


SPECTACULARISATION OF REALITY AND NEW MEDIA: WHICH SKILLS FOR FUTURE TEACHERS? AN EMPIRICAL RESERCH

SPETTACOLARIZZAZIONE DELLA REALTÀ E NUOVI MEDIA: QUALI COMPETENZE PER I FUTURI INSEGNANTI? UNA RICERCA EMPIRICA

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ABSTRACT

The WEB is a media stage and reality is spectacularized: young people are connected, between image society and social window dressing, privileging appearance and normalizing pain. In this regard, we present the findings of a research conducted on a sample of 196 students, between the *Mediterranea* University of Reggio Calabria and the *West University* of Timisoara, invited to reflect on spectacularization in the media and the skills to be acquired to manage the risks of digital society.

Il WEB è un palcoscenico mediatico e la realtà viene spettacolarizzata: i giovani sono connessi, tra società dell'immagine e vetrinizzazione sociale, privilegiando l'apparenza e normalizzando il dolore. Qui si presentano le risultanze di una ricerca condotta su un campione di 196 studenti, tra l'Università *Mediterranea* di Reggio Calabria e la *West University* of Timisoara, invitati a riflettere sulla spettacolarizzazione nei media e sulle competenze da acquisire per gestire i rischi del digitale.

KEYWORDS

New media, spectacularisation of reality, society of image, skills, research.

Nuovi media, spettacolarizzazione della realtà, società dell'immagine, competenze, ricerca

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1. Narcissus in the *Onlife* Era

But, perhaps because of the so-called liquid society, in which everyone is in a crisis of identity and values, and does not know where to go to find reference points against which to define themselves, the only way to acquire social recognition is to “be seen”, at any cost (Eco, 2014).

Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, elects sight as man's preferred sense since, more than the other senses, it allows us to acquire knowledge. Sight allows us to encounter the other, to come into contact with otherness, not always, however, giving the possibility of knowing it thoroughly: «men in universal judge more by their eyes than by their hands, for it falls to each to see, to hear to few. Each sees what you seem, few hear what you are» (Machiavelli, 1514).

In the *Onlife* era (Floridi, 2017), forms of communication are increasingly hinging on visual language, and sight seems to be the dominant sense in the relationship with reality. What predominates nowadays is not just “looking at others” but “being looked at by others”, in an age founded on the cult of self-image, highly individualistic and narcissistic, which prefers the sharing and connection of the virtual world rather than "real" socialization.

The technological inhabitant of the present experiences the dimensions of the visible/invisible, the physical/virtual reality of the self/double through the use of communication devices. This dislocation of the sense of reality into an alienating dimension, merges and blurs with the perception of one's own identity dimension, involves a continuous redefinition of one's semantic boundaries. Fashion needs to have a public space in which to express itself and show its multiple faces (Codeluppi, 2007) and uses a language of images: we show and we look, exponents and voyants (Migliati, 2008).

Evocative is the definition - *The Me Me Me Generation* - that appeared, a few years ago, on the cover of *TIME Magazine* to describe a generation that literally turns the spotlight on itself, through narcissistic attitudes, lack of empathy and reduced face-to-face interaction. On social media, the polarization between watching and being watched, voyeurism and exhibitionism, digital extroversion and introversion is activated, pushing individuals to show off, to make themselves visible, to expose themselves in a shop window, on the borderline between stage and mirror.

The society of the useless triumphs at the end of an insane process that has pushed industry to produce superfluous goods, as if the purpose of man was not to be and live in a just society, but to appear; and it is precisely on this need that the great

dogma of contemporaneity is based: one is successful if one appears (Andreoli, 2015).

The Web, transformed into a social showcase and ideal stage, allows an uncontrolled amount of self-related content to be displayed externally while simultaneously reaching thousands of people in an instant; a mirror in which to pour one's image; fertile ground for digital narcissism. The Narcissus of the *Onlife* era (Floridi, 2017), instead of reflecting his own image on the surface of a lake of Ovidian memory, prefers the display of a smartphone to take a selfie, which has now become the favorite tool of ostentation: places, affections, sexuality, one's body, death, daily events, of a public or private nature, experienced offline are destined to be immortalized in a self-shot and shared on Social, even before they are actually experienced (Tolve, 2019).

Research from Western Illinois University, published in the journal *Personality and individual differences* and in which 300 students between the ages of 18 and 65 participated, highlighted the link between narcissism and social networks. Analyses highlight a correlation between frequent use and narcissism: having many contacts on Facebook, accepting friendships from strangers, not reciprocating the attention received from others in an equal manner (e.g., responding to a comment on the wall), frequently updating one's profile picture, tagging pictures frequently, updating status and the news feed.

The abnormal need for validation and the desire to elicit approval and admiration leads visibility-hungry individuals to create profiles that care more about appearing than being, conveying an always winning, always perfect image of themselves. On the flipside, however, the idealization of one's image hides a much more modest and fragile self-representation. Spasmodically aspiring for the explicit appreciation of others betrays an underlying fragility and social loneliness that are camouflaged through maintaining a feeling of security and a stable and constant level of self-esteem.

2. The show must go on

In the set of its particular forms-information or propaganda, advertising or direct consumption of entertainment-the spectacle constitutes the present model of socially dominant life (Debord, 1967).

In the complex society, the WEB becomes a media stage, within which reality is increasingly spectacularized (Debord, 1967; Isidori, 2015; Migliati, 2008): today's youth are perpetually connected, at the mercy of the image society (Stramaglia, 2021; 2010) that leads to privilege appearance rather than being, fiction rather than reality, form rather than content, driven by the frantic search for consensus and the appreciation of others. Fueling the process of spectacularization, which now characterizes all dimensions of contemporary society, is social window dressing (Codeluppi, 2021), which from the goods on display is projected onto the individual himself, who, like the goods displayed in a permanently visible "showcase", becomes the object of daily staging, especially through the media. The human body, thus, annihilates its own identity in order to construct a social identity based on the ideal of aesthetic perfection dictated by the fashions, preferring appearance rather than being, stifling inner needs and authenticity.

According to Debord's thought, contemporary man, «reified, because he has been turned into a commodity, and alienated by the same system of spectacularization that he has created, [...] has chosen to become, paradoxically, an object like so many others, which is worth not for what "he is" (or "has", as was the case in society before the advent of mass media) but for how he "appears"» (Isidori, 2015).

The first stage of the domination of the economy over social life had resulted in the definition of all human achievement in an obvious degradation of being into having. The present phase of the total occupation of social life by the accumulated achievements of the economy leads to a generalized slippage of having into appearing. [...] The alienation of the spectator for the benefit of the object contemplated [...] is expressed thus: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he accepts to recognize himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desire (Debord, 1967).

In the shift from being to appearing, a dissociation is created between "reality" and "representation"; the real, gradually concealing itself as such, appears only (or almost) as "depicted", showing itself through substitute experiences to the real ones, from photography to mediality, from advertising to television and cinema (Priarolo, Simone, Zinato, 2009): «in the world truly turned upside down, the real is a moment of the false» (Debord, 1967). In such a spectacularized society, the boundary between private and public spheres becomes blurred, traditional moral values are downsized (Isidori, 2015), and one is incapable of living an authentic existence—both individually and socially—and spiritually profound, because it is always trivialized and made superficial by prostration to the "deity" of appearance (Menduni, Nencioni, PannoZZo, 2011).

Moreover, the new media convey on the Web an increasingly massive amount of information and multimedia content that is now *de-mediated* (Rivoltella, 2015), as anyone can publish and share without any filter, bordering on the blurred boundary between the right to information and media jackal, between participation and curiosity, between investigation and gossip. This leads not only to a normalization of the real, making even the most tragic events acceptable and making us increasingly numb in the face of media overexposure (Dambone, 2019; Cohen, 2002), but also to a dichotomy between what is visible and what is invisible: what does not emerge on the media stage is as if it did not exist (Giaccardi, 2005). Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), in defining the genres of TV information, identify a tripartite structure:

- *Information*, characterized by news TV (investigative and in-depth information), low entertainment function and, at the same time, high information function and news cooling;
- *Infoinment*, characterized by TV debate and utility TV (enlarged and spectacular information), midway between entertainment function and information function;
- *Infomotion/Entertainment*, characterized by pain and gossip TV (commoditized information), by high entertainment function and, at the same time, low information function and news warming.

News is “packaged” ad hoc, influencing the construction of social reality and public opinion. News, even the most tragic ones, are emptied of their objectivity, pain is turned into gossip, perpetrators and victims become the main performers of the show, informational intent is put on the back burner to take on the “sensationalist” and “spectacular” connotations.

The direction of events, the construction of twists and turns, the editing of arguments, the personalities and physical appearance of the performers, the seductive layout and titling, the construction of suspense, the work that continually the apparatus puts in to build an illusion of reality. [...] In television even news exists only if it makes a spectacle and submits to the laws of entertainment—the first of which is of course that the audience is always right and must never be bored (Calabrese, Volli, 2001)

The tragic, suffering, violence, pain and death become, in the society of the spectacle, a routine and commonplace spectacle for the masses. Faced with the “spectacle of pain”, the most widespread attitude is not the one indicated by

Boltanski (1999) in the *topic of denunciation* - detached attitude, repressed emotions and objective view of the facts - or in the *topic of feeling* - empathy and emotional involvement - but rather the one explicated in the *topic of aesthetics*: the subject rejects denunciation and feeling in order to dwell on the spectacularization of the event, on par with voyeurism (Rivoltella, 2015).

The media that turn death into a phantasmagorical spectacle is a form of pornography. [...] The problem is that information bulimia immediately transforms this real into new spectacle. When televisions do hours of live broadcasts rebroadcasting the same testimonies over and over again, even real pain becomes unreal. Unfortunately, we live in a society that loves to film its own death live in order to make it an object of consumption. This spectacularization exploits, denies and desacralizes a pain that should instead be sacred. [...] One can only hope that from such a deluge of information there will eventually remain some useful element and some fragment of humanity (Pennac, 2015).

The direct consequences include insensitivity, indifference or detachment on the part of the public, especially when the news is continuously replicated through the media, generating “information overload”, when sensationalist language is used, bordering between the right to information and media jackals, or when a trivializing rhetoric is favored, aimed at normalizing Evil (Silverstone, 2007).

3. Research: method and data analysis

In this regard, we present the partial findings of a field research conducted on a sample of 196 students invited to reflect on the concept of spectacularization conveyed by new media and the skills that, as future teachers and educators, they will have to acquire to manage the risks of digital society. In particular, the research aims to investigate the trends, regarding the use of social media, of students belonging to different and distant geographic realities; in fact, 165 students attend the second and third year of the courses of *Science in Primary Education* and *Science of Education and Training* at the *Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria* (UniRC), while 31 students attend the first year of *Teacher Training Department*, West University of Timisoara (UVT), interviewed during a series of lectures held at the Romanian university from April 3 to 6, 2023.

The instrument used was a semi-structured questionnaire, created through Google Modules, consisting of a total of 15 questions (11 closed-ended, 3 open-ended, 1 Likert scale), offered in Italian to the UniRC sample and in English to the UVT sample. In detail, closed multiple-choice questions with multiple response

alternatives were included. The open-ended questions, on the other hand, allowed participants to delve into answers for which it was thought appropriate to allow them to express themselves more freely.

Specifically, the areas investigated include:

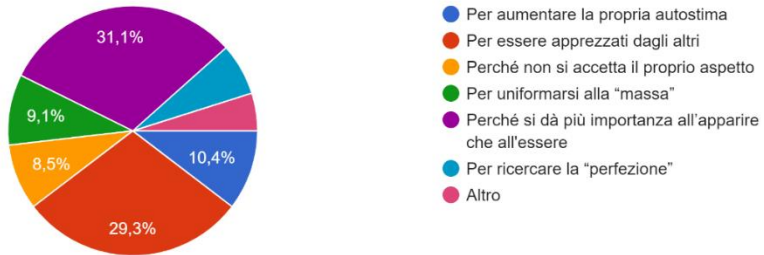
- the use of new technologies and social media;
- the type of expectation when posting media content on social (like, other type of emoticon, share, comment);
- the type of image usually shared on social media (Selfie with retouching or filters, Selfie without retouching or filters, Photo of own body, Photo of work context, Photo of food (food porn), Photo of animals, Photo of scenery/landscapes/monuments, Selfie with background of scenery/landscapes/monuments, Group photo, Group selfie, Photo of minors);
- the type of content shared on social media (quoting other authors, personal reflections, sharing news, personal videos, sharing videos);
- the motivations behind many young people's use of filters or apps to change their appearance (conforming to stereotypical beauty standards, boosting self-esteem, striving for perfection, conforming to the masses);
- the relationship between news and the spectacle of pain;
- the possible solutions to be able to "re-educate the gaze" and the skills to be acquired, as future teachers and educators, to manage the risks of digital.

Regarding the reference sample, 97% of UniRC students surveyed are female, 3% male; regarding the second reference sample (UVT), 83.9% of students are female, 16.1% male. In addition, the UniRC sample consists of 73.3% of students in the 19-24 age group, 9.1% of students in the 25-29 age group, 9.7% of students in the 30-40 age group, and 7.9% of students in the 41-49 age group; on the other hand, the UVT sample, is comprised exclusively of the 19-24 age group.

Among the reasons that, according to UniRC students, underlie the tendency to display an artificial image of oneself, we find first and foremost the desire to prefer appearing rather than being (31.1%), seeking the appreciation of others (29.3%), boosting one's self-esteem (10.4%), adapting to the "masses" (9.1%), and not accepting one's appearance (8.5%).

6. Perché si tende a mostrare sui Social un'immagine artefatta di se stessi e della propria vita?

164 risposte



Graph. 1 (Why do young people tend to display an artificial image of themselves and their lives on social media?)

Of the same nature, the answers given by the UVT sample, here are some of them:

- *Because they feel appreciated in this way;*
- *Because they care about what others think of them.*
- *Perhaps because on social networks they only want to be happy, online we can only store happiness*
- *Young people show an artificial self-image because they are insecure about their appearance and opinions, they copy other human beings because they don't know who they are... and that's why originality and authenticity are lost. In these times, it is not worth it to be normal but "perfect" (we use filters, quotes, speeches... but have no personal contribution in our lives).*
- *Most of the time, people show on social networks the life they would like to have, to live!*
- *Young people want to receive approval from those around them, a factor related to their low level of self-esteem.*
- *Because our society tends to lean toward perfection and high standards.*
- *They do this to give the impression that their life is perfect.*
- *Because that is how they want to be seen by others and, moreover, that is what they see from their influencers.*

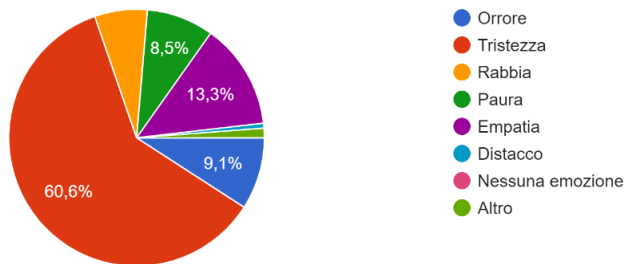
- To fill a void they have within themselves.

- To feed their ego.

The theme of the spectacularization of reality and grief is stated through a series of questions that appeal to each person's emotions: "When faced with images of an air disaster or bombed cities, how do you feel?" Sadness is the emotion of choice for most UniRC students (60.6%), while the UVT sample favored not only sadness (25.8%) but also empathy (19.4%), horror (16.1%), fear (16.1%), and anger (12.9%).

7. Di fronte alle immagini di un disastro aereo o di città bombardate dalla guerra, cosa provi?

165 risposte



Graph. 2 (When faced with images of an air disaster or bombed cities, how do you feel? – UniRC)

When faced with images of an air disaster or bombed cities, how do you feel?

31 risposte



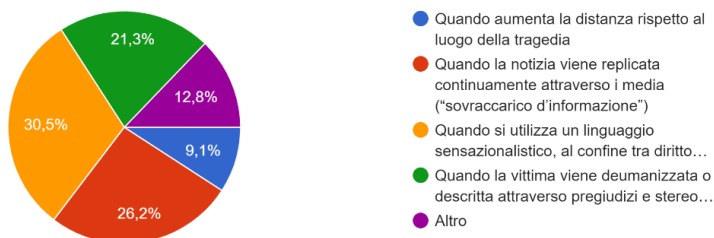
Graph. 3 (When faced with images of an air disaster or bombed cities, how do you feel? – UVT)

Images of other people's pain, on the other hand, might generate insensitivity, detachment, or habituation:

	Studenti UniRC	Studenti UVT
when the distance to the scene of the tragedy increases	9,1 %	19,4%
when the news is continuously replicated through the media ("information overload")	26,2%	41,9%
when sensationalist language is used, bordering between right to information and media jackals, between participation and curiosity, between investigation and gossip	30,5%	22,6%
when the victim is dehumanized or described through prejudice and stereotypes	21,3%	9,7%
More	12,8%	6,4%

8. Quando, invece, le immagini del dolore altrui potrebbero generare insensibilità, distacco o assuefazione?

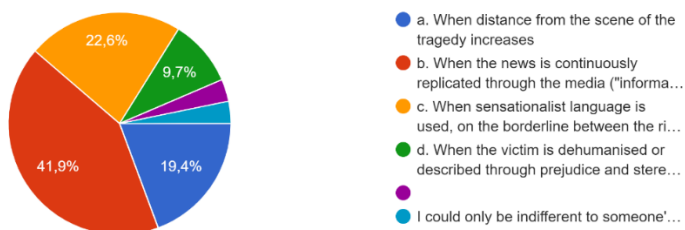
164 risposte



Graph. 4 (When, on the other hand, might images of others' pain generate insensitivity, detachment, or habituation? - UniRC)

When, on the other hand, could images of other people's pain generate insensitivity, detachment or addiction?

31 risposte



Graph. 5 (When, on the other hand, might images of others' pain generate insensitivity, detachment, or habituation? - UVT)

4. What skills for future teachers and educators?

Several initiatives, over time, have been undertaken by the European Union to foster the development of transversal key competencies necessary for personal fulfillment, active citizenship and social cohesion, such as the drafting of the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning* (2006); the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (2008); and the promotion, in 2016, of the *Skill Agenda for Europe* to reiterate the importance of digital competence and entrepreneurial competence. In addition, Hattie (2013; 2003) stresses the importance of the acquisition of communication and interpersonal skills for teachers, precisely because professionally qualified teachers with the appropriate soft skills have a direct impact in influencing students' interest and engagement in achieving their educational success more smoothly (Altomari, De Pietro, Valenti, 2022).

Among the transversal skills are listed by the OECD (2018) both emotional skills and social and cognitive skills: in particular, we refer, for the cognitive domain, to the importance of the development of critical thinking, creative thinking and self-regulation of learning processes and, for the emotional and social domains, to the fundamental role, both for the educational success of the learner and for the professional success of the adult, of empathy, self-efficacy and collaboration and communication skills (Biasi, Caggiano, Ciraci, 2019).

The last question in the questionnaire of the presented research concerns the acquisition of skills by future teachers and educators to counter the risks of digital. In particular, among the skills indicated by the students interviewed and shown in the table (Tab.1), we find not only key citizenship skills, primarily digital skills, but above all transversal skills: social-emotional, relational and communicative, cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, which are fundamental for personal development, social adaptation and both educational and occupational success.

Problem solving	Active listening	Sensitivity	Empathy	Interaction skills
Interpersonal skills	Negotiation and conflict management	Risk management	Observation	Analytical skills
Digital competence	Accountability	Critical thinking	Study and training	Planning
Prevention	Communication skills	Group management	Adaptive skills	Proactivity
Lateral thinking and creativity	Emotional intelligence	Curiosity	Flexibility	Resilience
Ability to relate with acceptance	Prudence	Psychophysical well-being	Awareness	Ability to relate with respect

Table 1 (Soft skills table designed by the sample of students interviewed)

Among the most significant responses:

- knowing how to manage the group and trying to create good communication within it; creating a safe space where one can feel free to be able to talk even about topics that are considered taboo but are actually essential and one must know how to deal with them so that they do not remain in the shadows.

- The competence and training of teachers is essential so that they can educate their pupils in the healthy, safe, legal and aware use of digital, not only on a technical level, for example through the creation of innovative educational paths that can really exploit the potential of new technologies

- Access to the Internet is a right. It is also a right to be educated so that one can inhabit the digital environment safely. Anyone at any time, can be under cyber attack. The first step is to understand the risks and threats present in the digital world. Only the possession of digital skills will make people capable of dealing with the uncertainty, challenges and risks that characterize the digital society. Digital skills are very broad and include elements of computer and digital literacy, communication and collaboration, security, and finally problem solving.

- Helping children/youth in increasing their self-esteem, thus helping them build their own vision of themselves. As an educator, in my opinion you should have group activities that allow children not to feel alone, that lead them to have solid relationships based on true values. It is necessary to educate them to respect each other, to be different, making them understand that we are all different, but we are all human beings. It is necessary to reflect on the imperfection that is part of each of us and on empathy, a skill that is increasingly rare in our days.

As future teachers and educators, one of the skills to be acquired to manage the risks of digital is emotional intelligence, which allows one to approach the other with awareness even behind a screen.

Precisely in order to develop the skills needed to interact with the world, it is necessary to reflect on how to promote soft skills within teacher education (Domenici, 2017) and analyze best practices related to soft skills present in university courses (Frabboni, 2015). Awareness of one's soft skills, in addition to fostering personal professional growth in young teachers, prepares them to take this important dimension into account in their future pupils and design teaching actions aimed at their enhancement.

Certainly many questions arise in the face of the risks of digital: is it still possible, in the liquid and complex society, to choose critically, to practice dissent, not to give in to conformism, not to get caught up in homogenizing labels and standardized formats, to step outside the mass? It is necessary to propose, already starting from the family and social institutions, a model of education that, makes people aware of the risks and potential of technological tools and social media, through a responsible and critical use of them. A pedagogy that will know how to use the media and the net in a critical-reflective and critical-emancipatory perspective will prevent people from being engulfed by the torpor of consciences and the failure of reason. The network, transformed into an extraordinary tool of resistance and emancipation, will be able to create an extraordinary collective intelligence made possible by sharing the experiences and ideas of individuals (Isidori, 2015). In the face of the society of the spectacle, it is necessary to re-educate the gaze (Ferrante, 2015): instead of passively observing, as spectators, the contents proposed on the "social stage" we should exploit the reflection of the "showcase" to observe ourselves, understand ourselves, look inside ourselves (Vincenzi, 2017).

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