

## Youth, digitalization, and activism. Some reflections

Juventud, digitalización y activismo. Algunas reflexiones

Juventude, digitalização e ativismo. Algumas reflexões

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### Abstract

Although a certain attitude of opposition to the adult and established world has traditionally been presumed by the youngest, it is true that some current social conditions, in addition to digital technology itself, make it more present now. Activism in and through social networks has become a frequent channel for this age group to present their demands and discontent, and it is worth reflecting on the characteristics that surround this generation and also the particularities of the use they make of technology itself. Among the former, the lengthening of dependence on the adult



world stands out, which implies a potential delay in the processes of maturity. This brings with it a vital discontent that finds in the networks a perfect setting to be manifested and to fight against the establishment. Regarding technology, it is clear that it satisfies the needs of young people at many levels, which makes it almost essential for their daily lives, at least in the developed societies. These reflections raise questions to be addressed within the framework of the study of young people and digital activism and that have to do with the degree of development of their digital competence, with their ability to fight against disinformation and its devastating effects on democracies, and also with the most human roots that raises the multidimensional use they make of technology. Young people occupy and live in digital spaces, and this implies radically confronting this reality, also from research.

**Keywords:** Youth; Digitalization; Activism; Digital competence; Mobile communication; Disinformation

## Resumen

Aunque se ha presumido tradicionalmente una cierta actitud de oposición al mundo adulto y establecido por parte de los y las más jóvenes es cierto que algunas condiciones sociales actuales, además de la propia tecnología digital, lo hacen ahora más presente. El activismo en redes sociales se ha convertido en un cauce frecuente para que este grupo de edad presente sus demandas y descontento, y merece la pena reflexionar sobre las características que rodean a esta generación y también las particularidades del uso que hacen de la propia tecnología. Entre las primeras destaca el alargamiento de la dependencia del mundo adulto, que implica un potencial retraso en los procesos de madurez. Esto lleva consigo un descontento vital que encuentra en las redes un escenario perfecto para ser manifestado y para pelear contra lo establecido. Respecto a la tecnología, es evidente que esta satisface necesidades de la juventud a muchos niveles, lo que la convierte en casi esencial para su día a día en las sociedades más desarrolladas. Estas reflexiones plantean preguntas para ser afrontadas en el marco del estudio de la juventud y el activismo digital y que tienen que ver con el grado de desarrollo de su competencia digital, con su capacidad de luchar contra la desinformación que asola a las democracias, y también con el fondo más humano que plantea el uso multidimensional que hacen de la tecnología. Los y las jóvenes ocupan y viven en los espacios digitales, y esto implica afrontar de manera radical esta realidad, también desde la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Juventud; Digitalización; Activismo; Competencia digital; Comunicación móvil; Desinformación

## Resumo

Embora uma certa atitude de oposição ao mundo adulto e estabelecido tenha sido tradicionalmente presumida pelos mais jovens, é verdade que algumas condições sociais atuais, além da própria tecnologia digital, a tornam mais presente agora. O ativismo nas redes sociais tornou-se um canal frequente para essa faixa etária apresentar suas demandas e descontentos, cabendo refletir sobre as características que cercam essa geração e também as particularidades do uso que fazem da própria tecnologia. Entre os primeiros, destaca-se o prolongamento da dependência do mundo adulto, o que implica um potencial atraso nos processos de amadurecimento. Isso traz consigo uma insatisfação vital que encontra nas redes um cenário perfeito para se manifestar e lutar contra o estabelecido. No que diz respeito à tecnologia, é evidente que ela atende às necessidades dos jovens em vários níveis, o que a torna quase

essencial para seu cotidiano nas sociedades mais desenvolvidas. Estas reflexões levantam questões a serem abordadas no âmbito do estudo dos jovens e do ativismo digital e que têm a ver com o grau de desenvolvimento da sua competência digital, com a sua capacidade de lutar contra a desinformação que assola as democracias, e também com a componente mais humana que supõe o uso multidimensional que fazem da tecnologia. Os jovens ocupam e vivem em espaços digitais, e isso implica enfrentar radicalmente essa realidade, também a partir da pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Juventude; Digitalização; Ativismo; Competência digital; Comunicação móvel; Desinformação

## 1. Introduction

Whilst they are not the only actors in the digital world or social activism, the younger generations are part of the genesis and promotion of movements that promote a wide range of social causes (Jenkins et al., 2016). This is perhaps because this age group has two features that make this easier or possible: first, they are in a life stage in which, due to their personal circumstances, they tend to be critical of the system and seek (often radical) improvements that satisfy their needs; and second, they are familiar with the digital technology that helps the online dissemination and promotion of their actions (Fernandez-Prados et al., 2021; Earl et al., 2017).

Just as one example, we only have to think of the role played by young Greta Thunberg in demanding that policy makers provide more concrete and effective measures against climate change (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020). Her activism is not only digital-based - for example, when she went to appear before the US Senate, she crossed the Atlantic by boat to minimize the carbon footprint of her journey. All of her gestures and actions are coherent and consistent with her position, but they also create perfect material for going viral on social media. This includes polemical perspectives that, in the long run, also increase the range of her positions and points of view. Greta's youthfulness has been pointed to by many of her detractors, who consider that she lacks sufficient experience. This however has often contributed to her impact as it also directly challenges young people, who are often accused of precisely this in order to deny their participation in social matters.

This paper aims to delve deeper into these two aspects of the younger generation: the personal, social and cultural characteristics that make them uncomfortable yet necessary agents for change; and their access to and widespread use of digital technology, which puts them in a strong position to give voice to their demands. Beforehand, a brief review of some of the issues in contemporary culture that affect this demographic group. The conclusions will necessarily be open-ended, as this situation raises new questions that need also to be addressed through communication.

## 2. Features of contemporary culture

Having been largely globalized through the influence of the media (Flanagan et al., 2007), capitalism and more recently digital technology, Western societies share some salient features. These social features are not exclusive to young people, but certainly affect them directly and indirectly by creating a certain environment in which they grow up and are educated, and by providing them with keys to self-knowledge and self-understanding, which will lead to a certain way of responding to social and political events. There are four general features that, for the purposes of this article, are of particular interest.

First, it is commonly acknowledged that Western society is suffering from a crisis of values (Holton, 1987; Kosellek, 2000; Amin, 2004) and that the prevailing convictions and ideologies that have been dominant for centuries are no longer particularly valid. However, according to Lipovestky (1990), it could be said that this is not the end of ideologies but, rather, that the time has come for them to be recycled in the "orbit of fashion". The French sociologist says that never before in history have there been so many changes in cultural and ideological orientation and a shift from an interpretation of the world that aspired to a certain grandeur in the face of the rapid consumption that is more a feature of market societies (Lipovestky, 1990). And the elusive nature of ideological matters is undoubtedly destined to increase and assume the liquid character that Baumann (2008) spoke about. Lipovestky's rather optimistic reading on this point is based on the fact that Western society has achieved a level of democracy that allows the ideologies which led us there to become more optional and less serious. This new ideological sensitivity has opened up new spectrums which, until recently, were of a minority or residual nature - such as the defense of the environment through the fight against climate change (Beloti et al., 2022; Han & Ahn, 2020) and gender ideology (Russell et al., 2010).

Secondly, as Jameson (1984) notes, there is a certain "disappearance of the sense of history" in contemporary culture. This loss involves denying or rejecting any valued aspect of the past that leads to living in an eternal present. This post-historical generation is sometimes critical of the personal and collective sacrifices that were necessary to achieve certain social conquests. Judging the past on the basis of contemporary moral assumptions often leads to a sometimes forceful repudiation of attitudes, behaviors or decisions from a past that cannot be changed and which tends to be judged harshly.

Consequently, the rapid mutability of ideologies that point to a future that has no guide - or is at best continuously changing - is compounded by a past that has no prescriptive value. And in this perpetual or eternal present which remains as the only possibility, an eminently emotional regime has been established that is sometimes the only possible guide. But this has its own paradoxes, since "today, scientific-technological rationality that believes only what it sees and can be demonstrated with positive scientific methods, coexists simultaneously with the romantic ideal of self-expression that has found its best playground in the internet, and particularly in social networks" (González, 2011, p.99).

Contemporary culture often indulges in emotions that have a romantic but often short-lived impetus: only in the present, without concrete implications or consequences for the future. A future, on the other hand, that looks uncertain in all areas, and particularly for the younger generations, who see increasing job insecurity and the difficulty of completing the stages of their lives, including their families' financial independence (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Milan, 2019).

The last feature to be highlighted in this text on contemporary culture is the transformation of the transcendental conditions of experience according to Kant: time and space. Globalization, and in particular technology, has significantly changed contemporary men and women's perception of space and time (Earman, 1991). The world is perceived as closer, smaller. New spaces appear, such as virtual ones, with huge amounts of information that generate the illusion of being manageable, explorable. There is a continuous transition from the concrete and accessible offline world to the sometimes distant and aspirational online world. Something similar happens when it comes to the perception of time: not long ago, the concept of real time, the response time of a system to a sent command, was estimated at four seconds. Today's technology is instantaneous, and communication can take place very rapidly through video, audio, images and text. Search tools return hundreds of thousands of results to specific searches in mere milliseconds, changing the perception of the value that the user of technology places on a second, which takes on a new depth if - as has been said - the present is all that is real and valid.

This brief review of some of the characteristic features of contemporary culture defines a crossroads marked by three axes: a society in which the future does not offer a solid guide as a reference; a past where the possibility of serving as a model for understanding itself is denied; and the *perpetual present* (Jameson, 1984) in which the prevailing emotional regime is eminently romantic and tends to let emotions show through with a high degree of naturalness (González, 2011). It is at this crossroads that young people find themselves today.

### 3. Young people and structures

Growing up has always implied a degree of breaking with that which is established. The naïve - or radically new - view of reality that young people have raises questions that the adult world no longer asks itself. Also embedded in the very tension around youth is the will to change that which does not conform to what is considered ideal or necessary (Ginwright and James, 2002). It is common to speak of generational gaps with all the connotations of the word gap: rupture, change, distance, even abyss. And these have occurred historically and are part of the process of personal and social evolution (Sharkey, 2008).

The youth of the early 21st century - the millennials or generation Z - have grown up in a specific cultural, social and economic context that has highlighted certain characteristics

compared to those of previous generations. In this context, technology has also played a highly relevant role insofar as it changes their self-perception, personal identification and relationship with others as well as with the immediate and distant environment.

According to Galland (2001), we are experiencing the consequences of an institutionalization of post-adolescence, brought about by the more or less explicit decisions taken to extend school life in order to ensure a better balance of the labor market, and of the system as a whole. What had been the norm until then - that a 16-year-old could get his or her first formal job and perhaps be able to start and support a family by the age of 20 - became impossible, as entry requirements were tightened and also as child protection systems were improved. The near-universal adoption of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child established 18 as the age for special protection.

In addition to offering not only university but also vocational training programs, it was assumed that adult society, the structure or system, was responsible for making decisions for an age group which, until then, had been able - or had been forced - to make them for themselves. For Galland (2001), post-adolescence can be understood as a revolution in terms of the value that different generations place on each other and the obligations that are established between them. Bejin (1983) recognized that in the late 19th century the idea began to spread that adolescence was not necessarily a brief and painful transition between two relatively long periods of life. Due, among other factors, to economic difficulties that meant there were no jobs for this younger age group, a collective effort was made to extend their entry into adulthood. By compensating young people for these disadvantages while denying them any power, adult generations would keep them in a state of prolonged dependency that served their own interests (Galland, 2001). This suggests, firstly, that the system itself has fostered a culture that has positively encouraged a degree of infantilism and provoked an unwanted or prolonged immaturity among young people.

This concern, or need to care, that adult society has assumed has also taken on other inherent characteristics due to other aspects such as the low birth rate, which has resulted in smaller households or family units, with an average of two children in many Western societies. A simple combination of these two factors makes it possible to understand that fathers and mothers have had the opportunity - as well as the concern - to care more closely and attentively for their offspring. Sometimes this leads to what is commonly noted with some concern: a potential infantilization of this age group, which are also exempted from making other decisions that their family makes for them and hinders them reaching full maturity.

Maturity is understood as the ability to differentiate one's inner life from the external world (Hogan and Roberts, 2004). Children often have imaginary companions that they believe and experience as real (Gleason and Hohmann, 2006). At this age, imagination - the inner world - intertwines with the external world in a natural way. But maturing is about acquiring the psychological resources to make this distinction; something that is hard for

today's youth to cope with. Sometimes they seem to think that the right ideas and the right attitude are enough to change reality (Naval and Sádaba, 2003). This dichotomy between ideals and everyday life produces a gap between judgements and actions. And this can lead to a certain predisposition to live in their imaginary world and, more specifically, in the virtual world. This limits their contact with a reality they have not come to know, and which depresses them.

This infantilization, encouraged by society to some extent, is perfectly described in an article published by The Atlantic in 2014: "The Overprotected Kid". It tells how in the mid-1990s Norway passed a law requiring children's playgrounds to meet certain safety standards. Ellen Sandseter, an early-childhood teacher in Trondheim, had just had her first child and watched as all the playgrounds in her neighborhood became as barren as they were boring. Sandseter, who had written her master's thesis on adolescents' need for risk, had perceived that if they did not satisfy that need in some socially acceptable and tolerable way, adolescents were likely to develop riskier and more careless behaviors. From her experience as a new mother, she wondered if the same would be true for younger children. In 2011 she published the results of her research in a paper entitled "Children's Risky Play From an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences". Children, she concluded, have a sensory need to experience danger and excitement. This does not mean that what they do is dangerous, but they do need to feel that they are taking a risk. It scares them, but then they get over the fear. In her work she identified six types of risky play: (1) exploring heights or getting a bird's eye view, climbing as high as it takes to feel afraid; (2) handling dangerous tools - scissors, knives, hammers - which at first seem impossible but which at this age they learn to master; (3) being near things that are dangerous (playing near water or fire so that they are aware that there is danger nearby); (4) pushing, shoving and fighting, where children learn to negotiate aggression and cooperation; (5) the risk of speed (cycling, skiing at speeds that feel too fast); and (6) exploring reality for oneself (Sandseter, 2011). It might seem that Sandsteter's exercise responds to a sense of nostalgia for a past that will not return, but her conclusions are consistent with other research on the maturing processes that contemporary youth go through - such as those led by Kyung Hee Kim (2011), who warns of a greater disposition to depression, narcissism and a reduced capacity for empathy among this young generation, as a result of this deficit of play and risk-taking (Sandsteter, 2011).

All this does not prevent young people from being a stage during which, as a result of its characteristic physical and psychological energy, this latent nonconformity seeks a way to emerge and make itself felt (Jay, 2012). In this context, the emergence and spread of technology and social media makes this possible and indeed occur.

All of this does not negate the importance of other activism activities beyond youth, or the involvement of other social groups. However, the increasing digitalization of society does make this age group a key player and particularly worth studying.

## 4. Digital natives? Young people and the digital environment

Children, adolescents, and young adults seem to fit the profile of *natives* when it comes to the digital world. Although there is no scientific evidence to support the existence of a generation that can be homogeneously and generally viewed as a generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), it is equally true that this age group has, in general terms, greater familiarity and continuous contact with technology across multiple contexts - both educational and family. This makes them preferential users of technology, especially in Western societies. This intense use of technology within multiple dimensions of their lives can sometimes be associated with risks. And, especially in the case of minors, there is a perceived need to protect them from potential risks.

For them, as a result of the lack of personal references to a world without technology or because they have not experienced other fears associated with using it, technology enables them to create a more fluid relationship with screens and the digital environment. In line with Buckingham (2015), it should not be forgotten that this special relationship does not imply greater knowledge as such. Nor, particularly, greater digital competence as defined. Buckingham himself warns that such intense use does not develop an ethical sense among users of the implications of the technology that needs to be worked out and dealt with in a different way. Whilst their technological skills may occasionally be higher for certain things, the critical and confident use postulated by international frameworks as characteristic of digital competence is far from complete (Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022).

That said, it is clear that in addition to greater accessibility, this age group uses digital technology and social networks intensively. In particular, the latter very conveniently meet the needs of pre-adolescents and adolescents (Sádaba, 2018). According to the theory of uses and gratifications mentioned above, it could be said that technology satisfies affective, social, escapist and identity needs that are experienced particularly intensely at this age.

According to Livingstone (2002), radical changes in the media and technological context have brought about new challenges and potential dangers for this generation, who live much more naturally in a digital context. This also offers them unprecedented opportunities. Public attention has tended to focus on the potential risks (even without the necessary distinction between risk and actual harm) and has rendered the formulation of the opportunities that technology presents to young people more ambiguous and confused (Richards et al, 2015; Staksrud et al, 2013). Within this context, there are many communication opportunities opening up in the digital environment and being exploited by this age group. Their particular affinity for social media highlights their usefulness in satisfying needs that are specific to them - either because of their age or because of the social and cultural context in which they live.



Arguably, social media is at the heart of a culture and a generation that has grown up with digital and which radically learns, works, plays, communicates, shops, and builds communities in very different ways than their parents did. Concerned about the lack of concreteness about what social media are and what they are for, Kietzmann et al. (2011) propose a *honeycomb* model consisting of seven functional blocks that social media can fulfil: identity, conversation, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups. This approach makes it fairly easy to see that many needs of young people can be satisfied more easily by social media and networks (Sádaba and Pérez Escoda, 2020; Naval and Sádaba, 2003).

The communicative practices that are commonly carried out in this environment during youth, and which have come to be put forward as a change of communicative paradigm (Sádaba and Pérez Escoda, 2020), are not exempt from an essentially experiential character that is linked to their own lives. This makes it a phenomenon that, given its potential implications for their personal formation and self-understanding, needs to be studied.

The commercialization that has also promoted the use of the internet means that brands are keen to understand the reasons why this age group moves within the digital environment. However, the enormous importance of this question means the answer needs to come not only from the sphere of economic interests, but also from other areas - such as communication, anthropology and sociology, which provide more enduring and universal clues.

## 5. In conclusion: more questions than answers

As stated at the start of this paper, this document has an open ending, in which answers are not given. To some extent this is because the very nature of youth is open to the future and is not therefore determined *a priori*.

Nevertheless, some ideas and areas of work can be put forward that would be worth investigating in the future in order to better understand the role of youth in contemporary social and political activism. In particular, three ideas stand out for their importance.

The first relates to the answers to the following questions: to what extent are young people prepared to deal with the consequences of using technology as part of activism, and have they acquired the necessary digital competence to use technology effectively but responsibly? Digital competence (Martínez-Bravo et al, 2020) is a concept that has had a multitude of approaches and can be summarized as the ability to use technology in an "effective, efficient, appropriate, critical, creative, autonomous, flexible, ethical, reflective way for work, leisure, participation, learning, socialization, consumption and empowerment" (Ferrari, 2012, p. 5). In spite of its importance and the fact that it has been the subject of numerous international documents, analyzing how to deploy the resources

for this competence to be acquired by all citizens (Martínez-Bravo et al., 2022), the truth is that there is still no standard that allows us to universally measure its scope. In contrast, it is clear that inequality and inequity can produce deep gaps in the ability to learn this skill, leaving large groups of the population (especially the most vulnerable) who do not understand it. From the outset, in Western countries at least, young people have been the focus of government and institutional efforts in this area. However, there is still a lot of work to be done and it is not clear that it is being done in a homogeneous way.

This first question is particularly important in the light of a phenomenon which is not new, but which is particularly urgent in contemporary society: namely, disinformation. In relation to this, the second question emerges, based on the ideas set out here: are young people capable of confronting a context in which disinformation takes on different forms and uses different channels - can they fight, and win? With the Covid-19 pandemic emergency, misinformation has reached worrying levels in terms of the health of democratic societies. And much of this misinformation circulates through the media and social networks (Salaverría et al, 2020). Digital competence would ideally respond well to this situation by ensuring that citizens - including young people who are heavily exposed to social networks - have the personal and technical resources to cope. However, there is a perceived need to continue working in this field and to train this group in the necessary media literacy that protects them and forms a part of digital competence (Sádaba and Salaverría, 2023). Activism uses traditional, digital and independent media - and, of course, social media. Being familiar with the mechanisms that generate disinformation is an obligation for activists, not only for carrying out their work responsibly, but also for protecting themselves from the proliferation of hoaxes and fake news generated in these environments. The environment and the speed that digital technology brings to this phenomenon requires a quick and clear response from all those involved in training young people (Sádaba et al., 2022).

Finally, given that young people use technology across multiple dimensions, one might ask: are they aware of the need for personal reflection on how and for what purpose they are using technology? On this, one could view this digital competence (or indeed media competence) as something that is more essential than instrumental (Kacinova, Sádaba, 2022) and which has deep humanistic roots. Maybe it is this last approach that is most relevant to the subject matter of this paper, since activism's very aims are rooted in social and human needs that transcend that which is technical and even technological - even if they are used to achieve their ends.

Covid-19's impact on this age group's social relations and their health and mental well-being (Samji, 2022) - particularly among the most vulnerable (Silliman and Bosk, 2020) - means attention must be paid to these issues, given their implication for the present and future of society as a whole. Analysis of specific digital activism cases and experiences, especially those promoted by young groups, can shed light on some of these questions and help to define research projects that aim to produce evidence upon which to develop educational initiatives and activities.

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