

Social media and the political-civic participation of young people. A review of the digital citizenship debate¹

Medios sociales y la participación política y cívica de los jóvenes. Una revisión del debate en torno a la ciudadanía digital



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Abstract:

Concern regarding apathy, disaffection and scepticism of the society toward conventional politics, especially among young people, together with the perceived preference of this group for digital media, have led academics to conduct research to determine the extent to which the opportunities for participation offered by social media can influence civic and political engagement and behaviour. This article examines research related to this subject that has been published since the beginning of the current century for the purpose of identifying the salient elements of the debate regarding the role of social media in the development of digital citizenship.

Keywords:

Digital citizenship, youth, social media, political and civic participation.

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Resumen:

La preocupación por la apatía, desafección y escepticismo hacia la política convencional por parte de la sociedad en general y de los jóvenes en particular, junto con la percepción de las preferencias de estos últimos por los medios digitales, han llevado a los académicos a investigar en qué medida las oportunidades de participación que ofrecen los medios sociales pueden influir en el compromiso y comportamiento cívico y político. Este artículo examina las investigaciones publicadas sobre el tema en este siglo con el objetivo de identificar los elementos claves del debate en torno al papel de los medios sociales en el desarrollo de la llamada ciudadanía digital.

Palabras clave:

Ciudadanía digital; jóvenes; medios sociales; participación política y cívica.

1. Introduction

The scarce or non-existent interest in political affairs or actions by individuals, which depends on civic involvement for its success, has been pointed out repeatedly on several fronts, not only during the successive electoral processes of the most entrenched and traditional democracies, but also with numerous investigations that have been carried out from this perspective. Two examples of this situation are evident in each of the surveys conducted by the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS)*: on one hand, the 2005 report on participation pointed out that 69.7% of the population claimed to have little or no interest in politics; while on the other hand, the 2016 survey concluded that almost half of Spaniards say they pay little or no attention to international news; these figures show little optimism considering that the world is at the peak of globalization and participatory inclusion in digital social media.

The use of new technologies in political participation and civic involvement has been the focus of debate, as the widespread growth of social networks has become a decisive feature of horizontality in the exercise of citizenship, which is a key aspect that has been reviewed in several investigations that have identified the degree of success of numerous civic movements. Furthermore, on many occasions, these studies have shown a before and after for the involvement of the individual in the problems that affect a social environment characterized by discontent and dissatisfaction with the political agenda and decisions made by its representatives. Through a review of the literature of the most relevant scientific publications of the current century, this article examines the core structure of the debate regarding the effect of digital communication on political and civic participation.

The first section addresses the transformation of citizen participation, highlighting both the innovations as well as the aspects that remain unchanged with the spread of digital communication and its adoption in political and civic areas. In the second section, the significance of social media is analysed by using specific examples of political and social

mobilization, and although its development is not essential for the existence of citizenship, they do respond to a clear manifestation of citizen participation; in this regard, complementarity is highlighted, but also the divergence between that which is online and offline in the commitment and political behaviour of these movements.

Next, as a third main point, the training of young people is considered based on the use of social media as a key element in channelling the inclination and will of this sector of the population toward the political world. Finally, as one of the notable factors in the empowerment of the individual as a citizen, consulting the news and sources of information stands out, with social networks being used for this purpose, which contribute in advance to fomenting political participation among young people.

2. Objectives and method

A qualitative methodology was used in this investigation. This option was chosen due to the exploratory nature of this study, which has a dual purpose: On one hand, to summarise the main ideas to see if the concept of citizenship has really changed with the generalized use of the digital environment; and on the other hand, to show an innovative compilation of the open debate in the related research during the last few years.

In this context, a review of the literature is considered with a four-fold objective:

- Describe the differences between traditional and digital uses in the development of the individual as a citizen.
- Investigate in the empirical studies those actions that have secured achievements derived from the use of social networks. Related to this aspect, we have also investigated the adoption of digital means by political-social organizations that are already consolidated.
- Consider the suggestions and characteristics highlighted by the academic literature for the development of the individual as a citizen (particularly young people and minors).
- Finally, we take into account the research that connects participation with the consumption, production and dissemination of current information.

In the search for research investigations, conducted between January and March of 2018, different catalogues were used: Scopus, Dialnet Plus, ID Research and Google Scholar.

As a basis for this search, different terms were used, which are considered from our point of view to be relevant in achieving the desired purpose.

The most outstanding were the following: Citizenship; Digital citizenship; Youth and citizenship; Participation; Political participation; and Citizen commitment.

For the selection of academic texts, the following filters were established, in the following order:

- The publication of documents during the years of the 21st century.
- The index of citations that have the implicit meaning of the influence contributed to subsequent studies.

However, not all of the collected articles were relevant nor did they produce original ideas. Therefore, some of them do not appear in the bibliography. As a complement, several of the bibliographical references used by the articles found at the beginning were very useful.

3. Traditional and digital practices in participation and citizenship

Considering civic commitment as the fundamental pillar of democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016), the concepts of citizenship and political participation have not changed as much in their aims as they have in the actions and tools used for their development. In this regard, Yamamoto et al. (2015) list various activities associated with traditional political participation: voting, broadcasting petitions, working for a political campaign, attending meetings, contacting elected officials, etc.; while Anduiza et al. (2010) contrast two formal groups of online participatory activity: on one hand, there would be E-petition and E-contact, and on the other, E-donation and E-discussion. The distinction made by Bennett et al. (2008) between the Actualizing Citizen (AC) and the Dutiful Citizen (DC) clearly reflects the differences involved in the participation and involvement of citizens in political affairs and the change observed since the expansion of the digital environment for these tasks.

In this regard, it is necessary to highlight first the degree of awareness of duty toward what is imposed (weak in AC and strong in DC); secondly, the approach given to everything related to politics: while the traditional model is characterized by its perception of voting as the central act of democracy, the AC model considers a broader perspective translated into behaviour such as that related to volunteering and social activism. Thirdly, and lastly, the updated type of citizen opts for networks and digital media for social action and communication, in contrast to the one who is obedient, who follows standards, and who joins social organizations that are already established, as well as interest groups and political parties.

In a subsequent investigation, and applying his own concept of a citizen, Bennett et al. (2011) consider young people to be the ones who are adopting the most expressive styles of actualizing citizenship (AC) for communication aimed at promoting civic involvement, an attitude that materializes in the exchange of content between colleagues and social media.

For García Jiménez (2018), citizens opt for collective action together with their peers in social networks in the face of distrust of public institutions and doubts about the usefulness of their own complaints or protests; Hernández Merayo (2011) clarifies that the AC model does not apply only to young people due to the fact that, among other reasons, this sector also participates in traditional models.

In fact, participatory action has changed, at least in its procedure. As stated by Gil Moreno (2017), it is necessary to redefine activism with digital democracy as its central support due to the fact that among other derivations, it entails greater self-perception of the citizen regarding his or her empowerment with more possibilities to expand participation. In a similar line, Hernández Merayo (2011) defends a revision of the concept of citizenship, and consequently, that of education for citizenship. He also warns that politics should be viewed from a broader perspective that accommodates all identities integrated into a great diversity of communities that do not necessarily have to be of a physical nature.

In a more advanced vision raised by Martín Pérez (2016) based on the work of Schnaper, citizenship has already been described, and he considers it to be desirable as a political process for the purpose of influencing social relations. Following the ideal types defined by Weber, Dahlberg (2011) proposes four positions of digital democracy that have a classification that responds to three elements: the democratic subject, promoted democracy, and democratic associations related to digital media. In this regard, the models he presents are the following: liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-public, and the autonomist Marxist.

In the last two cases, the author sees communication technology as the advance of radical democracy; in both cases, digital networks are considered as sites for struggle and discursive debate with challenges, which in the case of the counter-public model, strengthen alternative groups that are marginalized or oppressed; a vision that contrasts firstly with the deliberative model based on debate aimed at consensus; and secondly, with greater depth, it differentiates from the liberal-individualist model that is sustained on the basis that the digital media offer a means for the effective transmission of information and opinions between individuals and decision makers.

In this terminological and conceptual disaggregation, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2016) differentiate between civic and social motivations as the stimuli for participation: the first ones are understood as those which, without adopting a political nature, are aimed at solving the problems of a community or group; while the social options refer to the predisposition to engage in discussions about certain public issues that are also linked to the need to obtain information, express opinions and persuade the rest through informal political conversations.

4. Social movements and participation in the digital sphere

Gil Moreno (2017) dates the emergence of the first social movements popularized through new technologies to the decade of the nineties, when local indigenous revolts in Mexico spread internationally.

The study by Velasquez and LaRose (2014) on activist groups in the United States shows the effectiveness of online political activity, the direct consequence of which is the participation of individuals in joint actions, although with varying degrees of involvement that depend, nevertheless, on the type of action exercised.

The 15-M Movement in 2011 constituted a paradigmatic example of a high degree of involvement, up to the point where public opinion questioned the traditional democratic pillars of representation and electoral participation. With regard to the subject of this popular phenomenon that arose in Spain, Hernández Merayo et al. (2013) present the way in which the use of new technologies can connect horizontally and rapidly groups that already show a certain predisposition toward getting involved, and this tends to erase the lines between public and private, and the current authority and legitimacy of the traditional media are called into question.

Another example is seen in the demonstrations and protests in different physical spaces led by Chilean students to demand educational reform in 2006: In those years, the rapid transmission of messages and calls to action through new technologies was a surprise, which facilitated the success of the protests, and according to Valderrama (2013), three key elements were involved: the high level of organization of young people, the horizontality in the communications, and last but not least, the lack of political tutelage.

This direct relationship between offline and online participation is also raised by Borge et al. (2012) based on the theory of normalization by Margolis and Resnick (2000), who observed that individuals perform the same participatory actions in the digital environment that they have already developed offline; social media, and in general the Internet, do not increase the number of participants, but reinforce the participation of those already involved.

Robinson and Phillips (2016) also conclude that individual integration in civic action cannot be sustained exclusively online, but must be complemented by strong participation in the physical environment in order to promote a healthy and sustained commitment over time.

This complementary and integrative relationship of online and offline methods for political commitment is also defended by Hargittai and Shaw (2013), who show their scepticism regarding Internet's ability to transform existing patterns of political participation, although they do recognize that it facilitates new paths toward commitment. Cornelissen et al. (2013) are reluctant to consider that certain actions carried out online, such as marking with an 'I Like' a social cause or project that involves change, implies a real act of citizen participation; a fact that they refer to as clicktivism, a term already consolidated in related research (Karpf, 2010, Butler, 2011, Drumbl, 2012).

It is recognized that such actions are a way of expressing citizen concerns at a low cost and allows third parties to feel supported; however, this attitude can lead to the creation of slacktivists, who can be defined as "lazy citizens" when they believe that with a single click they have already contributed to improving society (Morozov, 2011, Butler, 2011, Cornelissen et al., 2013).

From a more optimistic perspective of the digital world, the study by Yamamoto et al. (2015) on young university students defends the fact that political expression has an important mobilizing effect in offline participation among those individuals who consume and consult blogs, social networks or forums; much higher than that detected among university students who used offline tools.

Holt et al. (2013) consider that participation should no longer be measured with traditional values such as participation in elections or rallies, but rather it is necessary to add key factors such as the management of a profile in social networks or participation in online debates and discussions.

Anduiza et al. (2010) present an intermediate vision by which even face-to-face activities such as involvement in protests that affect online participation allow them to observe the independence or autonomy of certain online behaviour. From their findings, it has also been suggested that participation in the digital environment, though not in the physical one, is a consequence of the easy accessibility that characterizes social media on the Internet. Lane et al. (2017) consider that the use of social media in maintaining relationships is a motivating factor in reinforcing political commitment, and believe that the level of intensity of this commitment is greater in those users who frequently share political information to show their disagreement or to reaffirm their opinions.

In certain countries, such as Turkey, where practices of the democratic regime are currently a centre of controversy, the use of Internet for participation and civic engagement has been formulated from a bipolar perspective. In this regard, Ünal (2017) finds that a significant percentage of the youth population of that country consider that online environments are a fundamental part of democratic expression where they can express their opinions and share political content, thereby reinforcing their political self-efficacy. Nevertheless, there is also evidence of an important sector of young people who distrust these means, which according to the author is a result of their concern regarding the possibility of reprisal or damage and of their vision of social networks not as democratic structures, but as a source of antagonism and conflict with people who try to impose their own opinions on others. Within this geopolitical perspective, it is important to note

the influence of social networks in States that restrict individual and social rights. In the six countries belonging to the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), Elareshi et al. (2014) maintain that university students find adequate space on the Internet to publish their opinions and perceive, despite the risk, a way of satisfying their lack of freedom of expression; in other words, in scenarios where offline participation is practically non-existent, there is no room to complement it with digital; one is simply replaced by another.

In Hong Kong, where the peculiar integrating model of “One country, two systems” is applied, Ji et al. (2017) observe that online discussion is a relevant predictor of participation, but the influence is much greater when the debate is face-to-face. The authors argue that the discursive content in the digital sphere is not as rich, and at times excessively trivial, although they suggest that the cause of this is a result of political pressure from the Chinese government that entails, in turn, self-censorship by Hong Kong residents in sharing their opinions online.

In the particular case of Western States with democratic traditions, the results found by academic research are contrary to each other: Xenos et al. (2014) observe a strong relationship between the use of social media and political commitment among young people in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom; a fact that is encouraging according to the authors for the purpose of alleviating political inequalities.

However, Theocharis and Loewe (2015), in their study of Greek youth, question the effectiveness of social networks like Facebook in making a distinction between political discourse and political participation. Theocharis and Loewe’s vision is somewhat pessimistic, as they consider it debatable that activities and political expression in social networks can be viewed as political participation.

Boulianne (2011) offers a more moderate view in his study of university students in Canada: Although he shows his scepticism of a positive relationship between social networks and commitment, he does admit that social networks can help to obtain the necessary information for young people to participate in civic and political life, a fact that can assist them in blurring the lines between the traditional knowledge gap and political participation that separate the youth population from the adult population.

4.1. Promoting citizenship through the use of social networks

Social networks are increasingly becoming an instrument used by different organizations and political and social entities for the purpose of obtaining the support of citizens, although on many occasions they do not motivate participation or encourage interaction with the user, as evidenced by the research on the Twitter profile of Spanish mayors carried out by Catalina-García et al. (2014).

Furthermore, this occurred despite the fact that networks and social media are designed to offer the user personalized information (Saldaña et al, 2015). This practice seems to be universally widespread as suggested by Bennett et al. (2011) with regard to the civic and political organizations of the United States: Although some of these organizations are slowly realizing the potential of networks and adjusting themselves more to the participatory demands of the Actualizing Citizen (AC), many others remain out of place in the presence of these changes and maintain a communication based on the DC model.

The nearly identical reflection in social networks of the hierarchical structures exerted by certain organizations in their offline actions distances the citizen so that he or she does not feel motivated to engage in conversation, a basic principle of democracy, which is defended by Dahlgren (2005), among other authors. This way of using social networks is contrary to the suggestions set forth by Caldevilla (2009), which are based on obtaining maximum efficiency for citizen participation and relegating the desire to attract a large number of followers whose only participation is likely to be limited to the aforementioned clicktivism.

As a practical and specific case of relations with public actors on Facebook, Chan (2016) notes that the links between users and activists are closer and stronger than with political actors as a result of the former showing more skills in propagating their agenda and exercising influence.

This is an issue to bear in mind, as the same author, following the O-S-R-O-R model (Initial Orientation –Stimulus–Reasoning –Subsequent Orientatio– Response) to measure how the use of media influences behaviour, warns that Facebook users are more likely than non-users to participate in politics and protests.

Faced with this inefficient way of using the online environment, Robinson and Philips (2016) recommend creating spaces and policies that promote commitment and foster a sense of community, generating online sites for conflict resolution, providing facilities so that everyday procedures are accessible, and finally, personalizing content to maintain a “human touch”.

5. Become a citizen

Nearly all of the academic literature is in agreement in pointing out that appropriate and adequate education is key in the evolution of the individual as a citizen, so that critical media literacy can be developed (Buckingham & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2013); doing so requires that educational and family environments are on alert, not only for risks, but also for opportunities provided by the new technologies in order to ensure that minors are able to consolidate behaviour associated with ethical values strengthened by their inclusion in social networks; a behaviour which, according to De la Torre (2009), is linked to citizenship education that implies participation, and as a result, “spontaneous democratization”. Bennett et al. (2008) are critical regarding the content of civic educational programs, which they conclude focus more on the traditional model of citizenship (DC); for this reason, they consider it desirable to promote activities in participative networks that will also encourage the Actualizing Citizen (AC). Regarding young people, the same authors warn of the need to link civic knowledge to skills in the online environment available to this sector of the population in order for them not to be excluded from participation.

Along these lines, García Jiménez (2018) regrets the limitations of digital and media education, which at least in Spain, maintain an instrumental orientation that implies deficiencies in the development of critical and reflective skills that are key to generating active citizens.

In addition to education, Anduiza et al. (2010) consider that the exercise of citizenship requires, on one hand, a certain predisposition and will from the individual, and on the other hand, that they receive external impulses and incitements, as politics is first and foremost a collective action.

However, the authors show their pessimism regarding this last point, as they consider that this impulse or appeal from outside comes mostly in the form of receiving support or a positive response, exceedingly far from the deliberation which, according to Martínez Nicolás (2011), is a key element of the democratic ideal.

In a broader sense, Licerias (2014) agrees with Morduchowicz (2003) in stating that mature, effective consumption of media content results in the socialization of minors, although he recognizes that the effects are not always adequate. As an example, he shows the exposure to the resolution of problems through violence or the reception of inappropriate content during children's prime-time viewing hours. However, Choi (2016) argues that reflective consumption of news leads to a better understanding of politics and a resulting cognitive basis for participation, which is reinforced among those individuals who have more experience in social networks; this point is also raised by Hargittai (2003) on the positive relationship generated between the knowledge of Internet resources and efficiency in the use of the digital environment for political purposes and objectives; and by Rivas et al. (2015), who place special emphasis on the importance of using open data to model and consolidate citizen empowerment, enhance the social capabilities of the individual, and increase their self-awareness about the democratic rights that protect them.

6. Consumption and dissemination of information for the development of citizenship

The academic literature has found a direct link between the consumption of news and political participation, although no clear vision exists regarding the meaning of this relationship; therefore, the boundary of cause and effect is blurred.

On one hand, Yamamoto et al. (2015) observe that interest in expressing political opinions in the digital environment helps individuals to obtain a greater volume of important and effective information in order to be ready for a debate, sharing news or exchanging different points of view in forums or social networks, which consequently leads them to paying much more attention to the sources of information.

However, for authors such as Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2015), the interest in seeking information and contrasting it with second online sources is presented as a predictive element of political participation; and along the same line, Baker et al. (2011) conclude that the use of forums, chats and other interactive tools among young people from 16 to 24 years of age encourages their interest in participating in politics; an influence that they also observe with the consumption of traditional media, but to a far less extent.

Saldaña et al. (2015) find a direct link between cause and effect with regard to queries and involvement: as the individual consumes more news, the greater is their participation in politics.

Holt et al. (2013) also find that the consumption of social and traditional media is shown as a causal factor in reinforcing interest, especially during election periods. However, the degree of influence between one format and another depends on age: young people compensate for less attention to the political news of traditional media by using networks and social media.

Within this population sector, and coinciding with a preference for the digital domain, and especially for the online press, authors such as Freeman (2013) and Elareshi et al. (2014) conclude that gender is also a differentiating element: while men

are more interested in the frequent monitoring of information, women recognize that they only do it when something important is occurring.

However, Boulianne (2016) does not find a divergence in gender regarding the frequency of inquiry, but he does observe, as Casero-Ripollés (2012) point out, a direct relationship with age: as these people get older, their tendency to be informed increases, though whether or not the sources of inquiry are free is also important. With respect to the origin, in the study contributed by D'Haenens et al. (2007) on young residents of Flanders and the Netherlands, no differences were detected between the civic feeling stated by native-born residents and by those belonging to minorities; although it has been observed that the latter, especially Moroccans and Turks, direct their search to information regarding religion, art and culture, while the Dutch and Belgians opt more often for entertainment.

It is already undisputed that in general terms of consumption, the assimilation of the digital environment is more profound in young people than in adults, but it is questionable whether this is the only reason that younger people set aside traditional media.

In this regard, young people perceive that they tend to be stereotyped by these communication channels, with regard to both information and entertainment (Rodríguez San Julián and Megías, 2014) and the content does not interest them because it is far from their needs and demands (Yuste, 2015). Furthermore, the content does not inspire confidence, nor do young people consider it impartial (Echeverría, 2013), and young people sense a close affinity between the interests of the press and those of the dominant groups, both political and economic (Muñoz Tamayo et al., 2014).

When examining the treatment of content and information by the different mass media, Alcoceba and Mathieu (2007) conclude that young people are in fact displayed as culpable of negative, conflictive events. Consequently, the imbalance between the presumed instability of the juvenile world and the assumed stability of the adult world is strengthened.

The adoption of new technologies by the traditional media does not offer an incentive for young people to resort to these channels for news; in this sense, Vázquez Herrero and López García (2017) find that the mobile applications of three internationally recognized newspapers (Britain's Guardian, America's New York Times, and Spain's *El País*) do not always motivate the reader to delve deeper or experiment. They are often kept in the role of passive consumer without enhancing their self-exploration or content production.

These traits that characterize traditional media suggest that young people's need to be informed as citizens causes them to be inclined toward social networks, as affirmed by Yuste (2015) when he states that this is their natural environment due to the fact that it allows them to interact, and it offers a vast amount of information they can receive without spatial or temporal limitations.

Although García García et al. (2014) observe that in spite of the fact that the level of trust shown by young university students in online information is still low, their ability to adequately select content is high. This self-recognition leads them to consider the content they exchange with their environment as reliable, and they perceive it to be highly useful as it encourages their creativity, and they use it as a tool to solve problems. This search for information on the Internet is positively associated with political commitment and civic action (Pasek et al., 2006). Even access to social networks for private purposes can foster civic attitudes and contribute to political commitment (Yu, 2016).

7. Conclusions and discussion

There are several factors that highlight the prominence of the digital world in transforming participation in both political and social areas, which is mainly evident among young people when adopting new technologies in a natural way: In the first place, this phenomenon occurs within the context of the disaffection of the entire population in general, and of young people in particular, toward traditional models of democracy. Evidence of this is seen, as an example, in the high degree of voter abstention that occurs in elections.

Secondly, there is the horizontality provided by social networks and media for participation, which diffuses the hierarchical structure of representatives on one hand, and those who are represented on the other, in the presentation of opinions as well as in the process of decision-making.

Finally, as a complement to what was stated above, Internet has caused a radical change in the consultation and dissemination of news, not only because of the rapid speed that allows for these actions, but also - and perhaps more importantly - the ease with which any individual is able to access a digital device that can produce information that reaches a huge number of people without spatial limitations, thus generating new processes in the production of public opinion as an essential aspect of democratic participation.

Consequently, the contribution of new technologies to the generation of other practices of citizen participation is undisputed, although it is necessary to reflect on whether the conceptualization of citizenship has also undergone a transformation from its own foundations. The academic literature presented so far does not show a clear consensus.

In this regard, the duality of the Actualizing Citizen (AC) and Dutiful Citizen (DC) established by Bennett et al. (2008) indicates the different practices of political participation, and even increased empowerment of the individual as a citizen. However, has the meaning of citizenship really changed?

The reticence that has been suggested in research regarding clicktivism and slacktivism does not provide resounding optimism for the transformation of the concept. In fact, it has been observed that citizen involvement in the offline environment is essential for the practice of citizenship in the digital sphere.

The clicktivist phenomenon is one in which the individual reduces his or her civic or political participation to the online environment through retweets, marking content they like, or their participation in collecting online signatures without taking further action, and as such, there is no advancement in their civic or political commitment.

These actions show distrust or offer support to others, and in certain cases may give rise to citizens who believe they can improve society from a distance without deeper social commitment.

It is true that consequences resulting from different social movements (15-M as a paradigmatic case) would probably have remained anecdotal if they had occurred outside of social networks and new technologies, but various investigations have not hesitated to point out that being a citizen also implies a predisposition of the individual to play this role, and with less emphasis on the methods or channels used for its development.

Within this contemplation, another key is to continue delving deeper into three aspects that maintain diverse links with each other: First, the obstacles maintained by the great majority of currently established political and social entities, which

as various empirical investigations have shown, do not know or do not want to take advantage of the digital environment in maintaining direct and horizontal communication with the citizenry, and consequently, on many occasions the interests of these groups move away from the expectations of the individual to change his or her environment.

On the other hand, civic education is essential in order for the individual to know how to demonstrate a critical, constructive view of his or her surroundings from the period of youth as well as from the previous years of adolescence and childhood.

The related literature influences the development of this type of education that awakens motivation and empowerment. However, research shows that this education is not being implemented correctly and sufficiently. Linked to what is stated above, consumption and dissemination of information is key to citizen development.

However, there is no scientific agreement between what the cause is and what the effect is, or in other words, whether the consultation and publication of news reinforces the will of the individual to exercise his or her role as a citizen, or whether that quality is truly necessary in order for a citizen to be interested in current affairs.

Apart from this dilemma, it is clear that the boundless spread of Internet has shown a before and after in the consumption and dissemination of information, providing a comprehensive aspect to the concept of prosumers, especially among young people who choose mostly to exercise this action in networks and social media due to their digital nature and their scarce affinity for traditional media.

The review carried out on scientific research in the 21st century regarding citizenship and political participation highlights the evolution that has taken place: that of the role of social media in the dissimilarity between what is online and what is offline with regard to political commitment and the role of edu-communication in fostering critical thinking.

The respective meanings of citizenship and political participation have evolved more in the way in which they are carried out rather than in their content. The goals have been maintained over time, though the way in which both assumptions have evolved stands out.

It is precisely those actions that determine the meaning of the committed citizen in a way that is either more innovative or more classical, or in a style that is either more expressive or more traditional. In the development of these distinct actions, Internet access and the mastery of new technologies take a predominant role.

It is precisely the ease of access to the Internet and social networks that has given rise to a new activism that has evolved toward cyber-activism.

In the latter, citizens perceive a greater possibility of participation and rediscover themselves as people who are socially committed, willing to solve community problems or participate in promoting conversations with public civil servants who might be able to solve them. It does not directly transform society, but for those who practice it, a feeling of being socially committed is the result.

In democratic systems with the consolidated right to freedom of expression, these attitudes result mainly from the ease of access to social networks. However, social networks play a central role in societies where offline freedom of expression is not guaranteed.

There are two important features still to be promoted in the area of digital citizenship. On one hand, though it is true that organizations are increasingly using online communication tools, the motivation for their use is very limited; they could promote intercommunication with citizens who use social networks through the creation of specific platforms for committed action.

On the other hand, it is necessary for educational institutions to start becoming aware of the importance of developing critical media literacy, which will consequently help to achieve higher levels of social commitment, and therefore the exercise of real digital citizenship.

In order to adopt a new concept of citizenship, it is therefore necessary to transform different elements that entail, among other aspects, a new vision of citizen participation with a genuine assumption of this objective by currently established political-social groups who are convinced of the necessity to involve society as a whole, in addition to a true desire to educate individuals, and the certainty that these individuals will fulfil their role as citizens.

The new technologies are undisputed and tremendously effective tools for this change, but they are not enough, at least until the present time.

8. Bibliographic references

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