Generations and Media: The Social Construction of Generational Identity and Differences

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Abstract

The chapter seeks to illuminate the relationship between audiences and those social formations known as "generations". It is based on the idea that "generational identity/belonging" is built through social relationships (mediated or not) and that this helps to define the social significance of generations. Media experience is relevant in defining generations and their audience practices (Aroldi 2011). For each generation, the so-called "generational identity", and experience with media and technologies in its formative years, shape some features of audience practices throughout the whole lifecycle of its membership. At the same time, media representations, repertoires, and technologies contribute to defining the particular "generational semantic" of individual generations (Aroldi 2011; Colombo 2011).

This chapter starts by reviewing the literature on relationships between media and generations. Firstly, we discuss technological(-deterministic) approaches (e.g. Tapscott 1998) and socio(-deterministic) approaches (e.g. Buckingham 2006). Thereafter, we turn to a discussion of the definitions of "generations" which assumes that media technology contributes to shaping and creating common characteristics in each age group (Aroldi 2011, Bolin & Westlund 2009). We also offer definitions of generations which emphasise the supposed common characteristics of a particular age group.

The second and third parts of the chapter focus on research conducted in different countries (e.g. Italy; Estonia; UK; US; Finland) highlighting how similarities and differences between generations as media audiences influence specific practices of consumption, or "produsage" (Bruns 2007), and how media uses contribute to building a "generational identity". The fourth part of the chapter is dedicated to exploring the role of computer-mediated communication (e.g. social networks, instant messaging etc.), mobile technologies and web 2.0 tools (e.g. blogs) in co-shaping social relationships among different generations (Siibak 2009; Vittadini 2010), and acting as platforms for building a common peer culture. Finally, this chapter highlights the implications of the concept of generation for media research and discusses potential avenues of further research.

1. Generations and media

Media technologies seem to have a special allure, which makes them very popular as generational attributes, symptoms or even manifestos. Media studies together with popularising discourses,

escalate the production of labels which are grounded in supposed differences in the generational use of new media technologies. By contrast, we never read about the "refrigerator generation" or the "dish washer generation", in spite of the fact that – according to John Hartley (1999, 100), the relevance of the refrigerator's advent can be compared to that of broadcasting. An explanation for this may be provided by Roger Silverstone who emphasised the "double articulation" of media, i.e. the inseparability of media as material technology and as symbolic content (Silverstone, 1994). This duality impacts enormously on the way media organise our experience, which has been recently identified as an important cultural glue within generations.

With culture growing stronger as an independent analytical category in the study of society, the concept of "generations" has expanded beyond the borders of demography and acquired new, cultural, meanings. The demographic perspective sees generations as age cohorts of people who were born and happen to be alive at about the same time. By contrast, the cultural approach stresses that generations are constituted on the basis of shared experience of the same formative events and collective memory[1]. Categories of "age" and "generation" are in similar relation to each other as e.g. categories of "sex" and "gender". Age is a biological quality manifested by external attributes which are not optional. Generation and generational belonging are cultural uses of age, opportunities for identity building, which people can take up and enhance, or not.

This latter approach was first outlined by Karl Mannheim (1964) in his essay "On the Problem of Generations"[2]. Ron Eyerman and Bryan S. Turner define a generation as "a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time" (Eyerman and Turner 1998, 93). Nevertheless, even culturally defined generations (such as the Beat Generation or Vietnam War Generation) cannot be fully disconnected from time – rather, they should be seen as synergies of temporal settings and cultural experience. Generations are not purely arbitrary outcomes of people's agency. The rigid biological structure of age is of course an indispensible (even disciplining) element in forming of generations. Our biological age is steadfastly fixed and, at the same time, purely coincidental, meaningless. This tension is a driver for filling age with some meaning through generation-building. Age proximity in experiencing the same cultural event or process matters simply because, as Wilhelm Pinder put it when writing of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous, we live together with other people of different ages and "for everybody 'the same time' is a different time" (quoted in Mannheim 1964, 283).

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1 Some authors even emphasise that the events which have the potential to form generations must be of radical, e.g. traumatic, nature (Wyatt, 1993: 2).
2 The essay was published for the first time in 1928 as "Das Problem der Generationen".

The concept of media generations, therefore, functions as a particular application of the cultural approach towards age, i.e. generations. Media generations are constructed as collectively produced, shared and processed responses to the availability or pervasiveness of a particular technology, which then becomes an element of generational identity. David Buckingham confirms that refining the study of media audiences with a generational perspective usually means focusing on the "potential role of media and technology in construction and self-construction of generations" (Buckingham 2006, 4). Self-construction is not always identical with awareness of, or theoretical reflection on, the constitutive dimension of media technologies. However, it does not also mean that the technological conditions of becoming a generation deprive subjects of all human agency and socio-culturally grounded interpretative propensity, as those authors drawing on the technological determinist legacy often suggest. Donald Tapscott, for example, asserts that technology is totally invisible for children who are growing up in a digital world; for them it is literally "like the air" (2009, 20). Similarly, Marc Prensky takes the technological environment to be second nature for those he calls "the digital natives" (2001, 2). This view of generation formation is not far from perceiving technology as some kind of technological praxis, which determines subjects. It is opposed by those scholars who acknowledge the centrality of social (and not technological) processes. For Pierre Bourdieu, generations are social constructs emerging through conflicts over available economic, social and cultural resources (1993, 100). Similarly, Leena Alanen interprets the constitution of generations as generational structuring or "generationing" by which different generations (e.g. children and adults) interdependently construct each other by purifying their distinctive sets of practices (2001, 129).

The cultural conception of media generations creates a bridge between two extreme positions: demographic absolutism on one hand and technological absolutism on the other. We can picture these two absolutisms as prioritisations of one or other of the two possible time axes: the demographic axis, which represents the successive generations of people being alive at the same time from newborns to the very old; or the technological axis, which represents the successive generations of media technologies from print to social media. If demographic absolutism were correct in claiming age to be the only relevant factor in media generationing, then there would be total correlation between technological diets and age; all young people would be using new media and all elderly people would read print newspapers. If technological absolutism were correct in putting sole emphasis on technology, then there would be zero correlation between the use of media technologies and age; the dominant technology would penetrate all generations equally. Of course, neither of these extremes reflect the reality of generational use of media technologies in everyday life. In day to day life, there is much less regularity and predictability; it is neither purely age nor purely technology which explains generational use of media. The key question is how people *experience* age and technology through their cultural environments, which include habits, influences of peer groups, memories of formative or traumatic events and many other culturally grounded variables. The statistics show that new media are

more frequently used by younger generations. However, in our model of cultural media generation, age should be understood as a cultural, not biological category. This correlation cannot be explained by the biological age of the users of new media. It is rooted in the nuanced and fragile processes of interpretation and understanding of what it means to be young and the value of technology in a particular age group or, more precisely, an "age culture".

In media generation scholarship, there is a strong bias towards the media profile of the contemporary young generation and the way in which it articulates itself in and through new media, mainly the internet. Nonetheless, the concept of media generations has a longer history. Some literary groups (e.g. the Beat Generation in the 1950s or Romanticist literary movements in the 19th century) defined themselves as generations on metonymical principle – they claimed to represent the Zeitgeist of their generation with such fidelity that they thought of themselves as its essence.

The phenomenon of media generations as a systematic and coherent response to some significant innovation in media technology appeared with the establishment of electronic media, particularly television in the 1950s in the US. Occasionally the radio generation is also taken into account, as the people who were born in the early 1920s (Maass and Gonzalez 2005). The assumed constitutive effect of the technologies of typography and print media was hardly captured in periods so short as generations, not even by trueborn technological determinists. Harold Innis spoke of "empires" (1950), Marshall McLuhan of "galaxies" (1962), and Neil Postman of "ages" (1985). The shift from large monoliths of typographic time to more swiftly passing electronic generations indicates the change of pace in the modernisation process and technological innovation. The compression of time which reduced media epochs to media generations was also reinforced by escalating commodification. Marketing started to target generations as naturally emerging markets, whose tastes and lifestyles are often specified by a combination of branding and media technologies, e.g. the Playstation Generation (Cordiner 2001), or the Google Generation (Gunter, Rowlands and Nicholas 2009).

Television experience had a special relevance in forming the identity of the Vietnam War Generation, an age subgroup within the Baby Boomers. The Vietnam War was the first televised war conflict. "War coverage demonstrated the power of pictures, often close-up, searing images of death and destruction" (Barkin 2003, 39). It was the suggestive character of the television image, the level of its detail and the unprecedented nature of this experience that burned television war scenes into the collective memory of an entire generation. The Vietnam War as experienced and remembered by those who followed it from a distance is inseparable from its television rendition. For that matter, Michael J. Arlen famously labeled the Vietnam War "the living-room war" (1997). Defining the Vietnam War generation as a television generation, and the Vietnam War itself as an historical event

4

shaped by television, seems to be a clear case of technological determinism leaking into the notion of cultural generations in spite of all attempts to avoid it. However, we are still presenting it as an example of a cultural media generation that is not fully and passively produced by television, but one who's members share an identity, within which its particular experience of television forms an inseparable part. Technological determinism reverses causes and consequences – it perceives media technologies as being determining causes. Conversely, from other perspectives they are seen as consequences of broader social and political transformations, the developments behind them, and the phenomena which they supposedly determine. Television has not determined the mentality of the Vietnam War generation; rather, its sensitivity to the television image together with pacifism and many other characteristics of life in the 1960s were the consequences of more general social movements contesting expansion of *petit bourgeois* society after World War II.

The next generation that is putatively taking shape in response to the rupture in technological repertoire and the coming of new "media grammars" (Gumpert and Cathcart 1985) and "generational semantics" (Colombo 2011) is the contemporary young generation, defined as people born after 1977. Those who have grown up amidst new media technologies since their earliest years are often supposed to have specific intra-generational homogeneity stemming from their very easy and intimate contact with digital technologies. The intra-generational homogeneity is translated into the names that these generations are given, including the "electronic generation" (Buckingham 2000), "Nintendo generation" (Green, Reid and Bigum 1998), "Playstation generation" (Cordiner 2001), "net generation" (Tapscott 1998), "wired generation" (Jacobsen and Forste 2011), "Google generation" (Gunter, Rowlands and Nicholas 2009), "Obama generation" (Sideridis and Patrikakis 2009), "cyberkids" (Holloway and Valentine 2003), "cyborg babies" (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998) and of course "digital natives" (Prensky 2001).

There is now a substantial amount of research which explores the various dimensions of generational differences in online practices and the search for digital specificities within the young generation. Other research claims that the digital rupture dividing the young from the other generations should not be overstated. The key research in this field has an exploratory character and aims at mapping the young generation's uses of new media. Sonia Livingstone and her team's project "EU Kids Online" provides an authoritative and complex picture of activities that children perform online (in terms of access, time spent, inequalities, education, communication, participation, risks and regulation) (Livingstone and Bober 2005). Other topics addressed within the field encompass online safety or cyber-bullying (Livingstone and Haddon 2009; Kowalski, Limber and Agatston 2012), internet addiction (Johnson 2009), the generation gap and self-socialisation of children and teens (Ribak 2001; Clark 2009; Helsper 2010).

Nonetheless, the most blatant polemic in media generations scholarship – either packaged as specialised articles or cutting across other topics – concerns the tenability of Don Tapscott's concept of the "net generation" (1998), later rephrased as "digital natives" by Marc Prensky (2001). From this perspective, technology in general has an epistemological quality. Digital technology hence produces a new type of mind and intelligence, especially with those who were born into it. This argument opens with the assumption that young people armed with new media "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" (Prensky 2001, 1). Tapscott, Prensky and their disciples emphasise that 'digital natives' are fully immersed in the digital environment, taking it as their second nature. Multitasking or "multiprocessing" (Brown 2000) is claimed to be their preferred style of work. In the intellectual area, the net generation is described as creative, interactive, collaborative and inclined to inductive thinking. Cyberkids also learn things differently; they privilege game and discovery-based learning over the obsolete didactic approach (Holloway and Valentine 2003). When this part of net generation theory made an intervention in education studies; a serious backlash came from this field, mainly opposing Prensky's statement that children socialised with new media develop new forms of creativity and inteligence (Bennet, Maton and Kervin 2008).

When scholars began to examine young people's online practices with focused empirical research, the rhetoric of net generation theory entered the phase of deconstruction in many other respects as well. The provocative speculation was translated into a set of indicators for empirical assessment of the level on which young people master new technologies, such as: use of emerging technologies, "produsing" activities in Web 2.0 style (Bruns 2007), collaborative nature of use, diversity of types of use, etc. As a result, scholars started to report that the use of the internet is very heterogeneous and Mannheim's old idea of fracturing generation into smaller units could be useful (Holmes 2011); it is not only age but a synergy of other factors such as gender, socio-economic status and type of school that leads to differences in young people's use of new media (Lee 2005). Similarly, it was also reported that "the use of collaborative and self-publishing 'Web 2.0' technologies that have often been associated with this generation is quite low" (Kennedy et al. 2007).

Technological determinism is usually employed as an analytical starting point of net generation theory, an approach which is troublesome for many critics. There is no doubt that the search for generational differences in new media use is a legitimate goal. The empirical literature, however, underlines that it is not merely digital technology that produces the mentality and mindset of the young people. The construction of technological endowment as part of their generational identity is closely related to social meanings ascribed to new technologies in broader social and economic contexts. Lisa Lee therefore revives the concept of "co-construction" (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003), which captures

the reciprocal process in which technologies and users mutually construct each other (Lee 2005, 317). She evokes it to tame fundamentalist technological determinism, while maintaining the relevance of new media as one of the entry points into the process of generational identity construction. David Buckingham also proposes a sophisticated critique of the new wave of technological determinism. He criticises Tapscott and others for assuming that the current technological modus is a random result of ingenious human intelligence which has emerged from nowhere and has no social and political preconditions. In Buckingham's perspective, technological determinations are seriously shaped by social and political affordances of the preceding social order and "interplay of complex social, economic, and political forces" (Buckingham 2006, 9).

2. Generations and media audiences

On the basis of the debate on generations and media the logical conclusion is that contemporary audiences are composed of people belonging to different generations. This is particularly relevant when observing generations from the point of view of audience studies and specifically according to what Alasuutari (1999) calls the third phase of audiences studies. Alasuutari describes this phase as being characterised by a specific focus on the cultural dimension of audiences and on the fact that being part of an audience is relevant as part of the process of identity construction (at both the individual and the collective levels). Although media use (especially television) has been described as being aimed at fostering social integration, i.e. identification with others and the realisation of a sense of belonging, the connection between audience behaviour and identity construction emerges when Abercrombie and Longhurst describe the contemporary "diffused audiences" experience. "The essential feature of this audience-experience is that, in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time. Being a member of an audience […] is constitutive of everyday life" (1998: 261). Being part of an audience, according to the authors, is constitutive of the personal identity and, at the same time, allows people to perceive themselves as part of an imagined community of people sharing experiences (mediated or not); cultural and material consumptions and lifestyles. The diffusion of technologies allowing mediated relations, according to the definition of "networked publics" (Varnelis 2008), increases the opportunities to share discourses and social exchanges about media consumption and promotes the construction of imagined audience communities.

According to this third phase of audience studies, generational belonging is part of the individual identity of the members of the audience and is one of the constituents of the audience as imagined community. At the same time the process of "generationing" (Alanen 2001) implies also the sharing of audience practices. Often these audience practices are diffused and consolidated through mediated discourses and narrations produced top down (by media institutions) or bottom up (by audience members).

Thus, on the basis of empirical studies, we can identify two levels at which generational belonging affects media audiences practices. The first level is related to the fact that each generation (in its formative years) grows up with a specific style of media usage and culture (responding to the available mediascape), which helps to differentiate audience practices of a generation from previous ones (Schäffer 2003; Colombo 2011). According to the Pew Internet Research Project on generations, each generation domesticates the digital environment according to different and typical media consumption habits. Various other empirical studies have been focused on the differences between generations in media repertoires (Hasebrink & Propp 2006) and, in recent years, on media technology repertoires. For example, the Pew Research Center report on "generation's digital gadgets" describes how the 18-33 generation privileges mobile phones, laptop and Ipod or Mp3 player; while the 34-45 generation uses desktop and games consoles, and the 46-55 generation use more desktop and e-book readers.

Besides media repertoires, different research projects highlight the fact that collective responses to the availability of particular mediacapes contributing to generational identity tend to suffuse amongst people belonging to the same generation specific styles of media use. For example, a style of media use focused on specific contents and time-consuming, as opposed to a flow, time-spending and snack consumption. A Finnish study (Lugano & Peltonen 2012) on generation-based differences, highlights some differences between generations in terms of values. For younger generations the speed of the answer in computer mediated communication is a value indicating attention and concentration on the conversation opposed to slowness that, for example for the middle-aged generations, is valuable as a sign of a more meditated answer. Differences are also visible in linguistic and narrative habits: short and dialogical communication in contrast to long and narrative descriptions.

Similarly, younger generations privilege ephemeral cultural objects to be consumed but not owned, in contrast to tangible, ownable and physical objects. In the "beta world of web 2.0" where, according to O'Reilly "the product is developed in the open [through] real time monitoring of user behavior" (2007: 6), these different values affect, particularly, both the way in which generations define the success of an application and the way in which they privilege some affordances rather than others. Other studies are focused on the differences of the online activities. For instance, studies in the US suggest that the members of the 34-45 generation are the most likely group to bank, shop and to look for health information online (Jones & Fox 2009). Findings of a representative survey carried out in Estonia indicate similar trends ("Me. The World. The Media", unpublished data). This analysis indicates that the 65-74 year old social media users are one of the most active groups (15.45%), together with the 20-29 year olds (13.3%), in posting information and links about politics and politicians, and in commenting upon different political themes on social media. In comparison to the younger Estonians

(15-29 year olds), the older age groups also appear to be more active in giving feedback to public institutions through social media.

The second level at which generational belonging affects media audiences practices is related to the fact that each generation shares (through media and digital technologies) narratives and discourses that help to stabilise consumption habits further in the consolidation phase of the generational identity, following its formative years. According to Edmunds and Turner (2002), we can say that media affect the social making of generational cohorts as cultural identities, also offering an inventory of spaces where people can share "the collection of practices through which generational experiences are manifest" (Edmunds & Turner 2002, p. 16). Being part of an audience (and in particular of a diffused, networked and performative audience) is, thus, a constituent of the generational belonging. Different research projects focused on the 18-33 generation can offer a significant description of this kind of connection between generation and audiences. This 18-33 generation's audience practices are characterised by a wide inventory of media resources and by an attitude to act as space-based audiences (in contrast to place-based, locally situated, audiences), able to share symbolic contents all over the world and using these contents to build a common cultural identity (Aroldi 2011: 60). Again, the development of web 2.0 provides them a new space containing a wide range of discursive resources, where self-narrations can be told and self-representations can be acted (Boccia Artieri 2011), increasing reflexivity on "generational belonging" as well as on audience status. An Italian study (included in the research program Media and Generations 2007-2009 funded by the Italian Government) has shown how blogs and YouTube are places where generational discourses emerge, where people produce stories and look for stories of people who share the same "we sense". Furthermore, cultural products are used in those stories as a mnemonic anchor to remember the common "mood of time", presupposing that everybody is familiar with them (Boccia Artieri 2011).

In an empirical study, McMillan and colleagues (2006: 87) show how the production of "we sense" through internet mediated discourses is relevant. A respondent in this study said "since they [friends] too are part of my generation we have all shared in similar experiences …we have all been in college to see the almost overnight change from card catalogue files, to online card catalogue". As Edmunds and Turner (2002) highlight, global and social media are increasing and speeding up the sedimentation of the generational "we sense", offering the opportunity to accede, re-mediate, share and socialise cultural products. Furthermore, according to Hartmann (2003) the relations between the generational identities of the 18-33 year olds (and of younger generations) and technologies has specificity. Younger generations, in fact, tend to perceive some kind of duty (mediated by social and media discourses) to use technology and to build their generational identity around the devices that they use, perceiving that the specificity of the self-definition of their generation is anchored in the use of such technology.

3. **The role of peer culture**

Peer networks are crucial in helping to form this generational "we sense", especially in the case of young generations. In this respect, some authors suggest that we can draw parallels with "doing gender" and "doing generation". For instance, according to McDaniel (2007, p. 4) "generation is a process in a similar way to gender as process, where generation is done by performance, in social relation to others". Hence, as also noted by Buckingham (2006, p.2), the process of defining a generation is a cultural issue as "it is a matter of how the potential members of a generation constitute themselves as having a shared identity". For instance, despite the popular "web generation discourse" (Hartman 2003, p. 10), which is used to refer to the preferences and supposed common characteristics of the present day youth, the latter have taken quite a critical stand against such labelling (Siibak, 2010). Jason Sternberg's (1998) studies among young people in Australia also indicate similar almost despicable reactions among the supposed members of the 'Generation X' towards the concept.

It follows that, in addition to being a crucial component in forming the generational conciousness, peer culture plays an important role in helping to create the public image of a generation. For instance, in the context of the digital generation, studies suggest that peers not only have a significant impact on young people's intrinsic motivation for making use of the internet (Zhao et al., 2011) but peers also have "a positive effect on increasing children's digital skills and the range of their online activities" (Kalmus, von Feilitzen & Siibak 2012, p. 252). Furthermore, they are often considered to be the largest influence on taking up the opportunity of creative online activities such as creating a Social Network Site profile, or keeping a blog (Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel & Siibak 2009). At the same time, this positive influence of friends should not be seen as being the same as ordinary peer pressure, which has often been named as the most frequent reason for taking up some creative and interactive uses of the new media (Grinter and Palen, 2002; boyd, 2008; Siibak, 2009). Thus, the false assumptions about the intra-generational homogeneity that the present day young people supposedly share may also be triggered by phrases like "If you're not in Facebook you do not exist!", which illustrate the taken-for-grantedness of the need to engage in and experience similar online activities.

Empirical studies also indicate that peers and close friends are most often viewed upon as sources for reference (Siibak, 2009) on whom one's own online behavior and usage practices may be modelled. For instance, studies suggest that the preferences and practices of one's friends are noted when selecting the 'markers of cool' (Liu, 2007) worthy to be put on one's SNS profile. In fact, such "markers" are also often used for illustrating or improving one's status in a group of peers (Peter, Valkenburg & Fluckinger, 2009). In other words, the impression management strategies young people use, for instance on SNS, are not only dependent on the affordances of the particular technological

interface, but are also largely built on the collective peer culture (Corsaro, 1997), whose values and norms help to frame the self-presentation process (Siibak, 2009).

In fact, according to Sonia Livingstone, young people's online identities are expressed "not as a free-floating, individual activity but as embedded in and shaped by specific social and technological conditions" (2009, p. 117). In other words, the findings of various empirical studies about young people's online practices clearly refer to the reciprocal processes of co-construction taking place between users and technologies that we touched upon earlier in this chapter. Those so-called space-based generations are therefore able to share their self-definition among peers and by doing so to reinforce generational communicative habits through discursive practices carried on within social networks.

4. Computer mediated communication and inter-generational relations

Susan Herring (2008: 78) stated that the label "digital generation" which is at present commonly used both in academic and public discourses when referring to the present day youth, is actually "an exonym - a name used to refer to a group by outsiders (in this case, adults)" and not chosen by the young people to represent themselves. Such an exotic label was meant to illustrate the age-based differences in technology skill and use.

In recent years, however, the previous technology-knowledge gap between the present day youth and the members of previous generations has been diminishing. Older adults, in particular, have become more and more motivated to learn basic skills of web-based communication and, by doing so, have become more aware of the opportunities to access their children's online worlds and mediate their internet use (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Having a chance to follow the lives of their grandchildren is usually seen as the one of main motivating factors for the grandparents to start learning and using web-based communication environments (Gonzalez, Jomhari, & Kurniawan, 2012). In fact, various studies (Smith, 2011; Tamme & Siibak 2012) indicate that older members of the families have acknowledged that new media technologies may offer them an opportunity to reach out to the young, who otherwise seem to be out of reach. In other words, ICTs have become key elements in bringing different generations together, helping to promote strengthened family ties and experiences (Taske & Plude 2011) and, hence, also helping to facilitate family relations (Mesch 2006).

At the same time, research reveals that young people are not as willing to interact with their parents via social media as their parents are to interact with them (Siibak & Murumaa 2011). In fact, it has be argued (cf. Siibak & Murumaa 2011) that parents are often perceived as being a disturbing factor on

such sites, i.e. "nightmare readers" (Marwick & boyd 2010), whose presence in the environment may cause young adults and children to readjust their privacy settings and disclosure practices. For instance, recent empirical studies (Siibak & Murumaa 2011) indicate that young people are making active use of the privacy tactic named social steganography (boyd & Marwick 2011), which is essentially a strategy where information is hidden in plain sight. Decoding such posts can be extremely difficult for the audience members without the appropriate "interpretative lens", and hence such posts are targeted and understood only by the members of the "ideal audience" (Marwick & boyd 2010), i.e. their closest friends and online peers who are usually representatives of the same generation and thus typically sharing similar reference points.

5. **Implications for research and conclusion**

In this chapter, we have demonstrated how using the concept of "generation" as a stratification of users and audiences may reveal valuable insights. The category proved useful for explaining differences in media repertoires, media habits, and uses of media as status symbols. There is, however, also evidence of some limitations. We know that generations are not homogenous units, not with respect to the shared experiences and events prevalent in a specific epoch, and not with respect to media use. By now, older age groups have started to become avid users of social media, comparable with young users. This phenomenon implies that the group of social media users may not be defined along shared experiences in a common epoch, but by similar life circumstances, such as time resources and thematic interest. On the other hand, it seems that the 18-33 generation considers the use of technologies to be one of its key defining elements. Thus, the crucial question is how a cohort may be integrated over a period of time and come to perceive itself, and be perceived as a generation.

One option answering this question is to look at self-definitions more closely. The internet has often been discussed as a forum where the individual can arrange, articulate and form their own identity, where self-narrations can find their place as well as attention from others (Aroldi 2011). So far, the focus has been on individual identities. While these are often defined in terms of the individual's interpretations and perceptions of the world, it seems that the generational identity is only loosely connected to subjective constructions of the groups themselves. So, one possible future research field is an examination of how much the formal definitions of generations also coincide with the understanding that the *generations* have about *themselves*. Possible approaches are, of course, to ask for statements about the sense of "generation" from the users themselves and ask them for an interpretation of the generation's scope and characteristics. The starting point for such a study may be to begin collecting information from people who grew up during the establishment of a particular *media* generation and then work backwards to the fringes of the age cohort. Theoretical sampling of other age cohorts should produce differences in self-definition. Another source of such information

may be found in self-narrations on the web, as disseminated by members of the generations themselves.

Another option takes its point of departure as the fact that generations are not only constituted by their actual social practice, but also by reflections upon it – certainly, scientific reflections, but also wider reflections within public discourse. A number of books already make the generations of 18-33 and 34-45 year olds accessible to a wide (non-scientific) audience. An even larger share of the public is reached by products of popular culture – specifically, sitcoms targeting young viewers (up to the 46-55 generation) depicting the lives, habits and views of the 20 or 30-somethings. In some of these tremendously popular series, we can observe the practices of young people involving ICT or mobile media. We can also observe what these technologies *mean*. An example of this is contained within an episode of "*How I Met Your Mother*" (US, 2005), where the protagonists watch another character at a party send text messages on his phone and form the unanimous suspicion that he is in a relationship.

Other series go beyond merely *showing* the practices concerning new technologies and give *reflective* if not *critical* accounts. One example of this is found in an episode of "*IT Crowd*" (GB, 2006) where one of the protagonists first gets involved in a SNS called "Friendface". The episode charts the steady decline of the protagonists' social life, and increasing addiction to the site, as well as the pressure to react swiftly, thus reducing time for everything else. Other portraits are on the verge of being stereotypes ridiculed by the humorous format: for example, new communication technologies are pervasive and probably one of the leitmotifs in "*The Big Bang Theory*" (US, 2007). When one of the characters needed to set up a lie, he creates a Facebook account for the person he was feigning to be with in support of his lie – mirroring the motto "If you don't have a Facebook page, you don't exist".

Another instance, indicative of reflections on contemporary life executed by the same series occurs when one of the characters of "*The Big Bang Theory*" had been out of his job for three months and no one had noticed. When asked what he had been doing all that time, one item on his list was "update my Facebook account". These few examples demonstrate how rich the fictional television world is in terms of references to the generations of 18-33 and 34-45 year olds and their respective characteristics. In a way, these mass media portrayals co-create a society's view on the generations. Yet, a systematic analysis of popular formats with regard to generational implications is still lacking. Moreover, as these series are viewed by an audience of millions worldwide, the portrayal and stereotypes transported there might be used by the audience to construct an image of a particular generation one does not belong to, or create a standard or norm for those who belong to the generation.

The third option is to look at modes of reception rather than at usage itself (i.e., what, how long, where, etc.). If generations are really held together by the conditions, events, and affordances of growing up and living in a certain time, that should create practices connected to certain styles of use and gratifications rather than specific technologies. For example, growing up in a time and place where it was crucial to be informed about politics every day, should make a person grow accustomed to being knowledgeable about political events – whether through traditional or new media hardly matters. Thus, generations may be defined by the motives and gratifications one expects from media, rather than by the technologies available to fulfil them. In a similar vein, reception styles trained in one environment may persist even when reading the same content in another. For example, someone who is socialised in the traditional linear reading of a newspaper, will tend to read linearly and sequentially even in multimedia, highly linked news portals on the web. Conversely, young users trained in non-linear styles by the hyperlinked structure of the internet will continue to browse and scan in traditional environments such as television and newspapers as well (see Schweiger's (2006) concept of "transmedia use styles"). Another option may be to explore the way in which intensive use of social media cultivates the urge to express instant reactions, an opportunity not available when using traditional mass media.

The potential applications are promising. The concept of "generations" offers a wide range of valuable heuristics to explore the meaning and use of media in people's lives, and may help us explore the complex interrelations between audiences, technologies and cultural settings. It is clear that a simple age-generation-equation will not be useful for understanding contemporary media usage, but that the theoretically meaningful application of the generations concept requires viewing generations as a multifaceted phenomenon. It covers several dimensions, including both objective (for example, shared experiences) as well as subjective (for example, self-definitions) components. While it seems important to explore the nature of each of the components, a comprehensive model of media generations taking into account the specifics of media is urgently needed and will represent an important task for future research on media use.

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