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# Participation and commitment of young people in the digital environment. Uses of social networks and perception of their consequences

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The article analyses the uses that young people (of 18 to 24 years of age) make of social networks (especially in terms of public-social participation) and their perceptions regarding the possibility of empowerment. **Methods.** Four focus groups were conducted: with vocational training students and university students, who were divided in turn into highly-active and low-active users. **Results and conclusions.** The power of social networks (generators of change and citizen participation) is perceived differently depending on the context and the degree of influence of the user. The level of activity and participation is not the only factor determining use: personality and interests, previous degree of implication, and use habits provoke greater or lesser resistance to change a social network. Although television consumption is decreasing, the credibility of its information is not related to the medium but to the confidence and knowledge that users have in relation to it.

## Keywords

Social networks; young people; citizen participation; uses; risks; Spain.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networks are shaping new forms of media consumption among young people, as a new source of general information, from the point of view of news, as a channel for interpersonal relationships and as an alternative platform for citizen participation. In this sense, the substitution of some media by others (the widely accepted hypothesis of technological convergence) must be analysed, based on its causes and, above all, real uses. Young people (18-24-year-old users, for the purposes of this study) constitute an age group whose study that allows us to identify trends in this area. Quantitative data from other studies should be supplemented by qualitative studies that allow delving further into the interpretation of reality.

Based on the literature review and the development of four focus groups, this article, which is part of a wider national research project, raises the following research questions: What uses do young people make of social networks? Which are their preferred uses and why? Do these different uses change according to network and in what sense? How do young people access general information and news in particular? How do they manage risks in social networks? This work tries to clarify these questions whose rapid evolution and the difficulty of access to this information prevent us from painting a real and current panorama.

The results obtained from the focus groups will serve, among other purposes, for the design of a survey questionnaire that will aim to quantify, based on a representative sample, the behaviours detected in them. These results will also support the interpretation of the causal explanations detected in the survey in terms of perceptions, representations and the beliefs that support these behaviours.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Uses of social networks. Consequences on participation

The assumption of the Internet in the daily life of teens and young people for the purposes of information, communication and even education is unquestionable. As digital natives, they begin to connect at an early age and consider it a way of social inclusion (Sendín *et al.*, 2014) to stay in touch with their peers and share content with them (García *et al.* 2013). Although they are aware of the risks (Martínez Pastor *et al.* 2013), they generally recognise that they maintain a high degree of confidence in the Internet (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2014).

Scientific research points out the changes that have led to the navigation and use of social networks to establish a new conceptualisation of citizenship that diverges to a large extent from the traditional approach, as a new action scenario is adopted in this digital environment (Hernández Merayo, 2011).

In this regard, a large part of the literature raises, among other advantages, the opening of new globalised relationship channels that enhance the participation of individuals (Arriazu and Fernández, 2013; Yuste 2015), the possibility to manage new alternatives for information sources and to stimulate the critical sense (Rodríguez San Julián *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Chen, 2015; Yamamoto *et al.*, 2015); and promote a conversational environment that encourages civic engagement and involvement (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2016) with a remarkable influence to alleviate political inequality between leaders, minority groups and citizens (Xenos *et al.*, 2014).

In the same context, Lane *et al.* (2017) consider that the use of social networks for different tasks can derive in the online political discussion which, in turn, presents itself as motivating factor for participation in the physical environment, since the exposure to disagreement becomes a potential stimulus for the political action of the user and that, as Únal points out (2017), the feature of freedom of expression that characterises the digital sphere provokes in the user a sense of self-efficacy that can be considered as a condition for civic participation.

Ji *et al.* (2017) have also found a positive correlation between the general use of social networks, regardless of motivation, and direct and indirect participation in political discussions, whether in the digital or physical environment. This benefit provided by the ease of access to social networks generates new models of political culture that enjoy more horizontality and deliberation (Gil Moreno, 2016). In the same line and in the case of Facebook, Chan (2016) has detected an important connection of users through this network with representatives in general, but especially with political and social activists, since the latter show greater skills to use this tool to disseminate their agenda and influence. The same author observes direct effects on the civic engagement of those users who consume, share and comment news through this network. In a more generalised view, Pasek *et al.* (2016) conclude that this activity is positively associated with political awareness and, in this context, information consultation in the media plays a decisive role.

However, authors such as Borge *et al.* (2012), argue that online forms of engagement complement, but do not replace, those forms built in the physical environment, and do not mobilise new individuals but only reinforce the engagement of those who are already involved. For a decade, several authors have questioned that citizen participation goes in a double direction (Sampedro *et al.*, 2008; Dader *et al.*, 2011; Calvo *et al.*, 2014; Dader *et al.*, 2017, Dader *et al.* 2014). From this view, Hargittai and Shaw (2013) also predict that the traditional patterns of engagement will not be radically transformed in any way. Indeed, a change is detected in the form but not in the structural way of rebuilding participation and, above all, establishing new ways of doing politics (Bescansa and Jerez, 2013). At this point and with regards to the *15-M* movement, Hernández *et al.* (2013) note that, although conventional forms of participation were questioned, the use of new technologies was truly manifest among those users who showed in advance a high degree of involvement. For their part, Anduiza *et al.* (2010) have concluded that those who participate physically in protests or other types of actions have a greater tendency to participate in the digital environment.

At this point, *clicktivism* is remarkable, as it has been alluded, among others, by Cornelissen *et al.* (2013) to define symbolic participation without further involvement and which, among other effects, may undermine the carrying out of more effective actions that do produce real social changes. In this regard, Boulianne (2015) shows his scepticism about a positive relationship and a true engagement

because young people, despite being digitally skilled, do not tend to be critical or activists in social networks (Lazo, 2017). In fact, Padilla de la Torre (2004) concludes that greater access to the Internet does not correspond to greater citizen participation among young people

In a more optimistic approach to the effectiveness of social networks, Holt et al. (2013) suggest that integration and compromise cannot be measured with the only scale established for the traditional and typical activities of democracy (vote, speak out in physical spaces or protest), as it is necessary to take into account the management of the user profile on social networks, the posting and sharing of multimedia elements and texts and the contribution in online discussions. However, this digital activity can only be measured in young people since adults still show a low perception and confidence about civic activity in the online environment (Sampedro et al., 2013). This perspective raises the division exposed by Bennet et al. (2008) between the “dutiful citizen” (DC), who is oriented to actions that respond to the traditional model, and the “actualizing citizen” (AC), who tends to develop interactive initiatives in the network and is the role adopted by most young people.

While there is a positive relationship between the use of media and social networks and the civic and social engagement and political participation (Skoric *et al.* 2016), the subject immersed in digital democracy can adopt the different positions described by Dahlberg (2011): the liberal-individualist position, which is based on a perspective that allows the citizen to obtain the information needed to examine the different political positions; the deliberative position, which sees digital media as instruments that allow two-way activities and as a way of generating public opinion; the counter-publics position, which goes beyond the previous one by associating itself with a progressive change in which, among other aspects, it strengthens alternative or marginalised groups in the traditional democracy; and finally, with a more radical trait, the autonomist Marxist position, which sees digital communication networks as a tool for self-managed participation that eludes the established political systems.

In this line, Skoric *et al.* (2016) conclude that the use of social media generally has a relationship with civic engagement, social capital and political participation; although authors such as Robinson and Phillips (2016) argue that this citizen engagement cannot be sustained solely in the digital environment, but must also be supported by a considerable practice of offline participation in order to encourage and intensify a sustained engagement; because, as they conclude, citizen action is constructed with the various activities developed both in the short and long term, whose objective is the improvement or the achievement of a social cause or value. In other words, civic engagement is not as much a purpose as it is a motivation that drives citizens to defend their own interests and those of their social environment.

## 2.2. News consumption

Young people use social networks to get news (Vizcaino-Laorga *et al.*, 2017) and information related to the political environment, but according to Elareshi *et al.* (2014), they use a wide variety of sources for this purpose, both online and traditional, and choose one or the other depending on the topic they seek. From the approach of interactivity, when young people want to share information, they mostly use social networks and social media, which have become, as described by Aladro *et al.* (2012), a vital element that encourages the incorporation of young people in the cultural and social sphere.

Meanwhile, Yuste (2015) defines social networks as young people's "natural space", as social networks exhibit characteristics that respond to the interests of this sector of the population when consuming information, which is a consequence of the eminently social and mobile features of social networks, their speed (Casas *et al.*, 2015), and the superficiality of the contents (García Gómez *et al.*, 2012). Even use of social networks with private and individualistic motivations (getting news, for example) can lead to a broader derivation by fostering public civic attitudes and contributing to political engagement (Yu, 2016).

In this regard, Freeman (2013) concludes that the Internet is the main source of news among young people and, although the online press is their first choice for consultation, they prefer to play the role of active audiences in media and social networks to share their own comments. In this regard, Choi (2016) also argues that the publication of news on social networks contributes to young people's participation and Guerrero (2018) claims that young people are moving away from television to never come back. Similarly, Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* (2016) have concluded that one of the reasons that promotes the use of social networks is the need to engage in debates on certain public affairs, as well as the need to get news to share their opinions and to find support in their surroundings. This consumption of news in the digital environment generates civic awareness by promoting, according to Bouliane (2015), a new source of knowledge of current affairs whose lack prevents the user from participating actively in the political and civic life.

However, Lane *et al.* (2017) clarify that individuals with greater engagement share news in this area with greater frequency when they disagree with them and want to reaffirm their own opinions. Meanwhile, Yamamoto *et al.* (2015) note that university students who consume online political news are more likely to participate in offline politics. From a particularised approach, Kim and Chen (2015) make a distinction of the users of social networks based on their social skills and emotional attitude. In this regard, they warn us that those who show greater extraversion are more likely to participate in civic activities, and that for introverts, social networks are an effective tool to communicate with other people and get motivated to participate in citizen actions.

However, this trend is not only observed with the use of social networks. News consumption in traditional media is also considered an influential factor (Saldaña *et al.*, 2014), although Casero Ripollés (2012) concludes that young people continue to opt for social networks and that, despite they resort to a multiplicity of platforms for this purpose, a large percentage show a lack of interest in the news. This attitude may, in part, be due to the negative, conflicting and stereotypical image of young people that is still presented in the different media detected by Alcoceba and Mathieu (2007). This fact leads to a low level of trust in news in this sector of the population, although the intensity of news consumption directly affects the degree of confidence and the perception they have on the usefulness of the news (García García *et al.*, 2014) and, although young people can show a certain concern for politics, most of them are not interested in the news offered by traditional media.

### **3. Objectives and methods**

The main objective of this article is to analyse young people's perception regarding social networks as spaces for civic and political participation and their capacity to empower youth.

This general objective has been broken down into the following secondary objectives:

1. Identify the different uses young people make of social networks and, particularly, the new practices around their participation as digital citizens, in relation to the meanings young people attribute to them.
2. Identify the representations and beliefs that circulate in young people's environment and inhibit their engagement in online public life.
3. Analyse the complex news searching processes that emerge with social networks.
4. Delve into the representations and beliefs of social networks and their relationship with the degree of credibility that users attribute to the contents and, particularly, the news that circulate in these social media.
5. Analyse young people's risk awareness with respect to the use of social networks and, particularly, with respect to privacy, personal data and reputation, and how they confront these risks.

### **3.1. Methodological strategy**

Qualitative data were obtained through focus groups with young people aged 18 and 25. The focus group technique allows a large amount of information to emerge from the spontaneous discourse that arises among participants, with minimal intervention by moderators. In this sense, this technique is perfectly suited to the objectives of this study, which seek to identify the perceptions, representations and beliefs that orient the use –or lack thereof– of social networks among young people as digital citizens who participate actively in the world around them, as well as getting access to the new more complex news searching processes that arise with social networks.

### **3.2. Population and sample**

We conducted four mixed-type focus groups (boys and girls) of five to eight participants each. The variables that articulated the design of the focus groups were educational level –vocational or university education– and participatory profile in social networks: limited to family and close friends or characterised by an active involvement that transcends that social environment and includes profiles of associations, NGOs, politicians, companies and influencers in different themes. The delimitation of the participatory profile is based on a previous survey that was used as a tool for the selection of young people and their distribution in the different focus groups.

### **3.3. Procedure**

The focus groups were conducted in the community of Madrid, between December 2017 and April 2018. The students were recruited in two vocational training centres –one in Fuenlabrada and one in Torrejón de Ardoz– and various universities in the Community of Madrid.

The focus group sessions were carried out in multipurpose halls of the study centres, outside school hours. The objective was to create a pleasant and private climate for interviewees to feel comfortable to express their opinions. The groups were moderated by the authors of the article, who also carried out their analysis.

Before the focus groups were carried out, participants were informed of the objectives of the study,

the anonymous and confidential treatment of the data. Each participant signed an informed consent form. The focus groups lasted between forty minutes and an hour and fifty minutes.

Group	Educational level	Degree of Participation in social networks	Location	Ages	Participants
VT-A	Vocational training	Active	Fuenlabrada	18-21	N = 6 5 men and 1 woman
VT-B	Vocational training	Non-active	Torrejón de Ardoz	18-22	N = 8 5 men and 3 women
UN-A	University	Active	Madrid	18-24	N = 5 4 men and 1 woman
UN-B	University	Non-active	Madrid	18-20	N= 6 2 men and 4 women

The moderators had a semi-structured questionnaire to guide the discussion but trying to intervene as little as possible. Consequently, the activity of the moderators was limited to the presentation of the different subjects. They only modulated the intervention of the interviewees, to focus the topic and request more details on any given intervention. First, participants were asked to introduce themselves and briefly state what social networks they used and for what purposes. Then, they were asked about participation with the purpose of explore young people’s conception of the term, to approach young people’s perception of the role of social networks in the empowerment of ordinary users and their relationship with the democratisation of society. Other topics of the debate revolved around their perception of the real uses that various institutions make of social networks, the perception of their socio-political role as citizens, the limitations in the uses of social networks for participation and its real efficiency.

Focus group sessions were videotaped and transcribed. At first, the data were organised in accordance with the topics contained in the initial script and the previous research issues. Subsequently, the new topics that arose in the thematic analysis of the speeches were labelled.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. General context of the use of social networks. Preferences and possible causes

In the focus groups, social networks are shown as a trendy phenomenon and seem to be related to the user’s profile. With regards to their perception as trends, social networks such as Snapchat have been replaced by Instagram “because Instagram does the same as Snapchat and so people stopped using the latter and... I did it too” (VT-B, participant 3). In this sense, references to networks other than Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are minimal, although, as it will be shown later, the use of minority networks seems to be characteristic of user profiles with very specific interests (Animo) or professional interests (LinkedIn and Telegram).

Twitter and Instagram are the two most recurrent networks, and their preference seems to be related to their use (and not so much to a trend). This happens in the generality of the groups, both high and low

activity profile, with the exception of the group of low-activity vocational training students (VT-B), which is the one that unanimously indicates that it has stopped using Twitter in favour of Instagram.

In most cases the use of Twitter before its substitution by Instagram was low or very scarce, but for some users Twitter has gone from being used very often to not being used at all (VT-B, participant 6), which could be related to the need to have to opt for a single network. Age seems to be a factor influencing the use of social networks: all participants pigeonholed older users in Facebook, while young people would be in a stage of evolution.

As for Facebook, its use is relative. In low-activity profiles (VT-B and UN-B), its use, if any, is centred on leisure; while the informative use only occurs (and exceptionally) in the group of university students with high activity in social networks (UN-A).

The personality of the individual seems to have some relation with the use of social networks or the preference for other media. Social networks demand a level of activity or involvement that not everyone seems to be willing to provide. Some say that “you end up focusing on a topic. If you want to look for something (...), you focus on that video game and see the latest news on that video game” (VT-B, participant 8). Having to select from the large amount of information circulating on Twitter is also shown as a problem for less active users.

#### **4.2. Different uses of social networks**

In view of the assessments made in the focus groups, it can be argued that each social network has a marked, but non-exclusive, use. Facebook is primarily used for family relationships and leisure (memes, cooking recipes and funny videos) and, exceptionally, for “news” (UN-A, participant 2) or for social purposes (UN-A, participant 4). There is also a direct relationship between this type of uses and the profile (low activity profile for leisure, high activity profile for news). However, participants from two of the four groups (VT-A and UN-B) claimed they did not use this social network with the exception of two individuals who used it for leisure and another one who used it to share news, but with a profile contrary to the aforementioned trend (leisure in the case of active vocational training students, and news in the case of non-active university students).

Another general appreciation is that the use of Facebook (or its lack of use) is linked, precisely, to family contact (which is, as mentioned, related to age). According to participants, Facebook would have become an environment in which family participation (parents, but also uncles or grandparents, for example) would have caused precisely their transfer to other platforms to be out of family reach and be able to express more freely.

Twitter, for its part, is the network that currently seems to be more clearly oriented to the reading and exchange of news of all kinds. All groups (except for VT-B) use Twitter either to share news, to participate, criticise or complain. Sometimes, Instagram also appears as a network used for “for information purposes” (UN-A, participant 4) or for professional purposes (VT-B), but it is mostly presented as a leisure-oriented environment.



### **4.3. Perception of news**

The focus groups suggest that news, opinion and information of another kind are diluted or converge on social networks. In this sense, television (as a news medium) appears as an obsolete channel for young people. Only on occasion it is cited as a starting information point, which is later further expanded over the Internet. For some, it even offers them more credibility (“I don’t usually watch television news. I read what I get on my phone and I trust that. One also has to know where to look, but I trust that more” (VT-A, participant 2). However, the opinion changes completely when participants do not actively use social networks. They consider, with some variations, that television is a more credible source, despite being aware that “they are managed by the government and sometimes present news that might be fake” (VT-B, participant 5). Another reason to opt for social networks versus other sources of information is because “news spread faster and are more current”.

There is also a mixture between news, information of interest and leisure. Some participants say they do not like television because it focuses on tragedies and “half an hour of sports” (UN-B, participant 3) and because it does not match their interests (“they dedicate 10 minutes to news that do not make any sense, and when they finally show something interesting they only talk about it for 2 minutes”, UN-B, participant 2).

### **4.4. Interrelation of networks and risks**

Young people seem to be aware of the different uses of social networks: contact limited to the family environment, social contact between peers, news, participation and professional use. In general, however, they consider social networks are closely related to the public. Thus, they do not believe their relatives (who use Facebook) can find out about their activity in another social network nor that the comments or pictures they post may have consequences in their future work. Only participants who are close to get a job or who are already working are aware of their potential risks.

The general trend in the groups was their lack of attention to their privacy settings on social networks, either because their use is scarce or because they do not know the network in depth (in the case of low-activity groups). Another concern is online purchases and the dissemination of personal data, despite participants have not had bad experiences in this regard. Risks related to material safety (such as theft of a house) also worry them, because the devices may automatically track their location, or because posting photos or information on the Internet can help thieves know when someone is not at home (low-activity focus groups). However, the opinion becomes contrary in high-activity participants: “People are super reluctant to the issue of location, but I love it” (UN-A, participant 5).

On the other hand, some participants are not aware of the limitations of social networks with regards to users’ personal data, because they speak, for example, of the possible sale of personal medical data (UN-B), which the law forbids.

### **4.5. Social networks and participation**

Young participants adopt two participative views of social networks: to share opinions (which, in general, they see as little useful) and to get news (which they consider positive). Thus, most of the participants agree on the low utility of social networks as a participatory tool. They consider that social

networks are useful to get to know other points of view, but not to change other points of view nor to be heard by (political or sports) personalities or influencers of any kind (who do not even answer to their followers).

Users with and without participatory experience in social networking consider that the voice (participation) that social networks offer to minority groups is a great contribution. However, young people without participatory experience believe that the user will have an impact only if he or she has a lot of followers. However, none of them believe this has a direct impact on today's political circles, but only a social derivation.

Some participants are more optimistic and believe that social networks facilitate the presence of marginal issues and can serve as a platform to make them visible: "The impact of certain messages starts to grow on Twitter and ends up reaching the ears of future leaders of a country" (UN-A, participant 1). However, they consider that in order for a marginal issue to begin to move in social networks, it has to be brought forward by people or organisations that are influential, either in the online or the offline environment. However, the real possibilities of influencing society are seen in a different way in the case of general issues. Here, they consider that the influence is low or null and that politicians, celebrities or influencers do not follow their comments nor reply to them because they are many and, therefore, there is no useful nor two-way communication, although some participants claim that they occasionally can make comments.

They consider that certain social actors (such as politicians) are participating in the media, either by employing in another way (the case of television debates or interviews) or by incorporating into them (Twitter and YouTube). However, they consider that it is fundamentally a social pose (pretending) rather than a use of ideological transcendence ("You can find a lot more ideology in any other account than what they say [politicians]", UN-A, participant 5).

It should be noted that one of the limitations for participation in social networks is the fear of being ridiculed or insulted, which is a recurrent theme in the different groups.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

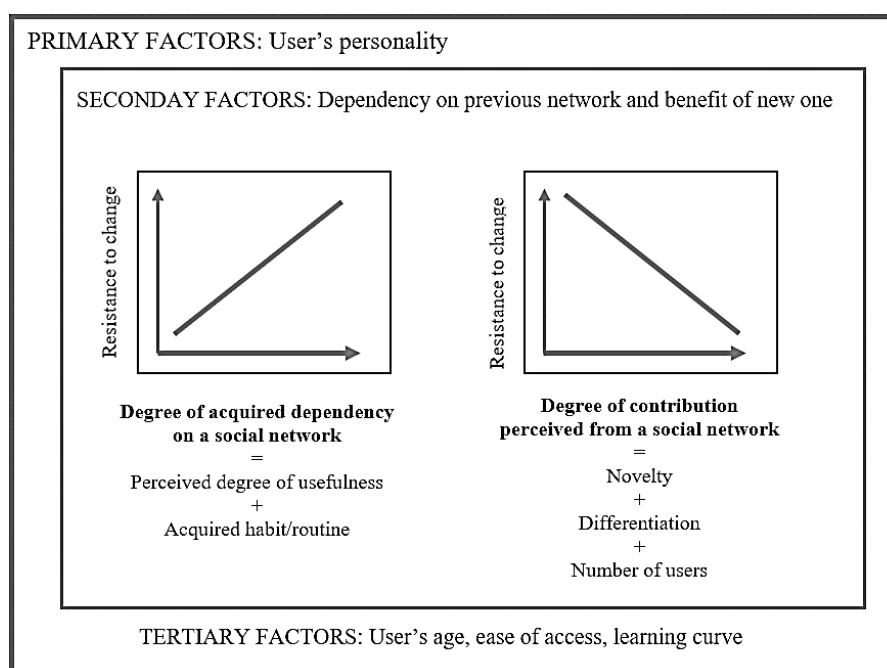
The level of activity of users in social networks is one aspect on which this research pivots. Specifically, this level was correlated to use and participation: we have considered active individuals who use social networks beyond the family and entertainment spheres; that is, those who also use social networks to participate civically (in politics and associationism) at different levels of intensity: from the mere retweeting of social issues to the most active participation through original tweets, comments, signatures and direct participation in online groups or calls for mobilisation generated in the online environment.

From this starting point, and in view of what we perceived here, quantitative studies should consider why low-activity users in social networks show different attitudes towards them. Thus, while some prefer Twitter and use it to get news, others (also low-activity users) have abandoned it completely and have moved to Instagram. There are two possible reasons in the focus groups: that the new network improves the preferred use (Instagram vs. Snapchat) and the user understands the benefit of replacing one network with another; and the low use habit, so there is no dependency and users can easily change

network. These two reasons would explain, in turn, why high-activity profiles use several networks simultaneously: because, although they see the usefulness of a new network (that can replace another), they remain using others that are also useful to them. Here, resistance to change would be stronger. Therefore, resistance to change would be linked to two factors: the degree of dependence of the social network (related to the utility acquired for the user) and the degree of utility offered by a new social network. Thus, the decision between replacing a social network or adding others to those already used would be related (as in many other everyday situations) with the cost-benefit valuation made by the individual.

In addition, and linked to this, we would have to consider whether age could have a direct relation with the adherence to a social network, since the younger the user we presuppose a lower previous dependence and therefore less resistance to change. Figure 5.1 summarises (tentatively) which could be these possible factors.

**Figure 5.1.** Hypothesis of factors conditioning users’ resistance to change to new social network (cost-benefit)



*Source:* Authors’ own creation based on four focus groups of 18-24-year-old students.

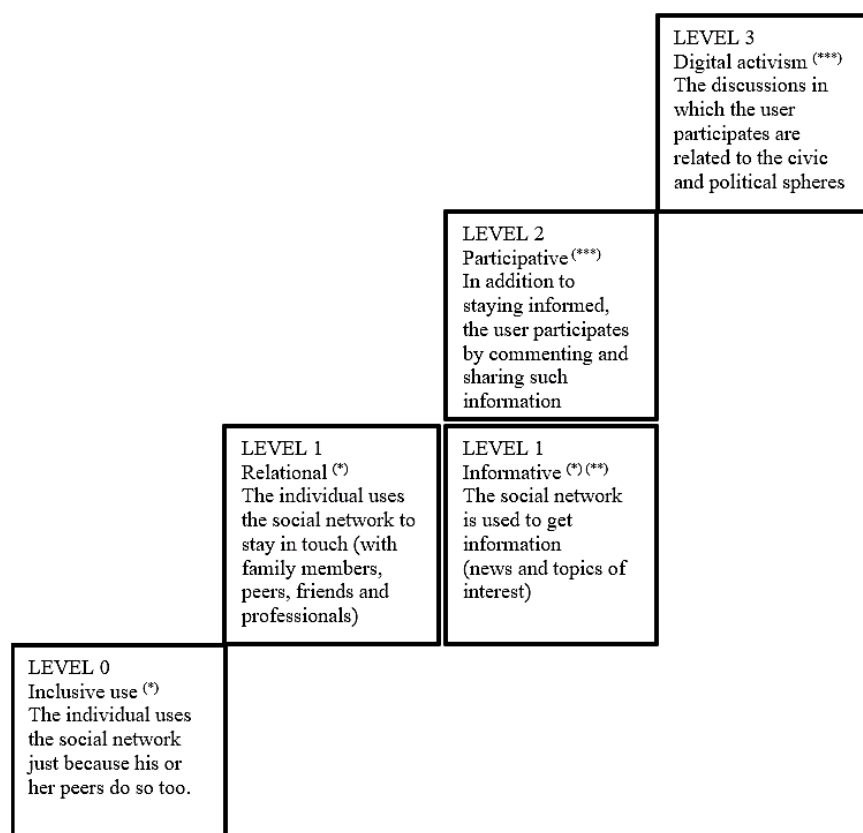
As for credibility, it seems that it is the degree of knowledge of the medium and its involvement with it that determines it. Thus, television is more reliable for those who use social networks poorly, while networks are more credible for those who use them on a regular basis. If this is true, we will have to resolve the dilemma of whether they use based on what they believe, or whether they believe and that is why they use it, or whether there are other reasons involved.

On the other hand, civic participation or online activism seems to be the pinnacle of a series of use

gradations that include independent uses (within a single level) and key uses (towards a higher level), as shown in figure 5.1. In this way, the inclusive use would not be a key to any other level, and therefore, those who have accessed a relational or informative level have not necessarily done so from an inclusive level. And although someone can use social networks to *stay in touch with* (relational use) or *stay informed* (informative use) independently, the informative use is essential to ascend to the participatory use (but the participatory level cannot be accessed from a purely relational use) and the latter is essential to reach a civic-participatory or online activist use.

The levels represented in figure 5.2 would pose a direct relationship with the degree of dependency and the type of issues covered. Thus, the inclusive level (level 0) would be the one in which the individual deals with anecdotal issues, looking around and browsing, not focused on topics of his/her interest. As the level goes up, the issues begin to be more focused on the interests of the individual and therefore the dependence on the network increases.

**Figure 5.2.** Levels of social network use and access path. Typology (independent, key and dependent), level (0-1-2-3) and profile (inclusive, relational, informative, participative and digital activism)



(\*) Independent level — access to it does not depend on another level.

(\*\*) Key level: Access to it makes it easier to move to a different level.

(\*\*\*) Dependent level: Can only be accessed through a key level.

*Source:* Authors' own creation based on four focus groups of 18-24-year-old students.

If the user finds a purpose for a social network, he or she may be more resistant to leave it. On the other hand, it has been found that the inclusive level does not imply resistance to change (perhaps because the benefit it provides is perceived as scarce), which suggests that the different levels of use (Figure 5.2.) can be weighted differently in the resistance to change. It has also been observed how the greater or lesser difficulty to break with a social network that is being used seems to be linked to habit (which is probably related, in turn, with the cost-benefit that it represents) and not directly to the level of activity. That is to say, users who have a low participatory activity but have used a social network like Twitter with a certain objective (to stay informed, for example) maintain that use. This habituation to a social network has a natural relation with the level of activity in this network, but it does not seem to explain it completely.

Through the focus groups it is possible to access the social imaginary that forms the basis of the collective identity and orients the action of individuals. It has been found that there could be differences in the use of social networks and that these are linked to the level of activity of the user, the perceived utility or the degree of knowledge about them. Although it will be necessary to use quantitative techniques, like the survey (which is precisely the continuation of the focus groups), some of the issues observed are summarised below:

1. A relationship between the subject's profile and the number of networks used. Thus, some of the least active users in social networks tend to focus on a single network or, in any case, to use fewer social networks. Therefore, not only the user is less active (less time, less participation or different use), but the dispersion is also lower. This happened clearly in the case of low-level vocational training students, but not among university students, which suggests that certain motivational traits are behind such preferences (and not exclusively the degree of activity or civic-social participation in the social network).
2. Linked to this, also certain lower-activity profiles seem to prefer social networks that require less intervention by the user. Thereby they leave networks like Twitter and start to use Instagram. This coincides, in addition, with the network's thematic orientation (currently, Instagram focuses more on the anecdotal sphere, although not necessarily) and the visual resources on which it is based (compared to the more textual-reflective resources of Twitter). Therefore, a social network that requires less participation in its use becomes more successful, as it prevails among certain low-profile users and coexists with other networks in the rest of profiles.
3. The degree of knowledge on a social network seems to influence aspects such as the level of credibility and the risks it poses. The more the user manages a social network the less risks they perceive.
4. This perception of risk is related not only to the level of activity in the social network (which leads to a greater knowledge of the network), but also to knowledge non-related to the network itself (such as knowing or not certain legislative aspects related to privacy, for example).
5. Even in the case of low-activity users, television appears to be a declining medium. This could be caused by the fact that the themes found in social networks are closer to those of young people. Therefore, there is a hybridisation or convergence between the interests of individuals and their preferred medium. While the separation was clear before (because it was assumed that television was

the best medium to find news of interest to the citizen, and other media, such as the specialised press, channelled the specific information of individual interest), now it is expected that television will play the same role as the Internet, where subjects find general-interest news and news of personal interest and leisure. Given that these types of news are found in social networks, the general tendency is to move towards them (although their use and implication occurs in different degrees).

6. The level of confidence in the civic-social possibilities of social networks seems to be directly related to the level of participation and knowledge about them. Greater confidence acts as a democratic-participatory tool and as a generator of change when the user has had experiences of participation.

7. Networks may have more influence on marginal issues than on topics of general public interest (media agenda issues), provided they have initial support from influential individuals or groups.

8. In view of the diverse complexities identified in the research, it can be argued that the personality of the user and all the implications that derive from it (ideology, a more proactive or passive attitude, a more or less participatory attitude, greater tendency to individualism or socialisation, tendency to passivity or reflection, and personal interests or hobbies versus the absence of them, etc.) are what converge on the type of use that each individual makes of social networks.

9. The concept of news is changing among young people. Being up to date, for them, involves a mix of news on topics of interest, following up a current affair, and being entertained with friendly info.

10. The civic-participative possibilities of social networks, in view of the information obtained in the focus groups, should be considered with different nuances. One cannot simply speak of the “power” of social networks as a participatory and social change element, but rather it must be contextualised. Thus, their capacity (or lack thereof) to empower minorities, or to have greater or lesser influence, depends on the environment (low influence in politics, greater in other emerging contexts), and on the agent or catalyst of the social network (anonymous, public figure or influencer, for example).

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