# Generations as media audiences: An introduction

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This Themed Section of *Participations* aims at illuminating the relationship between media audiences, their media consumption cultures and the social formations called "generations". It has been influenced by the inspirational cross working-group initiative meetings of the scholars working on the field of media and generations in COST Action IS0906 "Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies". The variety of studies, that we got to know about, and that were carried out on the topic of media and audiences, was remarkable. The present Special Section, however, provides just a small overview of the various empirical studies and variety of aspects for analysis that the topic of media and generations offers.

Studies on generations have a long history. Since 1928 when Mannheim published his essay "Das Problem der Generationen" (1928/1954) the concept of generation has been widely discussed in relation to the sociology of knowledge; the sociology of culture and in recent years the sociology of media and audience. The concept of generation has been useful in order to describe the social differentiation (Cavalli 1994) and the social change complementing the demographic concept of cohort. A cohort can be described as "the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experience the same event within the same interval" (Ryder 1965: 845) for example their birth. A generation can be described as "a cohort of persons passing through time that come to share a common habitus, 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). We can say that the concept of cohort describes the social differentiation from a demographic point of view whereas the concept of generation describes it from a cultural

point of view. The cultural concept of generation stresses the process of generational building (or "generationing" – Alanen 2001: 129) based on a synergy of temporal settings (e.g. events; historical context) and cultural experience. This process includes the "cultural uses of age, opportunities for identity building which people can take up and enhance or not" (Vittadini et al. 2013: 65) and the reciprocal construction of generations "by purifying their distinctive sets of practices" (Alanen 2001: 129).

According to the cultural approach, the construction of generational belonging and identity includes also the media technologies at two levels.

First: the media experience during formative years is relevant in defining generations and their media consumption cultures (Aroldi 2011). Each generation grows up with a specific style of media usage and culture (responding to the available media-scape), which helps to differentiate audience practices of a generation (Schäffer 2003; Colombo 2011). We can say that the experience with media and technologies on the formative years of a generation shape some features of their audience practices in the course of the whole lifecycle of its members. In effect different generations have been labeled as media-generations (Vittadini et al. 2013) for example: the "radio generation" (Maas and Gonzales 2005) and in more recent years the "net generation" (Tapscott 1998) or the "digital natives" (Prensky 2001). As Lisa Lee suggests generations and media technologies are involved in a process of co-construction, which "captures the reciprocal process in which technologies and user mutually construct each other" (2005: 317).

Second: media representations, repertoires and technologies contribute to defining the particular generational identity and the sense of belonging to a generation (Aroldi 2011; Colombo 2011; Aroldi & Colombo 2013). Each generation shares (through media and digital technologies) narratives and discourses that help to stabilize consumption habits in the consolidation phase of the generational identity, following the formative years. According to Edmunds and Turner (2002), we can say that media affect the social making of generations as cultural identities, offering an inventory of spaces where people can share "the collection of practices through which generational experiences are manifest" (Edmunds and Turner 2002: 16).

Therefore the cultural concept of generation can be useful in describing the differentiation of contemporary audiences, which are composed of people belonging to different generations. Furthermore, as Buckingham states, 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" (2006: 4).

Although interest in the concept of "generations" within the field of media studies is a relatively new phenomenon – in comparison to cultural and political sociology, family and youth studies, etc. – the term has triggered a lot of academic interest for decades, and the variety of empirical studies of generational experience of media is wide. However, as also noted by Bolin in his paper for this Special Section, these studies have mainly stayed on "the more structural level that Mannheim privileged in his writings" either focusing on one specific generational cohort or a specific medium. For instance, in the recent years many

studies have concentrated on exploring how different generations consume digital technologies (e.g. mobile phones, video, broadband) or make use of various options offered by the internet, (e.g. social networking sites, blogs, computer games, etc.). Although the majority of this research has focused on studying new media use of young people, also labelled by some as Generation C (see the paper by Starkey et al. in this Section), there are also many interesting studies which concentrated on studying how the members of older generations, e.g. "the silent generation" (see the paper by Gal-Ezer in this Section), were using and have profited from the use of new media technologies.

Although the nature of generational identity is usually defined in relation to *the other,* the number of studies which analysed media repertoires (Hasebrink & Popp 2006) across different generations has so far been quite limited. One of the most well-known and groundbreaking studies on the topic has been a study by Ingrid Volkmer and her colleagues (2006) who aimed at exploring cross-generational media use in nine different countries. This Special Session also helps to add to the knowledge of how members of several different generations consume television (see Landabidea Urresti and Andó), audio media (Lepa et al.), social media (see Napoli) or even perceive their own media consumption (see Bolin).

In short, the *cultural concept of generations* offers a wide range of valuable heuristics to explore the meaning and use of media in people's lives (media repertoires, media habits, media as status symbols, etc.). This Special Section thus aims at illustrating how the *cultural concept of generations* may help scholars in describing the contemporary audience fragmentation and in exploring the complex interrelations between audiences, technologies and cultural settings.

The Themed Section presents different points of view on: how generations matter for defining media consumption cultures and how media consumption matters for defining generations. In particular four papers present cross-generational analysis investigating the process through which different generations built their own identities also diversifying their perception and use of media.

In the first one Göran Bolin describes the different subjective perceptions of the same media-scape across generations. Xabier Landabidea Urresti and Romana Andò present two cross-generational analysis of contemporary television, which answer the general question: what is watching television today? Xabier Landabidea Urresti investigates television as a leisure artifact, whereas Romana Andò illustrates how different generations face the new consumer experience typical of the contemporary digital media landscape. The last cross-generational analysis, by Antonella Napoli, is focused on the social media use among four generations.

In particular Göran Bolin reports a focus-group qualitative study aimed at capturing the inter-cultural and inter-generational differences between four different generations in Sweden and in Estonia. The study is based on the Mannheim (1928/1954) idea that the "fresh contact" with objects, events and phenomena during the formative years is a relevant component of generational experience. The author describes the "relationship between the objective structures media users inhabit in the form of historical events and accessible

media technologies, and the subjective appreciation and appropriation of (some of) these technologies". The collected memories show to produce nostalgia both at the individual level (the childhood memories) and at the social or collective level (the generational memories of the formative years). The study proves that nostalgic memories have a great importance for the self-construction of generations and that they include both the formative years and the childhood memories. The cross-country comparison shows that generations should be locally based according with the strong impact of different "objective media scape" on nostalgic memories.

Xabier Landabidea Urresti reports a qualitative study that aimed at exploring the leisure experience provided by television watching. Arbitrarily splitting the 73 study participants into four groups of similar age range (a cohort of 15 years), the study enabled a structural-comparative description that identified and compared the key structuring elements of various age-groups´ relationships with television. Situated in the cross-section of media, leisure and generations' studies, the study indicated some similarities as well as significant differences between age-cohorts in understanding and experiencing television and in subjective generational affiliations. These similarities and dissimilarities appeared to be framed by the coexistence, cohabitation and contact of leisure practices and experiences of generations. In that sense, television has been depicted as an intergenerational leisure artifact whose significance is constantly created and recreated in relation to a complex and dynamic media ecosystem.

Romana Andò's paper suggests that audiences can be better described taking into account that they are composed by different generations of consumers. Andò consider that the appearance of technological innovation, which change the user experience, can be accounted as the right time to observe the behavior of different generations and the emergence of dissimilarities. Therefore the author reports a quantitative and qualitative survey carried out in Italy and aimed at describing the second screen, social TV experience of TV users belonging to different generations. Sampling people with the same technological affordances and similar consumption habits (i.e. who do live twitting of TV shows) but belonging to different generations the study stresses the "generational peculiarity" at the cognitive, emotional and relational engagement with technologies and during second screen activities. The study proves that differences between generations rely on the meaning that each one attributes to media and not only on practices.

Antonella Napoli reveals in her paper that communicative practices in the social web play an important role in building or re-configuring one's generational identity. She set out to explore social media use and peer-to-peer and cross-generational communicative practices among four generational cohorts – Baby Boomers, the X Generation, the Y Generation and the Z Generation – so as to find out if these practices also affect inter-generational relationships. In addition, following Aroldi's claims (2011), she set out to investigate how these communicative practices could affect the three main sociological categories of reflexivity, space and memory. Twelve focus group interviews with heavy users of social media indicated that web-based communication practices enhance inter-

generational relationships, both online than offline. Her findings also highlighted the important role of the social web in the sedimentation of the collective memory and strengthening the generational *we sense*, as well as peer-to-peer cohesion. Furthermore, for all the generational cohorts that were investigated, both the individual and collective aspects of reflexivity were enhanced and the temporal dimension of the generation underwent a change due to their communicative practices on social media.

Two papers focus on the contemporary audio-scape describing how one or more generations engage with it. Steffen Lepa, Anne-Kathrin Hoklas and Stefan Weinzierl describe the lifecycle of different generations through the development of a common modus operandi regarding everyday use of audio-media technologies. In particular Steffen Lepa, Anne-Kathrin Hoklas and Stefan Weinzierl propose an investigation on audio-media generations in Germany based on theoretical and methodological novel premises. Within the wide area of mediatization studies the authors investigate everyday music listening in Germany and in particular the complex, intertwined and situated practices accomplished with very heterogeneous media technologies. The theoretical premise is that the media repertoires can be considered a causal outcome of how generations actualize audio-media affordances in term of their perception and applications based on the everyday-life in formative years. The methodology is based on a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative) adapted from media repertoire analysis in order to empirically discover culturally meaningful audio-media generations units manifesting themselves in similar patterns of habitual audio-media use. The outcome of the analysis is the individuation and description of six different audio-media generations units – with different audio-media repertoires – which show a form of historical succession.

Guy Starkey, Angeliki Gazi, Paula Cordeiro and Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou focus their analysis on one particular generational cohort – members of the Generation C (born between 1990 and 1977) and explore how these young people adopt audio-media, especially radio, in their everyday lives. The authors have built their analysis on an idea that the availability of some particular mediascapes contributes to the formation of generational identity and thus leads to specific styles of media use amongst the people belonging to the same generation. An online questionnaire was carried out in Cyprus, Greece, Portugal and the UK with an aim to study "how younger generations consume audio media, through which platforms, and what they are doing while listening to it". In spite of the various cross-cultural differences that emerged, especially between the audio media consumption habits between the young from the UK in contrast to the youth in southern countries, Starkey et al.'s analysis suggests that radio has remained a significant medium for the youth in all of the four studied countries.

Two more papers suggest a different approach considering how the mediated representations of generations influence their identity-building. Eugene Loos and Maria Ekström describe the mediated representations of the older generations as a resource in the interactive process of age and generational belonging building. In particular they focus on a specific audience -- the generation of older consumers. Considering generation as a cohort

and as a period in the life course, the authors adopt a cultural approach to examine visual representations of older adults as an audience. After describing the common stereotypical portrayals of seniors in the media (namely, their presentation as either "eternally youthful, active and rich" or "frail and needy"), with which older consumers cannot identify, the authors suggest an alternative approach for visual representation of senior citizens. Their approach, which they call Multidimensional Segmentation Typology, is based on Moschis's (1996) life-stage segmentation principles for marketing strategy development. Using findings of three Dutch marketing studies and one Finnish dissertation, the article illustrates this approach and demonstrates how a market segmentation strategy can be developed while taking into account the pluralistic composition of the older generation.

In the final paper the Themed Section Miri Gal-Ezer presents a study on the Israeli so-called silent generation and its use of traditional and digital media in order to build their generational identity. Her paper offers insight into the development of mediated narratives all of which have helped in building the so-called *we sense* of a generation. Based on a five-year multi-sited ethnographic study of the Israeli ex-prisoners of war from the 1973 Yom Kippur War Gal-Ezer discloses various struggles on a national level these ex-POWs had to go through to achieve public recognition and government policy change. In her analysis Gal-Ezer draws upon various examples to illustrate how the ex-POWs who could be viewed as the members of the "media generation" of print, radio and film, gradually succeeded in governing new media and attracting the attention of the public which led to the reconstruction of their "traumatised habitus" into a national habitus and canonic culture. In the second part of the paper she analyses Israeli TV series "Kidnapped" which was based on the experiences of ex-POWs, and its US TV equivalent "Homeland".

As guest editors we hope that the articles selected for the Themed Section help to highlight the fact that "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" (Vittadini et al 2013: 124).

## Acknowledgments:

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