

# GENERATIONAL BELONGING BETWEEN MEDIA AUDIENCES AND ICT USERS

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## Abstract

This article aims to present some ideas about the relation between “media” and “generations” and, in a more specific way, between ICTs and generations of their users. The main questions are: firstly, whether (and how) media take part in the construction of generational identities; secondly, whether (and how) generational belonging affects media usage and sense-making in the everyday practices of media consumption; finally, what the differences introduced by ICTs in this relation between “media” and “generations” are. After the proposal of a model of the generation-building process based on a definition of “generation” in agreement with a review of the sociological literature, the article describes the roles played by the media in this model and in different theoretical approaches and finally discusses the new developments introduced by ICTs.

## Keywords

Media, Audience, Generations, ICTs, generational marketing.

## 1 TALKIN’ ‘BOUT GENERATIONS (AND MEDIA)

This article aims to present some ideas about the relation between “media” and “generations” and, in a more specific way, between ICTs and generations of their users (or non-users). The main questions I will attempt to answer are: firstly, whether (and how) media take part in the construction of generational identities; secondly, whether (and how) generational belonging affects media usage and sense-making in the everyday practices of media consumption; finally, what the differences introduced by ICTs in this relation between “media” and “generations” are.

The underlying assumption of this article is, obviously, that talking about “generational identity” or “generational belonging” is made possible by the real consistency of social formations called “generations”: by this word I mean, in agreement with Edmunds and Turner, “an age cohort that comes to have social significance by virtue of constituting itself as a cultural identity” [7].

Notwithstanding this assumption, I’m less interested, here, in discussing the *actual* generation labels and denominations (like *Boomers*, *X Gens*, *Generation Me*, *Millennials* and so on) or the *peer personality* of each of them (as described, for instance, by Smith and Clurman [28], Strauss and Howe [29; 30] or J.M.Twenge [33]), or the *time span* dividing one generation from another, than the general dynamics of the generation-building processes and the *roles* played in them by the media: my point is, in fact, that the media play different roles at different moments of this social construction of a shared identity, and that these roles are strongly affected by a lot of variables, both socio-cultural and technological; so that talking about “Net generation”, for example, may be a lucky but really misleading keyword to address youth, even in the western world, because of its oversimplification.

In order to reach these goals, I’m going to propose a model of the generation-building process based on a definition of “generation” which follows that found in a review of some of the scientific literature and in a research project entitled “Media and Generations” which was funded by Italian Miur (Ministry of education, university and research). I will then describe the roles played by the media in this model and in different theoretical approaches. Finally, I will discuss the new developments introduced by ICTs.

### 1.1 Generation’s coming back

To begin with, there is a notable return of the topic “generation” in the international debate and research of the last ten or fifteen years; the reasons for the interest regarding this issue are probably various: on the one hand, there is a crisis of the traditional forms of collective identity and social belonging, such as class or national community, really put to the test by the change of our late modernity, and the resulting need for researchers to

identify new categories that could help us to understand the social phenomena [6] or to forecast consumers' behaviours [28]. On the other hand, the speedy development of ICTs and media seems to have radically changed the forms of cultural transmission and socialisation, stressing gaps and differences between social groups and between age cohorts. One could say that a sort of "digital generational" rhetoric inspired a plurality of discourses, from marketing to education, to highlight the need to find new ways to address new consumer groups [28] or new classes of students [23; 24]. Some of these discourses will be discussed in the following pages.

At the same time, sociologists and historians seems to have rediscovered such a "traditional" category too: the former returned to classical sociology, from the seminal Mannheim's essay [15] to the Bourdieu's research into professional-artistic or academic fields [3], trying to read the new dynamics of social change in the key of generational consciousness [21; 7]; the latter reacted to "The End of History" trying to "apply the mirror of recurring human experience to gaze around the corner of current trends and say something instructive about the decades to come" [29] and claiming "how today's small children lie not at the end, but near the *beginning* of a new generational cycle" [29]. So, describing the new Millennials, Strauss & Howe put themselves in the same line as Elder's work on the generation that grew up during the Great Depression, a traumatic event [1] that united a particular cohort of individuals in a conscious social stratification based on age [9]; or of Wyatt's studies of the American generation of the Sixties, interpreted as a social group particularly active in determining, through the affirmation of a true generational subculture, an unexpected acceleration in the American society [35]: a theoretical background soon easily emphasised by "9/11" attack to WTC.

Against this background, media studies tradition *before* ICTs studies seems to focus very little on the topic of "generation": at a glance, it's possible to propose a generational interpretation of Meyrowitz's theory about Television and electronic media as drivers for social change in the USA [16]; there are some traces of generational belonging as a variable taken into account, besides class and gender, to better comprehend the Television experience of the women in the audience studies tradition [25; 12]; there are a lot of cultural histories of the early ages of radio and Television on the basis of private memories of the first generations of listeners [17] and viewers [13; 19].

## 1.2 A map to generations

OssCom's research on generational belonging in media audiences started in 2001, when our working group tried to find out the peer personalities of four spectatorships' generations in Italian Television; then we focused on the notion of "generation" itself, trying to understand the social making of the age cohorts as cultural identities implying media uses and media contents as tools and materials of this building; finally we returned once again to the field questioning different generations of people about their formative memories of viewing / listening / playing / using media and ICTs to find out their presence in what Corsten calls "generational semantics" [5]. Both the roles played by the generational belongings in determining media diets or media sense-makings and the roles played by the media in defining generational identities and "we-sense" [5] were investigated.

During these years our conceptualisation of what a generation actually is has changed, moving from a marketing-oriented definition to a more sociological one: a multi-dimensional concept, where biographical traits shall coexist alongside historical, biographical and cultural ones, and where age group belonging is connected to specific historical experiences, to the development of peculiar consumption habits or to the occupation of certain positions in the family chain. Such a multi-dimensional category appears particularly useful within a theoretical and research paradigm, in which the different segmentations of the consumer body (audiences in this case) cannot be reduced to either individual socio-demographic traits (such as age, gender, education, job position) or the corresponding life styles (such as those codified by marketing), but have to be strictly and simultaneously related to several factors - such as one's position along the lifecycle, media biography, contexts provided by families and friendship networks as environments for the elaboration of media experience, the belonging to a world of values shared with other members of the same generation, the historical development of the media system, the different phases of technological innovation, the processes of taming and incorporation of technologies and media products, as well as the wider structural changes affecting the social and cultural system.

Karl Mannheim's elaboration [15] obviously appears useful in highlighting many important points. It is common knowledge that Mannheim's proposal distinguishes between "generation status", "generation as actuality", and "generation unit". The "generation status", like class status, is a simple bond among individuals who, being born in the same period, occupy the same social space; thus the generation differentiates itself from the formation of concrete groups based on either communitarian structures (family, tribe, lineage) or associational ones (groups built around an intentionally subscribed goal, law, or rule). Each generational collocation in the social space can be associated with an inclination towards behaviors, feelings, action and thought models. The "generation as actuality" represents something more than a collocation: it's a further bond: "this additional nexus may be

described as participation in the common destiny of this historical and social unit". A "generation as actuality" should be thought of as an actualization of the potential implicated in the simple "generation status". The very "generation units" (which can take the form of concrete groups) are grounded upon the sharing of this bond. Affinity among the individuals belonging to the same "generation unit" reveals itself in the sharing of the common contents forming individual consciences and acting as in-group socializing factors: in a word, the Gestalt - the peculiar way of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating social, historical, and cultural phenomena. Or, in Mannheim's own words, "youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation; while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways, constitute separate generation units" [15]. Belonging to a "generation unit" means sharing a particular "unified view": "it involves the ability to see things from its particular 'aspect', to endow concepts with its particular shade of meaning and to experience psychological and intellectual impulses in the configuration characteristic of the group [...] to absorb those interpretive formative principles which enable the individual to deal with new impressions and events in a fashion broadly pre-determined by the group." [15].

Michael Corsten builds his commentary on Mannheim around the focalization on the feeling of generational belonging: what is it based upon? How does it develop and sustain itself? To find an answer to these questions he refers to the concept of semantic history [14], i.e. the idea that a generation recognizes itself as such when it is able to produce a dominant order of meanings continuously empowered through discourse practices and significant rituals among the members of the generation itself. Generational semantics is, in other words, a collection of themes, interpretative models, evaluation principles and linguistic devices through which shared experience is transformed in discourse within the forms of daily interaction. It can be read as a process of crystallization of a generation's encyclopedia and the linguistic rules employed to consult it, as well as a social contraction: the "cultural circle" of a generation is not a real, concrete group of individuals; it is not a "generation unit" but a bond, hence, in Mannheim's terms, a finite number of coetaneous individuals who "spontaneously observe that other people use certain criteria for interpreting and articulating topics in a similar manner to themselves" [5]. Corsten returns to the topic of Mannheim's age of adolescence, expanding the nature -not only biological but also historical and social- of this stage of the life-cycle, in which the issue of personal identity is felt with particular urgency and prominence. Experiences during adolescence are important in defining the we-sense of a generation, not so much because the age is in itself more "sensitive" or "impressionable", but because the common historical, social and cultural context provides a wide group of adolescents with the same tools to define their own individual self - starting from the very generational semantic that makes up the common language as well as the thematic repertoire to reflect one's forming identity with.

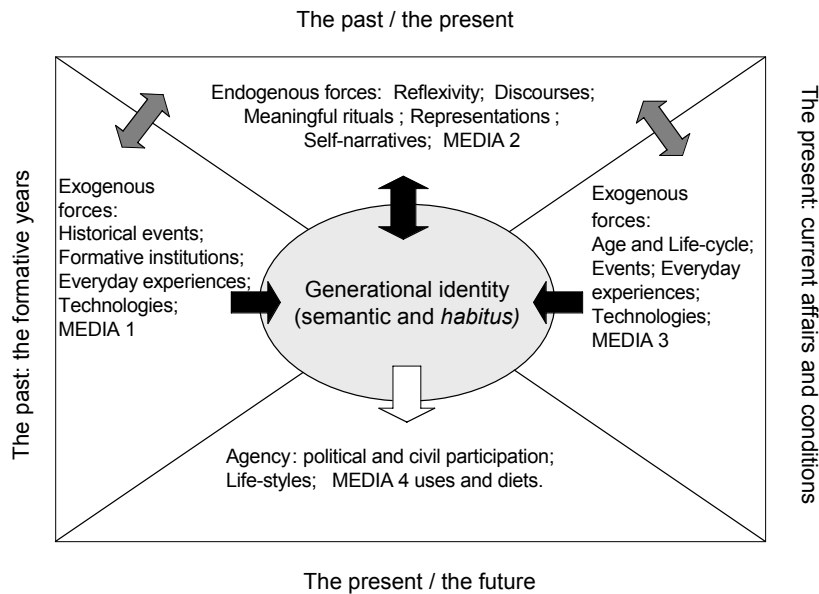
### 1.3 A model for generations

In light of this sociological literature on the topic of the generations, the main outcomes of the "Media and Generations" project allow me to propose a very schematic model aimed to describe, from a phenomenological point of view, the complex processes of generational identity-making and the roles played within it by the media.

This draft model cuts off, "freezing them" in a very artificial way, the "fields strength", operating in the past and in the present to shape the generational identities, thought as an open "work in progress" but characterized by some -more or less- stable and shared features. To this generational identity belong values, ideals, configurations of taste and sensibility, constellations of preferences that we could probably call, with Bourdieu [2], *habitus*, that is a system of durable dispositions to act and to choose, not strictly prescribed by formal rules, for example in the field of civic participation, of material and cultural consumption, of leisure.

In such a model I have tried to represent, first of all, the two "fields strength" (on the left and on the right) characterized by an exogenous dimension: an objective status, caused by the fact of being born in a certain historical moment.

The field on the left is developed in the past, during the formative years, and includes historical and political events, material and symbolic constraints and resources differently distributed among the population, some of which commonly shared by all -or the majority- of its members, others reserved to a minority or to the elites on the basis of the social stratification or other socio-demographic variables like age and gender. To be considered significant, in this area, on the one hand, traumatic or catastrophic events, able to mark a high discontinuity between "before" and "after", or a particularly intense experience, good or bad, within individual biographies (wars, revolutions, crisis etc.) and, on the other hand, cultural institutions and processes, commodities and services that shape the everyday experience, especially if intended for a young "audience": educational systems, formative agencies, social practices, technologies, brand, media and their contents.



**Figure 1: A model of generational identity-making**

The field on the right, exogenous as well because tied to the generation status, includes historical events and contingencies, social and cultural constraints and resources given in the present (obviously, in the “contemporary present” of the moment in which the model is applied). First of all, age and position in the life-cycle, combined with the biographical conditions depending on such a generational location and, for this reason, shared with the other members of the same generational cohort. People who had the same experiences in their formative years have thus, nowadays, to face with historical events and social conditions that are common to everyone who lives in the same society; but that people filter, and make sense of, these present experiences in a very peculiar way, shared within the same age group only, and depending on both a social position and a cultural identity: their generational identity and semantic, their we-sense.

Following Mannheim [15], Corsten [5] and Eyerman and Turner [10], we have to take into account a third “field strength” (on the top, overlapping with the first two of them), acting both in the past and in the present and characterized by a more “endogenous” perspective: it’s the field of reflexivity, of self-consciousness, of mutual identification by the members of a generation. In Mannheim’s analogy with class status, in fact, generation consciousness stands like class consciousness, and it’s not necessary to belong to a “generation status” as a social collocation: “inherent to a *positive* sense in every location is a tendency pointing towards certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling, and thought” [15]. But this tendency lies in a “stratified consciousness” [15], where “early impressions tend to coalesce into a *natural view* of the world. All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, whether they appear as that set’s verification and fulfilment or as its negation and antithesis” [15]. If it’s true that this “natural view” acts like a “common sense”, by definition a “non-reflexive” set of knowledge, on the other hand, Corsten introduces the dimension of reflexivity because the members of a generation share not only a common background of experiences, but above all they share the consciousness that also the other members of the same generation share the same background. As Corsten says, “they do not only have something in common, they have also a (common) sense” - in the twofold sense of *shared* and *taken for granted*- “for the fact that they have something in common.” [5]. This reflexive “we-sense” contributes to the making of a generation because a generation is formed exactly “by the sense that the members of a generation have of the criteria for belonging” [5].

Where does such a form of collective self-identification actually take place? As previously stated, a “generation builds up its comparable interpretations by establishing a dominant semantic order (order of meanings) in its discursive practices” [5] maintained, both during its adolescence and the following years, through rituals, narratives and mythologies, and fed with self-representations as well as with representations made by the other generations and with the other generation’s representations: self identity, in fact, is always negotiated with (and against) others’ identity and their mutual representations. These reflexive and discursive practices use, on the one hand, the materials provided by the past, shared, experiences and, on the other hand, the hints and the inspirations provided by the present occasions. Generational identity results thus, in this model, as a social

construction rising from both some exogenous forces and some discursive practices, mutually interwoven; a social construction able to affect cultural belongings and to shape a peculiar *habitus*, thought as a “collection of practices through which generational experiences are manifest” [7].

Finally, the last area (at the bottom) of the proposed model represents the sphere of the social agency, where political issues are managed and acted out, lifestyles are followed, brands and commodities are preferred showing, in a very evident way, generational identities and belongings. Stronger is this generational identity, and wider –and deeper- is the sharing of its *habitus*, a certain set of choices more likely depends on a generational belonging than on simple socio-demographic attributes.

#### 1.4 What about the media?

General hypothesis of our “Media and Generations” project was that the media play a role in the processes I have attempted to describe; the main outcome of our research is that the media play different roles in each of the “field strength” represented in the model. First of all, media (as technologies as well as contents, as in Silverstone’s concept of “double articulation” [26; 27]) have a part in defining the formative experiences of a generation, not only because they are so deeply embedded in the everyday practices as to become a “natural” element of its social landscape and its common sense, but also because historical events and occurrences, as well as cultural values and their symbolic forms, are often mediated by them. Media (“Media 1” in the model) provide a lot of the material and the tools used in the making of the generational semantics: news, facts, imageries, characters, celebrities, emotions, rituals, icons, music and brands that lie in the memory in a very stratified way and that contribute to shape (and to share) cognitive patterns, tastes, attitudes and expectations. Obviously, all these elements act in the past of the formative years and survive in the memory just as fragments, echoes, and scraps ready to re-emerge if “stimulated” by the present circumstances (or by a social researcher). When they do re-emerge, they often bring with them a part of biography (which they are linked to, as in the case of the “flashbulb memories”) and a set of previous experiences to compare with the others’ experiences. During our qualitative research, based on life histories and focus groups, our respondents revealed mnemonic *repertoires* filled with a lot of media-related materials (titles of TV programs and movies, names of musicians and rock bands, comics, cartoons, sport events, catchphrases, jingles and so on) very useful for them to tell their personal history as well as to recognize, mutually, people belonging to the same generation.

In the “present” area of the model proposed, the media do act in a different way: not as “natural” providers of “building material” but as “catalysts” and “hooks”. Explicitly, media (“Media 3”, in the model) are a part of the present experiences (conditioned by the social positions in terms of age and lifecycle) that interact with the stratified memories and are coped with by them; sometimes the new technologies and the new contents react with the generational semantics and identities producing new forms of feeling (as in revivals); sometimes they force memories to re-emerge; sometimes they simply cut off (or catch in) a target group.

However, it’s probably in the “field strength” of reflexivity that the media play a very different role; in this area they are resources articulating the public spaces of the generational discourses. Here the media (“Media 2”, in the model) act like available technologies and institutions that make it possible for the members of a generation to develop its discursive practices, its mythology, and its representations. They connect people with each other, giving mutual visibility, allowing people to tell their story to each other and assigning leaderships and entitlements to “speak on behalf of” the other members. They contribute to establish (and sometimes they simply *are*) the meaningful rituals where generational contents are shared and interpreted, appropriated or contested; they are the stage where the mutual generational representations are acted out. According to Corsten, the media seem to be (some of) the main discursive resources that make the members of a generation conscious “that they have something in common” [5], and that this “something” is really different from what is “common” for their parents (or children) and for their older (or younger) brothers and sisters. This reflexivity works both on the materials of the formative years, during the adolescence and youth (“Media 1”), and on the new materials of the nowadays (“Media 3”), embedding or rejecting social meanings and values to build a very dynamic “generational semantic”.

Finally, “Media 3” are, as well, the providers of a set of proposals amongst which people make their choices: on the basis of their *habitus* and conditioned by their present social position, members of a generation choose some media and reject some others, *domesticate* in a certain way a new technology, set up a determinate “media diet”, use (or do not use) a kind of device, read and interpret some narratives. “Media 4” represent thus the media practices actually performed by the members of a generation; forecasting these behaviours and providing them with generational products and rhetoric, are, obviously, the main aims of the generational marketing.

## 2 ENTER ICTS' GENERATION

The wide diffusion of ICTs, in the last two decades, coincides with the rise of the so-called “Internet Generation”; many popularizing commentators introduced generational definitions based on the similarity between people’s childhood and the metaphorical childhood of the emerging technologies. “Web generation”, “digital generation”, “bit generation”, “Nintendo generation”, “e-generation” and so forth are just a few among the many variations on this theme, based on the assumption that the younger generation are supposed to be more naturally inclined to get accustomed to new technologies than the elders.

The idea of an “Internet Generation” (or, quoting Hartmann [11], the “web generation discourse”), seems to have had, in these years, two main fields of application; the first one is the marketing discourse, pushed by the need to find, show (and sell) the newest target segmentation. The second one is the educational discourse, curiously often very close to the conceptualization offered by the first one in its facing the fast transformation that affected skills and competences of the “new” learners. Here I can just remind some of the authors who developed this idea: Tapscott, on the business strategy front, for instance, proposing his “Net Generation” for the Echo-boomers, states that their defining characteristic was that they were the first to be “growing up digital” and they were different from any other generation because they were the first to grow up surrounded by digital media: “Today’s kids are so bathed in bits that they think it’s all part of the natural landscape” [31], and this condition makes them a force for social transformation; ICTs, in fact, are seen to create new styles of communication and interaction, new conditions of education and learning, new competences and skills, new forms of personhood and new tendencies in political participation. On the educational side, Prensky calls “Digital Native” today’s students, grown up with ICTs, “native speakers” of the digital language: they “are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. [...] They prefer random access. They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent reward” [23]. According to Prensky, their thinking patterns have changed because the digital input they received when growing up shaped their brains physically in a new and different way [24].

Just to show to what extent marketing discourse and educational discourse are linked together, we could notice that “Digital Natives” and “Digital Immigrants” labels have been quickly adopted by marketing researchers to update and reinterpret the “old” generational targets, where the “Boomers” are to be considered as “Immigrants”, the “X” as “Adaptive” and the “Y” and “Z” as the true “Digital Native” generations. On the other side, an intergovernmental organization like OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) and its Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) promote the New Millennium Learners (NML) project focused on “the emergence of digital native learners” and aimed to “analyse this new generation of learners and understand their expectations and attitudes” [18]. NML, from Howe and Strauss’ label of *Millennials* [29; 30], are outlined with the same words of Tapscott and Prensky, as “the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital media, and most of their activities dealing with peer-to-peer communication and knowledge management, in the broadest sense, are mediated by these technologies. Accordingly, Millennials are thought to be adept with computers, creative with technology and, above all, highly skilled at multitasking in a world where ubiquitous connections are taken for granted” [20].

### 2.1 Questioning the Net Generation

As I previously stated at the beginning of this article, I’m not interested here in investigating the actual consistency of such a “Net Generation”; rather, I’m interested in the theoretical question about the role played by ICTs in its birth. How are they seen to affect the new generation? How do they enter in the generational identity-making processes? Are they the sole force shaping this identity? And how does this interpretation fit with the outcome of our “Media and Generations” project?

Some arguments come from the educational debate: David Buckingham, for instance, criticizing Tapscott’s approach, stresses its technological determinism: “from this perspective, technology is seen to emerge from a neutral process of scientific research and development, rather than from the interplay of complex social, economic and political force. It is then seen to have effects [...] irrespective of the ways in which it is used, and of the social contexts and processes into which it enters” [4]. Technology seems to be undetermined by any social force, but able to determine -by itself- the social change. In Buckingham’s arguments there are some remarks useful to give further details about the conditions of generational building: on the one side, we can not ignore the fundamental continuities and interdependencies between new media and old media “at the level of form and contents, as well as in terms of economics” [4]; old and new technologies often turn out to co-exist, acting together upon (and being used together by) old and new generations, without splitting them into two “worlds apart”. On the other side, “Tapscott’s approach is also bound to ignore what one can only call the *banality* of much new media use” [4]; it’s not just a matter of the diffusion of a technology, that has to be so

wide to be acknowledged as a common feature in the generational “we-sense”: it’s also a matter of the more common uses of that technology that can contribute to shape both the technology development and its impact upon its users.

More generally speaking, the “generational hypothesis” of the ICTs seem to be founded on an oversimplification of the processes shaping a generation, strongly focused on cognitive patterns (e.g. multitasking, networking, playing for learning and so on); very little is said about contents and imageries, that are often “old media” related even in the web [11]; social and historical events seem to have no place; changes in the very ICT system, and in the broader media system, are not taken into account. Above all, these approaches seem to completely overlook the subjective dimension of generation-building and the endogenous forces operating *inside* the generation and *between* its members. In the very same way, “pure” generational marketing approaches seem to have a definition of generation that includes only three factors: it is a group of people who share the same life-cycle stage; live through the same economic, educational and technological times; were shaped by the same social markers and events. Such a concept of generation seems to be more the passive product of outer forces that are pushed upon the peer’s group, shaping its values, its ideals (or lack of ideals), its *weltanschauung*, and determining, nowadays, its behaviour, than a social and cultural identity. To sum up, both these approaches tend to press flat a very dynamic process in a sort of mechanical imprinting.

## 2.2 Generations, Media and the novelty of ICTs

Prensky is probably affected by a form of “rhetoric of technological innovation” when he states that the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology constitute a “singularity”, a really big discontinuity “which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back” [23], but he’s obviously right in pointing out the novelty of ICTs. If this discontinuity can hardly be seen as the only cause of the birth of a new generation, however it’s possible to evaluate the impact of ICTs comparing them with the traditional media involved in the processes of generational identity-making I attempted to describe above.

My last point, in fact, is that the novelty of ICTs, with regard to the generations, lies in the transformations of these processes; these transformations, that affect in a peculiar way the roles played by the media, concern memory, space, and reflexivity.

Memory: according to the sociological tradition on generations as cultural identities, personal memory has a central role because it works like a stratification of experiences, facts and cultural meanings that characterize in the same way only the people who are the same age. In an “analogical” culture, the majority of the symbolic material used to build a common identity (the *repertoires* we registered during our research, made of remembered movies, TV programs and so on) is ephemeral; there are, obviously, archives and libraries to conserve films, tapes and papers, but these institutions keep them behind closed doors and hide them out of the social visibility. Narratives, character and music survive in a very peculiar way in the stratified memories of the persons who encountered them at a certain moment of their life, when they were broadcasted or distributed; “having” them in one’s own memory is a sure indicator of age and generational belonging and, for this reason, remembering them (or reminding each other about them) is a strong mechanism of the generational discourses. On the contrary, evergreen and classics are always available to different generations, and for this reason they are often a link between the generations. ICTs and digitalization change the status of many cultural products, that can find a new repository in the Net, where everything seems to stand side by side with everything, in a timeless condition, always available to everyone. It is not just a matter of a new kind of preservative institutions: it’s a new form of continuity of cultural provisions that works against disruption and discontinuity (and their power to mark the boundaries of elapsing time). With regard to the proposed model, it is likely “Media 1” are translated in “Media 3”, losing uniqueness (and value) for their first audiences and becoming a resource addressed, for example, to a certain age group without any generational meaning (like classic cartoons of Disney, VHS pioneer of this transformation, or the re-runs of old TV programs).

Space: in the sociological tradition, generations have a national dimension; traditional media and analogical technologies as well. National supply of cultural products, based on national languages, industries, deliveries and markets has been a constraint that conditioned the members of the past generations to use (more or less) the same, few, materials to build their own semantics. ICTs and digitalization act with no regards for national frontiers, redefining social space on both a global and a local dimension. What consequences are there for generational identities and belonging? Edmunds and Turner [8], for example, studying collective movements and political participation, suggest that, if that of the 1960s was the first global generation thanks to the new electronic media, nowadays Internet has created the basic technological conditions for the emergence of new global generations, linking together people through shared international experiences, introducing new reasons for political action and new means of coordination and activism, opening to new possibilities of sharing the same

traumatic events, like 9/11 or Madrid and London bombings, with their capacity for providing “a focal point around which memories and political activism hinge” [8].

On the other hand, Volkmer, studying with a cross-national and cross-generational approach the shared consciousness of the global public space developed by different generations as a part of their own *weltanschauung*, discovered that depending on different media (radio, black and white TV and Internet) in the formative years different perceptions of the world tend to be created: while the oldest generations can be described as “place-based, where physical presence and identity are bound to a geographical lifeworld context” [34], the youngest seem to be “space-based”, and “distance” and “proximity” are concepts defined in a very individual way. This way, ICTs increase the possibility for niche audiences, cultists and fans to share their symbolic material all over the world, using them to build a common cultural identity, at the same time emancipated from national binds and open to a global perspective.

But ICTs redefine social space giving more consistency to the local too; social networks maintain face to face relations, mobile phone is used for local coordination, some kinds of file sharing sustain personal friendship; concrete social groups can find an environment on the Net to enforce their shared identities, as well as the diasporic audience and users can build, thanks to virtual relations, a common identity, just like the “generation units” suggested by Mannheim.

Reflexivity: finally, this redefinition of the social space has consequences on the significant sphere of reflexivity and subjectivity. ICTs provide generations’ members with a wide range of discursive resources where self-narrations can be told and self-representations can be acted. Blogs and UGCs are stages where generational semantics (and aesthetics) can be verified, proposed and contested. If the “big talk” of the Internet doesn’t automatically mean an higher degree of self-consciousness or a more responsible way to participate in the “public sphere”, it does show a wider availability of social visibility, and a tendency to use this visibility to express oneself in front of the “others”.

This easy access to a “public sphere” is obviously very far from the opportunities given in an analogical culture to the members of the former generations, when conquering the social role that allowed to “speak on behalf of”, or “in front of”, the other members depended on matter of age and leadership. From this point of view, ICTs are likely to anticipate the processes of generational identity-making, taking them away from institutional constraints and professional hierarchy.

At the same time, these processes happen in a space densely populated by people belonging to other generations, intent on continuing on their own representations and to represent the “others”. According to Hartmann, the “web generation discourse” is likely to be more a representation labelling the youth developed by the adults than a label the young use to represent themselves: if an Internet generation really exists, it is an “unwilling” generation, radically “digital” in ICTs practices but not in contents, not always conscious in terms of their actual use but aware of the general discourse that construct it this way. “Thus, there is a web generation, but only in the experience of the discourse rather than the actual experience” [11].

## 2.3 Conclusions

The transformations that affect memory, space and reflexivity because of the increasing importance of ICTs in the processes of generational identity-making supported by the media seem to me to have introduced some elements of problematicity; rather than becoming more evident and clear-cut, they become smoothed and softened; instead of cutting dramatically one generation from another, they are likely to link them; national boundaries fade away, and generations are able to build their semantics both on a local and global basis; the time needed for a generation to be born and develop its identity seems to shrink; but, at the same time, some aspects of generational identities largely diverge. Considering the generations in a multidimensional mode could be a way to once more derive some benefits from this concept.

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