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Introduction

The relationship between media and education has long been the focus of both hopes and fears. In the early years of the cinema, Thomas Edison made the optimistic claim that motion pictures would 'revolutionize' learning and ultimately make teachers superfluous. Similar claims were made about radio and television in the mid-twentieth century; yet they were also challenged by those who saw these media as a dangerous threat to the work of teachers and schools. Neil Postman, for example, famously condemned television as fundamentally detrimental to the purpose of education, and indeed to childhood itself.

In recent years, we have seen similarly polarized views about computers. Like television, digital media have been condemned for creating distraction and superficial thinking, and for trivializing and instrumentalizing education. Yet they have also been heralded as means of creating more authentic, effective and student-centred learning. Such optimistic assertions about the promise of technology have been made by governments seeking solutions to the apparent crisis of public education; yet they have also been driven by technology companies who see schools as a lucrative new market.

Today, schools are no longer children's first point of contact with computers: digital media are a central part of their out-of-school experiences, and of their everyday relationships and identities. Children's lives today are thoroughly 'mediatized'. The question is not *whether* educators should make use of digital media, but *how* they should do so. And as we seek to answer this question, we clearly need to look beyond the idea that using technology will be instantly motivating, or indeed that it will somehow teach itself.

The advent of 'social media' –or so-called 'Media 2.0'– represents a further stage in this history. The internet is no longer a tool simply for disseminating and retrieving information, but for dialogue and sharing, for interpersonal communication and for entertainment. While only a minority of young people have yet become creative media producers in any developed sense, there is a level of 'vernac-

ular creativity' (or even 'mundane creativity') apparent in social networking, blogging and online sharing that has become widely available.

Of course, we should beware of the hyperbole that often surrounds these developments: these tools that appear to offer so much democratic promise also permit forms of marketing and surveillance that are much more pervasive and intrusive. Yet these developments may have particular implications for learning and for the institution of the school. Educational researchers are now struggling to take account of the changing relations between schools and these new digital spaces in which young people spend increasing amounts of their time. While some fall back on the notion that the school's primary role is to protect children from risk, others proclaim a faith in technology as somehow inherently democratic and empowering.

In this new environment, a range of new issues is emerging. How far can we trust the information that is available online? How are identities being constructed and lived out in an age where 'self-advertising' has become a social necessity? Where are we to draw the line between the public and the private, or has this distinction become meaningless? How can we address continuing inequalities, both in access to technology and in the skills and competencies that are required to use it?

In this special issue of *Comunicar*, we focus on one particular aspect of this relationship: the potential of technology for civic learning. Here again, the debate often seems quite polarized. While some see media and technology as a primary cause of the decline of 'social capital' and of civic participation, others look to the internet in particular as a means of creating new forms of 'networked citizenship'. Young people are often seen to be in the vanguard of a new form of politics, facilitated and promoted through the use of these new digital tools and services – and for some, this will help to overcome the 'democratic deficit' of modern societies.

Yet there is a need to move beyond these polarized arguments. The media are not solely responsible for the apparent decline in democracy; but neither are they likely to save it. Educators can play a vital role here, but the regeneration of civic life that many see as an urgent necessity for modern societies will be a long-term and difficult process. Addressing these issues means that we need to move beyond the instrumental view of technology and the disingenuous separation of technology from society that characterizes a good deal of discussion of 'educational technology'.

Young people today are growing up in a context that is saturated with relational technologies and mediated communications; and in these new digital spaces, they develop preliminary frameworks for interpreting life, sets of opinions and prejudices, stereotypes and dilemmas, that guide their understanding of the meanings of everyday actions. It is also here that the experience of citizenship is at stake. This is a context in which young people represent and share their life stories, feelings and experiences, construct their identities, and learn the norms of peer group behaviour. Educators and researchers urgently need to focus on these informal spaces, which are barely recognized in most technological, political and educational studies.

These developments have complex implications for how we address the interface between the school and digital environments, between education and the media.

In broad terms, we need to develop a social and political view of both school and digital scenarios. We also need to challenge the forms of curricular, pedagogic and digital secrecy that censor and conceal power relationships, create opacity in respect of decision-makers, steer the engagement or participation of citizens in particular directions, and determine the framing of issues in the mediated public sphere. Research in this field needs to address the relations between meaning and power in these digital networks, but also consider the potential for changing them.

In the process, we need to address the contradictory narratives that exist among the mass media, the network society and schools - narratives that embody and promote different styles of learning and of civic or political education in particular. In the arenas of both old and new media, the school is often identified as a field of struggle between conflicting group interests, and is constantly being assigned functions that are impossible to fulfill. Meanwhile, new social movements also adopt particular educational practices, not least through their use of social media. In Spain, and in other countries, there is growing tension in respect of political decision-making processes, in which young people are playing an increasingly important role in setting the civic agenda and in promoting more deliberative forms of politics.

Our contributors in this special issue address some of the overt and underlying struggles over the meanings of public space, politics and civic engagement that are emerging in the interface between educational and virtual spaces. They explore how young people feel, live and experience democratic citizenship within and between schools and the digital world. In the process, they challenge simple distinctions between online and offline, between learning and leisure, and between the formal and the informal; and they ask fundamental questions about the meanings of concepts such as participation, citizenship and identity.

The first three contributions confirm that in Spain –as in many other countries– young people are participating in online spaces at an ever-younger age. In addition to using the internet as a source of information, they are increasingly using it as a forum for conducting relationships and building social identities. Digital media have become a resource in young people's efforts to build their social capital, to create community and to learn about the wider world. In the process, they are having to learn to handle risks, and to make complex judgments about the relationships between the public and the private.

The article by Colas-Bravos, Gonzales-Ramirez and De Pablos-Pons outlines recent statistics on young Andalucians' use of social networking sites outside of formal educational contexts. While the overall picture is of exponential growth, they also point to some significant gender differences (not so much in access as in the purposes of use) and a continuing level of non-participation or limited participation among some social groups. Bernal and Angulo provide a further report on the same large-scale survey, confirming the extensive use of the internet for personal contact and for 'identity work'; while the contribution by Muros, Aragon and Bustos, which is based on qualitative research, argues that in using these media, young people are developing their own ways of ensuring their safety online. The latter authors also draw attention to gender differences, which are

much more apparent in the world of online games than in social networking. All these contributions discuss the potential of these media as means of developing social capital and active citizenship, although they also point to the challenges for education in this respect.

The following two articles provide some cautionary notes as regards the democratic potential of digital media. Marta, Martinez and Sanchez discuss the role of marketing in online spaces via a case study of the Coca-Cola corporation's use of the Spanish social network Tuenti. As they suggest, there is an appearance of 'participation' here, but the aim is primarily to secure users' multiple interactions with the brand. This is a highly managed space, in which negative messages are excluded; and users may not always be aware of the extent or the nature of the marketing that is taking place. The article by Buckingham and Hoyos provides a related analysis of Habbo, a commercial 'virtual world' for young people. In focusing on the rules that are enforced in this world, they suggest that the site offers lessons about citizenship that are quite different from the democratic, creative, fun-filled rhetoric of its marketing appeals. Taken together, these two papers present a significant challenge to optimistic accounts about the possibilities of informal online learning that are promoted by some commentators in the field.

The two articles that follow focus more directly on the *civic* dimensions of the use of social media. Hernandez, Robles and Martinez provide an account of the 15-M social movement, addressing its role as model for learning, a 'school without walls'. They discuss the movement's use of digital media as spaces for deliberation and the exercise of political agency; although they also point to some new challenges that arise in this development of collective political knowledge. Banaji discusses a very different case, the online responses to the video of a racist outburst that was shared online. As she argues, the emotional and sometimes aggressive nature of these responses could be taken as a depressing reflection on the communicative possibilities of online spaces; but she also argues that such debates can nevertheless provide a resource for civic learning.

In different ways, all these papers point to the potential role for formal education, as a means of developing critical media literacy as well as mere technical skills. They also suggest that if we are to take advantage of the opportunities for civic participation that are offered here, we need to find ways of teaching 'civility', or more constructive and ethical ways of engaging online. These new spaces raise difficult new challenges to do with trust and credibility; and they require new critical and deliberative capabilities. Rather than assuming that the technology itself will teach these qualities, or that the so-called 'digital generation' will spontaneously develop them, formal education may have a new role to play here.

The final three papers take up these challenges in different ways, but all point to the need to build connections between young people's in-school and out-of-school experiences. Hull and her colleagues (Stornaiuolo, DiZio and Hellmich) explore how 'community' can be brought into being through the process of communication; and in doing so, how young people negotiate different 'public' and 'private' identities, and make judgments about truth and authenticity. Likewise, Erstad, Gilje and Arnseth look at how learners move between and participate in different

learning contexts, both formal and informal, online and offline, in school and out of school. Crucially, they argue that these contexts are not given, but constituted by learners themselves, not least through their use of (digital) tools and signs. Finally, Middaugh and Kahne discuss the role of digital media in 'service learning', a practical, task-focused approach to citizenship education. They describe the challenges of this approach as it comes up against the institutional routines and relationships and the ideological constraints of schooling; but they also make specific recommendations for ways of using games and social networking sites, and the internet more generally, in order to support more authentic learning for citizenship.

As these articles suggest, the use of digital media in this context presents some concrete pedagogical challenges. While some commentators still appear to be inflating the bubble of technological hyperbole, or tolling the bell of digital doom, there are many researchers and educators who are moving ahead with the job of working out how we can make the best of the opportunities that are arising here. We hope this special issue will make a further contribution to this difficult but essential task.