1. Overview on Digital Citizenship

“Since, digital technology is a fact which nowadays dictates the flow of human life, only the awareness and sensibility of the young generation will play a key role in recognizing the positive, useful and good aspects of it.”
Maja Abramič, NSS Slovenia

The digital and the citizen

Would you consider yourself to be a digital citizen? The immediate response for some is ‘no’. However, on further reflection, when thinking about the daily participation in the digital world by: spending time online daily, being connected through one or more devices simultaneously, being in contact with peers, family, colleagues, or friends mostly through digital means, many would probably reconsider and realise that they are, indeed, digital citizens.

What about students then? We all know that today’s children and young people grow up surrounded by technology. We are probably familiar as well with the controversial concept of “digital natives”, created by Marc Prensky1 to designate the natural fluency that young generations have when using technologies, as opposed to older generations, which he calls “digital immigrants”, those who adopted technologies later in life and who will always preserve an “accent” when using them. Much has been written about this metaphor and about how it distorts reality. The EU Kids online survey, involving European children aged 9 to 16, warns that the “talk of digital natives obscures children’s need for support in developing digital skills”.2 Meanwhile, children go online: 93% of all 5-15 year olds in the UK used the internet in 2013, with as many as four in five 5-7 year olds (82%). Regardless of their degree of digital skills. Regardless of their fluency (or lack thereof) in the use of digital technology.

Prensky’s metaphor is nevertheless powerful: it recognizes the digital as a land and the users of digital means as the citizens of this land. However, it underestimates one of the most relevant aspects of this “new world”: the fact that no – or few – borders are foreseen, that no passport is needed, and that therefore the concepts of “native” and “immigrant” does not apply. What remains then of a land that has no frontiers?

Three main pillars come to mind when trying to define digital citizenship: belonging, engagement, and protection. Digital citizens belong to the digital society. They use technology to actively engage in and with society. Digital citizenship empowers people to reap the benefits of digital technology in a safe and effective way.

I belong here

The digital society provides opportunities for interacting, learning, working, being. Citizens both “work for” and “benefit from” their belonging to society, and the same aspects apply to digital citizens. Much of our interactions happen online,3 therefore we are part of a digital society as much as we are part

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3 https://www.iste.org/explore/articleDetail?articleid=242
of the (tangible) society we live in. Everyone has a sense of belonging, as much as everyone needs to feel they belong somewhere. This is especially true for young people, who are shaping their personality traits in adjustment to the group (and society) they belong to. In the negotiation of rights and duties that inevitably come with the concept of citizenship, a point not to be forgotten is enjoyment, which is at the core of the sense of belonging. We enjoy being part of a digital society and our obligations towards this society should not be detrimental to this joy of belonging.

Full participation in a digital society requires access. Access was the first criterion to explain the digital divide, a concept which came into use in the 90s to allude to the differences in digital inclusion. Digital inclusion has dramatically improved in the last decade, with access to technologies being almost saturated in Europe. However, there are still barriers that relate to access for the underprivileged, or for use of technologies in the household. For instance, women, in particular mothers, are often the last in the families to reach and use a shared digital device. We could argue that, if a century ago Virginia Wolf was claiming for every woman “a room of one’s own” to study and having access to education, today we wish for all a room and a digital device of their own.

How individuals behave as members of a digital society will shape the digital environment we all belong to.

I am engaged

In Europe, 77% of citizens and 75% of children engage in online activities. Participation in the digital domain is no longer a question of “have” or “have not”, as we have seen before, but rather of “can” or “cannot”. If digital participation depends on access and use, it even more so depends on attitudes. Participation has different gradients, from lurking to advocacy. You can participate just by browsing through the net, or you can have a voice (and a strong one).

For a long time, digital citizens have been considered as users of technologies (mere recipients, consumers). We now see that digital citizens can also become active participants. Their engagement does not only translate into the consumption of digital goods and content, but also is manifested in the creation of digital content, of tools, of apps, of codes, of practices.

Young people are prolific producers of digital content: they take and share pictures, videos, multimedia, texts, and opinions. Being producers rather than consumers allows digital citizens to contribute to the landscape of the digital society and to understand it better. When we talk about coding, for instance, and its benefits for education, we always put forward the argument that coding allows students to create and not just to use. Which is true. Yet, by engaging in coding and programming they will also learn to understand how the digital society they plunge into every day, runs. They might better grasp the rationale of the algorithms behind the search engine and other online tools they use.

We could see digital participation as a four ladder process. There would be those who lurk, who observe, who watch, who use the digital world as consumers and viewers. There are then those who participate by sharing information and content, by connecting people, by sharing ideas worth

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5 Eurostat Data for 2013.
spreading. On the third ladder, those that create new content, new practices, new tools, bringing about a new way to engage with other digital citizen, and to be part of a digital society. And on the upper ladder, those who harness the potential of technology for a better society. This fourth ladder includes those who want to engage in shaping the future of the web, as well as those who shape the future of society as a whole through digital means. We should acknowledge the importance of youth participation in internet governance discussions on a more consistent and regular basis, by acquiring ourselves the adequate knowledge and skills to both facilitate understanding and building of personal opinions on issues related to how the internet ecosystem works. Young people can be empowered to shape a better internet or, if they do not wish to reach the top ladder, they can still influence a better digital environment by promoting positive values and behaviours. At the same time, we should recognise the role of youth in engaging in and with society as digital citizens. We see how processes as online petitions, for instance, are now claiming space for civic engagement. Digital tools and means are, as well, used to advocate for ‘transparency’ in policy making, by allowing citizen to get together in new forms.

I am protected – and I protect

Citizens are by definition protected by the country they belong to. Protection is also part of the rights that people have when being online. Technologies offer opportunities – and risk. While risk does not inevitably imply harm, harm can be detrimental to the enjoyment of digital citizenship.

Digital access not only exposes young people to possible risk but also enhances their digital literacy and safety skills. This means that active users are more likely to become resilient users of technology. Therefore, policy makers, educators, parents and other carers must implement specific strategies to ensure children’s rights to protection, without curtailing their rights to participation.

Many young people are experts at telling adults what they need to do in order to stay safe online, however whether this translates into changes in their behaviour is less certain. A sensible and effective strategy is to encourage children and young people to be responsible users not only in their own actions online but also in the way that they support others. Ask a group of people (not just young people) how many of them have seen something inappropriate online and many will have done. Ask the same group how many of them reported this content to either the service provider or an adult and you will get a much lower number. Equally, one could question if schools and parents are properly prepared for preventive or remedial action when things go wrong.

Children and young people have particular needs and deserve protection and safeguarding. As in the real world, certain protective measures need to be established. Children and young people should also have room to experiment and learn from their mistakes, without every click or like being tracked or traced. They should be encouraged to respect and safeguard the right of others. This is a huge responsibility we all share.

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7 https://webwewant.org/
8 https://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/web/portal/practice/awareness/detail?articleId=687352
I am digitally skilled

At the turning point of digital citizenship, digital skills provide the entry point to this virtual land. In a society that is more and more digitized, we can consider digital citizenship as a right. Digital skills enable us to exercise this right. However, we should not consider digital skills as the bare ability to operate devices. We consider that awareness and tolerance, democratic values and responsibilities are all parts of the skills that are needed to be and become digital citizens. Within this context, education has a crucial role to play, as it is well placed to shape, from an early age, the future of a connected generation. We need to develop digital skills in every student, empowering them to belong to the digital society, with a safe, responsible and creative sense of engagement.

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