Active Citizen Participation in E–Government:

A Global Perspective

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Chapter 10

Social Networks, Civic Participation, and Young People:
A Literature Review and Summary of the Educational Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The latest report from the Pew Research Center (2010) shows that 93% of American teenagers and young adults use the Internet, and that 73% of them have their profile on a social network site. In the UK, data from Ofcom (2010) has come up with similar results. Citizen participation has traditionally been determined by demographic and socio-economic factors. Accordingly, the citizens who participate most actively are middle-aged and have a high socio-economic and educational level. By contrast, it is young people of low socio-economic status and educational level who participate the least. Some reports show modest signs that the use of the Internet could be another means to promote participation both online and offline. The main purpose of this chapter is to review the research literature concerning how social networks contribute to social participation.

INTRODUCTION[1]

A large number of recent studies have addressed the prevalence of the use of social networks among young (and not so young) people (see, amongst other publications Bringué & Sádaba,

2009; Davies & Cranston, 2008; DCLG, 2008; Ofcom, 2008, 2010; Smith, Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2009; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2009; Taylor & Keeter, 2010; Wildbit, 2005). Such media are attributed a significant role in fostering socialization and a sense of belonging to a community, although the results of research to date are divided as to whether these social networks

contribute in a real way to the development of greater civic involvement (see, amongst other studies, Boulianne, 2009; Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton & Robison, 2009; Jenning & Zetner, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Ofcom, 2009).

The key issue that arises in the context of these research studies, and which is to be addressed in this chapter, can be framed in terms of the following set of questions: How may the use of social networks affect civic behaviour and attitudes among citizens? Does such use foster real civic participation or, in contrast, does it lead to isolation from the real world as a result of engagement in online activities? Are there generic, quantitative and/or qualitative differences between offline and online social and civic participation? Exactly what types of activities are carried out through social networks? Can such activities be described as involving real civic participation? Do such activities foster participation in real life activities in a verifiable way? What conclusions may be drawn from the use of social networks in encouraging participative behaviours? And last but not least, can networkers be educated in their use of social networks so as to foster greater participation in civic life (or Society), both on- and offline?

Our aim is to respond to these questions by providing a review of the recent literature on this issue, including reports published in the US and the UK, as well as academic studies in the field.

First of all, we will take a look at the concept of civic participation in general, focusing in particular on young people, before considering the use and consumption of social media among young citizens when compared with the habits and behaviour of citizens in other age groups. Thirdly, we will analyze the current influence of social network use on different types of civic participation, both online and offline. Finally, and by way of conclusion, we will try to provide some guidelines on how to encourage participation.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Participation is a complex and widely debated concept (Livingstone & Markham, 2008), which also has multiple dimensions that are difficult to assimilate (Norris, 1999; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Pattie, Seyd & Whitele, 2004). Indeed, we may distinguish as many aspects of participation as the realities to which it is applied, and moreover, taking into account the diversity of forms it assumes in function of the spatial-temporal coordinates in which it materializes (Haste, 2004). Furthermore, there is as yet no general agreement regarding the definition of participation, or how to measure it, which makes it an even more complicated issue to address.

Participation is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as "when you take part or become involved in something". Etymologically, we can discern its meaning in an active sense in the Latin verb *participare*, "to take part," and in a causative sense, "to make (someone/something) take part," which completes the action of giving with that of receiving in terms of participation. As such, another meaning for the term arises, that of "impart, announce, communicate" (Naval & Altarejos, 2000; Redondo, 1999).

Thus, the notion of commonality is implicit in all the definitions of participation as the result of participation is "having something in common". Hence, if what we call community arises from the union of individuals who have something in common, participation turns out to be an inseparable dimension of community.

Certainly, there is no community without participation and it is precisely participation which makes it possible to constitute a community (Redondo, 1999, 163). A true community is impossible if there is no sharing in something which is common to its members, in other words if there is no participation. For various reasons, participation is an element that is characteristic of all democratic institutions. One of these is its

full realization in the form of communication. During participation an essential dimension of communication – giving - is evident, but without this implying any loss on the part of the person who gives. "That which is specific to communication is precisely this: giving without becoming impoverished. One who communicates does not relinquish what is being given, nor does he relinquish himself (...). It is precisely for this reason that communication cannot be defined without referring to the concept of participation, which expresses this idea of 'making something extend' to another, which is the essential constitutive element of communication" (Redondo, 1999, 178).

But here we refer to a specific aspect of participation, to civic participation which is based on two fundamental aspects of the citizen´s interaction with civil society, namely: communication and cooperation.

Civic participation is also called political participation by some authors and which looks specifically at questions such as: participation in elections (voting), interest in political issues (not only in relation to political parties) and participation in actions which seek to find answers to social problems, in other words commitment to the search for solutions (Livingstone & Markham, 2008).

The first problem that must be addressed is the need for consensus on a theoretical framework to understand and define civic participation. A second problem, which is more specific to young people, is the discontinuous pattern of activity in the public sphere, and the absence of clear and predictable patterns of civic behavior. Thus, in addition to considering who participates and how, it is important to consider the motivations involved and the context in which participation occurs (Benedicto & López, 2008).

It is commonplace to hear that we are witnessing a decline in civic participation, which does not make it any less important or serious. Indeed, special emphasis is usually placed on the fact that this issue is more worrying among the young. Without denying this reality –the importance of the lack of participation among young people-, it is clear that this problem exists amongst the young and adults in our contemporary society. The evident lack of social trust affects all of us and in a range of different environments: from the family to other social situations. In line with this point of view, and from the perspective of a social capital model, Putnam (Putnam, 2000; Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004) highlights an issue that is of special transcendence for civic action: the importance of social or interpersonal trust in order to promote voluntary participation at the local level. This type of trust also strengthens community relationships and it fosters civic commitment (Livingstone & Markham, 2008, 353).

However, we should not forget certain positive aspects that can also be perceived. For example, some forms of social action or participation have been seen to increase in recent decades, such as the involvement in voluntary programmes or more generically, more informal forms of social participation (Power Inquiry, 2006; Bromley, Curtice & Seyd, 2004). This is the opinion of Bennett (1998), who points out that this increase in voluntary work is related to an increase in social trust, civic participation and political commitment (Fine & Harrington, 2004; Cohen, 1999; Eliasoph, 1998).

There are many social and political factors that directly influence civic participation or its absence, such as social expectations and political efficiency (Inglehart, 1977; Haste, 2004), political trust (Bromley, Curtice & Seyd, 2004), the ability to discuss social problems or issues (Eveland, 2004; McLeod & Becker, 1974; Dahlgren, 2003), social capital, etc. However, since we are going to focus on young people, we will first briefly introduce them.

We feel that through education we can exert a positive influence and thus encourage the more committed civic participation.

Young People

We focus on young people for two reasons. Firstly, they have their whole lives ahead of them and thus have much to contribute to society. Secondly, given our educational perspective, we feel that young people, like infants, are at a stage in their lives at which education can have a great impact on their future development.

In order to understand the social commitment of the young, it would be a good idea to first explore, albeit briefly, what young people are like today, what their vital experiences are, and how they live and feel about the world around them. In this way, we will be in a better position to understand their relationship with the social and political world (Martín, 2007; Naval, Repáraz & Ugarte, in press).

In general, and in terms of the fundamental concerns of citizens, we can say that political issues take a second place in the list of young people's priorities. We currently live in a markedly individualistic society. Accordingly, the issues that worry us most are related to employment, housing and health, as well as leisure, and hence, civic or communal matters concern us much less. Furthermore, substantial differences are not seen amongst young people from different Western countries (Bonet, Martín & Montero, 2007).

As for the actual life experiences of the young (Benedicto, 2008; Naval, Repáraz & Ugarte, in press), we can consider that they find themselves at the crossroads of four paradoxes: integration and autonomy; dependence and independence; vulnerability and tenderness; continuity and rupture. However, in this chapter we will concentrate more on our particular interests and thus, when we talk about civic and political issues, what do young people understand them to mean? Essentially, they refer mainly to solidarity and respect for social norms as the basis for civic life.

For the vast majority of young people being a good citizen is to show solidarity with the people of one's own country and the rest of the world, and to comply with established regulations (obeying laws and not evading taxes). Keeping oneself informed and participating in associations take priority over politically more explicit obligations, including voting (Jover & Thoilliez, 2009), while ecological consumption falls somewhere between the two. The final position in this ranking is occupied by military service (Benedicto & López, 2008).

When trying to understand the young people of today, we need to remember that they were born and live in a world full of new technologies, screens and advertising (Naval, Sádaba, Bringué & Pérez, 2003; Loader, 2007). They have at hand new technologies and possibilities for consumption that were unknown to previous generations, although sometimes they lack the "primary experience" required for proper cognitive and social development. This refers to the experience life instils in them as a result of social interaction, as well as the development of most of their emotional and social skills, which constitutes a real educational challenge.

In conjunction with these issues concerning civic participation and young people, we will need to take into account a third element that will be addressed in this paper: information and communication technologies and more specifically, social networks and the role they can play as facilitators or obstacles to civic participation.

THE USE AND CONSUMPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE

In educational circles we are currently engaged in an important debate about how to educate a new generation known as "digital natives," the "Net generation," the "Google generation" or "millennials" (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prenskey, 2001; Tapscott, 1988; Strauss & Howe, 2000). This new generation is comprised of young people who have either grown up or are growing up in constant contact with the media. They were born in the

digital era, which started in 1981, and they are said to be born consumers of technology: they rapidly assimilate multimedia information in the form of images and videos, just as well or better than if it were textual; they consume data simultaneously from different sources; they expect instantaneous answers; they are permanently online and create their own digital materials. As active creators of a new digital culture, they are developing their own Web sites, diaries and blogs. They form part of a new participative culture (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006).

There are numerous and recent studies that describe the penetration of the use of social networks amongst young and not so young citizens. Some of the most significant results from these studies will be considered below.

The Pew Research Center[ii] has been conducting a series of studies to learn more about the next generation of Americans, who they call "millennials," and in these studies they compare this generation with previous generations. The peculiar and interesting thing about these studies is that, starting from the year 2010, they enable us to compare the young people of today with previous generations when they were young. Accordingly, we can differentiate four groups in these studies: Millennials (born after 1981), Generation X (born from 1965 to 1980), Baby Boomers (born from 1946 to 1964) and the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and 1945). Now, in 2010, Millennials are less than 30 years of age, Generation Xers are 30 to 45, Baby Boomers are 46 to 64 and members of the Silent Generation are aged 65 to 82.

The differences we encounter in these new young people may be due to three overlapping effects, and Keeter & Taylor (2009) warn us to bear these in mind when we analyze the data. The *life cycle effect*: young people today are very different to adults, although when they grow up, they will almost certainly be quite similar to their counterparts when they are their age. The *age group effect*: the differences that are found may be due to the intrinsic characteristics of adolescence and youth, a period in which there is a greater need for the affirmation and development of personal identity. The *historical period effect*: specific circumstances (wars, social or scientific movements, or technological changes) can have a more pronounced impact on young people during a period in which their values and habits are less consolidated than when they are that much older. Taking these issues into account, generally speaking these studies characterize millennials as the generation with the greatest ethnic variation in comparison to their predecessors. The majority are politically progressive and they are the first generation to live with social networks (YouTube, Google and Wikipedia) as something natural and necessary in their lives. They are less religious and more inclined to trust institutions than previous generations at their age.

A recent report from the Pew Research Center (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010) gives us an approximate idea of how American teenagers (12-17 years), young adults (18-29) and adults (individuals over 30 years of age) are currently using social media. In the case of the United Kingdom, Ofcom, an independent regulator and competition authority for UK communications industries, has recently published a report on the use of the internet amongst people over the age of 16 in the UK (Ofcom, 2010). The data which was compiled yielded similar results to those obtained in the Pew Research Center studies in the USA. In this chapter, we preferred to employ the American data because it covers more issues, it compares the data with habits in previous years and it involves a study of four generations. Whatever the case, both the Ofcom and the Pew Research Center data can give us an idea of the international tendencies in network consumption patterns in two developed countries.

In the data shown below certain trends over recent years can be perceived[iii].

A. The *Internet is a central and indispensable element* in the life of American teenagers and young people. Thus, 93% of teenagers and

young adults use the Internet compared to 73% of adults (81% of adults aged 30-49 years, 70% of 50-64 year-olds and 38% of adults over the age of 65). The increase in Internet users in the last nine years has been proportionate and modest in all age groups[iv]. It is noteworthy that teenagers are assiduous users of the Internet (63% use it on a daily basis and 26% weekly, while only 11% use it less often).

B. *The use of Social Network Sites (SNS) has proliferated* among teenagers and young adults. The data shows that 73% of teenagers, 72% of young adults and 47% of adults are SNS users. The number of users increased in all age groups in recent years. Taylor and Keeter's study (2010) shows that there was an increase of 68% amongst Millennials in SNS users in the last five years, a figure that reached 43% in Generation X, 25% amongst Baby Boomers and 4% in the Silent Generation. It also reveals that the frequency of social network use is greater amongst users in the young adult group than in other generations. In addition, 55% of Millennial users log on every day or several times a day, compared to 38% of Generation X users and 37% of Baby Boomers.

With respect to teenagers who use the Internet every day, 80% log on to an SNS, while 62% of those who use the Internet least often log on to social networks, which indicates that the frequency of Internet use is related to SNS use. If 93% of teenagers and young adults use the Internet, we might perhaps ask ourselves why the participation of young people in some kind of social network is not greater. Boyd (2008) proposes three possible reasons. Firstly, there are young people who are *deprived of the possibility* of going online, either because of social restrictions imposed by their parents, who do not allow them to have an SNS profile, or because of the requirements of certain schools which explicitly prohibit pupils from belonging to an SNS, albeit for structural restrictions (such as not having an Internet connection, filters in homes or at school which do not permit access to social networks, etc). Secondly, there

are *those who decide not to participate* owing to various social factors: a) young people who are short of time because they are very busy doing activities at and outside of school, at work, etc. – normally they have a very full social life-; b) young people who are concerned about their safety; c) marginalized young people who think that social networks are for popular people (*cool kids*); and d) young people who think they are too nice (*too cool*) to be SNS users. A third category consists of *former users* who have stopped participating in SNS for various reasons, for example because their friends no longer use them, their boyfriend or girlfriend has asked them to stop using a site, they have had a bad experience which has made them log off permanently, etc.

Some changes have been observed in the way teenagers communicate through SNS between 2006 and 2009. There was a slight decrease in the sending of group messages (50%), comments added to friends' messages (52%) and private messages (66%). On the other hand, various behavioural patterns failed to show significant changes: making comments about photos of friends (83%), sending text (IM or text messages) via a site (58%), or making comments on a friend's page or wall (86%).

C. *A decrease in the use of blogs by teenagers and young people*. In general, it can be seen that teenagers (12-17 years) share (38% vs 30%), *remix* (21% vs 15%) and participate in blogs (14% vs 11%) to a greater extent than people over 18 years of age. Nevertheless, if we compare the results for 2006 and 2009, we detect a greater production of blog content in subjects over the age of 18, whilst among teenagers blog activity has declined slightly. In 2006 28% of users under the age of 18 wrote blogs. In 2009 this figure fell to 14% for teenagers and to 15% for young adults. This change in behaviour is attributed to the fact that SNS have become fashionable amongst young people and that the most popular ones do not include a blog utility. Another possible explanation is that blogs have traditionally

been employed to talk about things people have been doing and the same activity can be realised through social networks. Finally, Twitter, a utility which enables us to keep in touch rapidly and briefly with the news and interests of others, was more popular amongst people over 18 years of age (37% of young people aged 18 to 24, 25% of young people aged 25 to 29, 22% of adults from 30-49, 9% of 50-64 year-olds and 4% of people over 65) than amongst teenagers (8%), according to data collected in September and December 2009 (Lenhart *et al.*, 2010). The data collected a month later, in January 2010 (Taylor & Keeter, 2010), showed that its use had evened out between different generations: Millennials (14%), Generation X (10%), Baby Boomers (6%) and the Silent Generation (1%).

D. *Mobile Phones and Wi-Fi Equipment*. Mobile phone ownership has greatly increased amongst teenagers in the last four years, for example we have gone from a situation in which 18% of 12-year-olds had a mobile in 2006 to one in which 58% had one in 2009, or in the case of 17-year-olds, this figure has risen from 64 to 83%. According to Taylor & Keeter (2010), Millennials tend to use a mobile as something which is necessary and important in their lives, and 83% of them go to bed with their mobile, as opposed to 46% of adults over 30 years of age. Young adults are keener on sending messages using their mobile than other adults. Among users who declare that they have received or sent messages in the last 24 hours, young adults have sent 20 messages (25% say they have sent 50 messages), whereas for other adults the number is 8.

With regard to Wi-Fi equipment, there was greater consumption amongst young people than adults. As for computers, laptops and netbooks are more popular with people under the age of 30 than desktop computers. It is the same for mp3 players or game consoles.

E. *Wi-Fi use depending on Age*. 81% of young adults, 63% of adults aged 30 to 45 and 34% of people over 50 years of age log on to the Internet using Wi-Fi. However, men and adults with a high income and educational status are those that are more likely to use Wi-Fi.

F. *Main News Sources*. Taylor and Keeter (2010) showed that the two main news sources for young adults and Generation X'ers are television and the internet (65%-59% and 61%-53% respectively), with no evidence of specific differences between these two generations. On the other hand, in older generations the main source for obtaining news is the TV, this being the case for 76% of Baby Boomers and 82% of the Silent Generation.

G. *Activities Performed in the Last 24 Hours*. Millennials differ from older generations, both in terms of the type of activities they perform and the time they assign to them (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Young adults like to watch videos online, place messages on the online profiles of their friends or play video games more than other adults. Adults over the age of 30 are more inclined to watch over an hour of TV or to read newspapers on a daily basis. There is barely any difference between the generations in their use of e-mail (just over 50% of everyone over the age 18 uses it). This latter finding coincides with the conclusions drawn by Boyd (2008), who proposed that teenagers and young people find e-mail a boring and out-of-date tool. They only use it to contact teachers and parents, and to send document attachments. They prefer to employ social networks or send text messages using their mobile phone in order to stay in touch with their friends and acquaintances. Different studies demonstrate how teenagers and young people use SNS to contact people they know in the real world (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006; Lenhart & Madden, 2007)

To sum up, along with Boyd (2008, p. 118), we conclude that these differences in behaviour do not stem from the technology but rather they are most likely driven by how these tools fit into the behaviour of different groups: "The differences may stem from the ways in which teens learn to

manage relationships during the period in which they are learning to negotiate social network sites, while these sites are forcing adults to develop new skills to handle new social situations." For young people social network sites are a place for meeting their peers, the "place" where they can stay in touch with the people they know and spend time editing their profiles, leaving comments and displaying personal information. Young people grow up and learn to socialize in network environments, just as adults learnt to socialize in squares, bars, sports clubs, etc. when they were young. Instead, adults learn to use social network sites to establish professional contacts and to re-establish contact with former colleagues from school or university. We could say that adults log-on in order to be on-line and that young people live online. Precisely because young people have grown with up and interact through social networks, we are presented with a particularly relevant means of encouraging civic participation.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORK CONSUMPTION ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Most young people use the Internet to communi-cate and to share digital content, behaviours that are fostering a participative culture according to Jenkins *et al.* (2006). It is a culture with few barriers with regards the promotion of artistic expression and civic commitment, which sup-ports the creation of people's own materials so that they can be shared. In addition, this culture relies on some form of informal mentorship from others who know more than novices do and who make the members of this culture believe that their contributions matter. It is an environment in which people have a certain level of social interconnection (or at least they are aware of what other members think about what they have created). The forms that this participative culture take include: affiliations, formal and informal SNS

memberships; forms of expression, producing new creative forms; collaborative Problem-solving, working together in formal and informal teams to complete tasks and develop new knowledge; circulars, shaping the flow of media.

We might summarize these manifestations of participative culture into two types: behaviours that lead us to communicate, express and make others participants of what we think and do; and those which lead us to collaborate with others in launching projects, solving problems, defending an idea, etc. From the point of view of social participation and civic commitment, this latter form is of special interest. Hence, it is worth our while examining to what extent online social networks are or are not encouraging greater social participation in comparison with traditional forms of offline participation.

Emerging Citizenship among Young Adults

To better understand how young people (15-25 years) involve themselves in political and social life in this new digital era, we might take the thoughts of Bennett (2008) as a starting point, who poses the change from the traditional ideal of the Dutiful Citizen (DC) to the Emerging Youth Experience of Self-Actualizing Citizenship (AC).

Characteristics of the DC include an obligation to participate in government-centered activities, voting being the core democratic act. The DC informs himself about political and social issues and the government by following the mass media, he joins civil society organizations and/or he ex-presses his interests through parties that typically employ one-way conventional communication to mobilize supporters.

In contrast to the Dutiful Citizen, a new citi-zen is emerging amongst the young. The AC is characterized by a diminished sense of obligation towards government (a higher sense of individual purpose), for whom voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined acts such as:

consumerism, community volunteering or transnational activism. The AC mistrusts the media and politicians, which is reinforced by a negative mass media environment, and the AC favours loose networks of community action that are often established or sustained through friendships and peer relationships. The close social ties of the AC are maintained by interactive information technologies.

The features proposed by Bennett for an *Actualizing Citizen* are very well reflected in the data on "*Political and civic engagement*" collected by Taylor and Keeter (2010). In this report people are asked about their participation in eight different activities to assess civic commitment: in terms of voting, voluntary activities, contacts made in person or online with members of the government, signatures or petitions in paper format or online, and purchases or decisions not to buy products on the basis of a company's social or political values. Some of the results are summarized below.

A. *Participation in Voting.* Traditionally, young adults have participated less in elections than people over 30 years of age. However, rates of participation in presidential elections amongst young adults (18-29 years) increased from 40% in 2000 to 51% in 2008. The participation of adults over the age of 30 during the same period was about 67% and it was not modified significantly. The increase in the participation of the younger population may be due to various factors: significant changes in campaigns, polarization with respect to the president and the two wars during his presidency; or special efforts on the part of political parties and organizations to mobilize the participation of the younger generation. Despite this increase in participation, the data collected during the elections to nominate the governor in New Jersey and Virginia in 2009 demonstrate a participation rate of 10%, which shows a tendency for participation to decline amongst the youngest group. Another way of evaluating political commitment is to ask how often people vote, and here we again find that voting frequency is

lower amongst the young. Thus, while 69% of Millennials indicate that they always or nearly always vote, a higher percentage of people over 30 years of age give the same response (85% of Gen X, 89% of Baby Boomers and 91% of the Silent Generation).

B. *Participation in Voluntary Activities.* In the last twelve months the respondents were asked about their participation in voluntary activities, working with an organization or offering any other kind of aid to others without receiving remuneration. In this case, 57% of young adults, 54% of Gen X, 52% of Baby Boomers and 39% of the Silent Generation had participated.

C. *Expression of Political Voice.* Another way of participating in political and social life is through communication with politicians. In fact, as far as signing petitions online is concerned, there are no substantial differences between participation rates among adults aged 18 to 65 years, which is in the region of 20%. With regard to signing petitions in paper format, a participation of 30% for Baby Boomers stands out in comparison to the rest of the generations, for whom the proportion is about 20%. Another way of participating is to contact politicians by e-mail, or to leave messages on official pages or official profiles on social network sites. In this form of participation Generation X'ers and Baby Boomers are the most active (25-30%), compared to the youngest and most senior respondents (about 15%). With respect to contact made with a politician in person, Baby Boomers are noticeable for having higher rates than Generation X'ers and the Silent Generation, albeit a lower rate than young adults.

D. *Consumption Patterns determined by Political Views* (*Political Consumerism*). There are two further ways of intervening in political and social life in order to manifest one's own convictions. We can stop buying a specific product or service as a sign of protest against the social or political values held by a particular company or organization, committing ourselves by means of a personal boycott. Another alternative is to

purchase or request the services of a company to support the values they defend. This is called "buycotting". Boycotting behaviour is similar amongst Millennials, Generation X'ers and Baby Boomers (about 35%), although it receives slightly less support amongst the Silent Generation (25%). On the other hand, purchases made for political reasons are slightly higher amongst Millennials (34%) than the other generations (Generation X'ers 30%, Baby Boomers 27% and the Silent Generation 18%).

As can be seen, the current civic participation characteristics of young people are very similar to those described by Bennett (2008). In particular, it is noteworthy that participation in voting and contact with politicians is lower amongst young adults. On the other hand, young people are more committed in terms of voluntary activities than adults, as they are to behaviours related to political consumerism. The belief that participation in voluntary work is a valid way of putting the social participation required of all citizens into practice has gained significant ground (a possible reason could be the existence of service-learning programmes in schools and universities, cf. Naval, Ugarte & Martínez-Odria, 2009).

Evidence of the Impact of Social Networks

Many social networks have been attributed considerable potential for fostering socialization and membership of a community. However, there are contradictory research results as to whether or not they are really influencing the development of greater civic participation. We find evidence contrary to this hypothesis in the meta-analysis conducted by Boulianne (2009), which maintains that the use of the internet has a negative effect on civic participation due to the amount of time spent online in detriment to the time employed offline. However, there is no evidence that the Internet has a positive and substantial impact on this commitment. In relation to this, all generations

have the perception that social networks have a very positive influence in fostering relationships. At least the popular perception and belief is that these networks serve to unite more than to isolate people (Ofcom, 2010; Taylor & Keeter, 2010).

In the study conducted by Ofcom (2009) on the United Kingdom population over the age of 16, we can see that the people who involve themselves most in public life are middle-aged citizens (40-60 years) with a high socio-economic and educational level. By contrast, the population that participates least consists of young people with a low socio-economic and educational level, and with few qualifications. As well as demographic and socio-economic variables, it seems that the Internet is becoming an important factor in prompting the participation of citizens. In the sample of regular Internet users, the rate of participation online and offline is greater than for the rest of the population. Similarly, amongst the least privileged population –in which participation is generally always lower- greater participation is found amongst people who have access to the Internet at home compared to those for whom this is not a possibility. It appears that Internet facilitates participation, partly because it helps to save the time needed for civic activities, which was cited by the respondents as the chief obstacle that prevented them from involving themselves more actively in the social and political life of their country. While in the more underprivileged population group a lack of interest is the main reason for not participating, the lack of Internet access and of awareness of what can be done online are also barriers leading to limited participation online.

Likewise, and in reference to Internet use, the Pew Internet study that analyzes the civic commitment of Americans over 18 years of age (Smith *et al.*, 2009) shows that there are modest signs of the influence of social networks in prompting a change towards a more participative attitude and civic involvement. Among its most striking findings are that online activity reflects the same type of behaviour and tendencies that we observe in

real life, satisfying a range of criteria: age, socio-economic level (educational level and income), broadband access, etc. Moreover, this study shows a strong correlation between civic participation (number of activities engaged in online and offline) and socio-economic status. However, when the group of young people is compared to the older group, the differences in participation between these age collectives are reduced slightly if online activity is compared, partly owing to the fact that young people are more inclined to use the Internet, although older people continue to be more participative than their younger counterparts. The youngest individuals (18-24 years) are the least involved in civic activities, less so than the most senior adults (+64 years). The youngest survey candidates only surpass the most senior ones if they are compared in terms of online activity.

As with the Ofcom report (2009), the Pew study (Smith *et al.*, 2009) offers some clues which indicate that the use of blogs or SNS could perhaps change the belief that socio-economic status is a decisive factor for participation. Thus, 33% of Internet users have their profile on an SNS and 31% of them are committed to some form of civic or political activity (joining a political party, including a politician as a "friend," etc.). This data leads us to believe that it is not inevitable that people with higher income levels are the ones who are most committed to civic and/or political issues. We should not forget that it is young people who are the most involved in online activities such as blogs and SNS (37% aged 18-29 years), rather than adults (17% aged 30-49; 12% aged 50-64; 10% over 65), and that the data shows that civically committed blog and SNS users are more active in offline situations when compared with other Internet users.

The impact that these new tools may have on the future of online politics will largely depend on how our new young people behave. Thus, Smith *et al.* (2009) ask themselves whether we are witnessing a generational change that will affect how young people behave, or whether new technologies will continue to leave people with lower incomes and levels of education behind.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Given the data presented in this chapter, we might ask ourselves what can be done, from an educational and political perspective, and from the point of view of the media, to encourage greater social involvement on the part of citizens. Although the data is not conclusive, there are indications that Internet access is partly responsible for permitting greater participation by facilitating and promoting activities that ensure a citizens' voice is heard, and partially overcoming socio-economic and educational barriers. It has been demonstrated that young adults are avid consumers of technology, that they grow up and mature surrounded by these technologies, and that to some extent, their way of conceiving citizenship and participation in society is changing. At the same time, it can be seen that they participate less than their elders in certain civic activities.

Along with Bennett (2008), we maintain that: "if nothing is done […], the default scenario is likely to be the persistent disconnection of the youth from conventional politics, with little reconciliation of the gap between AC [actualizing citizen] and DC [dutiful citizen] citizenship styles, and continuing unproductive paradigm battles in the academic world. […]. A second scenario utilizes the possibilities for convergence of technologies and political practices to bring vibrant experiences of politics into classrooms, youth programmes and, yes, even elections, showing young people how their concerns can gain public voice within the conventional arenas of power and decision making".

To achieve greater participation among young people, Bennett (2008) presents a series of suggestions for different collectives. He recommends that *politicians*, *organizations* and *webmasters* of youth-targeted webpages should offer neutral

information to young people, on the basis of their desire to find authentic sites, information and people. It would also be desirable to create interactive channels where young people can offer their opinion and participate. He recommends that *educators* should promote participation related to the community in which they live, employing interactive media for communication purposes. This idea is somewhat reminiscent of Boyd (2007) and Rheingold (2008) proposal. In order to engage in political life, people have to have access to public life first. Young people need an audience, networked or physical, before they can engage in any form of political life. Politics start first with school, with your friends, then they go on to being about citizenship. Pushing the other way won't work. You need to start with the dramas that make sense to you.

In view of these suggestions and the data presented in this chapter, we are in a position to propose three lines of action from an educational point of view, which are not incompatible with one another.

Firstly, the promotion of service-learning activities linked to the immediate environment of young people. In general terms, the implementation of service-learning programmes appears to yield positive results for students, teachers, parents and the local community. The greatest challenge to their implementation is the limited involvement of some students in their development. The vital role played by teaching staff in the successful development of these programmes must also be considered.

Secondly, awareness should be raised amongst citizens of the possibilities afforded by the Internet for participation in civic life: "There is a general consensus among respondents that the internet has made it easier to engage in citizen participation activities. However, even among the online user sample, a significant minority (31%) are unaware of online citizen participation opportunities. In areas of multiple deprivation this rises to 72%, suggesting that increased awareness would lead to more people engaging in digital participation.

Building awareness of what it is possible to do quickly and easily online could encourage greater participation" (Ofcom, 2009).

Thirdly, the use of participatory media should be encouraged. Rheingold (2008, p. 100) includes blogs, wikis, RSS, tagging and social bookmarking, music-photo-video sharing, podcasts, digital storytelling, virtual communities, SNS, virtual environments and videoblogs as participatory media. All of these highly diverse media have three features in common: a) they enable anyone to use the Internet to become an editor and consumer of information (text, images, audio, video, software, data, discussions, tags, links with other people); b) they allow us to bring people together to form an audience or a market; and c) they facilitate the task of coordinating activities rapidly and cheaply. Rheingold does not regard the use of these media as a solution to disengagement from political life but rather, as a useful tool to help people to commit themselves. The data presented above partially support this idea (Ofcom, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2009), and there are even some studies and experiences that identify good practices in employing these participatory media to achieve greater political and social commitment on the part of young people (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee & Philippi,, 2008; CivicWeb, 2009; Lara & Naval, 2009, 2010; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles & Larson, 2004; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008; Rheingold, 2008).

Finally, we wish to stress that the work described here enables us to define the role of social networks in the development of civic participation, highlighting specific aspects that will permit a conceptual framework to be built in the future. Our intention has been to analyze this issue as a first step in this process. In keeping with all the work reviewed here, the most appropriate methodological approach to reach this goal should combine both quantitative and qualitative research, each complementing and enriching our understanding of the subject and enabling a conceptual scheme to be developed.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Citizen Participation: Political or social involvement in the community, government, or school in order to improve the status quo and to have impact on policy formation and decision making.

Citizenship: The status of a citizen with rights and duties (cfr. *Marshall Dictionary*).

Generation X: According to PewResearchCenter (Keeter and Taylor, 2009), is a label that appears to have been coined by a British sociologist and popularized by the author Douglas Coupland. It covers people born from 1965 to 1980. And it long ago overtook the first name affixed to this generation: the Baby Bust. In many generational profiles, Xers are depicted as savvy, entrepreneurial loners.

Ofcom: The Office of Communications or, as it is more often known, Ofcom, is the independent telecommunications regulator and competition authority for the communication industries in the United Kingdom.

Pew Research Center: It is an American think tank organization based in Washington, D.C. that provides information on issues, attitudes and trends shaping the United States and the world.

The Baby Boom: According to PewResearchCenter (Keeter and Taylor, 2009) this label refers the great spike in fertility that began in 1946, right after the end of World War II, and ended almost as abruptly in 1964, around the time that the birth control pill went on the market. It`s a classic example of a demography-driven name.

The Silent Generation: According to PewResearchCenter (Keeter and Taylor, 2009), this label some times also knows as the GI Generation, covers anyone born before 1946. These are the children of the Great Depression and World War II. "Silent" overtook "GI" as the label relatively late in this generation's life cycle, when their conformist and civic instincts made for a dramatic contrast with the noisy ways of the anti-establishment boomers.

The Millennial Generation: According to Pew Research Center (Keeter and Taylor, 2009) this label covers everyone born from 1981 to 2000. They are the first generation to come of age in the new millennium.

Social Network Sites: Boyd and Ellison (2007) defines social network sites "[…] as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with

whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site". MySpace, Facebook, Hi5, and Bebo are some popular examples.

ENDNOTES

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ii   http://pewresearch.org

iii   When the results of studies other than Lenhart et al. (2010) are cited, this will be indicated.

iv   These figures vary only slightly in the data collected in January 2010 by Taylor & Keeter (2010): 90% of Millennial users, 87% of Gen X users, 79% of Baby Boomer users and 40% of Silent Generation users.