

Children and young people: the new interactive generations

Niños y adolescentes: nuevas generaciones interactivas

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There is no doubt that we are living in an age of profound and revolutionary changes in society. Experiencing these changes day-to-day, we are not conscious of the transformations that technologies in general and communication technologies in particular are making. Even though we can all access these new communicative relations and interactions, it is children and young people who experience them more fully because they were born and grew up surrounded by screens with these technologies; in fact, they are an «interactive generation» that exists —coexists— completely with numerous devices to hand.

The computer successfully competes with the television set for the attention of these new generations; 95% of 6- to 9-year-olds and 97% of 16- to 18-year olds have computer access, and home Internet connection is 82% for children over 10. The pattern is similar for that other device that defines this new generation —and perhaps the most revolutionary for its accessibility, ubiquity and universality— the mobile phone, owned by 83% of 10- to 18-year-olds, and by 100% of those who are 17 and older.

All this is evident in Xavier Bringué and Charo Sábada's «La Generación Interactiva en España. Niños y adolescentes ante las pantallas», The Interactive Generation in Spain. Children, Young People and Screens, (Madrid: Ariel/Fundación Telefónica), a text we use as a base, as it contains a macro-study by the Foro Generaciones Interactivas that analysed 13,000 individuals across Spain, involving 113 schools —the survey can be found on www.generacionesinteractivas.org.

The study shows that this generation is precocious in the use of technologies that are increasingly within reach and widespread. Before the age of 10, many Spanish girls and boys —as in almost any part of that world mistakenly called developed— have access to all kinds of screens: more than half already have a mobile phone; three quarters habitually use Internet and 9 out of 10 play videogames on a regular basis.

Television, Internet, videogames and mobile phones are now their «daily habitat», an unrivalled universe that gives them a range of uses that goes far beyond the conventional «mass media» screens we have identified with up to now. This multi-screen generation —as Bringué and Sábada point out— uses

media to «communicate» (e-mail, SMS, chat rooms...), «know» (web sites, downloads...), «share» (social networks, photos, videos...), «play» (online gaming, radio and digital TV) and «consume» (on-line shopping). This is also an independent, self-taught generation. For the first time in History, children do not need their elders to learn; what is more, they prefer to find out for themselves how the new media work, acquiring skills that are beyond the grasp of the older generations. This has ushered in the «dormitory universe», an exclusive space for sole access —or with friends and peers— to multi-screen consumption: 36% have a computer in their bedroom, 45% have their own TV. Above all, this is the generation of the «mobile phone», the most widespread device that has become «the supreme medium» —as was TV in the 70s—its



Photo: La Generación Interactiva en España. Ed. Ariel

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screen ever wider with voice and data communications, online videogames, social networks, Net surfing with all the experiences that entails, music, personal organizers and multiple apps; and now they are not just conventional mobile phones but smart phones —intelligent devices that bunch e-mail contacts, a personal organizer, a la carte TV, music, infinite podcasts... All this for a «multi-area generation» that has bypassed the linearity of the discourse and is comfortable with the «mosaic culture» of hyperlinked Web surfing, but which can perform many tasks at the same time: simultaneously studying and surfing the Net, listening to music and playing a videogame online and, of course, accessing a social network that allows them to communicate with hundreds of contacts.

This brief description of a new generation is not a fulsome tribute to this supposedly hyper-communicated generation —which could also be hypo-communicated— nor is it harsh criticism in the face of the challenge of technologies which — whether we like it or not— have put us well and truly on the spot. We cannot remain on the sidelines with regard to media; we have to learn to «live» with them. So, in the face of diluvian or apocalyptical attitudes, —very frequent in parents and teachers, unfortunately— we can only instruct the new generations from a positive, intelligent standpoint which, without renouncing the use of these media, is aware of their risks and potential. We need families and educators who are aware of this new reality, intelligently prepared for the new media, not only for the marasmus of new terms or the latest devices but also for the simple skills required to accompany their children on this new adventure of communicative interaction that takes place in their very bedrooms and invades all corners of their lives. No demonizing, no consecration...no dichotomic, impractical or unconstructive attitudes. Mobile phones, videogames, TV and Internet...are a consubstantial part of their lives and those of their peers. So, it comes down to educating young people in the critical use of these media, at their side as we alert them to the risks, discover the creative potential of these media and help them to control their languages and discourses, because this is the only way to ensure that this interactive generation exists as active subjects aware of their reality. This journal and its publisher, Grupo Comunicar, is also involved in this task, along with the Foro Generaciones Interactivas, with the conviction that today's commitment to education with regard to the screens of the new generations is essential for preparing new citizens for a world that is increasingly linked-up. The key question is whether the school as institution and the family as environment are moving in the same direction. If the answer is no, then the alarm bells should surely start to ring.

