

The World on a Screen. Streaming platforms and teaching

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Abstract

In light of the recent spread of streaming platforms, the possibility that these streaming platforms be used for training merits some thought. Indeed, despite the wide variety of genres and program types offered, entertainment occupies a central role in all catalogues. But if, as we have seen, entertainment has been a driving force for disseminating culture and linguistic knowledge, and if, with an instrumental approach, one can consider the use of media for learning, then it is legitimate to also draw on these technologies for educational needs.

Through the analysis of a television series chosen because it is considered particularly exemplary of the instrumental approach to platforms, we have identified a set of topics that formed the basis for constructing a questionnaire specifically for teachers. It was given to a fairly representative group of upper secondary-school teachers, including those being trained, and whose results were very encouraging from the viewpoint of the confidence shown in this tool.

Keywords 1

Technology, Education, Streaming Platforms, Multimedia Learning, Digital Skills

1. Introduction

Until recently, television has been considered a “hackneyed medium” [1]. Yet, from a pedagogical point of view, television has smugly returned as an educational tool following the Covid-19 pandemic. As viewer interest “cooled” [2], teaching became increasingly oriented toward the internet. Even schools themselves forgot about television, preferring to focus on other communication tools (particularly mobile telephones) [3].

However, on closer inspection, television has never really been far from the field of educational and instructional processes, although its current “wireless” nature [4] has reinforced its effectiveness.

Starting from this reflection, the current essay explores the contribution that recent streaming platforms can offer to teach, particularly in Italy and teaching in upper secondary schools. Through the analysis of a television series chosen because it is considered particularly exemplary of the instrumental approach to platforms, we have identified a set of topics that have formed the basis for constructing a questionnaire specifically for teachers. It was given to a fairly representative group of upper secondary-school teachers, including those being trained, and whose results were very encouraging from the viewpoint of the confidence shown in this tool.

Although the present research is a common work carried out by the authors, Luigi Traetta wrote paragraphs 1, 5 and 6, whereas Ludovica Lops wrote paragraphs 2, 3 and 4.

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2. Entertainment for an instrumental approach

In November 1960, in over 2000 listening points set up throughout the country by the Ministry of Education, thousands of illiterate Italians attended the first of the 484 episodes of the television program “*Non è mai troppo tardi*” (“It’s Never Too Late”). From that moment on, Alberto Manzi entered the history of television—and the collective imagination—as the teacher par excellence who helped tens of thousands of adults to receive an elementary school diploma.

Manzi was the most famous “teacher” on the small screen, but he was not the only one, nor the first. Earlier in 1954, or shortly after the start of the “regular television broadcasting service”, announced by Fulvia Colombo on 3 January of that year, university professor Alessandro Cutolo started his popular program, “*Una risposta per voi*” (“An Answer for You”).

But, above all, there was the ambitious “Telescuola” project, created in 1958, between Cutolo’s and Manzi’s experiences. This vocational training course was intended for those residing in outlying geographical areas or otherwise without means [5].

Although these expressly pedagogical and didactic educational programs have occupied considerable space in Italian television since its inception – often resulting in environments of educational experimentation, thanks to the synergy with the Ministry of Education – there is much discussion today about their tangible impact on viewer education. The exact role that the small screen played in the dissemination and learning of the Italian language – highlighted by Tullio De Mauro, among others [6], – would not be a prerogative of openly educational genres, but inherent in all programming, especially in those “great popular hits, from ‘*Lascia o raddoppia?*’ (“Double or Nothing?”) to ‘*Musichiere*’” [7], which reached and inspired millions of viewers.

If one accepts the principle that “the main glue of Italian television is actually [...] not the dissemination of culture but [of] entertainment [...]. It is the backbone of the ‘communicative contract’ with the public” [8], the horizon broadens and all those productions belonging to other genres rightly enter with a certain weight given to entertainment.

On the other hand, these conclusions do not contradict studies on the relationship between learning and mass media – clearly including television and audiovisual products in general – carried out by those who deal with media education (ME), briefly defined as “that particular area of education sciences and instruction that consists in producing thoughts and operational strategies regarding the media intended as an integral training resource” [9].

Rejecting a purely inculcatory approach, which distrusts mass media and encourages schools to contain them by training students in text analysis [9], we consider ME’s technological context, which is media-oriented, paying attention “to learning and teaching processes that they [the media] can facilitate” [9]. In other words, it is an education “with” media. Against this background, the instrumental approach is particularly interesting as it evaluates the potentiality of mass media’s use for teachers and learners.

By following this same approach, we are examining here, in the broad panorama of mass media, those tools that today offer a potentiality that was still insignificant a few years ago, tracking neither a predictable nor immediate use yet one entirely possible in the field of training and teaching.

3. Streaming platforms: the world on a screen

In 2015, CEO Reed Hastings pronounced Netflix’s arrival in Italy as “the biggest change in television history” [10]. During the press conference presentation, Hastings stated, “We want [...] to give producers and directors a platform from which to tell a story around the world” [10]. He reiterated what he had previously declared a few months earlier, saying that “the [company’s] goal is to provide a global stage to those who have something to tell [...]. Screenwriters and directors can finally have a global distribution of their works as well as access to new markets, all thanks to the Net” [11], referring to Netflix’s production and distribution effort.

The streaming platform phenomenon certainly did not arise in 2015. However, it was when – at least in Italy – they exploded in the general public, accelerating a change that was exponentially self-powered with the immediate arrival of new platforms and the growth of pre-existing ones.

An ever-increasing number of users access the audiovisual content offered by streaming through accounts that cost little or nothing – for some platforms, only registration is required and there are no subscription costs. With viewing habits now apparently modified irreversibly, we would be unlikely to give up not only binge-watching, i.e., the continuous viewing of shows for a very long time, but also the choice of language, the use of subtitles, and, particularly, the expanded range of genres and productions.

With this in mind, Reed Hastings's words have stood the test of time, as streaming platforms permit, as never before, the international circulation of content.

This aspect guarantees a double advantage, which we could define as “cultural” and “probabilistic”. On the one hand, audiovisual materials produced in the various states on various continents can be easily and immediately disseminated, inevitably permeating the culture and characteristics of the society in which they are produced. On the other hand, given the definite lack of quantitative limits, there is a high probability that the viewer will be able to find specific topics of interest. The benefits of video on demand, freed from the rules of television network schedules, and available to the user must be added. Moreover, this aspect guarantees a chance for allowing the distance asynchronous learning.

In light of the above, the possibility that these streaming platforms be used for training merits some thought. Indeed, despite the wide variety of genres and program types offered, entertainment occupies a central role in all catalogues. But if, as we have seen, entertainment has been a driving force for disseminating culture and linguistic knowledge, and if, with an instrumental approach, one can consider the use of media for learning, then it is legitimate to also draw on these technologies for educational needs.

4. Serving the viewer-learner

The significant number of productions offered by streaming platforms makes it practical to limit the discussion to a specific case with a superior and significant value.

Given the attention – that would remain central – to the potentialities related to teaching, it was decided to choose a discipline included in Italian teaching programs and focus research on a production available on one or more platforms in our country, even if not explicitly created for streaming.

Furthermore, the choice of genre is fundamental, as it must fall as much as possible into the category of pure entertainment.

Considering these specific elements, further screening was carried out based on language adequacy and content suitability for the age group of the targeted students. Thus, themes were to be excluded if they ran the risk of being perceived as discriminating or disturbing, given the differences found in the school classes.

4.1. Moral philosophy and ethics: the case of “The Good Place”

Among the many options available, the choice fell on a US production having all the optimal requirements. We are talking about “The Good Place”, a television series belonging to the fantasy comedy genre and made available to the Italian public on various streaming platforms.

The peculiarity that makes “The Good Place” a perfect case to examine here is that it deals with a topic unusual for the audiovisual narratives generally offered by mass media, specifically, a discipline included in Italian upper secondary-school studies: philosophy.

The show was created by Michael Schur and produced by Universal Television, Fremulon, and 3 Arts Entertainment. It aired in the United States, on NBC, from 19 September 2016 to 30 January 2020 for a total of 50 episodes over 4 seasons.

The story begins when young Eleanor Shellstrop (played by Kristen Bell) wakes up in the afterlife to discover she is dead and has arrived in the “good place”, a sort of paradise reserved for those who led an exemplary life on earth. Welcoming Eleanor is Michael (Ted Danson), the architect who

designed this district, a sort of “celestial circle” created in the image and likeness of the inhabitants and their passions and desires. He also takes on the role of mentor for those who arrive there.

Each element transmits a sense of peace and well-being to the viewer: from the scenography rich in deliberately and undeniably familiar elements to pastel colours and the soundtrack. However, after just a few minutes into the show, the disturbing aspect, the narrative’s real driving force, is revealed as Eleanor herself. The woman confesses to the man presented as her soulmate, the man to whom she is destined for eternity, Chidi Anagonye (William Jackson Harper). Eleanor reveals to him that she does not match the profile of the woman described by Michael, presuming a case of mistaken identity.

Chidi was a professor of ethics and moral philosophy with a deontological orientation during his life. He rigidly and forcefully observed the ethical principles learned from great philosophers of the past. He now finds himself in a moral dilemma that will be the basis of subsequent developments. Should he tell the truth and report his newly-met soulmate, or help her improve and earn her place in the “good place”. He chooses the second solution.

The overwhelming question that arises as the foundation of the dramaturgically solid idea of the series is: can one become a better person? And if so, how is it done? Every good deed, to be valid, must not be conditioned by personal advantages. Therefore, Eleanor cannot hope to improve herself simply by performing selfless acts since nothing she could do would be genuinely objective, with the length of her stay being at stake.

Consequently, the only viable way is ostensibly through knowledge. Only by thoroughly convincing herself of the validity of an “ethical” life can this woman act according to a truly just inner motivation that can free her from circumstances and selfish interests.

Chidi has a crucial role as a teacher, the same one he played throughout his earthly existence. Thus, he begins a cycle of lessons on the main topics of moral philosophy by studying the thinking of the foremost philosophers throughout history.

While the encounters initially take the form of a standard school lesson, with the teacher next to a blackboard, which is used considerably for explanations, and the seated learner facing forward, the setting soon changes.

Contrary to what happens in a “real” classroom, the protagonists here can experience – and thus let the viewer experience – all the potentialities that make the story not only possible but above all plausible, guaranteeing that “suspension of disbelief” needed to accept the events as they are presented.

The story’s otherworldly setting proves to be perfectly suitable here. Having eliminated the limits of reality, every narrative expedient is available to the screenwriters and at the exclusive service of the themes addressed each time. In other words, the walls of the traditional classroom-space collapse, allowing the action to freely unfold, using every tool helpful in supporting the philosophical theories presented.

The result is that ethics and moral philosophy are applied to concrete situations and placed in a dimension that the viewer has no difficulty in perceiving as being close to their own.

By carrying a similar structure forward, most episodes develop around a specific theme, considered fundamental to Eleanor’s journey to becoming the “best version of herself”, with two solutions adopted to dissect the arguments. Sometimes it starts by giving the pristine—complete and clear—definition of a doctrine, conception, or theory that the characters then experience directly. Alternatively, the protagonists must first deal with an ethical dilemma to have an “academic” definition.

In both cases, the conquest of knowledge requires mixing theoretical and practical study, neither of which can be ignored.

4.1.1. Ethical themes, doctrines, and dilemmas: some examples

To make what has been said so far clearer, it is helpful to briefly offer some examples of the topics addressed in the series. It should be noted that the progressive numbering of the episodes, called “chapters”, continues uninterrupted, starting from the beginning, between one season and another, thus reaffirming the story’s continuity.

Chapter 5 focuses on utilitarianism, which “postulates that the correct choice is the one that determines the greatest good or pleasure and, at the same time, the least pain or suffering”, and on the related dilemmas, i.e., “if what matters is the sum of the good result, then a lot of bad actions can be justified”. Given the definition immediately, the problem materializes in the characters’ daily lives. Chidi demonstrates the true sense of utilitarianism, following the moral duty that requires him to help the woman, effectively giving up his own happiness.

In chapter 19, the handling of the “Trolley Problem” (i.e., “a psychological experiment first introduced by the British philosopher Philippa Foot in 1967”) is particularly interesting. The dilemma is as follows: “You are driving a trolley when the brakes go out. There are five workers on the tracks in front of you who are about to be run over. You can send the trolley to another track, where there is only one person instead of five. What do you decide to do?”. The choice is complicated if you know one of the individuals on the tracks or if it is transferred to the medical field: “You are doctors that can save five patients by killing a healthy person and using his organs”. Can one person be sacrificed to save some?

Feeling deadlocked by the issue’s excessive theoreticality, Michael’s difficulty is such that, making the situation real, he catapults himself, Chidi, and Eleanor onto a trolley about to run over one or five men. He tries the experiment several times but always fails because there is no correct answer to this dilemma, as Chidi himself demonstrates.

Again, in chapter 34, Chidi’s momentary absence lets Eleanor put the teachings she has received to good use and helps Michael understand determinism, defining and using it to motivate some of their behaviours.

Other topics addressed are selfishness (chapter 2); the concept of self (chapter 4); the theory of contractualism (chapter 6); awareness of death (chapter 18); the principle of “double effect” (chapter 21); and free will (chapter 34).

The macro-themes developed over an entire season are added to these, becoming the backbone of the narrative. The second season, for example, focuses on the innate instinct of human beings to improve. The third season looks at the complexity of the modern world and the unintended consequences of good deeds.

Furthermore, numerous episodes cite philosophers, scholars, and works from Aristotle and Immanuel Kant – whom Chidi identifies as his main models – to Kierkegaard, John Locke, and David Hume, with his “Treatise of Human Nature”, to name but a few.

Therefore, it is a simple study program of philosophy from the ancient to the contemporary.

4.1.2. The characters, perfect speakers and travellers

In the universe of “The Good Place”, each of the main characters has specific vices and virtues that play decisive roles in developing the narrative. Four “human” protagonists have passed from their earthly existence and arrived in the “good place” after death. In the first episode, Eleanor and Chidi are joined by Tahani (Jameela Jamil) and Jason (Manny Jacinto). The former is an English heiress tormented by competition with her sister and constantly seeking the consent of others; the latter is initially presented as a Buddhist monk, only to turn out to be a petty thief and aspiring DJ who, like Eleanor, mistakenly ended up in that part of Heaven.

As the seasons go by, they each reveal that they died due to the same obsession that marked their lives. In other words, they were victims of their vices and sins. In chapter 17, Eleanor herself makes these associations: her selfishness, Tahani’s narcissism, Jason’s obtuseness, and Chidi’s paralyzing insecurity caused by the doubts instilled in him by studying philosophy.

Along the learning path to ethics and moral philosophy, the four humans face what, on closer inspection, corresponds to American screenwriter Christopher Vogler’s theory of the “hero’s journey”, which, as mentioned previously, passes through the lessons Professor Chidi suggests to Eleanor and, later, also to Jason and Tahani [12].

This universal model includes elements that, according to Vogler, would be the underpinning of all stories of all times, places, and genres. The hero is one of the seven archetypes (the others being mentor, guardian of the threshold, messenger, shapeshifter, shadow, and trickster). He goes through

the twelve phases of a journey that will force him to abandon his ordinary world by overcoming a series of challenges.

As Vogler points out, archetypes are neither rigid roles nor tied to specific characters, and their function can be assumed by several subjects (sometimes even objects). Thus, Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason, together with Michael and Janet – a “non-person” with human features, a sort of database containing all universal knowledge, at the service of the inhabitants of the “good place” – are periodically the heroes or one of the archetypes on their respective journeys. They manage to convert individual progress to a collective one, made up of tests strictly linked to the ability to “live ethically” and become the “best version of oneself”.

Yet the characters play another role: that of the perfect speaker. In fact, at numerous crucial points of the story, the events are entirely conditioned by the protagonists’ oratorical skills. They entrust not only their fates but also those of all humankind to real speeches, placing themselves within that Greek and Latin tradition that considered knowing how to speak coherently and persuasively a potent tool of personal affirmation [13].

We recall what was written on the subject by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), the greatest exponent of Roman oratory. Although some points should be overlooked, as they are closely linked to the historical-cultural context of his time, Cicero’s works still offer a sound set of rules for effective communication, which emerges especially in his dialogue entitled “*De oratore*”.

If a script of “The Good Place” were analyzed, it would be easy to see how, as the narrative develops and experience increases, the protagonists resort to these very rules, albeit not overtly and probably unknowingly, to demonstrate their universality. “Thus, the whole business of speaking rests upon three things for success in persuasion; that we prove what we maintain to be true; that we conciliate those who hear; that we produce in their minds whatever feeling our cause may require.” [14] (Cicero, *De oratore*, II, 115. Transl. by J.S. Watson, 1860). This is a clear example of how Eleanor convinces Chidi to help her stay in the “good place”. Chidi tries to involve his companions/students in philosophy lessons by appealing to the sensations that have brought him closer to the discipline, because “[n]or is it possible that the judge should feel concerned, or hate, or envy, or fear [...] that he should be moved to compassion and tears, unless all those sensations which the orator would awaken [...] shall appear to be deeply felt and experienced by the orator himself.” [14].

Cicero also adds that: “[...] of all the senses that of seeing is the most acute [...] accordingly, those things are most easily retained in our minds which we have received from the hearing or the understanding, if they are also recommended to the imagination by means of the mental eye” [14], and that, therefore, “[b]y these imaginary forms [...] we must fancy [them] [...] impressive, striking, and well-marked, so that they may present themselves to the mind and act upon it with the greatest quickness.” [14], just as Michael does when he implements the young man’s theoretical lessons, as seen in the case of the “Trolley Problem”, and which, moreover, as audiovisual products, clearly have the power to do towards viewers.

“*De oratore*” ends by evoking the theme of collective feelings, namely, those feelings belonging to the experiences and actions of all humanity. Likewise, “The Good Place” draws from the very emotional sphere of facing one of humanity’s greatest fears – whatever awaits us after death – and one of its greatest aspirations – striving for constant self-improvement.

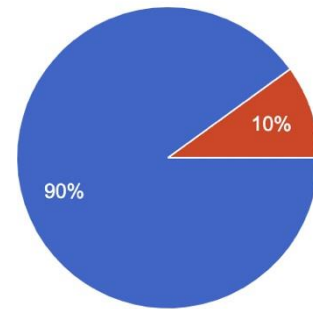
In the long and complex path that the characters must undertake, the only possible way to reach their goal passes through the study of philosophy, which uses the ability to communicate. Moreover, it is part of a perfect, universal narrative structure as it repeats the elements of the “hero’s journey”. In addition, the attention paid to these three different areas (philosophy, communication, and storytelling) makes this series a particularly valuable tool suitable for teaching upper secondary school students.

5. Teaching...on the screen: results from the questionnaire

The questionnaire was given in February 2022 to teachers attending a specialization course for support activities. It had four multiple-choice questions. The selected questions are general on purpose to take into consideration the different backgrounds of the trainers. Of the 540 questionnaires completed, the following results emerged.

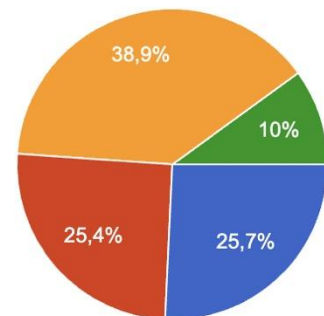
Question 1: *Have you ever used or do you plan to use a production from television or a streaming platform for teaching your subject in the future?*

90% of the answers were affirmative, demonstrating that teachers are quite familiar with platforms and consider them a full-fledged, indispensable teaching tool.



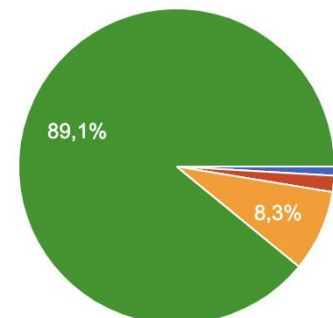
Question 2: *If you were to teach your subject using productions from either television or a streaming platform, which ones would you choose?*

The options included popular science, news, documentary, entertainment and/or serial TV programs. In this case, 38.9% opted for documentaries and 10% for entertainment programs. The remainder of the responses were equally distributed between popular science and information programs. Obviously, some prejudices have remained regarding the actual didactic value of TV series.



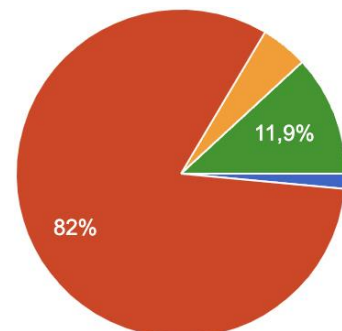
Question 3: *Which order/level of education do you think television productions or streaming platforms would be most useful for?*

The upper secondary school accounted for over 89% of the responses for the four orders/levels of education. Even this data should be cause for reflection as it seems to go toward a now outdated idea of television's capability to transmit scientific content or, at any rate, suitable from a learning point of view only for an adolescent age group. At the same time, everything ends up relegated to mere entertainment for pupils in kindergarten, primary, and lower secondary schools.



Question 4: *Do you think that a production on television or a streaming platform is more suitable for:*

Of the four options presented, 82% identified the possibility of supplementing a lesson as the best opportunity offered by the platforms. On the other hand, 11.9% of the course members felt that platforms helped introduce a new topic. The remaining answers were divided almost equally between "replacing a lesson on a specific topic" and "concluding a lesson or module on a specific topic".



The questionnaire feedback must be put into context with some recent studies, whose diverse approaches analyzed the audience's relationship with streaming platforms. Firstly, it should be recalled that this trend was highlighted by the recent CITE Research and Dassault Systèmes survey [15]. conducted in France, the United States, and China, it examined consumer willingness to spend large sums for increasingly personalized services. This is also true, of course, in the case, however symbolic, of the content available on streaming platforms. Capable of transforming the viewer into an

even more “variable” entity compared to traditional interpretative models, they aim at a public increasingly focused on a completely customized experience.

Shifting location from sitting at home or in a cinema to everywhere, from TV or a film screen to a smartphone or tablet, makes the platform experience increasingly engaging and completely reverses the concept of educational television, which “teaches the illiterate, sugarcoats great literature with historical dramas, [and] increases superficial knowledge through quiz shows” [16].

However, does this change in perspective correspond to teachers in Italian schools being genuinely aware of the potential offered by these new tools?

6. Conclusions

The advantages of multimedia and asynchronous learning are undeniable: participants can take advantage of personalized teaching that adapts to such various needs as work and family needs, the effective sharing of materials, and facilitated communication in virtual spaces [17,18].

Nevertheless, it strengthens the need to improve the used tools and strategies. A certain resistance to adopt technologies emerges, thus creating a need to ensure greater involvement by increasing motivation.

Data from the OECD’s latest Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), conducted in 2018 [19], highlights how Italian teachers have struggled to acquire the necessary level of digital competencies to reach the required European Commission standards, despite a European discussion on teacher acquisition of digital capabilities that culminated with the publication of “Digital Competence Framework for Educators” (DigCompEdu) [20].

Only 36% of the teachers surveyed in 2018 felt prepared to use ICT for teaching after completing their university degrees. In comparison, a more significant 47% (OECD average, 53%) acknowledged using ICT frequently or constantly in classroom projects or schoolwork for their students.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that although 68% of the teachers interviewed had participated in professional development activities that included the use of ICT for teaching in the 12 months preceding the survey, 17% of them identified ICT as the professional development theme for which they had the greatest need for further training.

The approach to streaming platforms is no exception. Even in this case, greater investment in training would lead to fully exploiting the educational potential offered by this tool.

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