

National report for Italy

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Contribution to the European report:

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Universities and Disciplines

The Ministry of University and research recognises 95 universities in Italy, among which 1334 research centres from different disciplines operate.

Of the 95 universities mentioned, around 65 are popular and well established academic institutions. Media Studies represent a core activity in different faculties and curricula, mainly named under the label "Communication Sciences". There are nearly 40 degrees in Communication Sciences all over Italy (5 in Milan alone), and about 30 master degrees. But media studies is a discipline taught also within the Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, Education etc. Informatics faculties are strictly related to Engineering, and they have little to do with Media Studies or Social Sciences. New Media is a discipline taught in Communication Science faculties.

National Data Collected

The ISTAT collects data on children's media consumption every two years generally.

Research on the issue of children and the internet is also conducted by other relevant research institutions (such as Eurispes) and funded by NGOs (Telefono Azzurro, Save the Children) or other associations, such as parental associations (MOIGE).

A turning point in Italian research on the topic was a study commissioned by the Regulatory Authority for Communication (AGCOM) in 2002 and published in 2003, which is the first investigation focused primarily on the topic of internet risks for minors. The main and most noticeable research gap concerning government statistics on internet usage and penetration is to do with the age of the sample: the majority of the studies deal with children aged 11-19. The use of online technologies is found in the so-called e-Family reports (the last is dated 2007). These data are focused on households and not specifically on children (though most of the families include minors). Confindustria annually collects data on family access. Among non-Government bodies, the majority of studies on children is promoted by NGOs. However they tend not to operate on a regular basis.

We can notice a lack of studies of the internet and children across time.

Institutional processes in applying to conduct research

Though ethical issues involved in making research on minors are debated within the scientific community, they are not regulated by any national institution/law.

The only reference to researching minors is included in the ESOMAR code, which is the code for marketing research and social research, and which, in the article 8, claims: "researchers might use particular care when interviewing children and young people. Permission should be obtained by parents before the interview takes place".

There is no national ethics committee on research that examines research proposals.

Research funded by either the Ministry of Education or by the University itself (Department projects) has to be checked. The research process within research centres based at universities is, instead, more informal.

Pressures to conduct research

Each faculty needs to publish articles and books in order to get a confirmation, though this may be or not based on empirical research. The pressure is generally focused on the production publications rather than on the research itself,

The last university reform was aimed at promoting a more direct link between universities and industry. Nonetheless, at least as far as Social Sciences and Humanities are concerned, departments and research centres are free to determine their partners, so that it is difficult to define a general picture.

Factors influencing the orientation of research

As regards the field of media and communication studies, media industries are quite used to asking academic institutions to provide research on consumption and on the emergence of new communication practices and new patterns of usage. There is no formal call to bid for particular researches by Ministries. If a university research centre develops an on-going relationship with a specific company or media sector, suggestions for research may come from the academic institution itself - though normally the reverse tends to happen.

National Research Traditions

We can say that quantitative research is still the dominant approach in the social sciences, while media studies are characterised by a more diffused adoption of qualitative methods both by academicians (ethnographies, interviews and focus groups) and marketing institutes (focus groups). As mentioned before, there is a strong tradition of qualitative research within media studies. In the social sciences, by contrast, the choice of qualitative methods is strictly related to the objects of study and mainly applied to the investigation of consumption practices and the sociology of culture in general.

A well defined tradition of media studies has grown up in Italian universities at least since the 70s. The study of interpersonal communication started in recent years (from the late Nineties onward) by the widespread diffusion of the mobile phone in our country. The internet has become an academic object of study in the second half of the Nineties. Reflecting the international debate on the internet, though, the object of study and the point of view has changed quite substantially, shifting from the idea of virtual communities to the study of everyday practices and the domestication of the internet in everyday life, to a focus on social networking and UGC nowadays.

Sources of Funding for Research

The majority of research within the social sciences and education is funded by Government through academic institutions. A relevant role is also played by two research councils, Istat (*Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* – Central Institute of Statistics) and Censis (*Centro Studi Investimento Sociali* – Centre for Social Investment Studies). Istat is a national research council that carries out a large number of surveys about generic subjects like national employment conditions, wealth and welfare state, administration of justice and safety, family, lifestyles and education. Among these, two studies have a specific focus on ICTs, *Information and Communication Technologies: Availability in households and individual use* and *Children's everyday life*. The first inquiries about the availability of communication and information technologies in households and the scope and aims of individual usage, including children. The second one provides statistics about children's leisure activities and games, including digital media, television consumption, mobile phone usage, cultural consumption, sport activities. Censis is formally constituted to be a foundation, co-funded by private and public agencies. Besides doing research commissioned by private companies or public institutions, Censis promotes annual reports about social cultural and economic conditions of Italian society with a special section dedicated to media and communication that usually reflects national media debate.

There are some cases of commercial companies funding research on ICTs whose results have been made publicly available. One of the most recent is "*Mobile actors: the experience of young people's media consumption in a multiplatform environment*", a research carried out by Osscom (Italian unit for EU Kids Online), commissioned by Mtv Italy, whose complete publication is forthcoming. Osscom has a long tradition of this kind, in the past studies of mobile phones and internet usage have been funded by private companies and later

published for the academic public. As regards research about children and internet, two large multinational companies, Microsoft and Symantec, have funded research whose results are publicly available. Microsoft in particular has funded two quantitative projects about internet usage at schools and parents' internet usage, within the project, *SicuramenteWeb*, promoted in partnership with MOIGE, an Italian parents' non-profit association.

Symantec has funded one of the first national studies about internet risk's for children like harassment and stalking, focused on children's approach to internet and styles of parental control. The research was sponsored by the Ministry of Communication and Unicef and was presented publicly in 2006 during an international conference "Online pornography. Strategies of contrast and prevention" promoted by the Ministry of Communication, which inaugurated many public initiatives about the subject.

Research councils like Istat and Censis play an important role in carrying out large surveys, representative of the entire population, that are therefore very useful for a general glance over dominant social trends in diffusion of ICTs and usage styles.

In contrast, we find much qualitative research in academic contexts is funded by the Government, allowing a more in-depth examination of social phenomena.

What is particularly interesting in Italy is the fact that the first projects about risk in children's use of the internet were developed outside academic contexts, funded by private companies like Symantec or NGOs like Telefono Azzurro and Save The Children Italy. In 2001 the National Authority for Communication (AgCom) funded an important research project about children and new and traditional media, with the aim of improving regulation tools according to the socio-technical specificities of media platforms, but there have been no other research initiatives in the aftermath. AgCom has regional operative committees named CoreComs, which in some cases, especially in northern regions, have played an important role both in promoting and funding research on children and the internet and in funding research about children and media (i.e. the research project Obiettivo Minori, promoted by CoreCom Piemonte in partnership with other public local agencies for education and private companies).

Political initiatives influencing research

We can identify two main periods that could have influenced some of the research projects conducted in these years. Partially because of the propulsion of EC politics, during the years 2001-2006 there had been many Government recommendations, discussion documents, ministerial reports that for the first time focused on the Italian delay in ICT diffusion and on the possible political strategies for promoting E-Society.

Since then, Istat (*Istituto Nazionale di Statistica* – Central Institute of Statistic) has started to introduce in its surveys about cultural consumption a specific focus dedicated to ICT availability and the scope of their usage in Italian families.

At the same time, the trade associations of the media and ICT industries have begun to conduct research and publish annual reports about the technological endowment of Italian families, showing data and features of the national digital divide. Since 2003/2004 we can observe an increasing awareness about risk issues in children's use of the internet. The introduction of the Self Regulation Code about Internet and Minors in 2003 and the public conference promoted by Ministry of Communication in 2004, "Online pornography. Strategies of contrast and prevention", have contributed substantially to creating a more responsive climate towards this subject. Telefono Azzurro and Save The Children Italy, two large NGOs, consistently engaged in child protection and safeguarding rights, have actively promoted research about children and new media; the annual National Report on Childhood and Youth of Telefono Azzurro have introduced a special section dedicated to risks and opportunities of media consumption and recently Save The Children have funded a research on social networking.

The Influence of media coverage, events and lobbies on research

Recently Italian public opinion has become very sensitive especially to the problem of cyberbullying, following a long series of key events emphasised by the press.

What happened in most cases was that children published on social networking websites like YouTube, photos or videos taken at school with their phones, in which they made fun of other fellow-students. Some have debated the introduction of strict liabilities for Internet Service Providers, but the guidelines of the Ministry of Education have taken a different approach. First, they forbid the use of mobile phones at school and second they introduce disciplinary sanctions or penalties issued by the Authority for Privacy to children (and to those responsible for them) who spread unauthorised photos or videos via the internet or mobile phones. This intensive media coverage and the legislative intervention of the Government could have stimulated some of the research published at the end of 2007 which focused mainly on mobile phone usage by children (*Minori e Telefonia Mobile 2007*, Minors and mobile phones, realised by Media e Minori, Department of Sociology and Political Science, University of Firenze; *Baby Consumers e Nuove Tecnologie 2007*, Baby Consumers and New Technologies, funded by Movimento Difesa Cittadino, an association aiming at promoting citizens' rights).

These last studies have started to inquire about children's awareness of privacy topics, usage in different contexts -domestic, school, public spaces- very often focusing on the frequency of and motivations for camera phone usage. Recently the large NGO Save The Children Italy has funded one of the first studies publicly available about teenagers' access to and usage of social networking websites (Italian Teenagers and Social Network, 1/2008). This research is in tune undoubtedly with the recent climate created by the media coverage mentioned above, but at the same time it has contributed to clarifying risks issues, focusing the attention of private companies and public opinion on safeguarding privacy. The public presentation of this research with noteworthy media coverage has in turn become a tool used by Save The Children for lobbying the companies owning social networking websites, like MySpace, Google, Microsoft, so that they introduce privacy safeguard procedures in their websites.

Particular debates and concerns about children

The recent debate about the commercialisation of childhood has been nurtured mainly by the National Association of Consumers that often denounces the close relationship between the media exposure of children and consumption choices regarding food, clothing or new technological devices like mobile phones used as status symbol especially among teenagers. *Altroconsumo*, an Italian consumer association, in 2004 monitored television spots in children broadcast during the protected scheduling time slot from 4pm to 7pm, denouncing the frequent violation of advertising restrictions prescribed by laws and by the self-regulation code of TV and Minors and the self-regulation code of the advertisers. In line with *Altroconsumo*, *Telefono Azzurro* denounced the increasing intrusiveness of advertising addressed to children, which occupies 10% of the total amount of companies advertising investments in media (V Annual Report on Childhood and Youth, 2004, Telefono Azzurro, Eurispes). In particular, the main part of these investments is directed to television spots and sponsored by food companies.

Another consumer association, MDC (*Movimento Difesa Cittadino*, Movement for Protection of Citizens) has funded a project named Stop to the Spot (*Baby Consumers*, First Report on Minor's Consumption, 2005, MDC, Junior Department) which analyses children attitudes towards spot television and the close relationship between exposure to media and the consumption habits of children and teenagers.

The quantitative research inquired into the styles of television consumption (frequency, which and how many hours per day, whether viewing was alone or with parents, preferred programmes, etc) and tested the awareness that children have of advertising's aims, the economic autonomy permitted by their parents in their consumption choices and the perception they have about their physical appearance.

Unicef Italy has recently collaborated with the *Osservatorio sull'immagine dei minori in Tv*- Observatory on children representation on television (the Observatory has been established by a firm producing clothing for children and has funded research about the commercialisation of childhood conducted by academic research institutions). They conducted a study about TV and minors, asking how children and teenagers integrate the objects, behavioural pattern and identity models conveyed by television commercials spot in their daily life. The debate about commercialisation of childhood is for the moment concentrated mainly on television, paying

very little attention to new media and the internet, where it is more difficult to monitor advertising messages and consequently to introduce regulations.

The effects of commercial advertising on children are assessed in the light of the psychological dynamics of the cognitive, emotive and relational development of children. Most of these publications go back five/six years and their theoretical assumptions are reinforced mainly by empirical research conducted outside of Italy.

In general, the tendency is to associate theoretical debates with some practical suggestions addressing parents and educators. The debate about the rights of children is encouraged mainly by NGOs like Unicef and Telefono Azzurro., and other minor civil associations less known at a national level but very active in local contexts.

The annual report about Childhood and Youth from Telefono Azzurro receives very strong media coverage. The research offers a steady update of lifestyles, attitudes, relationships' attitude of minors and the normative and socio-cultural context where they live, study and play, at the same focusing on particular troublesome situation, like domestic violence, bullying, child labour and juvenile delinquency. Another important contribution come from the *Centro Nazionale di Documentazione per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza* – National Centre for Documentation and Analysis for Childhood and Youth, which represents one of the most important tools used by the Italian Government, Parliament and local institutions for the promotion of childhood safeguards through policy initiatives and communication campaigns.

One of the aims of the *Centro Nazionale di Documentazione per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza* is to periodically report the state of the art as regards the public services offered to children and teenagers, in education services for early childhood, and the effectiveness of political initiatives aimed at protecting children in troublesome situations. Despite these activities that undoubtedly speak of a national culture sensitive to childhood, Italy has still been left behind in the establishment of a national independent authority for childhood and youth rights, as provided in 1990 by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The latest Eurispes-Telefono Azzurro report on youth 2007 investigates the activities and places of children's leisure time. Though they report a variety of outdoor activities (among which the preferred are cinema and sports – football for male and volleyball for females- and, increasingly shopping malls as leisure spaces), data on the amount of time dedicated to domestic media provide evidence on the diffusion of the bedroom culture in Italy. Reading, television watching, radio listening and online activities represent a significant amount of children's everyday lives: the 7,3% of the 24 hours for kids aged 6-10, the 9,1% for those aged 11 -14 (which means 2 hours and 11 minutes per day). Gaming is also very popular: the 39% of the kids interviewed spends up to two hours per day playing with Playstation. As previously indicated, homes are the main place where they have access to the internet: Among people aged 6-10, 75,6 % access to Internet at home and the 35,1% at school. 79,4 % of people aged 11-14 access to Internet at home, the 40,2% at school. 76,1% of people aged 15-17 access to Internet at home, the 57,2% at school.

Though we have no clear data on the location of ICTs in the home, we can state that their home-based entertainment activities (internet, gaming and TV) are accomplished alone, or together with peers, but without parental control.

Case Studies

A significant research project aimed at investigating online experiences by teenagers was recently promoted and presented by Save the Children Italy. The study represents one of the first attempts in our country to investigate teenagers' use of social networking websites and instant messaging services with a special focus on risky experiences. The research was conducted by Doxa, a well known research institution, and was promoted by Save the Children Italy within its involvement in the Safer Internet Programme and the Easy4 activity. Its origins and the nature of the subjects involved leads to the focus on risky experiences: beside issues of access and use, great attention was paid to issues of privacy and risky experiences. This focus resulted in questions on their willingness to give out personal information online, the degree of self-disclosure in personal profiles, whether online friendships result in offline face to face meetings or not (and if the person met is significantly older), if they encountered harmful or unpleasant content on the internet and how they tend to

deal with these risky experiences. In particular, they were asked if they wished a major involvement by Internet Service Providers in order to promote a safer online environment for children. The study was conducted on a national representative sample of 300 children aged 13-17. The questionnaire was administered by telephone using C.A.T.I. The results were presented on the Safer Internet Day, 12 February 2008, by Save the Children and Easy4.