Social and political engagement of university students in the digital sphere: Social network uses for citizen participation*

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Abstract

This research, which focuses on some aspects that link the digital life of university students and their civic, political and social involvement, aims to determine the level of engagement of young people in association-related actions or institutions through digital networks. Additionally, this paper attempts to specify the relationship between the level of social/political participation of this sector of the population and the interest of its members in the social media profiles of civically engaged subjects or organizations. It also looks at differences in access and interactivity in profiles with social and/or participatory interest between young people with some degree of civic commitment and those who are not involved any associations. While the data obtained through a convenience sample support, once again, youth disaffection towards institutionalized politics, the high intensity of digital access among all young people is confirmed, which *a priori* increases the possibilities of making civil society stronger. However, the intensive use of social networks by young people is not positively associated with a greater degree of civic involve-

ment. Finally, it is observed that young people prefer to consume content rather than to produce it.

Keywords: youth; social networks; civic engagement; citizenship

Resum. *Compromís social i polític dels universitaris en l'esfera digital. Usos de les xarxes socials per a la participació ciutadana*

Aquesta investigació, que té per objecte d'estudi alguns aspectes que vinculen la vida digital dels universitaris i la seva implicació ciutadana, política i social, pretén determinar el grau de compromís d'aquests joves en accions o institucions associatives mitjançant les xarxes digitals. Així mateix, intenta precisar la relació entre el nivell de participació social/política d'aquest sector de la població i el seu interès en els perfils d'organitzacions o subjectes amb compromís ciutadà. També aborda l'existència de diferències en l'accés i la interactivitat en perfils amb interès social o participatiu entre els joves amb algun grau de compromís ciutadà i els desvinculats de l'associacionisme. Mentre que les dades obtingudes a través d'una mostra de conveniència avalen, un cop més, la desafecció juvenil cap a la política institucionalitzada, es confirma que la intensitat en l'accés digital és molt alta entre els joves, la qual cosa a priori incrementa les possibilitats de fer més forta la societat civil. No obstant això, l'ús intensiu que fan els joves de les xarxes socials no s'associa positivament amb un major grau d'implicació cívica. I, finalment, s'observa que opten més per consumir contingut que no pas per produir-ne.

Paraules clau: joventut; xarxes socials; compromís cívic; ciutadania

Resumen. *Compromiso social y político de los universitarios en la esfera digital. Usos de las redes sociales para la participación ciudadana*

Esta investigación, que tiene por objeto de estudio algunos aspectos que vinculan la vida digital de los universitarios y su implicación ciudadana, política y social, pretende determinar el grado de compromiso de estos jóvenes en acciones o instituciones asociativas mediante las redes digitales. Asimismo, intenta precisar la relación entre el nivel de participación social/política de este sector de la población y su interés en los perfiles de organizaciones o sujetos con compromiso ciudadano. También aborda la existencia de diferencias en el acceso e interactividad en perfiles con interés social o participativo entre los jóvenes con algún grado de compromiso ciudadano y los desvinculados del asociacionismo. Mientras los datos obtenidos a través de una muestra de conveniencia avalan, una vez más, la desafección juvenil hacia la política institucionalizada, se confirma que la intensidad en el acceso digital es muy alta entre los jóvenes, lo que a priori incrementa las posibilidades de hacer más fuerte a la sociedad civil. Sin embargo, el uso intensivo que hacen los jóvenes de las redes sociales no se asocia positivamente con un mayor grado de implicación cívica. Y, finalmente, se observa que optan más por consumir contenido que por producirlo.

Palabras clave: juventud; redes sociales; compromiso cívico; ciudadanía

1. Introduction

This paper examines some of the issues that connect young people's digital lives and their civic, political and social engagement. From this approach, there are many aspects which have to be taken into consideration: on the one

hand, the activities of this sector of the population in the cyberspace sphere, and more specifically in social networks; and on the other, the focus young people place on political and social issues, as well as their attitude and level of involvement vis-à-vis political, social and activist-based institutions. Another important issue is how people, institutions, movements and specific causes are organized and position themselves both online and offline.

This study aims firstly to determine how important the use of social networks is with regard to civic involvement by young university students. Additionally, it attempts to specify the relationship between the level of social/political participation by young people and their interest in profiles of civically engaged subjects or organizations. Finally, it seeks to discover any differences in access and interactivity in certain profiles among young people with a certain degree of civic commitment and those who are distanced from associations.

2. Current status of research

2.1. Digital uses by young people for civic engagement

The academic literature on uses of technologies investigates, among other approaches, how digital channels can promote greater citizen empowerment in society, particularly among young people. This population group shows evident symptoms of disaffection towards traditional political institutions (Benedicto, 2016), which is reinforced by the lack of confidence they feel in their leaders (Injuve, 2016), a feeling of powerlessness upon perceiving that they are not being listened to (Sant and Davies, 2017) and, finally, a negative attitude towards their opportunities to drive social change (Gavilán et al., 2017).

However, this highly pessimistic perspective may not necessarily be linked to scant interest in their environment. In this regard, Varela et al. (2015) found that young Chilean people who state that they feel indifferent towards conventional politics show greater civic commitment. In the same vein, Padilla de la Torre (2014) concluded that university students in Spain are sensitive to issues which affect their environment and whose nature need not be politics-related. However, the scant involvement of Spanish youth is apparent: only a quarter of them state they are involved in an association (Canal, 2014).

In this context, the terminological and conceptual duality contributed by Bennet et al. (2011) between the traditional model of *Dutiful Citizen* (DC) and the less conventional model of *Actualizing Citizen* (AC) arises, where the latter is adopted mainly by young people for more expressive styles of communication aimed at promoting commitment, with content exchanged through social networks and media. However, Zumárraga et al. (2017) did not observe a direct relationship between online dialogic uses and greater offline participation as they understand that conversations in social networks

relating to political issues tend to be simply a mere complementary argument in order to maintain interpersonal relationships.

What is also in question is that young people take advantage of networks in their role as citizens as they generally do not know how to interpret the information that reaches them from the online environment and, even less, how to understand it (Leblanc et al., 2018); their digital use of networks only requires a minimal effort (López and González, 2016); and they opt more to consume political content than to produce it (López and Anaya, 2016). However, there are variables that can refine the degree of importance for political communication conducted in social networks: being of an older age is related to greater engagement (Kurban et al., 2017) and certain transitory events contribute to transferring democracy to other, more horizontal spaces where society plays a larger role (Keane and Feenstra, 2014).

Here, *clicktivism* comes into play. This is a term used, among others, by Cornelissen et al. (2013) to define participation in the whole digital sphere with minimum effort while entailing the user's perception that they are getting involved, even if symbolically. The causes that can give rise to this low-level exploitation of social networks by young people is related to their perception that they are second-class citizens (Benedicto, 2016) and their scepticism regarding their ability to engage in collective action (Vromen et al., 2015). Even the young people that Gavilán et al. (2017) call "pro-digital" demonstrate a negative view of their ability to influence and lead changes, although they do understand that these digital platforms serve to express themselves freely. In addition to this, there is a loss of quality in the deliberation deriving from the exacerbated and, on occasion, enraged discourses disseminated from social networks (Johansson, 2018).

Despite this pessimistic view, there is a great deal of research which benevolently observes how networks are used to train people as citizens, although there are divergences when defining whether motivation in the online environment is the cause or the effect of commitment in the physical setting (Espinar-Ruiz and González-Río, 2015). Benedicto (2016) raised the question of complementarity between the two options upon concluding that civic experience is concocted in the different physical and virtual settings in which young people are immersed. Quan et al. (2015) considered that this dilemma must have already been overcome as a consequence of the gradual normalization of actions in the digital sphere. Holt et al. (2013) also concluded that political participation can no longer be measured solely by traditional actions such as turning up to vote or getting involved in an organization. Digital activities such as uploading content or taking part in online discussions need to be included.

Authors such as Díaz Navarro and Mateo Mejía (2015) observed a shift in the contemporary political environment following the adaptation of social networks by young people which has enabled them to build a critical discourse in opposition to the official messages. In specific spatial contexts, González Lizárraga et al. (2016) observed that Mexican university students

feel comfortable expressing their opinions on social networks, despite acknowledging that they are not involved in social and political organizations. Vromen et al. (2015) found that youngsters from Australia, the USA and the UK who demonstrate a certain level of engagement prefer to participate in activities in the digital environment because it is less conflictive for them. This is joined by the decreasing apathy of young people with regard to politics and the increase in new youth movements linked to digital technology (Domínguez, López and Ortiz-Henderson, 2017). In their review of "technopolitics", Kurban et al. (2017) hold that the current trend is producing a more efficient democratic model based on the greater emancipation of the individual and on decentralization and horizontality.

By contrast, part of the literature does not understand digital engagement to be sufficiently effective if it is not previously accompanied by a certain degree of civic engagement and awareness. Padilla de la Torre (2014) concluded that increased Internet access does not correlate with greater citizen participation but that there have to be other pre-existing actions that show awareness and commitment, because otherwise the attitudes observed in the digital environment are merely superficial. Along the same lines, Cáceres et al. (2015) positively valued Internet use to facilitate social and political changes, but in reality it is not the sole decisive element. Changes also require real commitment in the physical environment which, among other consequences, lowers the importance of *clicktivism*-related activities. As regards exchanging and consulting information, Beam et al. (2018) have raised the question of whether, more than educational level, a key factor is users' interest in politics.

2.2. Adaptation by institutions and associations to the digital sphere

Immersion in the digital environment to train and engage citizens must be taken into account both by the institutions which aspire to increase actions that foster social participation and by NGOs and parties whose political priority has to be the development of active citizenship and civic commitment (Bee and Guerrina, 2014). Among the ensuing consequences, Warren et al. (2014) argued that postings by institutions on social networks promote citizen engagement and awareness, among other aspects.

Candón-Mena and Sierra-Caballero (2017) confirmed that young people are drawn to a horizontal, open and informal model such as that which can be developed online, while they reject traditional calls for debate and protest promoted in the physical environment by different socio-political and economic groups. However, several studies (Gallego Dueñas, 2017; López de Ayala et al., 2016; Catalina-García et al., 2015) have shown that neither political representatives nor activist communities know how, or want, to take advantage of the interactivity provided by social networks, as they have a similar attitude in both the digital and the physical environment. With an even more pessimistic approach, and regarding the arrival of Big Data as a tool potentially aimed at political manipulation and control, Duncan (2018) has

suggested that new activism models be based on transparency and democratic responsibility.

Mere use of the Internet by associations is no guarantee of success. Alvídrez and Franco-Rodriguez (2016) hold that messages have to be believable and the author's profile must inspire confidence in order for users to become involved in certain civic actions, although they consider that the agenda set by the organization itself is more decisive in achieving this end. Casero-Ripollés (2015) observed training on social networks by some civic platforms and organizations, but argued that traditional media still hold sway in establishing the public agenda.

Authors such as Blandford et al. (2013) found that certain events of special social interest foster network use, get increasing numbers of people involved each time and prompt them to communicate with each other. Situations such as unemployment and the perception that this problem, which far from being solved is becoming substantially worse, marks an important trend among those affected towards participating online in social and political actions (Novo and Vicente, 2016).

3. Research objectives and questions

As a general objective, this paper aims to explore the use of digital networks by young university students in their role as citizens in order, as a specific end, to draw a comparison based upon their connection, if any, to the social fabric. To develop this aim, three main research questions are raised:

1. How does young people's level of involvement in association networks or activities influence their use of digital networks?
2. Is the level of young people's social/political engagement related to greater interest in the profiles of civically engaged subjects or organizations at different levels?
3. Are there significant differences in the degrees of interactivity (they only look things up, they show their support/aversion or share and, at a higher level, they post comments and opinions) between young people with some degree of civic engagement and those not involved in associations?

4. Methodology

This research is based on a self-administered survey of undergraduate students at the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos of Spain. It aims to compare the use of social networks for participation by young university students who are civically engaged in the non-virtual environment and by those who are not. Issues are examined such as the number of profiles they have on social media, uses in social networks related to their civic ties, levels of interactivity by access profiles, motivations for use and perceptions of social networks.

Given the nature of the study, a convenience sample has been used. The objective was to ensure participation by students in different years of study and programmes in a similar ratio to the overall data for the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos student body. On this occasion, surveys completed by students over 25 years of age have not been taken into consideration, as they are not part of the population under analysis.

4.1. Study sample

After filtering the data, the final sample comprised 461 students in 10 different degree programmes. Of the total number of students who participated (mean age 20.32 years old), 34.9% of them were enrolled in the first year of the corresponding degree programme, 38.8% in the second, 24.3% in the third and 2% in the fourth. Of the total sample, 71.7% were women and 28.3% were men. In addition, 76.3% of the participants studied and 23.7% both worked and studied at the same time (2 lost cases).

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire with a structure based on closed-ended questions, which was answered on a voluntary basis in the classroom. Before administering the survey, it was tested on a small group of students. The field work was carried out in 2017 and the information gathered was filtered so as to be subsequently coded in a database. The data were then refined, reviewed and processed using SPSS Statistics 22.0 software.

5. Results

5.1. Offline involvement and following on social networks

Almost half of the young respondents (42.8%) stated that they are involved (as a member or supporter) in some type of social body or association. Among these, the highest percentage is found in sporting clubs and organizations (20%) and, at considerably lower rates, in charity and leisure clubs and organizations. It is important to point out that university students show the lowest participation in trade unions (6.9%). Involvement in political parties is also low: of the 11.5% who stated they had some kind of involvement with these organizations, more than half are only supporters and one third does not participate in the activities proposed by them.

Browsing intensity is very high among all the young people surveyed, as practically all of them (94.3%) go online every day and those who do so most are not involved in the association sphere (53.8%). Greater importance is found in the order of preference of the main social networks (those followed by more than 80% of the respondents): those who participate in associations mainly prefer Facebook, followed by Instagram and Twitter. This contrasts with those who are not socially and politically involved, who prefer, firstly, Instagram followed by Facebook and Twitter. Regarding Twitter, which is

currently deemed one of the most widely used social networks for political and social expression, a difference can be observed between the two groups of young people analysed. This result suggests that university students who are involved in an association of some kind in the physical environment are more prone, among other tasks, to be active in the online environment in the online environment (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentages of profiles in social networks based on respondents' involvement in the association sphere
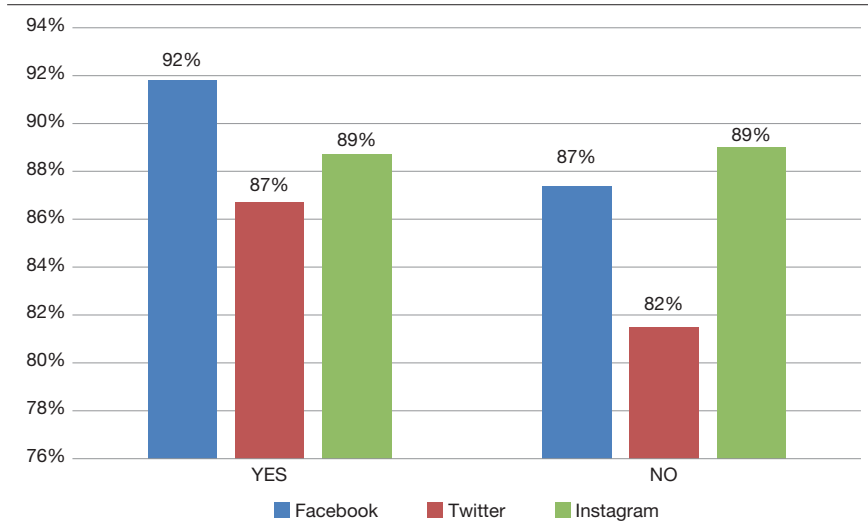
Source: own elaboration.

5.2. Online network uses related to civic involvement

There is a greater tendency by young people involved in the association fabric to establish interaction through social networks with people who show similar interests and tastes: 71.7% of them use this channel to develop such relationships compared to 61.4% of those who are not involved in any organizations. However, those who are not involved in an organization show a higher propensity to engage in this practice on a daily basis, whereas those who do participate in an association are split in similar percentages between 1–2 times per week and daily.

Among the different uses related to citizen participation, interaction with other people is the only item which offers significant results that differentiate the two groups analysed. For the rest of the variables, the results of the chi-square (x^2) test showed no differences according to whether or not they are involved in the collaborative fabric. In this respect, most of the respondents from both groups stated that they post content on their social media profiles once or twice a week ($x^2 = .323$). However, it is true that those who state they

never post content are mostly young people with no links to associations. Furthermore, and to reinforce the slight differences, an identical percentage (6.21%) posts content on a daily basis in the two cases.

Searches for the latest news in social networks provide no remarkable differences in the corresponding data (x^2 = .528). The majority of both groups check the news daily and the last percentage refers to young people who never do so, both among those who are involved in associations and among those who are not. Apart from this, and regardless of frequency, a considerably higher percentage is found among members and/or supporters: 91.2% check the news at least 1–2 times a week compared to 87.9% of young people who are not involved in associations. These significant results suggest that offline links to associations has less influence on checking news than the higher education the young people receive, which is one of the most important biases in this analysis.
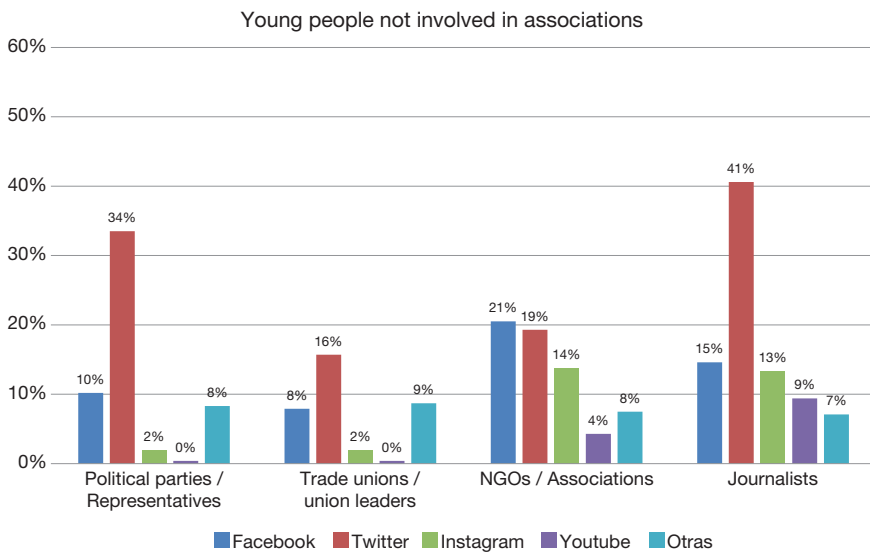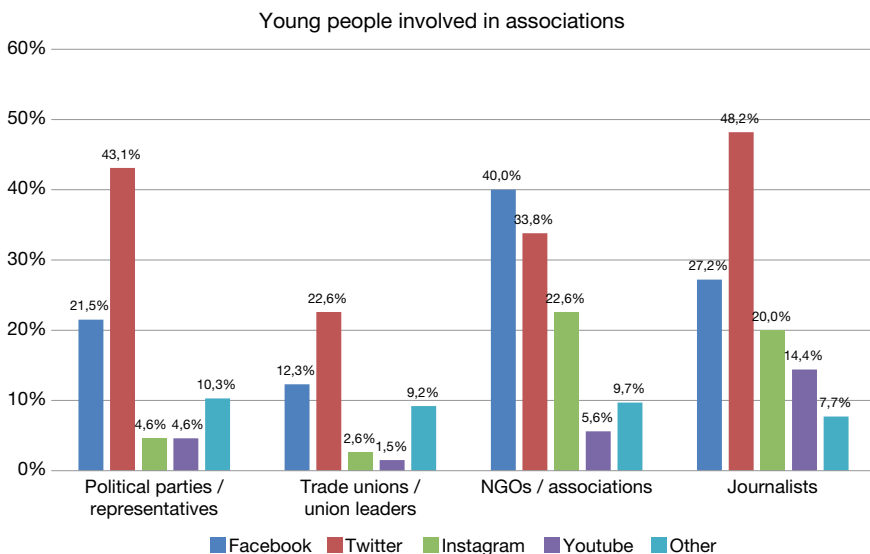
5.3. Places of access in the networks

Young people who participate in associations in the physical environment show greater interest in social media profiles which feature a civically committed person or organization (Figures 2 and 3). In all the items and networks analysed, a higher percentage of socially and/or politically committed students are interested in these profiles. The greatest difference can be observed in access to profiles corresponding to NGOs and other social groups, followed by journalists and, thirdly, political parties and representatives. Interest in the social media accounts of trade unions and/or union representatives is very moderate in all social networks. As suggested, this an issue which these associations should reflect on given that the digital environment has become an essential part of the information and communication routines of young people.

5.4. Interactivity with certain profiles

With the exception of certain sites where significant differences cannot be detected (civic platforms, sports clubs and the media), in the rest of the profile types a higher percentage of young people with some degree of civic engagement is observed to interact than those who are not involved in associations (Table 1). However, the ways they interact are, in general, fairly weak. In the best of cases, just over one third (37.6%) of the respondents who are members and/or supporters only reads comments on the accounts they visit but does not establish a textual or non-textual dialogic connection.

The data regarding the degree of interactivity (posting opinions, suggestions or questions) are not encouraging: only 12.5% of those involved in associations and 7.4% of those who state they have no offline involvement are interactive. These results suggest that despite being digital natives, university students either take little advantage of the Internet to express their opin-

Figures 2 and 3. Access to certain profiles by social network and involvement in associations

Young people involved in associations

Facebook Twitter Instagram Youtube Other

Young people not involved in associations

Facebook Twitter Instagram Youtube Otras

Source: own elaboration.

Table 1. Interaction on sites according to respondents' links to the association fabric (in percentages)

	Read the comments		Mark with a like and/or share		Give opinions, make suggestions and/or ask questions	
	Linked	Unlinked	Linked	Unlinked	Linked	Unlinked
Public associations	35.6	27.1	18	11.9	9.2	6.6
NGOs	47.4	26.4	41.9	19.9	13.9	4.5
Cultural associations	49.3	36.2	35.1	25.2	13.5	9.2
Political parties	42	30	22.9	15.7	15	8.8
Political leaders	38.8	27.6	22	15.2	13.9	8.5
Trade unions	21.7	15	13.9	7.6	7.7	4.8
Union leaders	19.8	14.4	13.1	7.7	7.2	4.4
Journalists	45.9	35.6	37.5	26.6	19.3	12.1
x̄ of the total	37.6	26.5	25.6	16.2	12.5	7.4

Source: own elaboration.

ions vis-à-vis profiles which can promote involvement by citizens or that the comments posted on these profiles do not raise awareness among young people or awaken their interest.

As regards the type of accounts they access, cultural associations, NGOs and journalists are, in that order, those in which respondents interact the most. Trade unions and union leaders rank last with percentages of around 11%; a figure which coincides with the comments above about the degree to which young people follow these organizations and their representatives.

5.5. Motivations for use and perceptions of social networks

Keeping up to date with the information published is the main reason why young people follow the profiles of parties, NGOs and other socially and politically committed entities and individuals. This option was chosen by 38.5% of respondents involved in associations and by 23.9% of those not involved in offline activism. For those with no links to associations, additional reasons include being able to change what they do not like and expressing complaints (16.6% and 15.6%, respectively). In contrast, the university students belonging to some type of organization stated that expressing complaints (26.1%) and the opportunity to exchange information with others in their environment (21.2%) as further reasons for following these profiles. This variable suggests the intention of young people who are committed in the offline environment to expand their civic involvement to the digital environment.

It is also necessary to point out the difference between some of the proposed items. Although the option of "keeping up to date" is the main reason chosen by both groups, there is an almost 15% difference between the two, which suggests that young people have a greater interest in finding out what is happening in the social and political context. The fact that there is a differ-

ence of more than 10% regarding expressing complaints is also symptomatic. This suggests that the most committed either have more confidence in the effectiveness of online networks for this purpose or consider that their involvement as citizens should also be shown and expressed in social media. In third place, the 10.4% difference detected in the greater identification by those involved in associations with the profiles they visit and/or follow is significant; thus indicating the greater attachment of these young people to goals based on a common interest, which are presumably set by the holders of these accounts.

Despite all the differences presented thus far, it is paradoxical that the perceptions held by both groups coincide in practically all the options proposed, with chi-square values that indicate non-significant differences. The only difference, although not extreme, is observed in a greater belief among young people with no links to associations that "anybody" can express an opinion on online networks without fear of retaliation. This appears to indicate that some of the more committed young people may have had or are aware of a negative experience in this regard.

6. Conclusions and discussion

The current academic reflections on young people, citizenship and the Internet coincide in three points: firstly, the "citizenship deficit" of contemporary democracies extends to the entire population. Secondly, young people show evident symptoms of disaffection towards traditional political institutions. Thirdly, while in the offline environment there is a shortage of spaces where people can reflect and debate publicly about the proposals of different social agents, Internet in general (and social networks in particular) constitutes, at the very least, a platform which offers new opportunities.

These three common places can give rise to optimistic or pessimistic working hypotheses depending on the case, but refer implicitly to regulatory models which have been strongly consolidated in ethical-political reflection. The old republicanism and the more recent reflections on deliberative democracy link the first and second points as critical to modern liberal democracies from the perspective of a regulatory recovery of the concept of active citizenship. The second and third points are connected through the "public forum" idea, promoted by digital young people in which, as Sunstein (2006) holds, new technologies make it remarkably and increasingly possible for people to become exposed to diverse opinions, as well as presenting excellent occasions for there to be substantial discussions about politics and principles, and for experiences to be shared. All this makes it possible to make the leap from mere description to an ethical-aspirational model which creates, at the same time, a framework for reflection on the future of democracy.

From this point on, scholars disagree. There are those who benevolently observe the use of social networks to train individuals as citizens and those who perceive with desperation that we are witnessing lost opportunities.

Our work appears to fall into this explicitly and implicitly known context, confirming some rather pessimistic data. For example, the low rates of involvement in trade unions and parties substantiate, once again, the disaffection felt among young people towards institutionalized politics. At the same time, it confirms that the intensity of Internet browsing is very high among all young people and there is no doubt that this increases the possibilities of making civil society stronger. However, the intensive use of social networks by young people is not positively associated with a greater degree of political engagement. Furthermore, confirming the pessimistic results of other studies, young people prefer to consume content rather than to produce it, that is, they mostly share participatory content but do not generate their own.

If interactivity refers to the properties of technologies which are designed to enable users to make significant choices, and participation refers to the properties of culture, where – collectively or individually – groups make decisions which have an impact on their shared experiences (Jenkins et al., 2016: 12), we can therefore say that our young people "interact with" many objects and subjects, but that even so they "participate in" very few activities embodying citizenship.

However, it is possible that the first common place on which to built the entire structure, the so-called "citizenship deficit", has to be revised in light of the consistency of the data, which indicate that it is very difficult to achieve the levels of politicization intended by the regulatory model. Additionally, the data on media consumption confirm time and again that young people, much more than adults, for life cycle causes, prefer trivial, escapist content.

None of this prevents the current cohort of young people from being relatively more involved in political developments than previous cohorts. Our survey data also show that almost half of the young people (42.8%) participate (as either a member or supporter) in some type of social organization. Moreover, young people involved in association networks show a greater tendency to interact through social networks with people who show similar interests and tastes. These data indicate a growing "social capital" in the classic sense, which could be more relevant in the long term than data on political participation in the strict sense.

How has the arrival of the Internet transformed the production and distribution of the cultural objects that enable many authors (Jenkins, 2008, for example) to identify the emergence of a new cultural system? What are the principles and characteristics of this culture? In what way does a participatory culture developed on the Internet differ from other forms of participatory culture? These questions remain open but our data seem to suggest that the development of new dynamics of weak interaction does not generate per se these great transformations of the political culture that many were hoping for.

In order to participate fully, actively, creatively and ethically in participatory culture – that is, to participate significantly – young people must develop a set of cultural skills. Even if most of these skills are learned in traditional

institutions for socialization (the family, school, religion, etc.), the web has created informal opportunities which have the advantage of disregarding differences of class, race, gender and educational level. This permits weak links to be established with like-minded groups and a certain degree of social capital to be developed, although it does not remedy the hypothetical "citizenship deficit" of the regulatory model, at least in the short term.

Finally, this study has some limitations, which will be taken into account in future research. First, the sample used is not a non-probabilistic sample. In addition, it only comprises young people pursuing a degree in higher education. Finally, an aspect which should be examined in greater depth is how to define terms such as "civic engagement" in a more specific and categorized manner; a fact which affects the relevance of the results of an empirical study.

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