

SAGGI – ESSAYS

FOSTERING ADOLESCENTS' CIVIC IMAGINATION:
A DIGITAL VISUAL PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO ED-
UCATION

PROMUOVERE L'IMMAGINAZIONE CIVICA NEGLI
ADOLESCENTI:
UN APPROCCIO PARTECIPATIVO DIGITALE VISUALE

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In the network society, adolescents and young adults are exposed daily to the action of the machines of dis-imagination that populate the infosphere: devices serving market logics and generating dependency and social disintegration. In this scenario, promoting digital and visual literacy oriented toward civic imagination represents a central educational challenge. The aim is to expand the space of adolescent agency by offering images, ideas and tools to construct alternative narratives to the market's "public pedagogy",

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which tends to direct processes of subjectivation and to limit participatory ones.

The contribution presents *cellphilmimg* as a visual participatory research technique, understood as an aesthetic, educational and digital practice that restores to younger generations control over self-representation, imagination and the creative process, giving them voice through multimedia outputs shareable on the wild, wide web.

Nella network society, adolescenti e giovani sono quotidianamente esposti all'azione delle *macchine della dis-immaginazione* che popolano l'infosfera: dispositivi al servizio del mercato, generatori di dipendenza e disintegrazione sociale. In questo scenario, promuovere un'alfabetizzazione digitale e visuale orientata a un'immaginazione civica rappresenta una sfida educativa cruciale. La finalità è quella di ampliare lo spazio dell'agency adolescenziale, offrendo idee, metodi e strumenti per costruire narrazioni alternative rispetto alla "pedagogia pubblica" del mercato, volta a indirizzare i processi di soggettivazione e a limitare quelli partecipativi. Il contributo è dedicato al *cellphilmimg*, una tecnica partecipativa visuale e una pratica educativa estetica e digitale che restituisce alle nuove generazioni il controllo sulla propria immaginazione e sul processo creativo, sulla rappresentazione di sé, dando loro voce attraverso prodotti multimediali condivisibili nel *wild, wide web*.

1. *Teens' Universal Ownership*

Digital media have radically changed how we communicate, relate to one another, and inhabit the shared world. The infosphere is transforming the cultural landscape, infiltrating even everyday micro-practices via smartphones and tablets, thereby reshaping our relationships, our engagement with information and the production of knowledge.

As of October 2025, 6.04 billion people – 73.2% of the global population – were online, spending an average of 6 hours 33 minutes per day (DataReportal, 2025). Smartphones dominate access (96%), with 9.2 billion active subscriptions worldwide, reaching

142 per 100 inhabitants in high-income countries where universal ownership (a penetration rate of $\geq 95\%$ among individuals aged 10 and over) has been achieved, while only 53% in low-income economies own a mobile phone (ITU, 2025). Internet use is highest among 15-24-year-olds (82%), about 10% above the general population.

When the adolescents who populate the infosphere are discussed, attention often focuses on social media, through which entry into their peer society – whose gaze carries crucial significance – takes place.

Digital-native adolescents, constantly haunted by the fear of being left out and biologically overwhelmed by the so-called FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), find in interactive digital devices a habitat that responds to their relational needs. On social media, they can present themselves to their peers through carefully crafted narratives, in both real-time and asynchronous modes, addressing a chosen and/or global audience and discovering new models to follow. Everyday life for digital natives comprises platforms for sharing images and videos, such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, online forums such as Reddit, messaging apps and gaming online environments. Online, people meet, make friends, flirt, break up and even confide in AI apps. We are faced with a form of “techno-adolescence” (Barone, 2019), in which social relationships increasingly shift online, and the constant presence of others reshapes the meanings of relationship, solitude, silence and the ways adolescence itself is experienced.

For these reasons, this contribution focuses on the smartphone, the technological device most widely used by adolescents to be/stay in relationships (both digital and non-digital) with their peers. It is reinterpreted as an effective tool for fostering civic imagination within a participatory perspective, capable of bringing the gaze of younger generations back to the centre of the public arena.

1.1. Hyperconnected Generations: A Double-Edged Sword

The digital age has transformed communication, permeating all social domains within a “glocal” network (Castells & Cardoso, 2005). With the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2016), the

infosphere emerges as a pervasive space governed by a new power regime: infocracy (Han, 2022). Capitalism and information intertwine, creating a surveillance apparatus that threatens democratic structures and individual autonomy (Floridi, 2015). Power relations, institutional and informal, are increasingly shaped by communication dynamics (Castells, 2007).

Paradoxically, the sense of freedom online renders invisible the threads of domination, making surveillance more effective. The fact that freedom and surveillance co-exist in the infosphere ensures people's complete, unconscious subjugation. Smartphones – the focus of this discussion – are central to this dynamic, acting as instruments of voluntary subjection, always accessible and enabling constant personal and professional connectivity (Han, 2022). They embody a neoliberal information regime, in which control appears as freedom and social community. Every day, users produce and consume information, exposed to a global surveillance system whose power continues to grow: «the final Pan Opticum has arrived» (Castells, 2023, p. 944).

Surveillance operates both vertically – through big tech profiling and data commercialisation (Floridi, 2014) – and laterally, via peer monitoring, bullying, revenge porn, political propaganda, fake news and AI-driven manipulation. These phenomena particularly affect adolescents, who navigate digital spaces with ambivalence and “discomfort of technology” (Fant & Milani, 2024). We have no unequivocal evidence of the impact on younger generations, but the onlife environment (Floridi, 2015) is likely shaping an anthropological transformation. Rising mental health issues among young people (UNICEF, 2025) are linked to algorithm-driven social media addiction, rooted in the cultural shift of the 2010-2015 smartphone era (Skenazy, Rausch & Haidt, 2025). Broader societal trends – narcissism, performance culture and market-driven consumption – have weakened social bonds, making individuals more susceptible to corporate influence (Crouch, 2004). Social networks reinforce these dynamics through sponsored content, cookies and influencers acting as propagandists.

Surveys show adolescents recognise social media's negative effects on peers (48%), particularly girls, yet only 14% see these effects on themselves. Many value these platforms for connection (74%) and self-expression (63%) (Faverio, Anderson & Park, 2025). Digital spaces help adolescents maintain peer relationships, crucial for identity formation, while offering protected environments for self-exploration, especially for those who are less popular or in minorities (Craig, Austin, Alessi, McInroy & Keane, 2017; Fantet *et al.*, 2024; Prinsen, Haan & Leander, 2015). Digital technologies also foster social and political engagement. Young people have mobilised online around migration policies (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik & Zimmerman, 2019), the Arab Spring (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari & Maziad, 2011), global climate strikes (Sainz & Hanna, 2023) and Hong Kong's resistance to Chinese pressures (Zhong, 2019).

2. *Educating for New Digital Visual Cultures*

The web gives, and the web takes away. It offers spaces in which identities can be expressed and affirmed but may also conceal vast abysses in which individuals risk becoming lost. If life today is increasingly *online*, as noted by Floridi (2015), particularly for Generation Z and Generation Alpha, we must ask how younger and older generations can be protected from the risks associated with the digital environment: identity appropriation, manipulation of information, the shaping of thought and growing loneliness. How can individuals be supported in developing the interpretative tools necessary to read the world and the meanings of human action? How can they avoid constant exposure to comparison with unattainable models?

The crucial role of educational processes must be re-emphasised. Adults must reclaim their role as meaningful points of reference, to create spaces of shared experience with their children from the earliest years of life and to devote time to accompanying them in their development, including through encounters with frustration and with limits. This is not simply a matter of recovering spaces for

embodied and dialogical relationships. Rather, the *infosphere* calls for a structural rethinking of educational pathways aimed at fostering a critical and emancipatory form of literacy, in the sense proposed by Freire and Macedo (2005). Such an approach should systematically integrate digital, media and visual literacy – approached from aesthetic, ethical and critical perspectives – beginning in primary school.

Policies restricting access to social media and the internet, both in schools and beyond, often appear impractical and inequitable, particularly for adolescents from minority groups, such as those living in rural areas, adolescents with disabilities, or LGBTQ+ youth (Watson, 2026). The so-called *digital wild west* (Guernsey, Levine, Chiong & Severns, 2014) calls for interventions at both regulatory and educational levels, from stricter rules for major digital platforms to monitoring and regulating minors' access to specific sites and content (e.g., online gambling or OnlyFans). But it is equally important that young people and families are offered educational initiatives that foster critical awareness and competencies for responsible engagement with digital environments.

These competencies are often framed as *transliteracy*, encompassing digital, visual, media, film and information literacy (Frau-Meigs, 2012). This contribution focuses on digital and visual literacy: the set of skills required to interpret, evaluate and produce content across transmedia contexts. Developing these skills enhances individual and collective well-being and counteracts exclusion and social inequality, given the link between digital participation and access to cultural and social resources (Ragnedda, Ruiu & Addeo, 2022).

Digital and visual literacy are central to contemporary education. According to the European Commission, *digital literacy* (DL) refers to the ability to use ICTs creatively to participate fully in the twenty-first century, encompassing operational skills, professional application and innovation (Martin & Grudziecki, 2015). Walton (2016) emphasises DL as the ability to find, evaluate, use, share and create content critically via ICTs, fostering personal, educational and professional development. More broadly, it involves retrieving, evaluating, using and producing information across multiple formats to perform tasks effectively in digital environments.

The European *Digital Competence Framework 2.2* recalls the *Council of Europe* (2018) definition:

Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, work and participation in society. It encompasses information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and cybersecurity skills), intellectual property, problem-solving and critical thinking (Vuorikari, Kluzer & Punie, 2022, p. 3).

Within digital spaces, the communicative power of images – ubiquitous, engaging, influential and often persuasive beyond conscious awareness – is especially pronounced. They are «ambiguous, animated and inanimate objects» with an undeniable power and global pervasiveness (Cometa, 2020, p. 301). Therefore, digital literacy must integrate visual literacy, which:

enables individuals to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media. Visual literacy equips learners to understand and analyse the contextual, cultural, ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical dimensions of visual materials. A visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to shared knowledge and culture (ACRL, 2011).

Emerging digital visual cultures (MacEntee & Flicker, 2023, p. 29) are largely unexplored educational territory. Guiding adolescents through participatory pathways in digital and visual literacy is essential to prepare them for a contemporary world that may be «perhaps more mysterious to us than the more recent or distant past, and that will continue by insisting on the interconnectedness of all forms of life» (Mitchell, 2005, p. 344).

3. *Participatory Visual Research*

Participatory visual methods encompass a wide range of creative practices, including still and moving images such as photographs,

drawings, videos and maps (Lomax, 2012). Visual approaches function as multimodal tools that allow researchers to access participants' perspectives and understand their lived realities. They provide a "situated" narrative capable of revealing dimensions of experience that are otherwise difficult to capture (Haraway, 1988). Visual methodologies are not merely used to generate visual data but to foster reflexivity, engagement and representation among participants and, more broadly, within the audience.

Audiences play an active role: visual language is designed to capture attention, stimulate reflection and engage viewers in dialogue around the issues presented. Engaging stakeholders and audiences in reflective processes is central to one of the primary goals of Participatory Visual Methodology (PVM): it promotes social justice, agency and transformation of oppressive practices and lifestyles within the social contexts in which individuals and communities are embedded (Horowitz, Robinson & Seifer, 2009). PVM provides an accessible framework for all participants to act as agents of social change, disseminating alternative perspectives and knowledge to encourage new conversations, public debate and policy development.

Tools such as participatory video, *cellphilm*, digital storytelling and photovoice facilitate reflexivity not only among participants but also among researchers and professionals guiding the process, orienting them to «address existing power dynamics before the initiation of research and to continuously question and re-evaluate how a more equitable distribution of power can be achieved» (Darroch & Giles, 2014, p. 30).

Such tools generate and disseminate community-based knowledge (Mitchell, de Lange & Moletsane, 2018) and situated insights (Haraway, 1988). In particular, participatory videos produced via smartphones have proven effective in engaging community members, altering existing power dynamics, shaping community dialogue and influencing policy-making by creating space for marginalised voices (Mitchell *et al.*, 2016).

When visual outputs emerge from collaborative processes, they foster participant empowerment. Individuals gain direct control over artefacts that represent themselves, their cultural universe, or

the issues under study (Barley & Russell, 2018). Images have the power to capture attention without resorting to provocation, giving voice to those who are otherwise unheard and offering alternative perspectives on reality. Visual media serve as platforms from which different viewpoints can be proposed and shared, challenging dominant narratives prevalent in the infosphere.

Historically, photography enabled Black communities to participate in visual storytelling and produce alternative representations of themselves and their histories, often excluded from mainstream narratives: «a way to empower ourselves through representation» (hooks, 1994, p. 60). Similarly, the work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado demonstrated the capacity of visual narratives to expose structural inequalities affecting communities in South America.

4. *Reframing Smartphone Use: Cellphilming*

Smartphones, social media and the visual aesthetics of contemporary technological culture have directly shaped the emergence of *cellphilming*. The term *cellphilm* – a portmanteau of *cell phone* and *film* – was coined by Dockney and Tomaselli (2009) to describe videos produced with mobile phones (or tablets) documenting everyday realities in post-apartheid South Africa (Dockney, Tomaselli & Hart, 2010). In the early 2000s, the increasing accessibility of mobile technologies enabled local communities to challenge media narratives previously dominated by segregationist power structures by producing and circulating their own accounts of social reality.

The concept reflects both the convergence of multiple technologies within a single device and the emergence of a new media culture based on the everyday use of mobile phones for producing, sharing and consuming situated media content. Cellphilms are typically short videos (of five minutes or less) designed to document participants' lives, social contexts and forms of knowledge while critically reflecting on experiences and perspectives and promoting processes of personal reflection and social change.

Widespread access to cheap, usable smartphones has enabled marginalised individuals and communities to make their voices heard and participate more actively in knowledge production (Baron, 2008). Through smartphones, participants can create “intentional” videos that rapidly communicate alternative viewpoints and narrate stories that challenge dominant perspectives. Cellphilm-ing thus emerged as a collaborative research approach within educational and social activism contexts to generate, represent and disseminate new forms of knowledge while encouraging participant engagement and collective learning.

The method typically unfolds through several stages. Participants first reflect collectively on the research question and address relevant ethical considerations, including the topic under investigation and issues of consent. Following brainstorming activities, they develop a storyboard, draft a script, and ultimately produce the video using a smartphone. This process facilitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study while also highlighting the power relations that shape participants' experiences. At the same time, it encourages reflective practices around personal trajectories of growth and learning, and critical interpretations of ongoing socio-political and economic processes (MacEntee *et al.*, 2023). In this sense, cellphilm-ing functions not only as a research method but also as a tool for knowledge production and agency.

For adolescents and young adults involved in these processes, such experiences allow them to see themselves not only as consumers of digital content but also as knowledge producers and active contributors to online conversations. Within the network society (Castells *et al.*, 2005), digital space assumes a fragmented configuration in which different social groups can develop their own narratives and influence existing power dynamics, introducing counter-hegemonic forces that challenge established structures and relations of power.

5. *Towards a Civic Imagination*

As Floridi (2015) emphasises in the Onlife Manifesto, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are not merely tools but «environmental forces» (p. 2) that shape and influence human agency. In everyday life, individuals are constantly exposed to what Jonathan Crary (2022) describes as the market's «machines of dis-imagination» (p. 2): systems characterised by their capacity to generate dependence, isolation, false hopes, cruelty, psychological distress, indebtedness and social disintegration. Within network society, the digital sphere is populated by a complex audiovisual apparatus governed by corporate-controlled infrastructures capable of shaping forms of public pedagogy (Mills, 2008), and cultural persuasion. Hence, these limitations constrain people's opportunities both to experience the world in the sense proposed by Dewey (1938) and to exercise agency within the public sphere.

One of today's central educational challenges is therefore to promote among pre-adolescents, adolescents and young adults the capacity to move beyond passive and merely consumptive uses of the web towards more critical, creative and participatory forms of engagement. Even young people with advanced technological skills should be supported in developing digital and visual literacy that enables them to go beyond a “bulimic”, apathetic consumption of online content (Felini, 2019) and towards more reflective and creative uses of digital media. Thus, they may also exercise within the infosphere their right to voice opinions, articulate critique and participate constructively in public discourse.

Participatory visual research has, therefore, significant educational potential, capable of influencing political debate and reshaping public narratives precisely because of its participatory and visual nature. With images and smartphone screens being ubiquitous, it is possible to speak of a new pictorial turn, where the relationship «between human beings and images is profoundly shaped (and transformed) by contemporary visual technologies» (Cometa, 2020, p. 13).

Engaging adolescents in critical and creative processes through the use of smartphones aims to foster digital and visual skills that

extend beyond what Ragnedda (2019) describes as the third level of digital competence: the ability to use the internet to improve one's socio-economic conditions. Within participatory visual research, cellphilmaking seeks to guide young people through processes of digital and visual literacy that stimulate imaginative capacities while fostering critical awareness and agency. Such processes may help interrupt habitual, and often algorithmically induced patterns of digital consumption shaped by social media platforms. Young people have long sought new ways to express themselves and make their voices heard within a social context still largely characterised by gerontocratic and hetero-patriarchal structures.

For this reason, cellphilmaking was introduced into the course *Educational Practices with Adolescents* within the Bachelor's Degree Programme in Education Sciences (L-19) (Dusi & Vittori, 2024), in the Department of Human Sciences (University of Verona), in order to help future educators, and the adolescents with whom they will work, to imagine and inhabit spaces of civic imagination within the infosphere. It aims to provide tools that encourage reflection on personal experiences, knowledge and identities while inviting participants to envision alternative possibilities, different ways of being and spaces where shared, participatory and socially engaged thinking can flourish. In this context, cellphilmaking was proposed as a transformative methodology capable of fostering socio-relational, economic and political awareness at both individual and collective levels, grounded in the recognition of the interconnectedness of living systems described by Haraway (1991). Here, imagination becomes a space for caring for oneself, others and the multiple forms of life that inhabit the world.

Within this perspective, educational pathways focused on contemporary literacies can become empowering practices of ethical citizenship where knowledge is constructed collaboratively and technologies are reoriented toward the service of living beings and the common good. Students are invited to "get their hands dirty" with technologies and images, to question what matters to them and to reflect on the issues that shape their lives and on the meanings conveyed by visual media.

A preliminary thematic analysis of the cellphilms (n = 18 in the current academic year) produced by students (collaboratively in groups of four) shows that most of them (16 of 18) address matters closely connected to their lived experiences, in line with the experiential dimension emphasised by Dewey (1938) rather than wider societal issues. Topics include the anxiety affecting younger generations, smartphone or alcohol dependence, loneliness and the search for meaningful adult figures. In some respects, given the rhizomatic structure of digital media and the dynamics of the contemporary infodemic, even the cellphilms produced seem to reflect a situation in which «the public sphere declines into private space», as the issues addressed are not necessarily perceived as relevant to «society as a whole» (Han, 2022, p. 20).

At the same time, these narratives seem to confirm a broader contemporary tendency to reconfigure the “private” – understood as experiences directly related to personal life – as a form of public expression. The themes explored resonate within peer communities and constitute a shared dimension of the public world. This raises the possibility that we may be witnessing a re-signification of the public sphere – understood, in the sense proposed by Arendt (1958), as a space belonging to all – albeit expressed through forms not traditionally associated with political participation. As conventional political engagement, such as party membership or voting, has declined in recent decades, more experiential and proximal forms of responsibility seem to be emerging (Dusi, 2018).

In the cellphilms produced by students, the private dimension – often amplified by the dynamics of the infosphere – is collaboratively reworked through creative and participatory processes grounded in reflexivity and critical awareness. These processes activate forms of literacy, agency and mutual care. Cellphilming thus enables a shared and creative reappropriation of technological devices, specifically smartphones, through imaginative processes that mobilise symbolic, narrative and social dimensions. They start from individual experience but unfold in dialogue with oneself, with peers and with the wider world.

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