



# **bYou: A Research Proposal About and with Children and Youngsters as Creative Agents of Change Through the Use of the Media**

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**Abstract.** This article presents the relevance, objectives, methodologies and expected results of a funded research project started in March 2021 in Portugal, seeking to provide children and young people with an opportunity to express and discuss their own views on the effect of media in their lives. The project will cross traditional research methods (questionnaires and focus groups) with participatory methodologies, implemented within formal and informal learning contexts. Participants' production will be organized and shared in the project's website for further interpretation and discussion. Simultaneously, the project will engage with teachers and students in order to revitalize media production in a set of schools. By encouraging, listening and sharing young people's voices as potential forces of the present time we aim to raise awareness and inspire public projects and policies addressed at them. These are the ideas that give the project its name: *bYou – be you and by you*.

**Keywords:** Children and young people · Media · Expression and participation · Media literacy · Social change

## **1 Introduction**

In December 2019, when the American magazine *Time* named 16-year-old Swede Greta Thunberg as Person of the Year for her environmental activism, adult society was showing signs of acknowledging and listening to the voices of youth. Although youth activism is not a recent phenomenon, the fact is that the worldwide movement to raise awareness for climate change led by Thunberg, the media coverage it has been given, its dissemination on social networks and the impact it has had on political leaders and institutions such as the UN has illustrated what Childhood Sociology has sought to emphasise and acknowledge children and young people as social actors and agents of change. Young people themselves have clearly shown and communicated their role at a global level through their activism and by taking the lead in this social cause.

At the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) [1] participation appears enshrined, along with protection and provision, as a category of rights for all children from birth to 18 years of age. Providing children with opportunities to participate and to

express themselves on the most diverse subjects that concern their lives is, therefore, a responsibility of all agents and structures of society, in particular those that most directly deal with children. In order to apply this set of rights to the digital environment, the UN Committee on the Rights of Children approved on February 4, 2021 the General Comment 25. The Committee intends with this General Comment to propose to the States measures to fulfill its obligations to promote and protect children's rights in the digital environment and ensure that other actors, including companies, fulfill their responsibilities. This measure will make it possible to support and promote the safety of children online, but also to create online spaces for them, to express themselves about their media practices and experiences.

Based on the potential of this intended participatory culture, this study seeks precisely to provide children and young people between the ages of 11 and 18 with an opportunity to express their views on their relationship with the media and thereby get to know and discuss one of their daily experiences which is most shared globally [2].

In the following sections we will briefly present the main theoretical and methodological assumptions that sustain this three year research project and reflect on its potential impact.

## 2 Theoretical Assumptions

This study acknowledges that childhood and adolescence are dynamic processes and that children and young people are not to be regarded as future-adult projects but rather as subjects of and in the present time [3, 4]. Following the perspectives of Spyrou [5, 6] on children's voices and joining the discussion of other authors on this subject [7], it starts by theorizing voice in research with children. By doing that, we follow Couldry's conceptualization of voice, considering voice as a process and as a value [8]. As stated by Couldry, "treating voice as a value means discriminating in favour of ways of organizing human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them" [8, p. 2]. Under the frameworks of valuing voice we consider, as suggested by Spyrou, the "multi-layered and non-normative character" of children's voices [5, p. 151] and "one of its more problematic features, namely, silence" [6, p. 8].

Children and young people will be heard and will express themselves about their experiences with the media and online communication technologies as an important part of their everyday lives. Internet and social networks, videogames, television, cinema, mobile phones, music and a huge number of applications are well-established in the majority's daily lives, as building elements of socialization, culture and identity. Their engagement with these media have reconfigured their play, friendship, sociability, self-expression and learning, drawing the attention of researchers around the world. This reconfiguration became stronger and more evident during the COVID-19 outbreak in which media and digital technologies became even more present in their daily lives and essential for the teaching-learning process. This situation makes it even more necessary and relevant to study the relationship of children with digital media and the internet. In addition, although the Committee on the Rights of the Child has underlined that children's

right to participation “does not cease in situations of crisis or in the aftermath” [1, p. 28], Bennouna et al. [9] and Cuevas-Parra [10] refer that there is a body of evidence from other humanitarian crises and disasters that children’s right to participate is limited and affected.

Meanwhile, in the last years, studies on children and the Internet have had a significant growth. In Europe, the EU Kids Online project [11] is one of the examples of research in this area involving more than 30 countries in some of its phases and making important contributions to understand the risks and opportunities that children face online [12]. Another European project – Transmedia Literacy - which involved researchers from the current team, analysed the transmedia consumption of adolescents between 12 and 18 years old in eight countries. The project contributed to a better understanding of how teens are consuming, producing, sharing, creating and learning in digital environments and provided a map of transmedia skills and informal learning strategies used by teenagers to be explored in the formal education system [13]. The Portuguese team found out there was a digital divide between in-school and out-of-school media uses [14] and concluded, from the analysis of teenagers’ media practices, that they are large media consumers but much more restrained producers [15, 16]. The same conclusion was emphasized by a study carried out in Portugal focused on Media Literacy competences of young people aged 17–18 [17]. The sample surveyed (N = 679) was a group strongly connected to the media, revealing a good level of functional literacy but low competences of critical reading, analysis and production.

Despite the awareness developed by these and other studies on the importance of the context of the lived experiences of children and on cultural differences, there is a need to go further in studying children and youth’s media practices as part of a broader media ecology, and in understanding how they are experiencing the convergent media culture [18]. These are important assumptions for this study. On the one hand, it aims to deepen the holistic approach of media uses [19] and develop the notion of media ecologies [20]. On the other hand, it seeks to value the production and expression of young people of and through the media, withdrawing the adult-centric perspective that sometimes stood out in research projects involving the youngest. It also aims to empower children and young people on issues related to production, sharing and dissemination of personal and public data and content.

For studying children and young people’s media ecologies in their everyday lives, the study follows the concept of media repertoires proposed by Hasebrink and Domeyer [21]. According to the authors, “the media repertoire of a person consists of the entirety of media he or she regularly uses” [21, p. 758]. Media repertoires, as stated previously by Hasebrink and Popp “can be understood as integral part of lifestyles and they have to be interpreted with regard to their practical meaning” [22, p. 374], being conceived as “comprehensive patterns of media use” [22, p. 374]. Therefore, taking into account that “in a time of deep mediatization, cross-media approaches to investigating media practices are becoming increasingly relevant”, as stated by Hasebrink and Hepp [23, p. 362], the repertoire-oriented approach is considered a relevant model for this study. Its focus on the patterns of media use composed of different media interrelated with users’ everyday practices is an important approach angle as it allows to analyse the ever more mediated children’s daily lives. In addition, the research methodological triangulation to

be followed is in line with the authors' methodological proposal to address the repertoire approach [23].

Media-related experiences, which are interwoven with other social practices, will be studied recurring to innovative methods that give a voice to children and young people, value it and call for their active participation. Participation of children and young people appears today in an extensive literature of many academic fields, suggesting potential benefits of a participation culture [24–26]. This is why we argue for the innovative potential of this project. Recurring to participatory methods, it values the voice and creative expression of children, based on what they choose for narrating and documenting their everyday lives and the media instead of following a script created and imposed by researchers. Although the studies we developed previously have shown that young people are more consumers than producers, they also demonstrated a centrality of informal media creation in the everyday communication of youth and in the peer-based exchanges and culture. A growing body of work on Media Literacy and production [27–30] shows how engaging youngsters in media production should lead to their empowerment, being a cornerstone for Media Literacy. As stated by Lange and Ito, “shifting youth identity from that of a media consumer to a media producer is an important vehicle for developing youth voice, creativity, agency, and new forms of literacy in a media-saturated era” [31, p. 247]. And these are crucial skills for engaging with a digital world [32], which we believe should encourage active rather than passive participation.

In the current context of children and media studies, the commitment of this project is to produce academic knowledge that matters, bearing in mind that “at a time, when neoliberalism has infiltrated all aspects of daily life and has limited our ability to imagine how things could be otherwise, children are showing us the way” [33, p. 6].

### 3 Main Objectives

Through the children and young people's voices, this study seeks to understand their worlds in the light of technological developments, which enable but do not ensure that these voices are let out, heard, reproduced and shared. The societal challenges we are facing make it all the more crucial that these voices have a say to enrich and distinguish public projects and policies aimed at them. Therefore, the main objectives of this study are:

- Understand how the daily lives of young people are interwoven with the media ecosystem;
- Listen to young people about the presence, role and importance of the media in their daily lives;
- Analyze their media uses and practices in a close perspective;
- Explore their comprehension of the media;
- Promote an active and creative expression of their media experiences;
- Identify and analyze the main areas in which children express themselves on the media;
- Provide for the expression and participation of children and young people through school media;

- Contribute to enhance school media as means of communication and participation in the community;
- To make proposals to integrate these practices in formal learning and to inform public policies.

## 4 Methodological Design

Despite the abundance of studies on children, young people and media, there are few which focus on media ecology in children and young people's daily lives. In recent years several studies have focused mostly on the Internet's risks and opportunities, whereas previously it was children's relationship with television that occupied the central place of research. The European project Transmedia Literacy<sup>1</sup> made a significant contribution at this level by studying transmedia practices of teenagers between 11 and 18 years old. This study sought to understand their production practices and to make proposals to integrate these practices in formal learning.

Inspired by the results of that project and looking to go further, this study intends not only to analyze media production practices, but to promote children and young people's participation, encouraging them to express themselves on and through the media. We seek to gain a broad picture of their everyday life media uses and experiences in different contexts, what aspects of the media are more problematic to them, and what they know about crucial media issues for citizenship, such as disinformation and fake news, online privacy and data protection, online safety, social networks and algorithms, ethical principles in media production and participation. The team will collect data and encourage discussion on these topics, but children will also take a leading role in choosing which aspects of their relationship with the media they wish to explore. This will give us information about how media helps shaping their identities and cultures, taking into account their social and geographical environment, gender and age range.

The study applies three main forms of children's participation in research, identified by Holland et al. [34].

In the first form, children are invited to participate in research methods designed and directed by the team. In the project, this step includes a questionnaire that will be applied to a national non-probabilistic sample of approximately 1380 students aged between 11 and 18 years old. The constitution of this sample involves 23 schools located in mainland Portugal and a total of 69 classes from 6th and 9th grades (basic education) and from 12th grade (secondary education). Quantitative data provided by the questionnaire will be discussed and further explored in focus groups with a subsample of students. A total of 15 classes of 6th, 9th and 12th grade, that is, approximately 300 students will be invited to participate in this second step. We intend to discuss media-related topics mentioned by the young people in the questionnaires and to be proposed by researchers (eg. misinformation and false news, data, social networks, digital media and algorithms, privacy and data protection). It is up to them to decide and it is up to researchers to identify and register the topics they want to discuss and how to do it. Authorizations and informed consents for holding questionnaires and focus groups will be requested.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://transmedialiteracy.org/>.

In the second form, the team prepares methods that enable children's views to be expressed through 'child-centered' forms of communication and creation (such as videos, media arts, photography, drawings, dance, drama, games, etc.).

In the third form, through the previously proposed methods, children are involved in research about aspects of their own lives and are encouraged to discuss and reflect on the research process and contribute to the dissemination [34, p. 361].

As also considered by Holland et al. [34], we assume that there is an overlap between the last two forms. To put them into practice, the research project adopts participatory and reflexive methodologies, which will involve active participation of children and young people in the production of media content and in the process of interpreting and discussing the different media outputs. Firstly, audiovisual methods will be used, considering, as pointed out by Pawels and Mannay, that "contemporary visual methods involve scrutinizing visually observable aspects of society as a gateway to the deeper traits of culture; they also include using visual means to visualize the material, immaterial and conceptual, generating a more nuanced understanding of social worlds" [35, p. 1]. Besides, visual methods are relevant because they "are not confined to the visible world, as they intimately relate to visualising the invisible and the (in)conceivable" [35, p. 1]. That is, audiovisual and textual data generated by young people will give us rich insights into their everyday media routines, their media worlds, their concerns, what they value, what they want to highlight in their relationship with the media. It is our aim to promote the creative expression of children and young people on and through the media. By involving formal and informal learning contexts at a national level, we intend to encourage this audience to use different media – video, podcast, drawing, photography, text, memes, cartoons, etc. – to creatively narrate their experiences with the media. Children and young people will be able to participate, individually or in groups, following the privacy and data protection recommendations to be provided by the team. This will be encouraged through a campaign to be launched at schools, cinema clubs, dance schools, theatre schools, among other institutions that work with children.

The material to be collected will be subject to categorization and analysis, aiming to identify the areas and themes on which children and young people manifest themselves the most, the type of content and messages they elaborate, the way their worlds and visions are communicated and the means they use most for this purpose. Based on these expressions, the team intends to encourage reflexive and critical practices, in a Media Literacy perspective. At the same time, a 'mural of expression' for online sharing of experiences will be created at the project's website in coordination with MILObs - Observatory on Media, Information and Literacy<sup>2</sup>.

At another level, we will study the role of students in school media—newspapers, radio, TV, blogs—with the aim of promoting their participation in those school projects. We will work with 10 schools already producing their own media. Workshops will be organized with the team—teachers and students—responsible for the school media. Based on what they already do, we will work together to give school media the strength of students' expressions, exploring different media languages and contributing to enhance school media. In order to get other teams inspired by the result of this work, a video will be produced, briefly reporting its process and the results.

<sup>2</sup> <http://milobs.pt>.

This participative approach will be conducted within a strong ethical framework that aims to protect children’s data and respect their privacy and image. This will be strictly followed by the team but participants will also be encouraged to be self-reflexive and careful in what they will produce and share. It will be an opportunity to empower children on ethical issues arising from accessing, using, interacting and producing contents through media, and also issues related to private and public space.

## 5 Conclusions: Expected Results

The innovative contribution of this project is partly in the research methods and the type of data they are going to provide and, of course, in the analysis that will follow. The project follows a step-by-step methodology, starting with listening to children’s voices, opinions and visions, to learn more about their social, cultural and media worlds, and extending to the application of methods that involve their active participation and creative expression as creative agents of change through the use of the media. Teachman and Gladstone [36], in the Introduction to a special issue of the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* dedicate to “Construction of ‘Children’s Voices’ in Qualitative Research”, mention that in research with children “there is potential for children’s “voices” to be represented in ways that serve adult researchers’ aims, but fail to account for the situated, relational contexts wherein meanings are co-produced and intergenerational” [36, p. 1]. According to Teachman and Gladstone the understandings of children’s voices have been internationally criticized by scholars who “called for more critically reflexive methodological approaches to research with children and youth” [36, p. 1], being also necessary to define and theorize the term ‘voice’.

The methodological design of this project takes into account that “when children are permitted in those rare cases to become active participants telling their own story in their own way, the research experience is often personally moving and meaningful and the data provided rich and complex” [37, p. 84]. It also considers, as noted by Holland et al. [34, p. 362], that “locating children as active social agents via participatory methods to facilitate children’s ‘voice’, ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’ have been highly influential in the early wave of childhood research”. Rather than conducting research defined solely by adults’ interests and agendas, this study offers children the opportunity to express themselves through participatory methods. We expect this research design to be particularly fruitful with young people. There are several studies [24, 38] based on child-centred forms of expression and communication (such as photos, video, drawings, drama and dance) with the aim to enable children’s views on certain topics that proved to be particularly rewarding in terms of results.

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