

Editorial

A complexified digital plenitude

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David Bolter (2019) uses the concept of digital plenitude to define the reality of digital media today: «The condition of media culture today is characterized by plenitude: a universe of products (websites, video games, blogs, books, films, radio and television programmes, magazines, etc.) and practices (the making of all these products and the remixing, sharing and critiquing of them) that is so vast, varied and dynamic that it is not intelligible as a whole». The media are everywhere, they enter into all the individual and social processes of our lives, they do not leave empty spaces. Their use has become normal, has 'naturalized' and is characterized by a phenomenon of widespread authorship.

In the first cultural industry, the one most of us grew up in and came from, there was a clear separation between who owned the media, who was the author, and everyone else who was simply a receiver, a "spectator. Today, the proliferation of personal and social digital media has expanded authorship, making it accessible to virtually anyone with a device. And if this, on the one hand, represents a new opportunity for the expressive possibilities of each one of us and probably an occasion for the democratization of culture, on the other hand, it has contributed and is contributing to a process of saturation and even levelling of quality, to the loss of a canon capable of fixing the difference between the products of high and low culture, and thus to the creation of a plenum, of a situation, as I said, of pervasiveness, of normalization, of naturalization.

We all live in this kind of reality. And often the agentivity that sees us using the media is an agentivity that is not accompanied by reflection. This is certainly the starting point: a naturalized but increasingly unreflected media reality, less and less accompanied by reflective awareness. And we know that reflective awareness is what keeps the media at the right distance from our decision-making: a precious distance within which the critical spirit is exercised.

Faced with this kind of reality, how do educational systems deal with it and what can their role be?

At the moment, we know that there is a strong dialectic between those who promote the digital as a tool for updating and innovating educational systems and those who defend instead the need to maintain them as "media-free" spaces. Within this polarization between enthusiastic supporters and concerned critics, teachers and administrators are called upon to take a position. What can that position be? What can our response be to the question: "Why do educational systems have to deal with media in the digital abundance? Should they do so because media presence enhances learning or because it makes teaching more effective? Or for both reasons? The answer to each of these questions is in the negative. Research shows that media do not enhance learning: there are many other factors that contribute to the quality of learning, and media are not the most important. Research also shows that there is no scientific evidence that media make teaching more effective. The quality of teaching depends very much on the personal qualities of the teacher, his or her cultural level, and his or her ability to teach, which cannot be reduced to the use of media.

So why use media in the classroom? The problem of the contemporaneity of school and university: educational systems cannot avoid using media if they want to be contemporary. The contemporaneity of school and university in relation to their time means guaranteeing students the cultural and interpretive tools they need to access their culture. Through this choice of contemporaneity, they offer students an important space for media mediation.

How can this typical work of media education be done? It can basically be done in two directions.

The first is the cross-curricularity of the media: to make the media pedagogical focus present in the various classes, regardless of the content of each discipline. Every teacher is an educator, regardless of what he or she teaches. My discipline may be more or less functional when it comes to discussing media with my students, but that does not change the fact that, to the extent that media are ubiquitous and have become an element of citizenship, I, as a teacher, as an educator, cannot avoid dealing with them. There is another perspective besides that of cross-curricularity. There are some teachers who, by virtue of their skills, training, or interests, have more precise information about these issues: within the curriculum, thematically, they can deal with the media.

Apart from teachers, families are in serious difficulties at the moment. Adolescent and family psychologists say it clearly: there is a generalized loss of educational capacity, of the educational resilience of the family, which affects not only the media, but obviously, within this loss, the media as well.

The models of parental education that still resist and that we still use are based on old models. The "parent school" model was born in the 1970s in a very different socio-cultural context, one that was very clear about the value of participation. It was society that opened schools to family participation. Today, fifty years later, many things have changed; above all, the concept of participation itself is in crisis, replaced by a privatist reflux, an individualistic drift and a strong loss of social capital. This situation has been aggravated and exacerbated by the pandemic of the Covidh crisis. This parental school model no longer works because it reaches few parents, only the most sensitive ones. The two main problems that every school director or class coordinator has to face are the presence of a small number of parents in the activities proposed by the school and the realization that these few parents are also the most sensitive ones. Moreover, today we live in a context of superdiversity: there are different cultures, there are different traditions, and therefore there are different models of education to deal with. How do we get out of this? I think we have to encourage bottom-up initiatives, the birth of parent groups, prepare them, accompany them, support them, train the trainers. Start with the most sensitive parents, the most present ones, train them so that they are able to gather around themselves micro-communities of parents in the area and try to transmit through them the concepts, the themes, the sensitivities, from below.

Finally, we must be aware that while we are discussing this, the media reality has already changed, it has already been transformed. The digital abundance has already been made more complex by the presence of data, by the protagonism of coding, by the role that algorithms and artificial intelligence are increasingly playing in our organizational contexts and, therefore, in our schools and in our lives. Data and algorithms, which are now everywhere, cannot be seen. Invisibility makes it even more difficult to develop a critical consciousness: we need new solutions in terms of updating the tools, techniques and methods of pedagogical work that bring with them the awareness that it is no longer enough to train only in critical thinking, it is also necessary to train in responsibility, because we are all authors - our children are authors too - and above all it is necessary to train in resistance. In the society of codes and algorithms, in the society in which the media are invisible and omnipresent, we cannot let our guard down, we must enter into a state of permanent mobilization, of "media activism" that makes us responsive to the stimuli, not only for ourselves but also for others, even those who share this kind of context with us.

References

Jay David Bolter, J.D. (2019). *The Digital Plenitude. The Decline of the Elite Culture and the Rise of New media*. Harvard (Ma): MIT Press.