

Digital inclusion and exclusion in media education

Inclusione ed esclusione digitale nella media education

Nico Abene

Università degli Studi di Bari | nicoabene@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the relationship between media education and digital democracy by focusing on the current processes of digital inclusion and exclusion. It is undeniable that social inequalities reproduce themselves as digital inequalities. An in-depth analysis of the digital divide, as well as media literacy in general, requires a discussion of the structural matrix of the digital economy. Digital inclusion is a political problem of social justice that involves bridging the gap between active and passive actors in the information society, between the leaders of technological change and its passive recipients. In a global perspective, this means bridging the gap between developed and developing countries. Legislators should propose a democratically advanced definition of the rights associated with digital inclusion, as an indispensable prerequisite for the correct definition of media education as a democratic educational tool in modern society.

Il lavoro si propone di analizzare il rapporto tra la media education e la democrazia digitale, attraverso una verifica dei processi in atto di inclusione e di esclusione online. L'evidenza indiscutibile che le disuguaglianze sociali si riproducono come disuguaglianze digitali, come conseguenza di un'analisi approfondita sul radicamento sociale dell'appropriazione tecnologica, e che non può non avere ricadute nella riflessione sulla media education complessivamente intesa, impone una verifica sulle matrici strutturali dell'economia digitale. E impone la consapevolezza che l'inclusione digitale non può che essere un problema politico di giustizia sociale, di superamento del divario tra i soggetti attivi e passivi della società dell'informazione, tra chi guida e chi subisce lo sviluppo tecnologico, e in una prospettiva globale un problema internazionale di superamento del divario tra paesi sviluppati e paesi in via di sviluppo. Del legislatore è il compito di una definizione democraticamente avanzata dei diritti di inclusione online, come premessa indispensabile per una definizione correttamente intesa della media education come strumento pedagogico democratico nella società moderna.

KEYWORDS

Media Education | Digital Inclusion | Digital Exclusion | Digital Divide | Democracy
Media education | Inclusione digitale | Esclusione digitale | Divario digitale | Democrazia

OPEN ACCESS Double blind peer review

Volume 1 | n. 2 | dicembre 2023

Citation: Abene, N. (2023). Digital inclusion and exclusion in media education. *Cultura pedagogica e scenari educativi*, 1(2), 09-13. <https://doi.org/10.7347/spgs-02-2023-02>.

Corresponding Author: Nico Abene | nicoabene@gmail.com

Journal Homepage: <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sipeges>

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN: 2975-0113 • DOI: 10.7347/spgs-02-2023-02

Received: 10/10/2023 | **Accepted:** 19/11/2023 | **Published:** 29/12/2023

1. Digital democracy

A properly understood and structured media education should include both technical and critical knowledge of an instrument that is itself a means of education and teaching, that is, it must include knowledge of the media as a pedagogical tool. The necessary condition for understanding the problems related to education through the media is to have certain specific skills and to think critically about the use of media tools in educational processes. Especially in relation to the new media, it is impossible to separate critical reflection on media education from the current state of development of digital democracy and from the objective and structural context in which this reflection, with its questions and knowledge needs, is evolving.

The ubiquity of digital technologies and their rapid transformation in every aspect of social life make the delicate issue of digital inclusion, understood as the exercise of a civil right and a political duty to enable it, a matter of great urgency:

The «excluded citizens» are conspicuously absent from the Internet narrative we are used to hearing. There is no room for them in this narrative; there is only room for a part of society, for those who are «at the top», who create a language and a culture that ultimately ignore and exclude those who do not share their codes and traditions. It is they, but in reality it is we, who breathe life into the meta-novel of contemporary society, ascribing to us the role of protagonists, while excluding millions of people without digital citizenship. In a society where the organizational model of the Net has taken hold and where access to and exchange of information are crucial to civil rights, the threat of exclusion can become as serious as that of exploitation. The danger of exclusion from political and cultural citizenship for millions of people is becoming extremely tangible and represents another obstacle to the social cohesion that is so much talked about but little built (Bentivegna, 2009a, pp. IX-X).

Not surprisingly, the analysis of social roots in relation to technological empowerment highlights that social inequalities are in fact reproduced in digital inequalities, and that there can be no true digital inclusion without social inclusion. Social exclusion is at the same time digital exclusion. However, if we look at the structural roots of the digital economy, it becomes clear that digital inclusion is a political problem of social justice, of bridging the gap between the active and passive players in the information society, between the leaders of technological change and its passive recipients. In a global perspective, this means bridging the gap between developed and developing countries:

The awareness that an «information society for all» is not in sight is now widespread among all those who follow current social change closely. Rather, there is a danger of fostering a social polarization in which members of the so-called «broadband elite» are at the top, while those at the bottom of the social ladder are unable to take advantage of new technologies. Faced with a technology that is increasingly socially *embedded* and rooted in contexts of use and design that are constantly engaged in processes of mutual contamination, the exclusion of significant segments of the population from the changes that affect our daily lives becomes a problem that must be addressed with the sociological imagination mentioned by Mills (1962), rather than with the analytical categories typical of technological determinism (Bentivegna, 2009b, p. 41).

A correct pedagogical perspective on the dynamics of digital inclusion and exclusion is one that is structurally grounded in its underlying structural analysis, especially in a country like Italy, which is lagging behind other countries and is plagued by contradictory modernization, as there is no development: “The statistical data relating to Italy leave very little doubt in this respect: those who are able to access the Internet and use it to their advantage have the resources – material and intangible – skills and abilities to create and share a digital culture” (Bentivegna, 2009a, p. X)¹.

1 Also: “The reflections and data presented so far on the extent of Internet access in Italy reflect a system of inequalities that



2. The digital divide

Since the digital divide is expressed in the dialectic between Internet access and the digital skills that determine the quality of that access, different consideration for the two poles of this dialectical opposition obviously determines different pedagogical strategies and different choices in social policy². A digital divide in which the dimension of access prevails as the exclusive criterion of value over the dimension of capabilities, privileging simplification over an analytical and comprehensive reading of events, simultaneously simplifies and marginalizes spaces for action and political and pedagogical interventions in favour of a purely infrastructural and technological approach. This is tantamount to advocating an ideological perspective that is at odds with the analytical results and the subsequent planning of interventions. With the «Declaration of Rights on the Internet», Italy has contributed to the international, i.e., Western, dimension of this ideological reduction, demonstrating that it is not enough to take political measures to cope with the ongoing changes, but that it also matters how one does so:

1. Access to the Internet is a fundamental right and a prerequisite for the full development of individuals and society.
2. Everyone has an equal right to access the Internet in a technologically appropriate and timely manner that removes all economic and social barriers.
3. The fundamental right of access to the Internet must be guaranteed in its material conditions and not only as a way of connecting to the Net.
4. Access includes the free choice of devices, operating systems and also distributed applications.
5. Public institutions guarantee the necessary measures to overcome any form of digital divide, including those determined by gender, economic conditions, and situations of personal vulnerability and disability³.

These declarations of equality and freedom are such only in principle, but not in fact, because they lack an expanded dimension of sociality that does not limit implementation strategies to the simple dimension of access to the Net and the possession of appropriate technological tools to make it possible. What is missing is an idea of real, substantial democracy.

Finally, if we consider the cumulative processes that determine the acquisition of knowledge, in which knowledge generates other knowledge, and the processes by which informal knowledge is acquired in the technological age, it becomes clear that the digital divide is at the same time a knowledge divide that multiplies and intensifies due to a lack of digital skills. With all the consequences in terms of the exercise and appropriation of rights of active participation in the social and political spaces of the present. At the same

is social in nature even before it is digital. The data on the distribution of physical, cultural, relational and communicative resources can therefore be interpreted in this context, along with the methods of technological appropriation used by individuals. In today's social structure, the coordinates of the individual lie on a *continuum* that ranges from successfully embedding the Internet into one's home and life to complete alienation from the world of the Net³; "In short, the values reported in the different profiles leave very little room for doubt or uncertainty about the strong and evident link between digital and social inequality in this country. The cumulative and recursive model presented above finds clear empirical confirmation in the data presented earlier: the social and positional characteristics of individuals, as well as the availability of different types of resources (physical, cultural, communicative, and relational), affect both the acquisition of digital skills and the subsequent development of technology appropriation processes. Depending on the outcome of these processes, people can make effective use of the opportunities offered by the Internet – in terms of individual and social empowerment – and thus consolidate their presence in the broad areas where the mechanisms of social inclusion manifest themselves. Those who fail to do so, see their state of digital and social exclusion confirmed, if not reinforced" (Bentivegna, 2009b, pp. 80 and 180-181).

2 On training as a vehicle for social inclusion in the specific field of the transmission of digital skills and on weak categories, at risk of exclusion, such as the elderly and the disabled, see Striano, 2010, pp. 22-24.

3 "Dichiarazione dei diritti in internet", July 2015, art. 2.



time, in a context of constant change and development, without a dynamic perspective in the measures to overcome the digital divide, there is the risk of a return to digital illiteracy and therefore, continuous training in computer skills is necessary.

3. Politics and morality

Whether we are aware of it or not, the structural roots of the technological present, its unchanged economic paradigm, the ideological narrative of its ultimate goal and its fulfilment of historical becoming as the last of the ideologies that finalistically and optimistically produce the matrix of future revolutions, require that any project of denunciation, change and government of the same is a political project, even a cultural-political one, in all its dimensions. A project of confrontation/clash, also of the pedagogical with the political. As a dialectical counterpoint to the official narrative, another narrative of the digital revolution emerges, which tells how the digital revolution has taken a “wrong turn” because

it has fostered a system of political repression against the promises of democratization of society; it has promoted the formation of real capitalist oligopolies; it has exacerbated inequalities between those who access the Internet and digital information and those who do not (the so-called digital divide); it has created precarious, underpaid occupations and other forms workers exploitation; it has led to an excessive consumption of energy in spite of the green rhetoric of the same revolution; it has endangered individual privacy by favouring on the contrary a «culture» and a form of capitalism based on users’ surveillance and tracking (Balbi, 2022, pp. 94-95).

At the same time, the superstructural level of ethics and universality of values, secular and Catholic spiritualism, conviction and moral exhortation is used to exercise a critical function and to guide the current processes, in the absence of the social and political motivations that alone transform us into active subjects of change. The decalogue of computer virtues is at the same time a pedagogical tool:

1. Be careful and critical when searching for information and check its foundation and authenticity.
2. Be aware of what and where you publish, share your sensitive data with due precautions.
3. Respect the words and space of others, your body and that of others.
4. Save the addresses of interesting resources, keep them in folders and subfolders, organize all this material so that it can be easily retrieved if needed.
5. Be careful not to deny availability, accessibility, and inclusion to your interlocutors.
6. Reject conformism and omertà.
7. Before taking action, give yourself time for a proper evaluation, harmonize your media consumption, overcome the temptation of camouflage.
8. Be personally responsible and trust the responsibility of others.
9. Make sure your communication is always generative.
10. Never forget to show mercy for other people (Rivoltella, 2015, pp. 107-108).

And so, educational institutions of all grades are called to celebrate the new liturgy of the pedagogical virtues of digital communication and its efficacy at all levels: at the individual level (“as a support for media asceticism”) (ivi, pp. 109-110), in the family (“as a way to promote conscious and shared media consumption”) (ivi, p. 110), in education (“as a basis for designing a Media Education or Digital Citizenship curriculum”) (*ibidem*), and in training (“as a guide for updating educational professions on media”) (*ibidem*).

The emerging anthropological mutation and the threat to man posed by the new information technologies, with their power of biological and psychological manipulation, require the construction of a new



digital humanism “that resists the tendency of excessive technicality and puts the human person and respect for human dignity back at the centre” (Piana, 2022, p. 11). The founding values of this digital humanism erect a barrier to the current invasion of social life, and even before that, of consciences. As if it were possible to oppose the non-neutrality of modern technology with the blunt weapons of morality and not with those of politics.

Bibliography

- Balbi, G. (2022). *L'ultima ideologia. Breve storia della rivoluzione digitale*. Laterza.
- Bentivegna, S. (2009a). Introduzione. In S. Bentivegna, *Disuguaglianze digitali. Le nuove forme di esclusione nella società dell'informazione* (pp. VII-XI). Laterza.
- Bentivegna, S. (2009b). *Disuguaglianze digitali. Le nuove forme di esclusione nella società dell'informazione*. Laterza.
- Buckingham, D. (2020). *Un manifesto per la Media Education* (G. Cappello, Trans.). Mondadori. (Original work published 2019).
- Felini, D. (2019). *Pedagogia dei media. Questioni, percorsi e sviluppi*. Morcelliana.
- Piana, G. (2022). Introduzione. In G. Piana, *Umanesimo per l'era digitale. Antropologia, etica, spiritualità*, with a note by F. Garelli (pp. 7-11). Interlinea.
- Rivoltella, P.C. (2015). *Le virtù del digitale. Per un'etica dei media*. Morcelliana.
- Rivoltella, P.C. (2019). *Media education. Idea, metodo, ricerca*. Morcelliana.
- Silverstone, R. (2009). *Mediapolis. La responsabilità dei media nella civiltà globale* (E.D. Midolo, Trans.). Vita e Pensiero. (Original work published 2006).
- Striano, M. (2010). L'inclusione come progetto di sviluppo sociale nello scenario europeo. In M. Striano (Ed.), *Pratiche educative per l'inclusione sociale* (pp. 9-29). Laterza.

