Digital Literacy Circulation: Adolescents and Flows of Knowledge about New Media

# Details

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## Sample

50 adolescents (25 boys and 25 girls), aged between 16 and 18.

# Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the output of an empirical research on digital skills in order to develop a typology of skills circulation among young digital users. Relying on research on digital literacy in media studies and on users in STS, in this article we start criticizing the concepts of “digital divide”, “digital inequalities” and “digital competencies”. Then, we present the principal results of a research study involving 50 adolescents in Italy about how they acquired their competences in the use of digital media. This gave us the opportunity to focus on the digital skills of young people and the development of their abilities in using digital media. The research outlines the patterns of circulation in digital competences among young people in relation to family, school and peer group, defining four kinds of “flows”: parental flow (involving fathers and mothers), peer flow (connected to friends and people of the same age), educational flow (referring to formal education) and technological flow (involving technological devices, such as computers, laptops, smartphones, tablets, etc.). The aim is to understand the interactions between digital skills and the social, institutional and technological conditions that influence the youth’s digital literacy for the everyday use of digital media.

# Outcome

"The analysis showed that adolescents’ interpretation of their relationship
with technology still is largely overflowing with technological determinism.
Interviewees described a stereotypical image of technology as a
field dedicated to specific social actors, typically young teenage boys.
Young people's accounts reveal a fil rouge that insists on a specific definition
of competences, framing them mainly within a technical domain.
Moreover, adolescents’ discourse marks a symbolic generational frontier
between adults and adolescents, in which digital media represent the wall
that divides the two groups. This symbolic separation defines the flows
that we called parental and educational, which are mainly unidirectional
and do not permit the spread or sharing of technical and social skills useful
for life in information society. On the one hand, the educational flow concentrates only on technical and functional skills and frequently considers a vertical transmission of
knowledge based on formal education. [...] On the other hand, the process seems to be inverted for the parental flow. It is also based only on technical and functional skills, but envisages a transmission that goes from the adolescent to their parents. [...] According to our analysis and in line with the studies discussed in the
first part of the article (Hargittai 2007; Street 1995; Warschauer 2003),
adolescents define, redefine, modify and improve their knowledge of digital
media, mainly by direct experience and within the peer group. Technological
flow, even if not explicitly mentioned by the interviewee, plays
an important part in adolescents' experiences. They are, on the one hand,
modelled by technology and, on the other hand, they redefine the technology
itself. The technological flow shows explicitly one of the recurrent
topics in STS and media studies: the mutual co-construction of technology
and society that, as in the SCOT (Pinch and Bijker 1984) and the domestication
approaches (Silverstone and Hirsh 1992), puts emphasis on
user-technology relations. [...] Far from confirming a deterministic image of media-competent adolescents,
our analysis allows the figure of the bricoleur (Drusian and Riva
2010) to emerge. Adolescents use their own cultural and social instruments
to combine different flows of circulation of competences and to
create their own toolkits for using digital media." (Scarcelli Riva, 2017, p. 96-98).