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Young Italians' Cross-media Cultures*

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Abstract

The article discusses the findings of a qualitative study aimed at investigating the development of new cross-media diets and new practices of media consumption and production among Italian young people (aged 14-24). These practices are certainly enabled by the diffusion of broadband, mobile media, digital television and the media convergence processes at the institutional and production level. They are also influenced by social and cultural factors such as age, gender, household composition, the extension of one's social networks, and so on. The study has followed a multi-sited approach, with the adoption of different techniques of investigation (in depth interviews; participant observation with the support of visual sociology; an exploration of Italian online discussion areas). The article discusses some specificities of this young generation of Italians in the development of cross-platform consumption diets. In particular, it focuses on screen-based media consumption and technologically-mediated interpersonal communication. The findings on Italian youth's media cultures provide the chance to reflect upon some relevant issues of the contemporary debate about media convergence: especially, the relation between private and public contexts of consumption, between mobile and domestic media, social broadcasting media and networking social media, and linear and non-linear patterns of reception.

1. Media in transition

We are currently witnessing a phase of change, characterised by broad margins for negotiation and unpredictability. Change at the level of media offerings (concerning the redefinition of the role of market players, various forms of economic valuation of media products, and even issues of standards and copyright) goes together with an increase in the possibilities for and forms of media consumption.

The ubiquitous nature of digital and networked media (from the multimedia Internet to personal media and ICTs) define an ever more articulated and complex scene wherein subjects move and make their choices (Ito, 2007). In this scene analogue platforms (e.g. general television) sit alongside various new digital platforms (e.g. digital, multi-channel and multi-thematic television). Traditional forms of distributing television, movies or music (e.g. broadcasting or physical supports) exist alongside new circulation practices (e.g. p2p online networks). One-to-one communication modalities (e.g. fixed or mobile phone) sit alongside many-to-many forms (e.g. Instant Messaging, blogs, social networking sites). Contents produced by institutional and commercial subjects exist alongside user-generated content of ever more multi-medial

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nature (not only text, but also pictures and videos). Niche contents, to be shared with a closed social circle, are to be found alongside mainstream contents. And so on.

The increasing complexity of this contemporary mediascape makes it utterly urgent to re-think media change more broadly beyond the usual utopias and dystopias. For some years now the need to rethink the dynamics of media convergence beyond its mere technical dimension has gained prominence across the theoretical literature (Gitelman and Pingree, 2003; Jenkins and Thornburn, 2003a; Jenkins and Thornburn, 2003b; Jenkins, 2006; Gitelman, 2006). The digital revolution paradigm, oriented to the transformative features of digital technology, is thus being replaced by the *convergence paradigm*. This appears more responsive with regard to the multi-dimensional nature of media change, to the role of subjects along with that of technologies, and to the hybridizing and re-mediation mechanisms between old and new media. In Jenkins' terms, "convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content towards content that flows across multiple media channels, towards the increased interdependence of communications systems, towards multiple ways of accessing media content, and towards ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006, 243).

This attention to the forces and the subjects shaping media technologies is one of the striking features of the convergence paradigm. While the advent of new media and the digitalization process provide the conditions for widespread change within the media system, these same conditions are being actively shaped by the various actors populating the contemporary media environment: that is to say, by multimedia conglomerates (on the supply side), by public institutions (on the governance side) and by the users themselves (on the consumption side). A medium, therefore, can not be defined unless one starts from its accompanying "protocols" and "practices", which shape it on the cultural, economic and social level (Scaglioni, Sfardini, 2007).

The present global phase is characterized by tactical decisions and unforeseen consequences, multiple signals and competing interests, and above all by uncertain directions and unforeseeable outcomes. The dynamics of convergence assume different characteristics depending on the specific cultural and economic contexts, which in turn depend upon the various national histories of media systems. We will attempt to provide a (non-exhaustive) depiction of the Italian context, starting from a snapshot of the diffusion of different digital platforms.

1.1 Overview: media change in Italy

While analogue television appears today, together with radio, to be the platform with the highest penetration rate among the Italian population, a look at families' technological equipment reveals highly

differentiated diffusion rates among the four typologies of devices and services (ICTs, informatics, entertainment, consumer electronics) that digital convergence is centred upon. As of June 2006, according to data from the Ministry of Communications, the mobile phone remains the most diffused technological device, being present in more than 80% of households (two or more per family, in the majority of cases). The personal computer's diffusion is limited to less than half of all families (47%), albeit growing at more than 3% since June 2004. However, with regard to the PC universe, market tendencies reflect a substantial transformation: in 2006, laptop sales (2.540.000 units) exceeded those of desktop PCs (2.255.000), and the total number of PCs in Italy (counting both workplaces and households) has reached 24.7 millions (data from Assinform 2007 Report).

Apart from the diffusion of the above mentioned platforms, in the last few years technological innovation has been driven by new ICT products as well as by the development of entertainment electronics. As regards ICTs, the highest growth rates have been recorded by UMTS and broadband-enabled mobile phones, which finally managed to overcome their niche status (UMTS user by the end of 2005 where almost 10 million).

Broadband diffusion speed rates look stunning. By September 2006, on the infrastructural side, the current technological reference point for broadband, xDSL, was available to 88% of the population. On the diffusion side, records show a growth of 20% since June 2004 – broadband is to be found in 27% of Italian households (and in 38% of connected households)[1]. With regard to consumer electronics, the highest-growing devices are DVD video, DTT recorders, digital cameras, digital camcorders, and, more recently, MP3 players.

[1] Data from Osservatorio Banda Larga (available online at: www.osservatoriobandalarga.it).

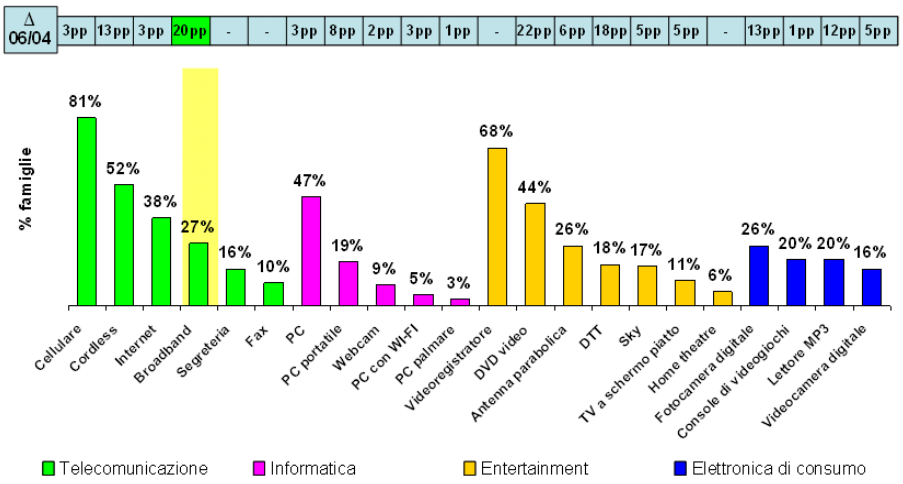

Figure 1. Source: Ministero delle Comunicazioni, Osservatorio Banda Larga – Between (2006)

1.2 Television facing convergence in Italy

Within this context, the central medium itself – television – is undergoing transformations that are redefining both its role in the wider media scene and the positioning of its players with regards to the development of the various digital platforms (Aroldi et al, 2006; Colombo and Vittadini, 2006). In particular, forecasts predict a strong diffusion of DTT, matching the progressive extinction of analogue television by 2012. This is the date set by the Italian Government for the switch-off, which is going to involve almost twenty-four million national households. However, these forecasts look optimistic, considering the shortcomings still affecting terrestrial digital television.

The satellite platform, featuring the highest growth rates in the 2003-2007 period, thanks to the launch of SkyItalia, should stop growing due to the saturation of the pay-TV market, stabilizing at around five millions households.

IPTV diffusion is related to the growth of broadband connections (estimates predict more than 15 millions in 2012), and although it only began in 2007 it should become a market ripe with offerings and contents. Here too estimated growth rates – supposed to surpass satellite subscriptions around 2011 - may appear to be too optimistic. Broadband diffusion might naturally relate to, and drive, the diffusion of various forms of Internet TV, outside the “closed gardens” of IPTV. The diffusion of MobileTV should be approached with even more caution, being affected by further uncertainties concerning the prevalence or the co-existence of a linear flow-based TV (based on the Dvb-h platform) or of audiovisual on-demand services (based on UMTS and Hsdpa).

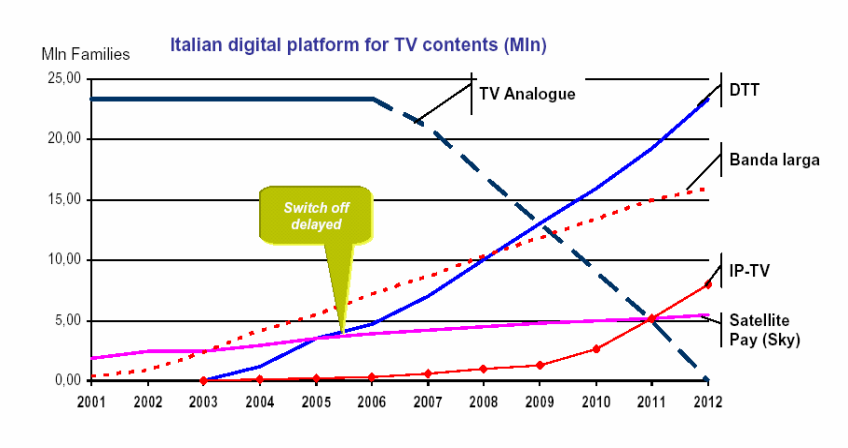

Figure 2. Source: Mediaset/Booz Allen Analysis, based on forecast Telecom Italia, Informa Media, Gartner, ScreenDigest, Sky, Ministero delle Comunicazioni

2. The research project

Despite some delays, Italy has finally entered a fully networked information economy, characterized, in Yochai Benkler's (2006, 3) terms, by the presence of a "communications environment built on cheap processors with high computation capabilities, interconnected in a pervasive network". Corresponding to this change in the technological and institutional scene we are starting to find a re-defintion of media consumption, at least in those audience niches that are more easily reachable by processes of technological innovation. In the Italian case, the most recent data on media consumption indicate that adolescents and youths are the population segments more directly involved in the emergence of the networked information economy. A key example of this is the growth among Italian adolescents and youth of downloading and file-sharing practices (Bennato, 2007) and of web 2.0-related services[2] involving a convergence between institutionalized and user-generated contents as well as an inter-connection between different communication platforms.

Italian youth and adolescents are therefore now fully integrated within the communicative economy of *convergence culture* "where old and new media intersect, where grassroot and corporate media collide, where the power of media producer and media consumer interact" (Jenkins, 2006, 2) in structuring new media diets.

[2] For example, data published in the research report by Nielsen//Netratings, relative to January 2007, state that in the last few months 56% of Italian web surfers use web 2.0 sites, with a particularly strong diffusion among younger users. As a result, Italy ranks fifth among European nations for the traffic on sites such as YouTube, MySpace, and Wikipedia.

Undoubtedly, while the situation benefits from the relevant technological variables we discussed in the previous paragraph, it must nonetheless interact with the specific social and personal variables that, according to social shaping theories of media and ICTs [3], drive the adoption and incorporation of technologies into everyday life.

The research[4] whose results are presented here, was designed to study the emergence of new cross-media diets among young Italians. While still a consumption niche, it nonetheless appears to provide a peculiarly interesting case study. This group domesticates digital technologies rapidly. These youth participate in large social networks that act as reference groups wherein media contents – even traditional ones – are important resources for socialization (more so than for other age groups). Finally, they have a considerable amount of time available for both media consumption and technologically-mediated or face-to-face relationships.

2.1 Methodology

The complexity of the chosen research object led to a rethink of traditional ethnographic approaches to media and required the adoption of a flexible and multi-sited methodology (Marcus, 1995). In a way analogous to the line of thought that originated in the field of Internet studies – and especially in Internet ethnographies – the methods of "mobile" ethnography were adopted (Hine, 2000, Hartmann, 2006). This methodology captures the inter-connections between life (both on- and off-line) and the flows of interaction, thus requiring multi-situated researchers and research objects.

Being both adaptive and reflexive and able to progressively redefine itself on the base of the research findings, this research approach allowed us to set up an iterative interaction between empirical data and the theoretical base, and to triangulate several inquiry tools and objects of study. The research was articulated across three areas that were in a continuous, reciprocal dialogue. Each area corresponded to different knowledge objectives and engaged different inquiry techniques: in-depth interviews and both on- and off-line participant observation.

The triangulation between these different research tools and observational environments was intended to reconstruct the relationship between the subjects and the various platforms they use, insofar as they are integrated into the domestic and extra-domestic contexts and shaped by the daily lives and individual biographies of the subjects.

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[3] As regards these topics, see the section on *Technology Design and Development* in Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002), the proceedings of the Helsinki conference *The Good, the Bad and the Irrelevant: The User and the Future of Information and Communication Technologies* promoted by COST269 and Haddon et al (eds) (2005).

[4] This research – directed by Fausto Colombo and Piermarco Aroldi – was carried out by a workgroup of the *Osservatorio sulla Comunicazione* at the Università Cattolica in Milan and was financed by Mtv Italia.

The processes of incorporation of the new digital media platforms within extra-domestic contexts were accessed through ethnographic observation at the places where urban youth meet and are entertained (a gym, a shopping mall and a games arcade). This was captured through ethnographic notes, photos and video. Here the nomadic consumption practices and their contexts of use and socialization could be observed. Ethnographic observation was integrated with brief, non-directive individual and group interviews with the subjects frequenting these places, in order to reconstruct the discourses and dynamics of outdoor digital consumption.

With regard to domestic media consumption, 40 non-directive in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted inside people's homes, in order to observe the subject's social context, the devices owned, their physical collocation, and to explore better the "moral economy" of the household regulating access to technologies (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992).

The sample interviewed, equally divided between males and females, was built upon the intersection of two main variables: the typology of the platforms owned and used by the subjects and age. With regard to the first aspect, the sample was segmented on the base of the ownership of devices from at least two of the following platform macro-typologies: digital television platforms (DTT decoder or satellite TV or IPTV); PC with a broadband connection; mobile devices supporting audiovisual practices (third-generation mobile phone or TVPhones or portable players, such as MP4 players and Sony PSPs). With regard to the age variable, the sample was distributed as follows:

- 5 pre-adolescents (11-13 years of age) and 9 adolescents (14-18), meaning a total of 14 people.
- 15 youths (19-24 years of age) and 11 young adults (25-35, among which 6 under-30s and 5 over-30s), making a total of 26.

In this article we will focus on the empirical data gathered through home interviews and in particular on the media consumption practices of adolescents (14-18) and youths (19-24). The aim is to highlight the emergent consumption forms across the different platforms in this first phase of their incorporation into daily life (a phase characterized by high uncertainty and unpredictability).

3. Media competition in cross-media cultures

Within the above-depicted multi-platform media environment, young users are faced on the one hand by ever more interconnected and inter-operating multimedia and multitasking digital technologies. On the other hand they face a set of technologies and services allowing for the same media consumption practices (e.g. watching movies, listening to music, or communicating though mediated interpersonal channels) with different modalities, timings, contexts of use and formats. Our focus shall then be on understanding not

only how these practices are enacted within the new media context, but also on the reasons driving the choices made between the many options (both old and new) that are possible today, as well as the specific and differentiating features of each solution[5].

What factors, not only technological in nature but also economic and above all socio-cultural, define the selection criteria and make the various ICTs at times compete with each other as alternatives or complement each other? How do these selection processes impact upon the way digital and networked media are socially incorporated into life and upon the way that pre-existing media and communication practices are symbolically functionally re-configured since, as Jenkins (2006) points out, "old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (p.14)[6]? These questions become crucial when the ubiquitous nature of digital and networked media (from multimedia Internet to personal media and ICTs) define an ever more articulated and complex landscape wherein subjects move and exercise their choices.

The purpose of this paragraph is to re-read the research data findings in order to highlight the processes of selection that youth make at three different levels, corresponding to the moments of *appropriation* of the available media and contents (the choice of whether to buy or not to buy a ICT), of *access* (the choice of which ICT to use among those that are owned) and of *use* (the choice of practices using ICTs accessed). In particular, we shall focus our attention on some socio-cultural factors shaping these choices[7], such as the spatial-temporal structures of daily life, social networks, individual biographies and gender. However, within this wide range of recorded practices, we shall here focus only on "screen-based" and communication-related practices.

3.1 Screen-based media consumption

With regard to the practices of screen-.based media consumption, we can distinguish the platforms from their contents. As regards the platform, youth show some after-effects of the decline in the centrality of television that is currently affecting their age segment. This decline is expressed by a vast competition between linear television consumption practices and non-linear audiovisual consumption practices. The old general, analogue television broadcasting still retains some value, but it must compete with digital television platforms, other media platforms and communication platforms, over the above-mentioned dimensions of appropriation, access and social use.

[5] For a similar approach applied to the practices of mediated interpersonal communication see Haddon (2005); for one focusing on screen-based media see Livingstone (2002).

[6] The assumption upon which this article is based, part of a long tradition within media studies, is the unacceptability of the "displacement" thesis, according to which the arrival of a new medium implies the displacement of pre-existing ones. Rather, the experience of pre-existing media seems to modify itself when accompanied by the new medium, thus generating a more differentiated and specialized pattern of use, increasing the complexity of the media mix. For an overview of the debate concerning the relationship between old and new media, see, among others, Pasquali (2003).

[7] For an overview of the cultural and social factors shaping adoption and use of ICTs see Thomas et al (2004).

As regards *appropriation*, the competition between television and other media is first and foremost driven by domestic negotiation, still highly influential for this age segment, and by economic factors. The adoption of digital platforms such as the personal computer, for example, occurs within intra-family dynamics where the purchase of a PC takes place for a broad spectrum of reasons centered around collective utility and its value as an educational tool. Meanwhile, the greatest investment made by youth, in terms of adoption, is in mobile devices. Limited money for spending and the lower relative cost of such technologies contribute to shaping the choice to buy MP3 players and mobile phones, without any interest in the more advanced standards (dvb-h mobiles are notably absent from this age group). This platform selection process is also influenced by peer network, which strengthens the social relevance of those ICTs that are considered to be more strategic in their lives (i.e. mobile phones, MP3 players, tools for online communication).

A typical example is the presence of further television platforms – typically, satellite TV. The presence of SkyItaly in the household relates to intra-familial power dynamics, and its acquisition depends upon the politics of purchasing. Here, youth assume a secondary role, or else they are in weaker position compared to considerations such as both parental consumption choices and the wide presence of children's or pre adolescent's contents on Sky channels.

As regards *access*, the competition between television and other media is very harsh and is influenced by several factors. First among them is the general shrinking of the amount of free time spent in domestic activities, which leads to television consumption being relegated to a residual position (especially among young college students and/or workers). The temporal economy of daily life influences access to screen-based platforms, for example de-centering those platforms with the lowest symbolic investment (such as analogue TV). It also leads to a re-valuation of other platforms within specific communicative situations or contexts (such as the viewing of music videos on mobiles or iPods when mobile, when studying and when on vacation).

The factors that spatially restructure consumption play an important role in driving the logics of platform scarcity or abundance in specific places or domestic spaces. For example, the presence of satellite TV in the living room has a bearing upon the selection of analogue TV as a secondary platform, and even on the selection of movies to be consumed on a PC (in young people's bedrooms) as an individual practice for viewing contents that have not been negotiated with parents.

The relation to others in social networks also appears highly relevant in shaping the use of media. On the one hand it pushes young people towards favoring CMC and mobile telephony over cinema and television. On the other it confers more value on those screen-based platforms that offer video contents with the highest 'social spendability', such as audiovisual files that can be converted into items that can then be traded online. This happens both with audiovisual files containing narrative products (such as movies and

TV-series), which file-sharing practices thrive upon, and with short video files ('amusing videos', user-generated-contents), which provide material to be exchanged via email, chat and Instant Messenger. Familiar gate-keeping roles can be found here. Within this younger population these gate-keepers influence access to certain platforms in terms of timing, costs and contents. Meanwhile, the more competent subjects (males) or older peers (older brothers) are designated as leaders as regards the downloading of music and audiovisual files.

As regards the dimension of *use*, audiovisual consumption puts into direct competition platforms that are usually used for ritual family practices with those that are used for individual practices. While analogue TV and even satellite TV (or DVD viewing through a DVD-player) are integrated into the dynamics of rituals internal to the family (or to friendship relationships), the use of DivXs or of downloaded movies or TV-series is an individual practice. Furthermore, it should be noted that the very marginalisation of television consumption can be traced back to an intensive use of the personal computer and of the Internet as platforms allowing access to the very same television contents. In this sense, downloading a TV-series or movies, and to an extent streaming funny videos and UGCs, are for these young people practices that are competing with the traditional television or DVD use.

Precisely with regard to contents, the linear viewing of television, either via the old analogue platform or the new digital ones, is for some people still a central practice providing a reference point for choosing contents (e.g. to locate TV-series, movies, music videos that can then be retrieved and consumed on other platforms).

This dimension is also influenced by factors tied to the subjects' social networks, which uphold and drive the discursive centrality of some television contents (such as brands, themes or characters). On the supply side, the general competition of analogue and digital TV (mostly satellite and IpTV, but also to some extent the DTT platform) revolves precisely around the contents offered. While there is a tendency for youth to symbolically de-invest in analogue TV, digital satellite television is one platform that is re-activating audiovisual consumption. Access to audiovisual content is further influenced by factors relative to the youth's time-budgets. For example, interstitial times – breaks in study, moments of socializing at school, journeys to school or work – influence how they consume short videos (funny videos, UGCs). Meanwhile, free time in the evening leads to the consumption of specifically-narrative audiovisual contents (movies, TV-series).

3.2 Technologically-mediated interpersonal communication

Within the media diets of Italian adolescents and youth, technologically-mediated interpersonal communication practices (either via mobile phone or via the Internet) are objects of strong temporal and

identity investments. Their use often colonizes time previously dedicated to other media-related (or non media-related) activities (such as watching TV or simply filling up daily interstitial times). Furthermore, the management of technologically-mediated interpersonal communication is a terrain of fierce competition (essentially between voice calls, SMS, Instant Messaging, e-mail and VoIP), which has gone through a major re-configuration. This re-configuration started with the availability of flat-fee, always-on broadband connections, which actually re-defined the role previously played mainly by mobile phones (Scifo, 2005). Thus mobiles effectively compete with forms of computer mediated communications, which, in turn, arise because of the nature of the spatial-temporal configuration of the communication itself, because of the other communicators and because of the communication's content and purpose.

Let us start, then, with the use of the broadband-connected PC with Instant Messaging software (mainly the highly popular Microsoft Messenger, MSN). Its diffusion and ubiquity among those young people that can have access to this platform represents the most recent development on the contemporary Italian scene as regards interpersonal mediated communications.

The *appropriation* of instant-messaging software is undoubtedly made possible by the availability of always-on broadband, whose fee is paid for by the family and not by the young user. But it is socially driven by the pressures of peer network. These pressures play a fundamental role in the diffusion of knowledge about how to use this tool, they fuel the drive towards the adoption of the software as a symbol of group belonging, and, finally, they activate related literacy and social learning processes.

However, while the young may be in possession of the software, the relative *access* is not to be taken for granted. Its times and spaces are negotiated with other family members particularly at the intra-generational level (i.e. among siblings). This is due to the limited number of Internet-connected PCs in households (typically featuring a single unit in the children's – often shared – bedroom).

When accessibility is granted, the *use* of the MSN software is shaped by several factors. First of all, from a temporal point of view, a central factor is the need to synchronize with the times when peer networks are online, times which are in turn determined by the alternation between two different spatial-temporal configurations. The first relates to social obligations (school or university) and outdoor pleasure time. The second is presence in the home during times when the PC becomes accessible (e.g. in the morning before leaving, during the afternoon and/or the evening when it can be used concurrently with other study-related activities, but also with PC-related ones such as web surfing, downloading and listening to music and watching television).

With regard to the interlocutors, Instant Messenger is directed at the subject's close and bounded social circles. That is to say, it sustains pre-existing networks of relationships instituted through daily life[8], but

[8] From this standpoint, MSN has completely displaced open chatrooms.

limited to the peer group (to classmates, to out-of-school friendship networks), thus excluding adults (typically parents). Therefore, this social norm, shared among adolescents and youth, deems instant messaging to be a practice typical of these age cohorts (indeed, findings show reduced adoption and usage of Instant Messaging in pre-adolescents and an higher predilection for email in young adults).

Finally, from the perspective of the contents and purposes of communication, the use of MSN operates at several levels: the phatic one (i.e. simply maintaining some communicative contact), social micro-coordination, sharing and expressions of identity. It is a truly multi-functional tool whose uses go beyond mere synchronous communication (that is, chatting). As a background practice (either alongside other computer-related practices or as dedicated communications), it is instrumental in the organization and synchronization of the activities of outdoor informal sociality. Furthermore, an important role is played by virtue of the possibility of exchanging multimedia materials (both personal and otherwise), such as photographs, music files and links to popular funny videos, as well as through building spaces for self expression and sharing them with the restricted peer network, through the blog area offered by MSN.

Two developments need to noted. The first is the consequences of the rise of the Instant Messaging practices for the re-configuration of mediated (and non-mediated) communication practices previously incorporated by young Italians. The second is the kind of competitive dynamics it generates between the various possible options.

First of all, the considerable temporal and symbolic investment in Instant Messaging makes it one of the main drivers of PC use (indeed, the use of MSN is a very first action that takes place right after powering up of the unit). But above all IM is an agent for the symbolic re-definition of the PC, re-domesticated as a networked “ego-centered” platform (and not only as a platform for gaming, study and multimedia use).

The second development, even more relevant, is the way in which the use of Instant Messaging re-configures that of SMS, its direct competitor. Indeed, MSN and SMS exchanges take place within the same social networks, but since in households access to both platforms is available, MSN’s competitive edge results from its economic advantage (no charge for the subject, who exploits a family resource and not a personal one), from its technological features and capabilities (writing via the PC keyboard is more efficient and comfortable) and because it supports more easily many-to-many multimedia communications.

In which case, when and in what forms does SMS usage persist? First of all, within the domestic context the use of SMS acts as a substitute when online connectivity is not available (the interlocutor does not possess broadband technology, the software or the rights to access). Furthermore, the decision to use SMS depends upon the kind of communicative content to be conveyed and on the different social location of users. SMS still plays a fundamental role in the ultra-short-time micro-coordination of users (be it “just in time” communications or outdoor ones).

Finally, the incorporation of MSN into young people's lives has re-defined the use of email (more frequent in young adults than in adolescents). This is deemed to be a slower means of communication whereas the communicative needs of youth hold speed to be fundamental, including for the above mentioned short-term management of micro-coordination. However, email has a competitive edge when there is a need for communication, which does not have to synchronized, in order to manage the planning of time either for coordinating study or work activities or for social coordination over the long term. Furthermore, from a symbolic point of view, email is perceived as involving fewer social obligations and being less invasive. Interestingly, always-on connections and familiarity with MSN lead to the constant monitoring of mailbox when at home.

In closing this section, we shall only briefly mention the other digitally mediated communication practices that can managed through the computer or through mobile devices. As regards the PC, video-calls made possible by VoIP systems (e.g. Skype) are highly appreciated. Immediately perceived as a video-communication service, they are starting to compete with MSN. Significantly lower interest has been recorded in mobile video-communication. This is often viewed negatively (due to lack of privacy during the act of communication), especially when it is compared to domestic video-communication (through a webcam connected to either MSN or VoIP). Finally, no intensive use has been recorded with regard to MMSs, whereas the simple act of taking photographs via the camera phone appears to be highly appreciated and widely adopted. It is followed by an exchange of materials via MSN or e-mail.

Therefore, while Instant Messaging is becoming the main support platform for digital media communication, SMS and email still co-exist as the main alternative tools, whose use is differentiated in relation to interlocutors' contexts and contents.

4. Media integration in crossmedia cultures

Cross-media diets among different technological platforms and contents are also incorporated into the daily lives of Italian youth and adolescents through the practices of acquisition, consumption and exchange of contents. With regard to these practices, some cultural factors act either as drivers of or as constraints on the adoption and usage of cross-mediality. These factors include the temporal structures of daily life (societal structures shaping time use as well as cultural expectations about that same time use), the technological configuration of the households and values (both of the family and in relation to group orientations).

Meanwhile, the presence of multi-functional media technologies (PC, mobile phones and other mobile devices) enables 'multitasking' consumption practices using the same platform (e.g. using Microsoft

Messenger while listening to music files stored on the PC and/or sharing audiovisual files; or playing games while listening to music on mobile phones). Although this multitasking appears to be dominated by a *'centripetal logic'* (the *logic of convergence*), Italian 'networked public' (Ito 2007) practices respond to different logics, foreboding an evolution towards new scenarios. We will describe in this section the cross-platform mobility of contents, the cross-platform content acquisition and the consumption and the cross-platform cultural exchange of either institutionally-produced or user-generated contents.

The technological configuration of households, involving the presence of multiple platforms (e.g. analogue/satellite TV, personal computer), alongside forms that generate a strong affection (close to fandom) for some television brands and content (e.g. The Disney Channel, MTV; serials, cartoons and music videos) both act as drivers for the twofold development of cross-media mobility, aimed at either the extension or the intensification of consumption practices.

(1) On the one and we have the prolonging of the consumption experience, either repeating it through switching consumption practices between digital and analogue television platforms or through accessing stored material (see, for example, the Sky reruns of TV-series or the archiving of cult TV-series on DVD or DivX). On the other hand we have the intensification of the experience through gathering related materials on the Internet (either from institutionalized sources or from other users' "grassroots" sources).

(2) Then we have some kind of substitutive consumption (even in relation to contents with low symbolic investment) through the retrieval of the synopses of missed episodes or through the podcasting of segments of the beloved programmes, in cases when it is not possible to access analogue or digital television platforms.

These forms of consumption grow in relevance with the age of users (being more present in youth than in adolescents). This is due to a different orientation (and literacy) to Web 2.0 and a different and higher value ascribed to breaking free from the rigidity of flow-based schedules. In these cases, cross-platform mobility acts according to a '*centrifugal logic*', where a central media (TV or cinema) remains prevalent while propelling additional uses of other media and technological platforms as 'accessory uses' aimed at enhancing the consumption experience itself.

Even more relevant among the young Italian 'networked public' is the development of cross-media content acquisition and consumption. Indeed, the cross-platform diets of young Italians widely feature patterns structured into three phases:

1) Location and consumption of contents (music files, movies, TV-series) on mainstream platforms (analogue TV, radio, cinema); or their individuation through word-of-mouth (either virtual or real-life)

2) Content acquisition either through the Internet file-sharing and streaming modalities (with initial, often transitory, hard disk storage); or through the purchase of originals (Music CDs and DVD box sets).
3) Transfer onto other forms of storage (DVD/DivX, CD) or onto mobile forms of storage (MP3/MP4 players, Sony PSPs, mobile phones) for either consumption in other spatial-temporal contexts, archiving, trade or exchange.

The relevance and intensiveness of these practices among young Italians is supported by factors related to the evolution of the spatial-temporal structures of consumption and to family and group orientations.

(1) The first is the value ascribed to the flexibility of consumption due to the increase of consumption's spatial-temporal structures. Indoors this is related to the ever-stringent negotiation for digital platform access (television and PC). Outdoors this is related to the progressive emergence of new spaces and times for the consumption of media products both individually (during increasing interstitial or 'in-between' times during routine patterns of mobility) and collectively (with the progressive colonization of the time spent meeting social obligations – e.g. school – or time set aside for informal sociability, such as for the peer group).

(2) The second is the large amounts of disposable time available to this age group (especially in the case of students). This includes a large amount of time spent indoors (typically study time) into which file-sharing fits easily as a background practice while accomplishing others activities on the PC or consuming others audiovisual contents (when it the not colonizing the night). In fact, the decrease in free time that occurs when people reach working age leads to a progressive reduction in the frequency of file-sharing, an increase in selectivity, and a change in the perception of file-sharing, now seen more as an excessively time-consuming activity.

(3) The third is the relevance of friendship networks. These are both motivators for using services and software as tools for symbolically indicating group participation and one's identity and they are contexts for the social learning of file sharing software and related practices.

However, cross-platform content acquisition and consumption still presents some margins of resistance, again due to social networks and spatio-temporal constraints. The scarcity of household PCs makes usage times dependent on the platform's accessibility. Unequal literacy within the youth context and within family micro-contexts can lead to a various processes:

(a) younger (adolescents) experience gate-keeping processes whereby either older (typically male) siblings exercise forms of control over software access, or parents monitor the timing and cost of connections.

(b) older youth delegate the management of access to more competent local experts (brothers, boyfriends, friends – also typically male).

In these cases, cross-platform practices act according to a '*linear logic*' and – regarding particularly processes involving content selection – the orientation or agenda role played by TV and/or radio platforms as drivers of cross-platform practices appears to be highly relevant. This is the direction pursued by 'young' brands and channels, and by some formats (such as movies, TV-series, or music products – even non-audiovisual). These either activate forms of autonomous consumption, or configure themselves as cult products and are therefore purchased (a) as collectable items (b) for recovering contents the evoke emotion or re-enacting memories, (c) for pursuing non-mainstream materials or (d) for screening materials in advance.

Finally, another development to note is the cross-platform cultural exchange of institutionally-produced or user-generated contents. In the youth context, media contents live their peculiar social life through a '*network logic*'- driven circulation across various groups. Exchange patterns are sustained by networks of relationships instituted through mediated communication (Microsoft Messenger, Fastweb). Here contents may circulate in their integral form (music files, trailers, movies, and UGCs such as pictures and videos) or as web links. Or they may be traded as items within real-life networks of relationships, through lending or being given as gift stored digitally (on DVD, DivX, CD) in the case of movies and TV-series, or through wireless data exchanged between mobile devices (such as MP3/MP4 players, mobile phones, Sony PSPs) in the case of music files, amusing videos and UGCs.

Different types of content are also uploaded, although this practice is more marginal, with regard to web personal spaces (blogs, social networking sites).

In all of these cases, content exchange is at the crossroads of highly trans-platform practices (e.g. UGCs produced through mobile phones and stored on PCs; or institutionally-produced contents acquired through file-sharing and stored on DVDs and DivXs). Within such patterns, contents acquire a value in terms of "social capital", mobilized according to various competitive or integrative logics. The already-mentioned colonization of outdoor informal spaces of sociability by mobile devices confers a form of 'social spendibility' on those contents, characterized by high levels of identity investment (in UGCs, music files). In terms of integration, the presence of computer mediated communication as a fact of life within youth's media practices defines a context in which even low-investment, spontaneously consumed contents such as amusing videos (acquired from YouTube and Google Video), are valued as tools for the preservation of both real-life and virtual social networks.

With regard to institutionally-produced contents, their re-contextualization within the logic of gifting and reciprocity confers on them a symbolic value as a part of the cultural capital defining both group

participation and the group itself. In addition, these practices entail the potential for resistance related to the dynamics of family negotiations that shape access to the PC as either (a) a platform for content archival, (b) a tool to archive contents on DVD and DivX for gift and exchange and (c) as a re-distribution platform.

Another limiter in this process is the (real of imagined) reduced literacy as regards the audiovisual management skills within this distribution network. Managing audiovisual content is supposed to be complicated and difficult to manage (a supposition that is shared in the process of learning through the socialization of ones peers, given that usually such skills do not arise simply from direct experience of the technologies). Meanwhile, mobile devices are still perceived as being too expensive and at the moment as lacking sufficient technological support.

5. Conclusions

As the research data show, consumption among young Italians (representing, potentially, a cutting edge for broader tendencies within society) has to be conceptualized as a strongly interconnected set of practices. Young people are increasingly able to switch between different technological platforms and different contents (both those created by media companies and user generated contents). And they are engaged in redefining their relationship with media, in terms of both the social role played by media and the technologies, places, times, patterns and rituals of consumption practices. Henry Jenkins is therefore undoubtedly right when, discussing the new media scene, he describes it as a stratified, often contradictory ensemble of consumption practices. It is certainly possible to "describe such a scenario in terms of convergence, but steering clear from the usage the term has usually acquired in media and technology circles: the utopian dream that today's chaotic and often redundant array of communication technologies will someday coalesce into an elegant and all encompassing singularity, a monolithic medium for every kind of message" (Sinnreich, 2007, 44). Rather, what we are witnessing is an ever-increasing complexity as regards the possibilities for media consumption. These offer themselves, to use an expression dear to the field of Internet studies, as a hypertext of possible pathways, as an ensemble of possibilities for use, where consumption is based upon different variables that orientate relative choices. These pathways are, as we demonstrated, individual in nature and often idiosyncratic in their singularity. However, we still can map them according to shared patterns and highlight homogeneous aspects rooted in the generational and national specificities of the subjects analyzed here.

We would like here to comment upon two aspects that seem to transversally characterize young Italians' cross-media consumptions.

The first element is the centrality bestowed upon the relational element of communication. As research by Mediappro (2006) (albeit limited to adolescents and pre-adolescents) also indicates, we are dealing here with the centrality, in our country, of media and technologies sustaining interpersonal relations (such as the mobile phone in past few years and presently instant-messaging software). This contrasts with some other countries where the aspects of production and participation play more relevant roles in young people's relationship with the digital landscape.

The attribution of meaning to user-generated content, amusing videos and even to file-sharing, is in this sense emblematic. These are often conceptualized as resources primarily in relation to their social spendability, at one moment in time having a purely phatic function (e.g. amusing videos), at another moment acting as identity resources (e.g. user-generated content) and at yet another moment serving as a tool for the consolidation of relationships (e.g. file-sharing).

The second, particularly Italian, dimension is related to the peculiar history of our media system, dominated up until the last few years by the centrality of general commercial television. Digital TV and new media have undoubtedly and crucially broken this dominance. But older media, at the very least, retain a strong symbolic importance, as witnessed by the role still played by mainstream media in orienting the cross-media consumptions of young Italians.

Young Italians are part of the so-called "web 2.0 generation" or "iPod generation" and are actively participating in the processes of transnational media consumption. Nonetheless, particular social variables such as age or nationality, as well as the ways in which media have been socialized and ICTs incorporated within different national and cultural contexts, continue to play an integral role in shaping of the processes by which media technologies are incorporated within the framework of convergence culture.

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