as tools to be employed in general educational processes; education to media, referring to critical understanding of media intended as tools, but also as language and culture; education for the media, addressed to the education and training of specialists. Not only does education to media aim at providing the new generations with the keys to understanding media, but it also tries to promote better quality of media for a constructive impact on the society of men and women. After building this taxonomy of contemporary mediatic pedagogies, Rivoltella (2017) has shown some elements that educators and teachers should consider within media education: the use of several platforms to create unified educational experiences, the ability to use media as tools for introducing new contents rather than interacting passively, the ability to detect tools supporting the educational context and allowing students to cooperate and learn through experience. According to this perspective, 3.0 students must be able to search/remix/spread contents on different platforms and manage simultaneous information flows, represent their ideas in a combination of languages and, finally, be able to deal with fluid

knowledge (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2015). Some supporters of the digital revolution say that we are about to develop a new kind of relationship between citizens and institutions, a new model of democracy (Livingstone, 2007). But many focus on the risks implied in such a change, especially if it is not properly governed (Castells, 2000). Too many times, what looked like a revolution, when reconsidered with the awareness coming from experience, has resulted in a course correction or superficial agitation. This is the present situation: through its supporters and protagonists, the digital revolution promises to radically change and improve both the global functioning of the society and the life of every person (Buckingham, 2006). Symmetrical fears are expressed by those who are afraid that such changes may turn into involution and regressions. Ideological tensions become more and more serious as the change is characterized by a wider and wider diffusion of technologies in our lives. Developing media literacy is the condition to be offered to students. The media literacy that a media educator is expected to encourage includes different skills that, as suggested by Baacke (1997), can be listed as follows: informed reading of the contents offered by the media and critical interpretation; knowledge of the main communication systems, of the related technologies and of the social factors they originate from; improvement of their receiving capacity, a relevant factor for benefiting from the content and the messages transmitted by mass media; the ability to create new messages, contributing to the mediatic system, thus creating information and communication and not being passive receivers. Rivoltella (2015) says that young people «have very powerful tools in their hands, but they need a compass». Nowadays, a reader is not only a reader, but an author, a producer of cultural forms to be socialized through publishing. And the texts are no longer only texts, but hybrid cultural forms that are one with the socio-materiality of our days and that can be found not only in formal contexts (schools), but very often in informal ones (third spaces). Hence, new alphabets and new skills are required (Rivoltella, 2017). And a new ethic frontier. Also, resistance against strong economic powers is needed as

new problems arise, such as profiling and data control. Civic education means constructing a citizen, which is opposite to constructing a consumer (always monitored via sentiment analyses that automatically turn non-structured information into structured data of public opinion on products, services, brands, politics or any other subject. These analyses can focus on positive, negative or neutral polarities of online communication, reveal feelings and emotions or discover intentions). Schools and educational bodies must teach creative production and counteract stereotyped production. It is necessary to provide young people with the appropriate equipment. It is necessary to form responsible citizens, and education to media is education to citizenship. Today's parents are called to manage a complex educational challenge trying to reconcile different needs: on the one side, they want their children to be familiar with digital devices so that they can take advantage of knowledge, communication, learning and interaction opportunities; on the other side, they need to know how to negotiate media fruition, manage the impact of harmful or violent content suggesting a questionable style of life, but also to prevent the risks caused by an inappropriate or incautious use of media, in order to grant privacy and child safety (Tisseron, 2016).

School is in a transition phase, in particular regarding the introduction of new technological devices in teaching (e.g. Flipped Classroom and Augmented Reality). Interactive boards, e-books instead of textbooks, didactical blogs are only few examples of the impact of technology on teaching. Currently, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, widespread e-teaching experiences are demonstrating the potentialities of these devices if correctly used. Together with learning environments and tools, also traditional teaching is moving towards innovative teaching where the borders between formal and informal learning tend to disappear and the student becomes an active constructor of personal knowledge. The media educator could be a new profession whose skills and contributions might reach schools, families and territory (Rivoltella & Marazzi, 2001). Indeed, educators and trainers must be aided in order to fill in the knowledge gap of the new phe-

nomena and communication tools. This is one of the reasons why institutions are called to a new mission: involving different generations in a new literacy plan for the right to citizenship in the digital society. A valuable experience in this sense is *Education and New Media. Rights and responsibilities towards digital citizenship* (2019) cofounded by the European Commission and Save the Children. In the 4.0 era, the hope is that media education should be integrated in the school curriculum, in order to develop media literacy for critical, responsible and active citizenship.

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