



# Cyberactivism: A new form of participation for University Students

Ciberactivismo: nueva forma de participación para estudiantes universitarios

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to show the results derived from a sample of students who were enrolled in different bachelor degree programs offered by the University of Sonora in Mexico. There was a double objective for this study. First, to identify cyber activist students through the answers gathered through a questionnaire taken electronically using as inclusion criteria the presence of high and medium levels of participation and commitment in different actions undertaken in four topic areas (environment, academic, social and citizen issues, and human rights). As a second objective, and after selecting three unique cases of cyber activist students, inflexion points were determined in the activities performed by these youngsters in digital social networks. Using personal narrative as a methodological strategy, the students described how they interact with others through different digital networks. Among the first categories identified in the in-depth interviews are: interaction history (use, access and availability of technology at a young age), and active participation about topics of interest in social networks (organization and the perceptions of achievements made). As main findings, there are the availability of these resources from a young age, personal motivation in participating in diverse topics, enjoyment of expressing one's opinion freely, electronic participation as a way to commit to a cause, and not joining an organization while participating.

## RESUMEN

Se presentan resultados derivados de una muestra de estudiantes que asisten a las diversas licenciaturas que ofrece la Universidad de Sonora en México. El objetivo fue doble, en un primer momento, identificar a estudiantes ciberactivistas a través de las respuestas obtenidas de un cuestionario aplicado de manera electrónica, utilizando como criterios de inclusión la presencia de puntajes medios y altos en el nivel de participación y compromiso en las diversas acciones emprendidas en cuatro temas (medio ambiente, académicos, problemas sociales y ciudadanos, y derechos humanos). En un segundo momento y a partir de la selección de tres casos únicos de estudiantes ciberactivistas, se determinaron puntos de inflexión en las actividades desarrolladas por estos jóvenes en las redes sociales digitales, utilizando como estrategia metodológica la narrativa de los propios estudiantes cuando interactúan con otros en las redes. Entre las categorías iniciales en las entrevistas en profundidad se encuentra: la historia de interacción (uso, acceso y disposición de la tecnología desde temprana edad), y la participación activa en las redes sociales sobre temas de interés (organización y percepción de logros alcanzados). Como principales hallazgos se encuentra la disposición de estos recursos desde temprana edad, la motivación personal en los diversos temas, el gusto para expresarse de manera libre, la participación electrónica como forma de comprometerse con las causas, y la no afiliación a organizaciones al participar.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Cyber activist, cyberactivism, commitment, digital culture, university students, interaction, student participation, social networks. Activista cibernetico, ciberactivismo, cultura digital, estudiantes universitarios, interacción, participación estudiantil, redes sociales.



## 1. Introduction and state of affairs

The impact that technological tools have today in the general population is well known, in particular, it is young people who actively participate through Social Networking Sites (SNS) as part of their daily lives. They do it in order to communicate, to be entertained, to learn and to participate in their civic, political or cultural reality.

In a study conducted over 21 countries, recent statistics on the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) show that people have integrated themselves into the use of Internet, in particular through the use of social media through smartphones. These technological tools have become the most popular and most used among individuals under 30 with some degree of higher education (Pew Research Center, 2012). By 2013 in Mexico, 34.4% of households had Internet access (an increase of 12.8% compared to 2012); of all Internet users, 38.6% were young adults between the ages of 18 to 34, and 39.6% used SNS (INEGI, 2014).

This has produced a culture among young people in which it is possible to identify elements of ICT integration in everyday activities in order to organize, communicate, create content, play games, discuss, chat and even encourage others to participate (Castells, 2014). In this way, young people are building their reality of emerging issues and collective interests through active participation in SNS; however, only a few are placing themselves as in control of content management, virtual community organization, and data compilation.

In all these activities, participation<sup>1</sup> is a nodal concept that becomes salient; it is a form of interaction among individuals sharing ideas and values in which each one seeks to influence the other. In the case of young people, digital media usage is being used increasingly intensively in order to generate participation. The integration of digital media has created new ways of participating, or a participatory culture (Jenkins et al, 2009). Participating through different networks and digital platforms allows them to denote different forms of engagement, which are categorized as medium or low level by some authors (Castells, 2014; De-Ugarte, 2007). Furthermore, communities are created in which the decision to continue participating and belonging is made because of emotion, closeness and level of commitment they have to the topic (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2010).

According to Serna (1997) –who takes up what Clauss Offe proposed– participation by young adults has the following features: it revolves around new

issues or ideologies, seeks action and immediate results, the reason why their relationship with the topic is not long term, participates in a community without losing the subjects' individuality, organizes horizontally, and uses the technological means available.

Recently, some authors have used different terms when it comes to refer to types of participation: standing out among them are the youth, the effective, the social, the political, and the civic ones. Youth participation is considered as such when there are young people in general, as a segment of the population, who carry it out, whether they are students or not. Conversely, when there is involvement in decision-making, this is called effective participation (Krauskopf, 2000). Social participation engages in issues with peers and seeks to support mainstream topics while political and civic participation are linked to exercising the right to vote and interaction with political parties or well-consolidated political groups (Balardini, 2005).

Meanwhile, Henriquez (2011) mentions that changes in the form of communication and organization enable new ways of social participation. One of them is cyber-activism in which young people use technology, especially the Internet, to organize activities, discuss, share information, participate and express their dissatisfaction on issues with which they identify themselves. De Ugarte (2007) adds that cyber-activism is all forms of social participation that occur via ICTs which are seeking to change the current situation through mobilization and militancy. This concept of cyber-activism has received several names, from click-activism, online activism, e-activism, digital activism, online activism, network activism, to digital social movements. However, just like participation, cyber-activism is horizontally organized around new issues and it looks for results such as changes in mentality. Based on a review of several authors who have researched these issues, Table 1 shows the similarities and differences between participation and cyber-activism and how commitment is perceived in both.

Having identified the main characteristics of participation, cyber-activism and the role that commitment plays, the aim of this study is to determine the number of students considered to be cyber activists in a university population, based on the following criteria:

- a) Young adults who participate through signing, joining, or subscribing to causes, petitions or groups and to manage or share information (Cardoso, 2014; Castells, 2014; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003) related to the four selected topics.
- b) Young people who report having a medium or high level of commitment to these issues.

c) Those who participate via Internet or in both places, online and on the streets.

All of the above criteria are related to the topics identified by theorists as related to cyber-activism which are: environmental, ecological and animal rights (Ba-

rranquero, 2012, Henríquez, 2011), social and civic issues (Castells, 2014; Henríquez, 2011), human rights (McCaughy & Ayers, 2003; Henríquez, 2011), and educational /academic issues (Castells, 2014; Henríquez, 2011).

There is an important list of authors who have addressed the issue of political participation among citizens through the use of SNS and/or Internet to access political information, as in the case of the studies of Xenos and Moy (2007) on the US population, or those who have addressed the youth protests as a central element for political change, as in the case of studies carried out in Chile by Valenzuela, Arriaga and Scherman (2012) and in Mexico with the «Yo Soy 132» movement (Diaz, 2013). However, these studies have focused on the civic behavior and political education of young people, or have analyzed how these events influence electoral processes, election of candidates and their understanding of political parties. These authors have not been considered in this classification, nor has the criterion of political subject in carrying out the classification of young cyber-activists, considering that another approach and analysis is needed to deepen the political education of young people; thus, the authors referred to in the classification do not consider political issues as belonging to cyber-activists.

Young university students belong to a generation that has been characterized by the constant use of technology in their daily lives. Nonetheless, this study,

and taking into account the points already mentioned, wants to determine what this participation, which is established by a sample of university students interacting with others through different technological means, is like. Specifically, the present study's main concern is to deepen and understand, what features do identified cyber-activists have in common? And what are the elements or turning points in the activities that they develop in the interaction with others that allows them to be presented as cyber-activists?

## 2. Methods and material

The method used for this study combines two types of techniques: a questionnaire with closed ended questions, and in-depth interviews. First, the questionnaire served as a starting point for selecting students with greater participation and medium-high level of commitment from a sample of students from the Universidad de Sonora (UNISON) which is participating in the project «Jóvenes y cultura digital. Nuevos escenarios de interacción social»<sup>2</sup> (Youth and Digital Culture: New scenarios of social interaction). The questionnaire section chosen for this work relates to the level of involvement and commitment young university students have with certain topics and online-platforms. The two questions asked were the following: Select the issues with which you have some kind of involvement and the level of commitment you have with this (these) topic(s)? On that question you can

**Table 1. Similarities and differences between participation and cyber-activism based on commitment (Yanez, 2015)**

| Features                  | Participation  | Cyber-activism  |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Affiliation</b>        | Young adults maintain individual dimensions or participate in lower-institutionalized groups.  | No organizations apart from political parties and unions. Subjects act autonomously.  |
| <b>Site</b>               | Using new technologies.  | Born and spread through the web, in some cases using cell phones. Occasionally consolidated in urban spaces or on the street.   |
| <b>Results</b>            | Immediate and/or mediate, priority to short-term effects.  | The main result is to change people's minds and transform consciousness. Sometimes they can trigger protests, destabilization of institutions, or even changes in laws. |
| <b>Organization</b>       | Horizontal working groups, round tables or networks. Reject unidirectional instances.  | Leaderless, horizontal and direct interaction with others. No rigid rules and hierarchies.  |
| <b>Topics of interest</b> | Citizen issues, social-and community issues, ecological and environmental issues, human rights, gender equality and sexual rights, labor, and culture. | Several topics based on the feelings experienced by the youth and its proximity to them. The strongest feeling is indignation.  |
| <b>Commitment</b>         | To participate actively is a way of demonstrating commitment.  | Low or medium when only online interactions are present, high when actions are taken outside the web.   |
| <b>Motives</b>            | Causes supported by their peers.   | Spontaneous, usually by feelings of indignation.  |
| <b>Main authors</b>       | Balardini (2005), Krauskopf (2000), Serna (1997), and Jenkins (2009).  | Calderón y Szmukler (2014), Cardoso (2014), Castells (2014), and Henríquez (2011).  |

select up to nine topics: 1) environment, ecology, and animal welfare, 2) educational/academic, 3) work and employment, 4) Artistic/Cultural 5) leisure, fun and entertainment, 6) Social and civic problems, 7) Human rights, 8) Political, and 9) Religious. The level of commitment that could be selected on this questionnaire by each subject was: high, medium, low, or none; the latter corresponding to no involvement or commitment at all.

To determine the students who showed traits of cyber-activism, the results of activities such as signing up to, joining or subscribing to causes, petitions, or groups, and managing or sharing information, having a medium or high engagement on these issues, involvement through Internet or both on the Internet and on the streets were also considered, all the latter related to topics such as the environment, ecology and animal protection, social and civic issues, human rights, and education/academic problems.

Out of the total sample from UNISON (713 participating students), only 13 met the established criteria.

The second technique was in-depth interviews following an interviewing guide also used in the previously mentioned project; under the design of a single case study. The main objective at this stage was that, through a narrative method, students explain how the process of interaction in networks and platforms takes place and to derive turning points<sup>3</sup> that can assist as categories of analysis for subsequent studies. The interview guide consists of 35 open questions, so that the interviewee could express his or her opinion freely. Even though the initial contact with the thirteen students was via email, only three of them replied. Despite the low participation among selected students, it was considered appropriate to continue the study because of the exploratory nature of this second stage, and the relevance of the responses obtained with the three participants.

### 3. Analysis and results

At first, after identifying the cyber-activist students (N=13), it is possible to point out that eight of them are female, and five are male and their ages range from 19 to 26. An important feature is that a large percentage of these students also work (9), while only four are entirely devoted to studying. From the department with the highest representation to the lowest, they were enrolled in the

Schools of Social Sciences and Economics and Administrative Sciences (3 each), the School of Engineering (2), Biological and Health (2), and Humanities and Fine Arts with two students as well, while the least represented is the School of Natural Sciences with one student.

Inquiries about digital platforms used to protest showed that the SNS Facebook (named by all of them) is an important means for communicating and sharing information, inviting and/or calling for events, and even requests to join groups or other associations. They also indicated that they use email continuously (8), but employ newer platforms like Twitter (3) and Instagram to a lesser extent (1).

Regarding their affiliation, none of the Internet activists are incorporated into any organization or formal institution, but they participate as independent citizens.

Among the results perceived by this group of young adults the following are included: citizen awareness (6), followed by actions on the Internet (5), walking, creating documents or holding a demonstration to show discontent (2), and one reported having achieved the creation or modification of a law. Only one participant mentioned, as another type of result, upsetting others by writing that «offenses by ignorant people who believe that you are the ignorant».

By matching the four topics identified as theoretically related to cyber-activism with the level of commitment, it was found that there is a higher percentage of medium to high, as shown in table 2.

In a second stage, when examining the in-depth interviews conducted with three of these students (two men and a woman) the fact that they are studying and working stands out, besides from actively participating in online social networks. Their studies are under the social sciences umbrella and are senior undergraduate students (table 3).

The parents' level of education and socioeconomic status are two variables that indicate family capital regarding access to electronic goods from an early age,

**Table 2. Subjects with cyber-activist characteristics' distribution related to commitment and to the topics they participate in (Yanez, 2015)**

| Level of commitment | Topics                                 |                      |                             |              |
|---------------------|--|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
|                     | Environment, ecology and animal rights | Educational/academic | Social and Citizenry issues | Human rights |
| High                | 38.5%                                  | 38.5%                | 23.1%                       | 30.8%        |
| Medium              | 46.2%                                  | 38.5%                | 53.8%                       | 46.2%        |
| Low                 | 7.7%                                   | 15.4%                | 15.4%                       | 23.1%        |

in this regard, educational level is located at HE level, highlighting that in two cases, where parents had asso-

ciate degrees, an older brother had already reached a university level of education; second line relatives (uncles), or parents had university studies, leading to the suggestion that students belonging to this group are second generation higher education students. Regarding the socioeconomic status, they report being part of either middle or upper middle class, this means that although it is true that they do not belong to the upper class in the social stratification, their lives are characterized by having access to mobile phones with Android or iOS operating systems, as well as a desktop and a laptop computer. They are connected daily via cellphone and other devices, and especially have had easy access to Internet and computers from an early age.

Regarding the first category, interaction history, the following stands out: their first encounters with technology occur through video games and begin during childhood at home or with friends, school and internet cafés are the second place where they kept in touch with technology, stressing as a major factor that the high schools they attended promote active participation in topics of educational (one case), political (one case) and of general interest (one case).

In the category of active participation in social networks, there are several matching areas across the three students. They point out being aware that their participation is active on forums or wikis because they frequently give their opinions on the four topics (environment, education, citizenry and social issues, and human rights). However, each student mentions at least two more issues of participation and personal interest. For example, in the case of student 1, he adds the issue of politics and labor; student 2, added politics, religion, science and sports, and the third student repeats labor and scientific topics, adding arts and entertainment (games), so it is considered that altogether, there are at least six issues addressed by each of them (table 2). The interviewees confirm that they give their opinion on a frequent basis, especially on social problems that arise, as they are motivated primarily by the proximity of these issues to their lives. One of them states that it was a discomfort with a problem the student was facing which lead to his constant participation.

On the other hand, it is important to observe a cri-

tical stance in relation to the undergraduate program, because two of the students are in Communication Sciences making references, for example, to information management as for instance «there are several versions of the same news stories because reality can be interpreted in different ways».

Concerning the perception they have of their participation and impact on digital networks, the female student believes that the contribution made by feedback is valuable, while the two male students said they were not satisfied with such efforts, student 1 said in relation to the low response obtained from commenting online: «No, not completely. Because if what I write, I could..., the feelings I express in those words when I am telling all my acquaintances that something is wrong and only few people respond to that call or feel the same way that I do. Very few, I think that is why».

Meanwhile, student 2 expresses discomfort asso-

**Table 3. Characteristics of the interviewed cyber-activists**

| Interviewee | Bachelor degree program | Semester | Sex   | Age | Employment situation | Economic Class | Number of topics of interest |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------|-------|-----|----------------------|----------------|------------------------------|
| 1           | Law                     | 9        | Man   | 24  | Unemployed           | Middle         | 6                            |
| 2           | Communication Sciences  | 10       | Man   | 23  | Employed             | Middle         | 6                            |
| 3           | Communication Sciences  | 7        | Woman | 22  | Employed             | Upper-middle   | 6                            |

ciated with the small amount of time devoted to this activity: «No. I feel I could contribute more, but for work reasons I cannot contribute more on social networks. Like I said, I get up, go online in the morning, the short break I have, say, at nine I start to ... I get up at eight and I have an hour or two, no more, that I can go online in the morning. I get back until five in the afternoon or so. And from five until ten or eleven, that's how long I have. And yes I would like to stay in touch longer».

However, all three agree on the importance of achieving change through an intensive interaction in digital social networks. They believe that if there were no ICTs, they would seek other forms of traditional active participation (newspapers, posters, murals, and demonstrations). Another point of view where the interviewees agree is that they do not approve of the laws of several countries seeking to control the Internet.

In relation to their affiliation to groups or organizations, one of them belongs to one and organizes different actions as a result. In reference to the perceived impact and consolidation of their actions, two students have acknowledged that their projects (group or per-

sonal) have extended to other national or foreign groups. One says that only a few projects have managed to become reality, but some others have not. However, the female student indicates that only group projects have actually become a reality, adding that with the actions taken they have managed to help the people concerned. Another student stated that the projects that have been successful have achieved informing people of the current situation.

Regarding the freedom with which they act in networks, the three students agree that their work in digital social networks has not been censored. Yet, one interviewee indicates that, because of copyright, he did get censored. Concerning the laws of several countries seeking to control the Internet, two of the interviewees (a man and a woman) consider that freedom of speech would be violated. The third student indicates that part of society will cease to be informed of issues that may concern them. Finally, they agree that their work as a person involved in intense and frequent activity in digital social networks does not involve costs, so they see this as very convenient.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In general, it can be concluded that the young participants classified as cyber-activists can be found in any academic department, actively participating despite having to work and study at the same time in most cases. These young adults are enthusiastic about the work they perform through digital platforms because it revolves around topics of personal interest and considered as new issues.

Nevertheless, this participation, even when presented as active, involves a medium level of commitment, reflecting the few developed activities, i.e., they are active and involved in all topics, but not devoted or do not go into details about specific actions. Castells (2014) indicates that when young people participate in an online social movement or in a related activity, even when actively involved, their commitment is limited.

The way they organize is horizontal, meaning that it relies on their peers to organize and spread information, but does not have a vertical hierarchy with leaders who decide for them, they make decisions collectively and look for each voice to be heard. As evidence of this, it was found that very few subjects characterized as cyber-activists belong to an association or formal organization.

The use of Facebook as a central platform agrees with McCaughey and Ayer's (2003) proposal, who mention that activists, not just cyber-activists, have used the new types of media to promote movements,

media that captures a larger number of potential participants. Also, Gil-de-Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) found that Facebook and social networks are used by all university cyber-activists to check the news, access alternative information or discuss with others about topics of interest, which could increase the commitment of individuals and their participation in community issues. In this sense, as stated by García, Del-Hoyo and Fernández (2014), cyber-activism falls precisely into the possibilities for any individual to have a global impact through dialogue, as in the case of Facebook, not only as a means of communication, but also the means by which to carry out a form of social participation and global activism.

On the other hand, observing the results obtained and reported by this group of cyber-activists, this agrees with Krauskopf (2000) and Balardini (2005) on the participation and pursuit of immediate results. Also, Castells (2014) and Cardoso (2014) sustain that young people seek change of consciousness, not more profound changes.

The turning points that can be obtained from the in-depth interviews are: use of these tools at an early age through video games, also school, particularly high school, plays a very important role awakening interest in various topics, but this interest is also associated to the educational process in which students are engaged just as it is expressed through labor concerns (being young people who are about to graduate from university), scientific advances and caring for the environment as part of a general university culture, and sport and arts as their own personal interest associated with their age. In active participation in social networks, the right to speak freely, the use of electronic participation as a way to engage with causes, and non-affiliation to organizations when participating commonly stand out.

We also found that there is a presence of middle and upper middle class individuals, as stated by Hernández, Robles and Martínez (2013), that this phenomenon has a process of declassing, that is, the authors note how their motivation to participate is coupled with proximity to the topics, mainly where they perceive injustices such as job-related issues, where, as one of the participants said, there are low wages and exploitation of labor.

Overall, the interviewees have shown a critical view on the use of Internet. They agree that changes can be achieved interacting through social networks and disagree with countries' intention to control the Internet.

In conclusion and as a reflection, it is important to recognize that, within the limitations of qualitative stu-

dies using of interviews, generalization of these traits to other populations is low. This is commonly known, as what is gained in depth is lost in generalization, especially from claims that may arise when analyzing three students, from which it was intended to derive analysis categories for further studies.

However, once this limitation is recognized, it is important to note that this small group is part of a larger sample of 713 students, which has been systematically studied for the past three years. Thus, it is possible to affirm from these studies that, while only a small portion of this sample has characteristics of cyber-activists, the overall sample presents important features of active participation in the topics mentioned (González, Durand, Hugues, & Yanez, 2015), sharing similar traits to these thirteen students. This is the case in terms of high identification with digital culture, socio-economic level ranging from middle to upper middle class, and good educational level in their parents being among the most significant elements (González, Hughes, & Urquidi, 2015). On the other hand, those of us who work with issues of social sciences know it is not easy to voluntarily obtain participation from young adults for several reasons, including the already-mentioned resistance to institutional participation and distrust in the use of personal information, or simply apathy about the usefulness of what they think and that others might use. These issues are not minor and have been consistently identified by other researchers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term participation is understood and taken from the definition provided by Lima (1988) as a personal interactive process which is consensual and spontaneous for the common good, where it seeks to obtain a goal (usually the transformation of social relations), there is adherence to the ideas and values of a community, tasks, functions and roles within it are carried out.

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of turning point was taken up from Yair (2009).

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