

Long abstract – Monographic section

YOUNG PEOPLE BEYOND STEREOTYPES
Edited by Carlo Buzzi

Young Italians' relationships with science and technology. Analysis on data from the Science, Technology and Society Observatory 2007-2023

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The relationship of the younger generations with science and technology has been the subject of growing interest in the latter decades, with numerous initiatives aimed at investigating youth's educational outcomes, motivation and, more generally, the orientation towards research activities and scientific organizations. Understanding the younger generation's views on science and technology remains a matter of strategic importance. The paper presents the results of an annual monitoring of the Italian population conducted by Observa Science in Society from 2007 to 2023, focusing on six domains: scientific and technological knowledge, exposure to science through the media, participation in scientific events and shows, perceived reliability of information sources, opinions about science and technology, trust in science and scientists.

Analyses of data collected by the Science, Technology and Society Observatory from 2007 to 2023 show a progressive increase of the level of scientific literacy for all age groups. However, the young Italian population has a higher level of scientific literacy than adults and, especially, than older citizens. With equal educational qualifications, young age is a positive factor with respect to scientific knowledge.

The level of scientific literacy is also affected by the frequency of exposure to science and technology contents in the media, from daily newspapers to radio and television, to websites and blogs.

Over the years, exposure to science and technology in the media has increased across all the five considered news channels and across all age groups. In 2023, among young people, 65.3% declare to read scientific articles in newspapers at least once a week. Slightly lower, but still above 50%, is the share of those saying to frequently watch scientific information television programs. The increase in consumption of techno-scientific content through the media has also involved the radio (2007=3.9%; 2023=36.4%), but it is mainly the Web to have become for young people the main source of information about science and technology. In 2023, nearly eight out of ten young frequently access science contents through blogs and websites, compared to the 26.6% of 2007.

The wide spread of digital technologies has raised many questions with respect to the reliability of the circulating news and information. The frequency with which users are exposed to techno-scientific contents is reflected in perceptions of the quality and reliability of the sources: those habitually exposing themselves to scientific and technological contents, searching for information online and sharing news on social media are actually more cautious about online news.

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Exposure to science and technology is not limited to mass media. We are increasingly being exposed to technical and scientific content in various informal contexts. An increasing proportion of young people visit museums or science exhibitions, participate in science festivals, public meetings and debates, or in protest events. The 15–29-year-old population is the age group most involved in protest events and science festivals, and from 2007 to the present, it has consistently represented the majority in such events, showing an increasing willingness to participate.

Higher levels of education and literacy and a greater exposure to scientific and technological content, however, do not prevent young people from criticizing scientific research and its technological implications. The new millennium generation shows trust in science, but not as an uncritical “scientism”. Indeed, the youth seem to be sensitive to the risks related to scientific research and its implications, while trust in science and scientists appears to be subject to an *ethos* emphasizing universalism, communitarianism, autonomy from religion, and commitment of the scientific enterprise in favour of humankind.

The opinions and attitudes of young people reflect a changed relationship with scientific culture. Among the younger generation, the separation between humanistic and scientific culture seems to have been profoundly reduced.

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