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EDITORIAL

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Age, generation and the media

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the First World War, sociologist Karl Mannheim ([1928] 1952) and philosopher José Ortega y Gasset ([1923] 1931, [1930] 1932) sought explanations for social change in the continuous exchanges of generations. Their aim was to unveil ‘the rhythm of ages’, as Ortega y Gasset ([1923] 1931: 18) put it, and to use the concept of generation to understand the ‘dynamic compromise between mass and individual’ ([1923] 1931: 15). These perspectives have never been prominent in media studies, despite the many findings that media consumption is – and has always been – divided in terms of social and demographic variables, among them age.

Currently, some age gaps seem to be closing: the Internet, some aspects of the mobile phone, and social networking sites such as Facebook are increasingly used by older segments of the population. Yet other gaps are widening. The dynamics of this development have yet to be fully explored, but as especially the elderly are rarely singled out as an important target group for advertisers, or have to any extent been the main focus of academic media research, they constitute a blind spot of media research (Syvertsen 2010). And

while the elderly seem a neglected research topic, there is an abundance of studies examining the media use and preferences of the young, often highlighting innovative and/or dangerous media use (Staksrud 2011).

Further, the public debate and to some extent also media research have a tendency to be preoccupied with age in connection with trends in media use and consumption, often so in a worried manner. During the 1980s the advent of satellite TV, offering new types of entertainment programmes attracting children and adolescents, spurred many studies on the possible negative effects of increased television viewing by the young. However, the old age groups increased their television viewing considerably more than the young did, without attracting much attention or concern. Indeed, as Lennart Weibull and Oscar Westlund point to in their article in this volume, the 'young generation' has attracted solid scholarly attention while 'other generations have been passed over'. These authors seek to remedy some of the lacking research attention by systematically investigating the media use and preferences of several generations. The present volume of *Northern Lights* aims to take age, life course and generation seriously, as dynamic analytical categories in themselves.

The two key concepts in this volume, 'age' and 'generation', are both contested and problematic analytical categories. 'Age', which in its simplest definitions may refer to an unquestionable personal characteristic, takes on a number of different meanings depending on the perspective applied. 'Generation' refers to a collective that may be defined in relation to many different aspects, e.g. age, experiences, memories, lifestyle, media use, etc. In the following, we draw attention to some of these issues as well as point to how the articles in the volume relate to them.

AGE

With the media developments of the past decades, particularly the advent of the Internet as well as digital and online media production and services, much media research has focused on how new services and digital technologies have been adopted in different social groups, among them age groups. In the Nordic countries the oldest age groups generally watch more TV, read more newspapers and listen to the radio more than younger groups do, whereas the pattern is the opposite regarding use of the Internet, blogs, advanced functions on smartphones and other mobile personal media. In other words, media consumption is age-separated – a fact that several of the articles in this volume, drawing on data from several countries, not only confirm but also nuance. A key question in this volume is the discussion of the degree to which general characteristics can be distinguished in current media use and consumption, or whether life course explanations are more important for understanding the differences between age groups. Weibull and Westlund find indications of both. Kalmus et al. confirm the general picture, but also point to online news consumption as more common among those over 30 than among the young, confirming that media habits are changing in several age groups. Popular entertainment, on the other hand, is consumed in most age groups, thereby bridging age and generational gaps.

In media research, age is often used as a background variable in the construction of different audience segments and profiles. It is seldom analysed in its own right, as a research problem in itself. The typical use of age in research and marketing is as a social parameter for distinguishing target groups, or

for describing audience profiles. A specific social and cultural aspect of the relation between age, culture and society is generational belonging. In media research, 'generation' has often been applied to developments in technology: the first generation of mobile phones, the second generation, then 3G and now 4G. In other contexts, the concept of generation has been used as a characteristic of people born in a certain decade, and the media behaviour characteristics of this group of people: the 'Net Generation' (Tapscott 1998), the 'Digital Natives' (Prensky 2001), 'Generation X' (Coupland 1992), the 'Digital Generation' (Edmunds and Turner 2005).

Several of these, however, are accounts of less scientific standards, typically essayistic depictions of trends in contemporary society, and such labels are questioned by several authors in this volume. Tim Riley, among others, shows in his article how digital skills can be acquired and developed at a rather high age, thereby refuting stereotypical images of the young as 'digital natives' and the old as 'sporadics' (Brandtzæg 2012). Andra Siibak and Virge Tamme draw attention to the same unhappy link between age and use of specific technology in their analysis of the use of online media in multigenerational family settings. Their article discusses how social media have entered and changed everyday life in families, drawing attention to the increased contact and connectivity that digital media allow.

With the categorization of age groups follow theoretical challenges. Empirically, age is an individual variable that can be aggregated and interpreted in several ways. In its simplest version, age refers to commonly occurring characteristics by particular demographic groups. However, the simple categorization of media use may camouflage other cultural and social aspects of media consumption. Statistics from most countries show that young people are heavier users of online and social media than older groups are; yet the differences between the age groups can be ascribed not only to age but also to differences in education and income, and reflect the fact that the everyday lives of young people are simply different, and always have been. In Åsa Jernudd's article on film memories from a small town in Sweden, a side point is just that: the informants recall very different aspects of their experiences with film, spanning from fascination with technology to deep emotional distress.

Concerning media users, then, age can have different interpretations and refer to several dimensions (Bolin 2004b). *Biological age* refers to the physical age of individuals or groups, focusing on biological factors that may be conceived of as universal. However, the fact that the characteristics of these age spans not only have varied with time and space but also are changing within the same cultural frameworks makes biological age not very robust for theorizing about specific characteristics, behaviour, consumption, etc. There may also be considerable differences among individuals when it comes to their conception of the match between their biological, physical age and their subjective age. Biological age does not determine individual taste, health, mental abilities or the like.

Another dimension is tied to *psychological (mental) age*, often in terms of age spans such as children, youth and the elderly, signalling that ageing consists of different transitional life phases. Sometimes, particular media products, media events or media experiences may form lasting memories for cohorts of people. In this volume, Laura Suna and Åsa Jernudd look at how media products belong both to the collective memory of generations and to the personal memories and experiences of childhood and adolescence. Different life phases will be tied partly to different types of media consumption, and

media consumption shifts in different phases. Common to these life phases are the facts that they implicate different forms of mediated and mediated experiences (Hjarvard 2008), and that these experiences may be seen as more or less integral to different phases. Popular media products, particularly entertainment, play on age as life phases.

Nevertheless, Kalmus et al., in this issue, argue that the separation of age groups is being increasingly blurred: 'the boundaries between children's and adults' media worlds are both disappearing and being reinforced' as children have easy access to all kinds of media content, and, simultaneously, 'children increasingly participate in globalizing cultural and social spaces that are inaccessible, even incomprehensible, to their parents and teachers'. This duality in the conception of borders between age groups concerning the consumption and interpretation of media content is analytically and theoretically challenging. For instance, the use and access to mobile phones is ubiquitous in all age groups. Mobile telephony has been rapidly diffusing all over the world; in the Nordic countries the number of mobile subscriptions exceeds that of the population, and use and adoption is high in all age groups (Bolin and Westlund 2009; Skogerbø and Syvertsen 2004). The mobile phone has taken over as the main means of personal communication in both business and everyday life, contributing to structuring and coordinating contact, activities and shaping culture as well as improving contact and security for old as well as young people (Ling 2008; Helles 2009).

Still, age groups may also make up *cultural groups*, which in turn form niche *markets* for cultural production (children, teenagers, young adults, mature adults, elderly). Television, film, books and music are among the media products that are highly targeted in terms of age groups, although targeting may not accurately predict media consumption. As categories, childhood and adolescence have spurred the production of easily identifiable media products: *Bear in the Big Blue House* (Playhouse Disney 1997) intrinsically belongs to childhood and *Teenage Boss* (NRK 2012) to the young. As mentioned above, the use and consumption of different technologies and services show striking differences between age groups. Media products are designed according to not only age but also social and background characteristics, such as income, education, type of household (particularly with or without children), etc. As an expression of life phase, age is blurred by other factors such as taste, socio-economic and cultural background, type of family or a combination, factors that may be more important for the consumption of media than age is. Neither do these categories reflect the changes that take place within the different age groups, as part of their *life course*, as Natalie Claessens points to in her article.

From a life course perspective, age is also a dynamic of its own, with different stages that have their own specific characteristics, and that influence media behaviour in conjunction with other social circumstances that make up phases of life, such as the fact that you go to school during a certain period, you are active on the job market, you perhaps get involved in family life, have children, retire, etc. All these moments or phases in the course of life naturally affect our behaviour in general, including our media behaviour. It is characteristic of life course, life phase and generation that, contrary to the objectifying concept of cohort, laid as a matrix upon a statistical sample based on divisions of biological ages, they try to capture the social dynamics of the individual as related to the societal context (Burnett 2010: 41ff). Thus the 'school phase' differs in length between individuals, as do the points in time when people marry, enter

the job market or have children. And for some people, these phases simply never occur. Such social circumstances have traditionally also been proven to have strong relevance for media usage (Gahlin 1977). Weibull and Westlund argue that we can see a double articulation of age: 'age is seen to present us with an indicator of the importance of life course' as it highlights the importance of conditions following from the life course perspective (such as type of household, with or without children) that have a clear impact on media consumption and media expenditure. They conclude that 'generations and life courses are intertwined. We acknowledge that members of different generations pass through individual life courses, and emphasize that they do so at different historical locations in relation to both society and its media system'.

GENERATION

Generational theory has never been a prominent feature in media research, barring a few examples (e.g. Gumpert and Cathcart 1985; Bolin 1997), whereas in sociology the interest in generational theory has been a vivid theme since it was introduced by Mannheim ([1928] 1952) and Ortega y Gasset ([1923] 1931) in the 1920s (e.g. Eisenstadt 1956; Murdock and McCron 1976; Frith 1978; Jamison and Eyerman 1994; Eyerman and Turner 1998; Corsten 1999). Lately, however, we have seen a growing interest in generational components as part of media and audience research (Volkmer 2006a; Colombo and Fortunati 2011; Loos et al. 2012).

Ortega y Gasset was never specifically precise in defining generation as an analytical concept – at least not compared to his sociologist colleague. In the theory on generational succession, Mannheim argued that it was not only age that was significant, but also the common generational experiences of people born at about the same time. In theorizing the basic structure of generations, Mannheim made a major distinction between generation as 'location' and as 'actuality'. Making analogies with the class position of certain groups in society, Mannheim defined generation as 'the certain "location" (*Lagerung*) certain individuals hold in the economic and power structure of a given society' (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 289). The basis for the generational location is naturally year of birth: all people born in the same year, for example, have a 'common location in the historical dimension of the social process' (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 290).

However, location in time is not enough; it would reduce a generation to an age cohort (cf. Burnett 2010: 48), and thus Mannheim introduced the concept of generation as *actuality*. Actuality should be seen as opposed to generation as potentiality, and Mannheim develops his concept of generation as actuality against the background of Aristotle's concept of *entelechy*, a term that in Aristotle (1997) refers to the realization of something that previously existed as potentiality, the 'inner aim' of something. Generation as actuality first appears when individuals who occupy the same historical location share the same experiences and become realized as a generation also *for* themselves (as opposed to *in* themselves). These experiences can naturally vary. Some are triggered by dramatic historical–political transformations such as the demise of the Soviet Union and the sudden independent status of countries formerly under Soviet rule; this is the case with the empiric examples in the articles by Opermann, Kalmus et al., and Siibak and Tamme. Some are triggered by cultural experiences, such as cinema-going and music preferences, exemplified by Sūna and Jernudd.

Furthermore, not all who share the same experience of large and evolving societal events (revolutions, war, famine, etc.) will react to these events in exactly the same way. When faced with a specific phenomenon, individuals can 'work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways', which will result in separate 'generation units' (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 304). These generation units can be seen as ways of relating to the same phenomena, and as such make up 'an identity of responses' to the problems at hand (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 306).

An important component in the formation of the generational experience is the phenomenon Mannheim calls 'fresh contact' that is, that moment at which an individual is confronted with a novelty of some sort (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 293ff). As young people are lacking in experience compared to older people, fresh contacts will have a deeper impact on the young than on the old, and '[a]ll later experience then tend to receive their meaning from this original set, whether they appear as that set's verification and fulfilment or as its negation and antithesis' (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 298). Experience, then, appears in the form of a 'dialectical articulation, which is potentially present whenever we act, think or feel' (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 298). Furthermore, the individual is most receptive in relation to phenomena he or she is confronted with around the age of 17 years, give or take a few years, according to Mannheim – who, just like G. Gumpert and R. Cathcart (1985), refers to research on the formation of language in an individual, of which it is said that the spoken dialect seldom changes after the age of 25 (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 300).

Gumpert and Cathcart argue that how we relate to new and old media is parallel to how we relate to our native language, as opposed to those languages we might learn later in life. In this sense the media have their own grammar, which needs to be learnt and incorporated. Following Gumpert and Cathcart, each new medium an individual is confronted with is read through the grammar of what could be termed our 'native media':

Even when a person learns several spoken/written languages in a lifetime, the person will generally tend to interact with the world through the bias of the native language. It is our position that the early acquisition of a particular media consciousness continues to shape peoples' world view even though later they acquire literacy in new media. [...]
For example, those born into the age of radio perceive the world differently from those born into the age of television.

(Gumpert and Cathcart 1985: 29)

This means that one might expect a certain homology in, for example, the way 16- to 22-year-olds relate to a certain media technology and its dominant uses, and that they should bring with them these relations as they grow older. This is also the point of departure for Signe Opermann in her article on this issue, analysing the linguistic characteristics of how four different generational groups talk about their media use and memories.

As Mannheim points to social and cultural factors as important in the formation of the generational experience, his generation theory resembles other theories that have tried to grasp the relation between the individual and society. There are also striking similarities between Mannheim's concept of *entelechy* – that is, the 'stratified consciousness' and the 'similarity of location' he finds as the common denominator for the generational experience – and Raymond Williams' ([1961] 1965: 64f) concept of *structure of feeling* that is, the

emotional structure through which we orient ourselves in culture and society. Williams also discusses this in terms of generational succession:

One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come 'from' anywhere. For here, most distinctly, the changing organization is enacted in the organism: the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling.

([1961] 1965: 65)

Both the entelechy and the structure of feeling are systems of durable dispositions that guide the actions and practices of the individual, and make him or her orient in society in a way that is self-evident to the individual. These systems will privilege certain ways of acting at the cost of others, although they will not determine individual action in exact and minute detail. Thus, they are open to certain variations in behaviour. Through privileging certain modes of action over others, the concepts of entelechy and structure of feeling are also close to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus that is, the system of durable dispositions that an individual has internalized through family upbringing and education and in relation to the surrounding society, and which imposes on the individual a specific disposition to act. Habitus is 'society inscribed in the body' (Bourdieu 1990: 63) and a 'durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu [1972] 1977: 78) that encourages certain ways of acting over others.

Mannheim foremost theorizes generation in relation to time, and location in the historical process. One might argue that location in terms of *place* is of equal importance, and will also have a bearing on the experiences gained. For example, dramatic events should mean different things depending on the national position one has. The experience of evolving historical events, like the student revolts in Paris in May 1968, the protests on Tiananmen Square in Beijing or the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, should vary depending on whether experienced on site or in mediated form. These are arguably events that have left their mark on people all over the world, but responses will vary depending on the geographical relationship one has to them.

In line with Mannheim's insistence on the importance of fresh contact, it follows that the media technologies and content one encounters during the formative years of youth can be expected to be the media that will also form all subsequent media experiences (which is why most people as adults develop a certain scepticism towards novelties). This is how media generations are thought to develop, with common experiences being connected to specific media technologies or media content (Gumpert and Cathcart 1985). The generation who grew up with the cinema at the birth of the film medium will bring with them this special experience of film as it was phenomenologically perceived at that moment, in that very technological, cultural and social setting. This will bring together persons with similar experiences (and will separate them from those who do not share these experiences).

This is also why expressions like ‘new media’ are relative (if not outright non-sensical), as what is new for one generation is not new for another. And reversely, for the very young child all media are new. It is only as adults that we can distinguish between the new and the old, that is, because we have lived long enough to having seen new media appear in addition to the old media that we were used to. For the toddler, the newspaper and the book are media technologies that are just as new as smartphones and tablet computers.

Indeed, all media have been new at one point in history (Marvin 1988). Today we think of the video as an outdated medium, but there was a time when this was a radically new medium, that introduced new ways for viewers to relate to television, for example through timeshifting (Cubitt 1991), but also to film. This was naturally coupled with national variations. In Sweden, with its long-standing tradition of cinema censorship, a wide repertoire of action and horror films with extremely violent representations became accessible. And of course the very young were those who were the early adopters, which was revealed in the fact that families with small children were among the groups in which access was highest (Forsman and Bolin 1997). However, some young people were more active than others; Göran Bolin (1997) analysed a group of young male video enthusiasts from a perspective of generational identity.

The examples above have analysed generations in single national settings. However, the idea of there being distinct media generations in specific national contexts has been analysed by Ingrid Volkmer (2006a) and a group of international colleagues in a cross-national study on news and public memory, involving nine nations. Volkmer and her team studied how different national media users in three specific generations related to media technologies on the one hand, and on the other, to international media events or news stories such as the first moon landing, the Second World War, the Vietnam War, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Prague Spring, Watergate, Woodstock, etc. The generations studied were born in three cohorts: 1924–1929 (the radio generation) 1954–1959 (the black-and-white TV generation) and 1979–1984 (the Internet generation). It was concluded that these three generations did relate to international media events differently, whereby the oldest were marked by the media being addressed to adults, over the growing image culture of television and to the global media flows of the youngest generation.

Although also engaging in cross-national analysis of generations, Terhi Rantanen (2005) designed her generational study as the case study of four generations in three families in Finland/the United Kingdom, China and Latvia/Israel. Her objective was, however, not to analyse generations as such, but rather globalization. Nonetheless, she analyses globalization through the lens of these family histories. However, she does not use the concept of generation in the same sense as Mannheim and others, but rather one based on kinship and the succession of family members (cf. Burnett 2011: 24f). Such intergenerational relations have previously mainly been studied within anthropology, for example in Margaret Mead’s (1970) famous account of the widening generation gap. In this issue, Siibak and Tamme extend this discussion to include the web-based media as the connecting link between family members of different generations, where they help in ‘maintaining emotional bonds and enhancing connectedness’, thus overcoming the geographical separation of family members of different generations.

Volkmer’s study focussed on the role of the media as technologies *and* content structure (news and journalism). An analysis of generations centred

more specifically on media as technologies was conducted by Bolin and Westlund (2009), on the role of mobile phones in shaping Swedish media generations. Inspired by Volkmer's three-generation approach, taking their departure in three specific generational cohorts, they conducted a statistical analysis of user patterns correlated to general cultural characteristics among mobile owners in an attempt to identify and discuss the character of different generational units in relation to the mobile phone technology. They could tentatively conclude, based on a data set spanning five years, that there was a noticeable consistency in the ways the three cohorts used the mobile, and that the differences between the three generational groups persisted. As we can now see databases covering longer periods, such as the SOM data that Weibull and Westlund analyse, we are better equipped to draw sustainable conclusions regarding the possible stability of generational media use.

Whether technological experiences can indeed be the basis of generational self-understanding is discussed by Piermarco Aroldi and Fausto Colombo, who round off the issue with a critical reflection on 'digital global generations'. Taking issue with those who have argued that there are global generations, formed for example from the 1960s student movements or the international workers' movement at the turn of the century in 1900, they refute a too-general idea of global generations, in favour of a more complex and perhaps also temporal idea of the formation of global generations. There might be no mutual agreement as to whether there exist specific 'media generations', or indeed certain media that are defining for specific ages or different life phases. Taken as a whole, the articles in this volume shed empirical light on these complexities, and open for new avenues of research.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The point of departure for this volume was that there was a relative lack in media research, first, of critical reflection on age as a category in its own right (besides being a statistical parameter among other social variables) – especially if it has concerned life phases other than youth. Second, we have seen few attempts to empirically analyse generational user patterns and/or generational experiences beyond the buzzword jargon of digital natives, net generations, etc. Third, there has been a relative absence of cross-national analyses of generational experience as well as cross-generational analyses of media users. This volume can hopefully be seen as a step towards a more intense and extended focus on these areas. Among other things, we see a combination of generational and life stage analysis as particularly fruitful, as we do a further merger between memory studies and generational analysis. And as the technological developments of media follow similar paths in geographically close media systems, we also see empirical advantages in cross-national analysis, since comparative perspectives of media audiences and users should benefit from the fact that there is a high similarity in access to media technology, but on occasion vast differences in cultural and historical contexts. These are fertile circumstances for understanding the roles of age and life phase as well as generational experience.

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