Abstract
This article introduces and discusses how social theatre can be used in preventive healthcare in a new methodological framework including peer & media education and digital literacy.

The essay begins at the gap between the new risks affecting adolescent behaviour (new addictions, gambling and online pornography) and health services' strategies for preventing them. While youngsters are online, chatting and dating, health professionals are ready in their offices: service is not matched to need. They must provide a new methodological framework for prevention that is underpinned by an understanding of youngsters’ practices and can make sense of what they do on social-networking sites and digital media in their daily lives.

Peer & media education – originating in a meeting between peer education and media education – seeks to do just this. Peer education traditionally entails training young people to educate their peers. Media education, meanwhile, aims to develop critical thinking to enable youngsters to become aware of media messages and to produce and publish their content responsibly. The result is a joint preventive and educational framework in which critical thinking is developed and fostered through peer activity.

In collaboration with partners from health prevention (Contorno Viola), teen education (Informagiovani) and social theatre (Industria Scenica), CREMIT recently ran an action-research project on sexting prevention (Image.me). It was a good opportunity to test the peer & media methodology. Social theatre was conceived of (and used) in two ways.

First, it provided a form of social care and web risk prevention. The methodology entailed choosing the best performing arts for the context, focusing on the project’s target audience, and trying to imagine how to tackle sexting effectively. The result was a new mascot, OPS!, a puppet that the researchers used to meet youngsters in schools, discos and other informal contexts. OPS! was also involved in peer video making, as the young people created videos aimed at preventing sexting in their own communities.

The second way in which social theatre was used was in communicating the research data at the project’s conclusion. A dramaturgical framework was devised for commenting on the data and facilitating understanding and participation. These activities are part of a wider research project.
on theatre and scientific communication at the Catholic University of Milan, run by Claudio Bernardi and Pier Cesare Rivoltella’s research groups.

**Keywords**
Social theatre; media education; peer education; peer&media education; sexting; health prevention.

1. BODY, DIGITAL MEDIA, SOCIAL NETWORK

In recent years, the media have changed radically. They are no longer “mass-media”; they are increasingly becoming personal tools, embedded in our lives, an integrated part of what we mean when we talk about relationships and social behaviours.

This change can be explained by thinking about what some scholars call the “post-media era”. The first to use this label was Felix Guattari in 1985; his insight was then developed in the field of communication studies. The idea is that the media as we have always known them are disappearing, or rather they have already disappeared. Ruggero Eugeni explains this in dealing with the three main processes that the media are involved in: naturalization, subjectivation, socialization.

The media are disappearing through naturalization, because they can migrate into every object; they are always with us, we wear them; we use them for knowing, communicating, and sharing; and we do this at every moment in our lives, beyond the old idea of a virtual sphere separated from the real world. The computer has become invisible; it seems to be a part of our nature.

The media are disappearing, in the sense of subjectivation, because they are the tools through which we commonly have our experiences. Thanks to mobile devices, the social media and the Web, we are able to receive first-person images of whatever is happening at a distance from us. In this way the media are becoming a part of what we are as individuals and how we construct ourselves as subjects.

Finally, the media are disappearing in the sense of their socialization, because they are part of the processes of the construction of reality; with the result that reality and the discourses that deal with it are so closely fused that it is difficult for people to understand the exact nature of each of them. As Philippe Breton observed some years ago, the Information Society is made up of social representations and discourses: probably today we can understand more fully the true significance of his idea.

Starting from the disappearance of the media, as briefly described above, we can try to understand how this development affects our body and its space and role in the media.

First of all, the media are embedded in our bodies, they are part of our subjectivity; we feel that without them we are unable to go out, stroll about, work, meet others, or be safe in the urban space. Derrick de Kerkhove wrote, in the early days of the Informa-

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tion Society, that the media are the skin of our culture⁹: nowadays they have probably become our own skin.

Secondly, the digital media make sense with the body because they are embodied; we can consider them as an extension of our five senses, in accordance with McLuhan’s argument. This means that it is incorrect to consider their reality as virtual reality, unrelated to reality: our body is not absent when we use digital media or we tinker around in a digital environment; this is only a new and different way of using it.

Finally, our body is involved in our digital and social being, because in these cases we enact with others. This happens in two main ways.

The first concerns our feelings. When we share our memories with our old classmates on Facebook, when we meet someone we haven’t seen for thirty years, when we flirt or lose our patience while chatting, in all these cases emotions change our somatic state: our body is like a sounding box; it registers and amplifies what we feel in everyday life.

The second way our body is part of what we do in our digital and social interactions concerns our representations of it. Some scholars have already written about what they call “publicy”¹⁰, or “extimity”¹¹. In both these cases we are referring to hybrid situations into which we are neither in nor out; situations in which what was usually part of our intimacy now becomes public; situations in which the processes that were traditionally inside are now outside. In these cases our body is often exposed as a medium for the practices through which we build up our identity, search for social approval, or seek to foster our reputation. Even if this is normal in the culture of the social networks, it is clear that this general shift from interior to exterior can create risky situations above all for young people, like teenagers, who are not yet fully aware or capable of taking critical decisions¹². Sexting, which is the subject of this article, is one of these risks.

2. FOR 2.0 PREVENTION: PEER & MEDIA EDUCATION AND SOCIAL THEATRE AS EDUCATIONAL TOOLS

2.1. When youngsters become educators

Adolescence is a risky period in the developmental age. The reason is that the brain is not yet developed, especially the frontal and prefrontal cortex, the parts of it which enable us to control ourselves, make decisions, and manage reflective processes. Apart from this, what drives teens’ decision making is the reward circuit: when we do something exciting or really amazing, some parts of our deep brain (the Nucleus Accumbens and Ventral Tegmental Area) release dopamine and other substances involved in our sense of pleasure. The more this happens, the more dopamine our brain produces, and the better we feel. Teens’ decision-making is driven by this kind of urge. This is one reason why they make decisions that adults may consider irrational; this also explains why they are so lacking in awareness when it comes to sexual behaviour, or the con-

sumption of alcohol and drugs. Finally, this enables us to understand why teens seem to go in search of risks, why they love danger, and have a natural tendency to get involved in serious trouble.

Considering all these facts, public institutions have always targeted adolescence with forms of prevention. Traditionally, this consists of giving youngsters information. It may be provided by booklets, TV commercials, or websites on which the risks are explained and at the same time information is provided about how to protect themselves from it. In addition, operators (such as psychologists, physicians, or educators) may go to schools and talk to youngsters in the classroom, or provide consultancies for them in services where people can talk to experts capable of answering their questions.

This kind of prevention strategy (we can call it “prevention 1.0”) is not highly effective for a number of reasons. Firstly, many youngsters may not be interested in turning to these consultancies for information; secondly, the operators, as adults, may be perceived by youngsters as people outside their world, unable to really understand their needs and behaviours. This has led to a new approach termed “prevention 2.0”, which is capable of reaching out to adolescents without meeting them in person, attuning prevention activities to young people’s culture so as to bridge the generation gap between social operators and their target group.

Peer&Media Education (PME) is a part and expression of this strategy. Its origin lies in integrating Peer Education with Media Education, two established methods in education.

Peer Education is a peer-to-peer method by which peers, not adults, act as educators. To do this, it is necessary to select young people and train them so that they can get involved in educational activities with their peers. What is interesting and useful in Peer Education is that adult asymmetry has no impact on teens. If teens themselves play the part of educators, it becomes easier for them to meet as friends and talk over the issues on which the programme is focused.

Media Education is both a popular movement and a research field which fosters correct behaviours in media appropriation. Usually, we can consider three main areas in Media Education: Teaching (about) the media, is the study of media messages and processes, their culture, and people’s behaviours in the consumption of media; Teaching with (or through) the media is the use of the media as tools and environments for education; Teaching for the media, is the professional training provided to media professionals. Nowadays, with the spread of digital and social media and their migration into our lives (as described in the previous section), Media Education is shifting to ethics and citizenship.

Critical thinking is the focus of both Peer and Media Education: if teens are able to think critically, they are less exposed to the risks of sexual diseases, gambling, drugs and other types of needs; at the same time, if they are able to think critically, they become more fully aware of the reception of media messages and more responsible in producing and publishing contents. In keeping with this shared principle, it is possible to talk about Peer&Media Education as:

– an educational method;
– promoting critical thinking;
– a strategy of risk prevention;
– and education in an ethical and aware use of the media and their messages.

PME’s methods are derived from Peer Education and Media Education. Its heritage from Media Education is text analysis and media-making; from Peer Education group-
work and active methods used in social animation. Social Theatre is one of these methods. It was one of the most original aspect of the project that we report on in this article.

2.2. Social theatre: between performance and social action

In the contemporary world, participation in the construction of public goods, peaceful coexistence, and the civic sense are impossible goals without the production of social capital or mutual aid, cooperation, trust, institutional effectiveness arising from relations between individuals, social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness\(^\text{13}\). On the other hand, it is necessary to try and minimise harmful consequences: sectarianism, individualism, ethnocentrism and corruption\(^\text{14}\). Social Theatre grows out of this assumption and, through performative experiences, cooperative and collaborative work, promotion, enhancement and identification of the needs, histories and values of a group and/or a territory, it promotes participatory sociability and active enjoyment.

The critical balance of experience and theatrical theories in the last century shows a polarization between performing arts aimed at the enhancement of the individual, both in the educational and therapeutic arts, and arts aimed at the recovery and the exaltation of the collective, communities and groups, both in the arts and in the social area. However, the emerging contradictions and current practices highlight the need to combine these two poles, no longer opposing the individual to the group or, as Jervis\(^\text{15}\) claimed, founded on the individual’s new social practice and policy. This is social theatre’s objective which is then defined as the expression, training and interaction of people, groups and communities\(^\text{16}\).

The actions of Social Theatre respond to urgent artistic and social needs, combining the potential of performative actions with the development of social processes focused on creativity and participation\(^\text{17}\). The actions presented tend to break up the daily rhythm and to engage participants in performative ways; they are site-specific art interventions that take place within a community or group.

The targets are the participants, the authors of the project and those responsible for the process, in a relationship that should be organic, creative and productive.

Starting from the identification of a need, it has to pass through the participatory creation of a social-relational map connecting the target group to existing socio-cultural resources. The creative process of Social Theatre is a life design, which starts from an accurate analysis of the problems and resources, representations, actions and rituals of people, groups and communities. It has to create representations, actions and relationships, to enable a continuous process of positive transformation of people and their living environment (family, friends, work, time, space, school, neighbourhood, country, nature etc.).

Social Theatre is a means, a “vehicle” as Grotowski\(^\text{18}\) would say; it subordinates


\(^{14}\) Putnam distinguishes between *bridging* social capital, and *bonding* social capital.


aesthetics to ethics, building the individual and the community through performing activities.

3. **IMAGE.ME: A CASE STUDY IN PEER MEDIA AND SOCIAL THEATRE FOR TEENS’ PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE**

*Image.Me – Bodies, Consumption and Transformation of Youngsters into a Social Media Mirror* – is a biennial action research project (June 2013-June 2015) designed to study and prevent sexting in adolescence. Before we present the project’s framework, we need to understand what we mean by sexting.

There are various definitions of sexting. In 2008, it was described as the action of persons who “sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves”. This definition was given in the USA during the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, pointing out the implications, both positive and negative, for sexual health. The research was directed towards an exploration of medical consequences and psychological motivations.

Thomas, in a study (2009) involving 655 teens (ages 13-18), included text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude pictures; in the same year, Phippen described sexting as sharing intimate pictures/videos with a boyfriend or girlfriend, also referring it to couple behaviour.

Regardless of the approach adopted, the researchers agree that sexting is a social phenomenon that involves different activities and situational factors, content characteristics, motivation, physical and virtual settings and motivational scenarios. Heath pointed out the importance of teens’ perspective in understanding and developing effective strategies to deal with it, but few qualitative studies are aimed at understanding the nature and origins of sexting from the perspective of young people.

The literature review held during the first phase of the *Image.me* project highlights the gap between research outcomes and practices for sexting prevention.

Particularly, what the review shows is:

– that sexting is associated with a range of health-risk behaviours. Sexting may have emotional effects on students, making them upset, embarrassed, or afraid as a

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20 *Image.me* has been developed as a partnership between: CREMIT (Web site: http://www.cremit.it); Spazio Giovani (established in Italy in 1994 as a non-profit company, is active in the field of youth education. Web site: http://www.spaziogiovani.it/cms/); *Industria Scenica* (a cultural no-profit organization that enhances creative activities of individuals and communities through Social Theatre. Web site: http://www.industriascenica.com); and the support of the Provincial Office of the Ministry of Education and the Local Health Authority Service (ASL) in Milan Metropolitan Area.
result of their involvement\textsuperscript{26} and the experience of peer pressure\textsuperscript{27}. Moreover it could lead to early sexualization and increased exposure to pornography, dating, violence and suicide\textsuperscript{28};

- how digital images of bodies reinforce gender inequalities: young women are more likely to be negatively impacted by this behaviour\textsuperscript{29};

- how technology offers teens the “important task of exploring sexual identity while avoiding the embarrassment of doing so face-to-face”\textsuperscript{30}.

All these research projects point out the need for a critical pedagogy, the adoption of a multi-perspective approach, and support the idea that prevention is the most effective way of dealing with sexting. However, practice seems to be tailored to a specific problem, instead of adopting a holistic approach.

The focus is to provide teens with information. Emphasising “the importance of talking “with” rather than “at” young people, ensuring discussions are not framed to focus on the negative aspects of behaviour\textsuperscript{31}, students are educated about three areas: the legal, emotional, and career implications of sexting. The methodological choices are traditional: large classroom guidance lessons, psycho-educational groups and assemblies, councillors who discuss or give advice about potentially damaging effects, the legal consequences and academic disciplinary actions (probation, suspension, removal, dismissal, or expulsion). Strategies suggested for dealing with potential risks associated with sexting underline the risk and seem based on control and regulation rather than negotiation.

Image.me starts from the idea of bridging the gap between research and practice, youngsters and adults, body (emotion and cognition) and action, through what we could term a “Pedagogy of the Contract”\textsuperscript{32}.

The project is based on Action Research principles (Reflective Critique, Dialectical Critique, Collaborative Research, Risk, Plural Structure and Theory, Practice, Transformation)\textsuperscript{33} and a Peer&Media Education framework\textsuperscript{34}, with these specific points:

- connection between formal and informal contexts to discuss and collect data. From schools (889 questionnaires from 20 secondary schools, reaching 45 classes in the Monza Brianza area) to extra-school settings (selfies collected at social events, shows, public places, discs and Facebook quizzes and posts);

- the use of actively empowering methods in seminars and training sessions (social theatre, performative actions, media education laboratories) and other activities to generate rich insights into the young;

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\textsuperscript{29} M. Salter, “Privates in the Online Public: Sex (ting) and Reputation on Social Media”, \textit{New Media & Society}, September (2015).


– the use of social media as a tool and scenario. As people’s sexting practices are embedded in their use of technologies, we used media not to amplify the problem but to find solutions and methods of prevention (videos, the campaign called #respectyourcyberself in Facebook).

As we wished to extend our practices, we met peers at school and worked with them in their presence, while the peers started to use digital environments to communicate and share ideas on their networks following the media laboratory promoting critical thinking. These environments are open and they can allow youngsters to meet other people outside the school and talk with them about prevention or similar issues.

Implementing a situation of Brick&click Peer&Media means focusing on active prevention, “2.0 prevention” capable of changing the way teens’ interact and socialise.

Reflecting on the way young people build relationships and behave through social media is a primary action, “because texting is a skill teens utilize to socialize and communicate with their friends”.

4. IMAGE.ME, WHEN SOCIAL THEATRE MEETS DIGITAL MEDIA

The Image.me project has presented social theatre actions on the web together with current patterns of communication and interaction among young people. Industria Scenica took part in it with a performative research into the topic of sexting with workshops and performative activities. Workshops were held with 12 teams of peers; their focus was the creation of digital story-telling with youngsters in order to spread an understanding of sexting prevention. Performative activities mainly consisted in co-designing the theatrical framework of the event with which the project closed.

The working process started from a careful analysis of the cultural and aesthetic aspects of what youngsters do online. This map of their habits and cultural interests led the research team to choose a contact strategy for interacting with youngsters: a strategy that could appear non-mediated, fun, effective, participatory and immersed in their relational and cultural context. In Italy today, hip-hop culture is directed towards mainstream visibility: an underground and élite culture, which was formerly a successful vehicle for writing and recounting their experiences, is no longer very popular.

We adopted three main lines of action:

– first of all we decided to create a large fun mascot called OPS!. OPS! helped us in our first contacts with teens; large and bulky, it was an unexpected presence and a novelty immediately visible in different contexts, both formal such as schools, and informal such as clubs and squares. It immediately caught youngsters’ attention. The mascot is a theatrical strategy that relates teens’ use of social media to a live performance, a theatrical link between real life and digital cultural production;

– second, we created short videos for online distribution. This production was the occasion for youngsters to train in peer education: they expressed strong interest and displayed civic responsibility;

– finally, we took part in a cultural booster event for young people called “Zarro Night” and built up the performative framework of the final conference to disseminate the project. During the Zarro Night we used the invisible theatre strategy: a set of photo portraits engaged the teens in live actions with OPS! These photos created an online relational space into which peers’ experience in an informal context was associated with prevention messages.

All these cultural tools were used both as a formal vehicle for the content and as a tool for a quality survey of the perception of sexting.

**• Short Videos**

The first video, edited as the project headline, was enriched with original lyrics by two rappers (well known in the area): Scarty and Tempo. We chose to integrate the video with drawings to move between fiction and reality.

With reference to our target, the use of video techniques is similar to the adoption of theatrical techniques. The body as a tool for relationships and for language mediation is supported by the immediacy of video: the single take of the camera brings the content of the project into the background, involving adolescents and reflecting one of the main ways they act and create their relationships online. For example, the success of the Snapchat app is based on this relationship with reality.

The second video was the result of a participatory process with the peer group at a secondary school, the Liceo Majorana in Desio. After a training on the project topics, peers developed the subject of the video and joined the set.

The third video was made with the group of peers from the Istituto Mosè Bianchi in Monza. Attention here was focused on students’ principal reaction to the publication of sexual content and pictures. As for the previous video, the school community was the first target.

**• “OPS!” The Project Mascot**

The mascot OPS! was designed to engage students directly and give them a first positive idea of the project. It is not easy to talk about the prevention of risky online behaviour, especially in relation to the body and its exposure. The solution with OPS! consisted of creating a playful setting, through amusing attitudes, involvement and motivation, thanks to an honest and sincere communication.

OPS!, with its cyclopean shape, looks like a webcam; in its digital existence, thanks to its Facebook page, it can interact widely, in addition to its physical presence.

**• Performative Action with Peers for a Participatory Culture**

Peer participation in video making was crucial to the project’s success. User-generated contents, as Shirky suggests, are social acts, as well as being creative.
The phrase ‘user generated content’, the current label for creative acts by amateurs, really describes not just personal but also social acts [...]. The atomization of social life in the twentieth century left us so far removed from participatory culture that when it came back, we needed the phrase ‘participatory culture’ to describe it\textsuperscript{42}.

The participatory process is very important in the preliminary survey and selection of content. Among all possible representations, one chosen through participation helps to represent the experience by reflecting the culture of the group. Equally important is the quality of the multimedia product that is generated, since it is related to an educational and preventive content. Multimedia products have to speak the language of the culture as lived and “worn” by students; they have to be cool and spreadable\textsuperscript{43} in order to increase the motivation of a community.

In the context of our work, aesthetic quality and peers’ ethical participation – their “face on the stage” – are factors that perfectly match the participatory culture and technical resources, regarded by Jenkins as content facilitators.

In the participatory process generated, being and acting on the stage and creativity are essential factors; this often clashes with a cultural school heritage, where attending a lesson means being sitting on a chair with one’s own desk. Here we find the clash between theatrical cultures: representation in traditional theatre is presented for people who watch a show; in social theatre, the show is made to be experienced and lived.

- \textit{The final conference. Performance for an emotional and effective communication}

The \textit{Image.me} project closed with an international conference “Mediated body. New media, identity, representation”, held at the Catholic University in Milan, May 15, 2015.

Giving a voice to the people involved in the project and to scholars, the conference allowed operators to share the results of their work, while enabling the hundreds of young people and parents involved to observe the outcomes: to clarify the state of the art, but also to mark a new starting point.

The scholars invited presented their research alongside phases of performance, starring OPS! and the actors working for Industria Scenica. After this session, we presented our videos and the results of workshops held with peers.

The dramatisation of a scholarly event is part of a research project held by Claudio Bernardi and Pier Cesare Rivoltella and their research teams. It seeks to disseminate academic research through artistic performances and videos, which could be useful for making scholarly contents available even to an informal audience.

The performances addressed the main themes of the conference in straightforward, interactive language. Their visual and theatrical elements made the concepts and information more immediately understandable, especially to young audiences. The aim was to add clarity, effectiveness and pleasure to the event and stimulate direct and active participation.

The use of theatre and the performing arts as a teaching tool is recommended by an international perspective: social theatre, or applied theatre\textsuperscript{44}, is a living, dialogical art


\textsuperscript{44} S. Jennings, \textit{Dramatherapy and Social Theatre: Necessary Dialogues}, London-New York: Rout-
form capable of stimulating our instincts and stirring our deepest convictions. It is the main focus in sessions and performances of a kind of theatre that seeks to return to the essence: to shed professionalism and stage behaviour, understanding that theatre professionals find their own specifics elsewhere.

5. CONCLUSION

As the article shows, the spread of digital and social media is affecting the ways people share information, manage relationships and create their social image. This is true particularly in the case of youngsters. More than adults, they seek peer approval: their reputation is extremely important, so they are deeply involved in their identity performance on the social networks. They even display in the public sphere much that it would be better if they did not display there. Intimacy is changing, becoming hybridised with public space, so that scholars now speak of “publicy”, or “extimity”. Some new risky forms of behaviour by teens depend on this shift from privacy to publicy: flaming, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and sexting.

Clearly, all these kinds of behaviour deviate widely from traditional norms. The principal difference is that they are online, even though they involve real bodies: the processes related to them are effective that we have to rethink what we usually mean when we speak of virtual reality. If I use a social network to stalk one of my classmates and he/she decides to commit suicide, this is real. What we are dealing with in this and similar cases are conversations capable of producing real effects, the different dimensions of a single social reality.

Given these observations, it is easy to understand why we need new strategies for prevention and education in healthcare. In this article we proposed Peer&Media Education as one of these strategies. It contains some interesting points for a new approach to prevention: the role of peers as educators, the use of media as educational tools and environments, and critical thinking as a life skill, an active and participatory orientation for involving teens.

The Image.me project, presented as a case history in this article, is a good example of what we mean by “prevention 2.0”: an intervention based on Peer&Media Education, in which video making and Social Theatre play a central role. Video making offered a good opportunity for involving youngsters in a participatory process where they could be made aware both of media languages and healthy behaviours. Social Theatre made it possible for the research team to meet youngsters in their informal world: the puppet OPS!, happenings in their meeting places, and the use of dramas for presenting research results were all choices made to achieve that aim.

In the near future our research agenda will consider how to provide an epistemological and methodological foundation for this new approach created in the meeting area of Peer&Media Education with Social Theatre.