Democratic Culture, Citizenship and Digital Literacy in Mexico: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract. The configuration of modern digital spaces suggests that citizens interact in a responsible way generating and selecting information on which our criteria is based, it also implies that they can deliberate in the digital public sphere to influence decision makers in government; placing them as transformers to achieve political-social goals while questioning them. However, citizenship faces two main challenges in Mexico: In one hand, the lack of access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) which has to do with structural aspects related to poverty, marginalization and/or unemployment; and in the other hand, the need to guarantee the values of democracy in the network thru different political and electoral exercises. This paper seeks to review public policies aimed at developing a digital citizenship and an analysis of the implications and challenges in the concept of digital citizenship and the democratic impact in Mexico where the digital citizen interacts, defends and exercises his rights.

Keywords: Digital literacy · Democracy · Digital citizenship · Mexico

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that technological advances have changed the way in which we interrelate globally. On the one hand, information and communication technologies (ICTs), defined as the "set of codes and devices involved in the stages of encoding, processing, storage and communication of information" [1], have allowed the free flow of all kinds of data at any time and in any place [2] and on the other hand, the immediacy in the transmission of information has facilitated the development of increasingly liquid social relationships [3]. In addition, the arrival of increasingly advanced digital technologies has driven the transition from a hyperconnected world to one with digital societies and economies [4].

Inevitable phenomena such as the enormous number of people who inhabit and surf the Internet are daily analyzed as objects of study of great dynamism. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) of the United Nations (UN),

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in 2021 there will be an estimated 4.9 billion Internet users worldwide. In Mexico, 84.1 million Internet users were estimated in 2020 according to the National Survey on Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Households (ENDUTIH).

Therefore, information is currently considered to be the most valuable asset, since it gives awareness, knowledge and power to those who possess it [5]. Thus, information has become an "element on which the productive process revolves, determining social evolution as a whole" [6]. Thus, several authors have called today's society "the information society" [7], a society built around information technologies based on microelectronics [8].

As a consequence, the UN, through Resolution 56/183, stipulates that "[…] it is a necessity to promote access by all countries to information, knowledge and communications technology for the development of States". However, access as a process of appropriation of technology consists of a series of stages beyond the simple access to the network for consumption or the simple reproduction of messages within social networks, but rather implies a transition in which people gradually produce and reproduce social relations mediated by ICTs, hence its importance as a social phenomenon. Within Van Dijk's theory [9] we find that the first step is the motivational access related to the interest and attraction for new technologies; passing to the physical or material access by means of hardware, software, etcetera; for later, we find the access to digital literacy, necessary for the acquisition of digital skills through educational processes; and the last step is the access to meaningful opportunities of use.

With these changes, "new" human rights emerge, since the States are the ones that must guarantee citizens access to this process, thus creating a digital divide, i.e. "the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with respect to their opportunities for access to ICTs and their use for a wide variety of activities" [10]. According to the ITU's "World Telecommunication/ICT Development Report and database", 56.727% of the population had access to the Internet in 2019, leaving about 45% of the world's population without access to fundamental rights.

In the case of Mexico, according to Ortega [11], inequality not only implies unequal income distribution, but also includes segregation by sex or gender, ethnicity and place of birth, so that despite investments of more than 140 billion pesos and policies to accelerate competition in the telecommunications sector, the digital divide has not decreased [12, 13]. The lags are mainly related to structural inequalities linked to factors such as "socioeconomic level (insufficient income to cover the cost of access), education, gender, age, ethnicity and socio-cultural type" [13]. Mexico "remains a nation that has failed to match its economic size with its appropriation and use of ICTs by the population" [14].

In addition, Castaño [15] establishes a "second digital divide", which consists of the level of techno-media appropriation of people. That is, the differences between Internet users in terms of the information capital they possess, which allows them to reach a high level or basic level of digital skills useful for greater citizen and political participation. Social problems such as poverty, illiteracy and inequality of opportunities prevent more people from being able to participate politically online [16].

It is under this scenario that this article seeks to analyze the implications and challenges that the concept of digital citizenship has for the young Mexican democracy.

Since it is in the Internet space where the human being relates and links socially and politically, that is to say that it is the environment where the digital citizen lives, defends and exercises his rights [17].

2 Digital Citizenship Vs. Traditional Citizenship

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, the arrival and omnipresence of the Internet and ICTs have produced digital economies and societies, characterized by interaction between citizens at any time and in any place. Under this communicational possibility, the need arises to establish criteria and guidelines that direct our coexistence in digital life [18, 19]. For this, Cobo [20] establishes as axes: healthy use, referring to the dependence on electronic devices; understanding the scope of online data use, since the information footprint we leave on the network is often misunderstood; safe and ethical use, which aims to avoid adverse effects resulting from acts such as cyberbullying, grooming, and sexting without consent; the last aspect is digital citizenship, an axis that we will address in more detail.

Before defining digital citizenship, it is necessary to briefly review the traditional conception of citizenship as a comparative study. This concept has its antecedents in the conception of the human being as a social animal (zoon politikón) belonging to Aristotle's polis, and the Roman institution of civitas, which granted, in a privileged way, the full enjoyment of rights. Under these classical principles, we can define citizenship in the generic sense (status civitatis), which comprises the set of subjective public rights of citizens; and in the strict sense of citizenship (status activae civitatis), which makes immediate reference to political rights; so that the status of citizen implies an active participation in the course and determination of the politics of the State [21]. To this conception of citizenship as a simple entitlement to rights, Marshall, Casado and Miranda [22] give it a broader scope by adding a "social" dimension focused on the enjoyment of rights and guarantees. It is on the basis of this exercise of rights that citizenship becomes the means of political participation in the State [23].

It is on this aspect of participation that it makes sense to take up the work of Habermas [24], who conceives of the public sphere as the site for the exchange of ideas through a deliberative process of a rational nature that leads citizens to create agreements and understandings. Today, this public sphere has gone beyond the barriers of the material world to expand into the digital. Thus, the digital city becomes that space in which citizens relate to each other and to the rest of society through the use of information and communication technologies [25]. In this new plane, digital rights allow individuals to access, use, create and publish digital content through ICTs, as well as in virtual spaces and communities [26].

The inhabitants of these new intangible cities, digital citizens, can be defined as "[…] that individual, citizen or not of another community or State who exercises all or part of his political and social rights through the Internet, independently or through his membership in a virtual community" [27]. This definition is nourished by what Vromen [28] calls "personalized life politics", in which participation is related both to electoral processes and to consumption and social action, whereby citizens are mobilized by specific social movements and issues, which have a global character. In this way,

digital citizenship becomes more than civil responsibilities, but the way in which the digital world facilitates new ways of participating in the public sphere [29], where it is unthinkable to consider that political-electoral issues can be left aside.

3 Democratic Culture and Digital Citizenship in Mexico

The study of the scope of the Internet for society has two central positions: cyber-optimists, who believe that it can bring "greater empowerment to citizens thanks to the increased circulation of information and the possibility of participation" [30]; and cyper-pessimists, who, according to Torres Soriano [31], consider that the Internet generates mirages about the existence of pro-democratic movements.

Under the first approach, ICTs have become support tools for the construction of a digital, participatory and inclusive democracy [32], since they allow the exercise of novel forms of political participation that favor, above all, the consumption of political information and the exchange of opinions through different social networks [33].

Although, under the pessimistic lens, although the Internet has a very relevant role with respect to the new ways of doing and consuming politics, and there is the possibility of invigorating political participation, it cannot be assumed that by creating new forms of participation there will be new practices, which means that there will only be a reproduction of the old practices through new resources [34]. There are even academic contributions that point to the fact that the use of the Internet decreases political participation in societies with greater social inequality [35].

Theoretical evidence points to the fact that the construction of a participatory citizenship and the consolidation of a political-democratic culture is only possible through cooperation among citizens, for which institutional trust is necessary [36].

In Mexico, it is observed that trust towards the institution in charge in electoral matters is a different phenomenon from the trust placed in other institutions relevant to democracy [37]. According to the 2020 survey on "Trust in Mexico: institutions" by Mitofsky [38], the National Electoral Institute (INE), in charge of regulating electoral processes and citizen participation, has a "medium" level trust, while other political agents such as parties and legislators have a very low trust.

However, "the good perception" of a single institution is not enough for the consolidation of trust, but requires the exercise of all actors in an impartial, equitable and transparent manner [39]. A clear consequence of institutional distrust is political apathy, which is "the attitude characterized by disinterest or indifference towards political issues" [40]. This, in turn, would cause "lack of participation in the act of voting" [41], or in other words: electoral abstentionism.

To illustrate the above, the "Process of Revocation of Mandate of the President of the Republic elected for the constitutional period 2018–2024", an unprecedented electoral exercise in the country to determine the anticipated conclusion of the federal executive held in April 2022, is taken up again. Although innovative strategies were implemented, such as electronic voting for Mexicans abroad, there was a minimal citizen participation of 17.7785%. This lack of involvement could be read as simple "apathy or political alienation" [42], or perhaps a way of "expressing disapproval in the absence of effective ways to express citizen demands". But it can also translate into poor political

communication by the government to the electorate regarding this particular and new process of exercising the vote, since, according to a telephone survey of a thousand Mexican citizens between February 11 and 26, 2022 conducted by Grupo Financiero [43], 60% did not even know when the recall vote would take place.

Under the trend of using social networking sites for elections and communication between representatives and the public in the information age [44, 45], the increase in citizen and political participation is stimulated through strategies of digital democracy[46], which is an important commitment to digital citizenship [47, 48].

In order to strengthen a democratic culture and the exercise of full digital citizenship, in October 2020, INE and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) signed an agreement on media and information literacy. The President of INE, Lorenzo Córdova Vianello, pointed out that "it is necessary to generate capacities for digital interaction that favors participation, respect, exchange and informed deliberation, collaboration and peaceful coexistence. In short, the recreation, in the network of democratic values" [49]. It follows that the pure implementation of technological investment policies and/or digital literacy by the State are insufficient to consider that it is investing in the generation of digital citizenship.

4 Conclusions

As tacitly analyzed, and following Choi's theoretical proposal [50], digital citizenship is defined and practiced in four ways: as ethics, since understanding virtuality as new spaces where people inhabit and interact, it is necessary that this coexistence be in an appropriate, safe and responsible manner; as literacy, since it is necessary to educate ourselves on how to access, use, create and evaluate the information with which we base our criteria and with which we communicate with others; as participation, which implies the engagement of citizens to discuss and deliberate in the online public sphere in order to intervene in the political life of the state; and as critical resistance, which implies considering citizens as transformative subjects who act to achieve social justice while challenging the status quo [51].

However, digital citizenship faces two main challenges in our country. On the one hand, the digital divide, or the lack of access to ICTs, is significant in Mexico, which is related to structural problems such as poverty, marginalization or unemployment [52], making it difficult to consolidate digital citizenship for a large part of the Mexican population. And on the other hand, in the political-electoral sphere, it is necessary to guarantee the values of democracy in the network, but the Mexican experience does not even seem to have consolidated these values at the "real" level, since electoral processes are developed under significant levels of distrust [53] Therefore, achieving full digital citizenship in the next few years seems to be an unattainable challenge for Mexico.

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