

Informative habits and online participation: a study about young undergraduates in Argentina

Hábitos informativos y participación online: un estudio sobre los y las jóvenes universitarios/as en Argentina

Hábitos de informação e participação online: um estudo sobre os e as jovens universitários/as na Argentina

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ARTICLE



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Abstract

This research explores the information habits and digital participation practices of young undergraduates in Argentina. A mixed methodology was used that combined quantitative and qualitative data obtained from surveys (n = 1243) and interviews (n = 132). The results indicate that students are informed in two stages: they find the news incidentally and then delve into those news with which they empathize. They prefer digital environments,

but television is part of their informational habits. They read what others share and comment, but prefer to stay away from digital conversations.

KEYWORDS

News consumption, Undergraduates, Social media, Political participation, Digital public space.

Resumen

Esta investigación explora los hábitos informativos y las prácticas de participación digital de los

y las jóvenes universitarios/as en Argentina. Se utilizó una metodología mixta que combinó datos cuantitativos y cualitativos obtenidos a partir de encuestas (n=1243) y entrevistas (n=132). Los resultados indican que los y las estudiantes se informan en dos etapas: se encuentran con la noticia incidentalmente, y luego profundizan en aquellas noticias con las cuales empatizan. Prefieren entornos digitales, pero la televisión forma parte de su dieta informativa. Leen lo que otros comparten y comentan, pero prefieren mantenerse al margen de las conversaciones digitales.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Consumo de noticias, Estudiantes universitarios, Redes sociales, Participación política, Espacio público digital.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa explora os hábitos informacionais e as práticas de participação digital de jovens universitários/as na Argentina. Foi utilizada uma metodologia mista que combinou dados quantitativos e qualitativos obtidos a partir de questionários (n = 1243) e entrevistas (n = 132). Os resultados indicam que os e as estudantes são informados em duas etapas: eles encontram as notícias por acaso e depois se aprofundam nestas notícias com as quais eles simpatizam. Eles preferem ambientes digitais, mas a televisão faz parte de sua dieta informativa. Eles leem o que os outros compartilham e comentam, mas preferem ficar afastados das conversas digitais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Consumo de notícias, Estudantes universitários, Redes sociais, Participação política, Espaço público digital.

1. INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of social media into daily practices has caused the modification of a large part of social, political, cultural and educational processes, in a versatile scenario of constant mutation in which the interaction between technology, uses and the public is steeply and continuously transformed. One of these changes is related to news consumption and political participation. On the one hand, the gradual abandonment of traditional media as a source of information accompanied by a growing consumption of news on social networks is the subject of academic analysis due to the consequences that this change seems to bring to the formation of informed publics, necessary for the construction of a society based in democratic values (Dahlgren, 2018; Pariser,

2017). Likewise, social networks have enabled new spaces and performances of participation, mobilization and political activism, previously reserved for the urban sphere (Jenkins et al., 2018) especially in younger communities (Tarullo & García, 2020).

The highest percentage of internet connections in Argentina is concentrated in the youngest population: almost 80% of Argentines between the ages of 15 and 34 are daily Internet users and the highest percentage of social networks users is also in this age range (INDEC, 2017, 2018; Sistema de Información Cultural de la Argentina, 2017). Argentina is the third in the ranking of countries whose population spends more hours browsing profiles in social media (Kemp, 2018).

Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp are the most used social networks in Argentina (Hootsuite, 2018; Sistema de Información Cultural de la Argentina, 2017). Followed by Instagram (27.30%), Twitter (13.20%), Snapchat (6.30%) and LinkedIn (2.10%) (Hootsuite, 2018; Sistema de Información Cultural de la Argentina, 2017). However, Instagram has grown steadily in the last year among adolescents and young people for an architecture based on sharing photos and videos, and stories that only last 24 hours in the digital space (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Newman et al., 2019).

These novel habits in technological devices modify behaviors and practices, including those related to news consumption and political participation. The vast majority of Argentines say they inform themselves on online spaces: 86% affirm that the web is the main source of news (Newman et al., 2019), this percentage includes the search for content on informative sites that only operate online and the incidental consumption of news published on social networks (Antunovic *et al.*, 2018; Serrano-Puche *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, 63% use Facebook for information, while WhatsApp is chosen by 39% of the population, Twitter by 15%, YouTube by 25%, Instagram by 18% and Facebook Messenger by 11% (Newman et al., 2019). Instagram is the only social network that not only has not decreased the number of Argentines who use it to be informed, but also has grown five points compared to 2018 (Newman et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2019).

In the latest report on digital cultural consumption in the country, it is stated that 35.40% of Argentines comment and share content of any kind on social media and more than 32.80% read the publications but do not comment on them (Sistema de Información Cultural de la Argentina, 2017). Regarding interaction with news content, 58% of social network users sha-

re news on these platforms or via email, while 31% choose to comment on content of public interest (Newman et al., 2019). In this scenario, this research investigates the information habits of undergraduates in Argentina to find out their sources of news consumption and asks whether or not they use the interaction tools that social networks allow when this group claims to consume news in digital spaces, such as content sharing and the ability to express comments. These practices can be understood as collaborations in the expansion of public space and in the participation in public issues (Dahlgren, 2018; Jenkins et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2012).

2. BACKGROUND OF THE TOPIC

An important group of investigations shows the essential role that news consumption has for the democratic life of a society based on its impact on the social, cultural and political participation of citizens in general (Bailey et al., 2014; Carpentier et al., 2013; Dahlgren, 2005) and the youngest in particular (Almansa-Martínez *et al.*, 2013; Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2018; García Jiménez et al., 2018; Yuste, 2015).

Among the various studies that have served as a background for this article, the research of Antunovic *et al.* (2018) stands out and concludes that surveillance, incidental access to news and direct consumption of it from different interests and motivations, are the three moments that make up the new information behaviors of young people who primarily use the digital space (Antunovic et al., 2018). Access to news in digital spaces and through mobile phones, but in coexistence with traditional media, is part of the information habits of young Spaniards in a scheme in which the social and family routine affects this civic practice (Martí-

nez Costa et al., 2019). A recent study on information habits and political participation among university students carried out in Colombia reveals the low participation in online and offline spaces of this social group (Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2018). Casual access to the news from social networks and quick access to informative content in digital spaces to check news of interest are part of the conclusions of the investigation by García Giménez et al. (2018). A study on incidental consumption of news on Facebook reveals that prior knowledge on the published topic is the main reason for involvement with the news that users casually find in that social network (Karnowski et al., 2017). In Argentina, the work of Mitchelstein and Bockowski (2017) examines the incidental consumption of news based on the informative content that young people find on their timeline when browsing digital networks.

Consuming news about public affairs is associated with the formation of a civic subject committed to participating in topics of general interest and also with the exercise of duties and rights as citizens (Martínez & Maldonado, 2017; Valenzuela, 2013). Likewise, being informed is one of the fundamental pillars for speaking and discussing public affairs in socialization spaces. (Brites, 2017; Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Graber & Dunaway, 2017; Habermas, 1990, 2006).

With informative consumption practices in digital spaces, the architecture of social networks provides tools for interaction and conversation that allow an expansion of that Habermasian discussion space (Carpentier et al., 2013; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2018). On this question, different studies have investigated with different and even contradictory results. On the one hand, there are the investigations that maintain that social networks have collaborated in the expansion of civic participation (Dahlgren, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015), while other studies

show that what happens in digital areas does not have its corollary in the offline world, and that practices in the online dimension are typical of *slacktivism* or couch activism rather than real manifestations of participation (Fuchs, 2017; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). This scheme is complemented by the expanded use of smartphones as access devices to the digital world of news (Deloitte, 2018). Although for some, the consumption of news through smartphones is the only way to access informative content (Mossberger et al., 2013; Napoli & Obar, 2014), the cell phone screen limits the attention and consultation of news for a large majority and is related more to a “sample” of content than to the concentration and attention that these types of publications demand (Dunaway et al., 2018).

Likewise, recent research indicates that the increasing use of Instagram and Snapchat to the detriment of Facebook by younger age groups has essential consequences regarding news consumption. Although this social network has been used to transmit false news, especially in periods of electoral communication campaigns (Bounegru et al., 2017; Guess et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2018), the interactions that Facebook allows are not allowed by Instagram or Snapchat, networks that currently receive migrated youth and adolescents from Facebook (Tarullo, 2020) and whose architecture prioritizes the image over the text, and the emoji over the word (Brake, 2018; Sampietro, 2019).

The objective of this study is to investigate the informative habits of undergraduates in Argentina using the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the sources of information of the population group studied?

RQ2: What are the mediums they choose to access news in the digital space?

RQ3: What is the frequency and depth with which university students are informed?

RQ4: To what extent does the studied group interact with digital news content using the tools that social networks support?

3. METHODOLOGY

This research used a mixed methodology. A questionnaire was carried out in digital format for the collection of quantitative data. At a later stage of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to obtain qualitative information that would allow the phenomenon of study to be examined and analyzed in all its complexity. The participants were undergraduate university students from central Argentina, as detailed below, who belong to the National University of the Northwest of the Province of Buenos Aires (UNNOBA), Argentina. The research is based in this institution because it is a line of study of a broad project that explores the digital skills of university students and professors and the relationship of these skills with their academic and civic practices.¹ The UNNOBA student body is made up of more than 85% by students who come from localities in central Argentina (UNNOBA 2015, 2016, 2017).

For the collection of quantitative information, a sample (n = 1243) stratified by academic school was constituted from a simple random sampling among the students who attended class in

the period between May 20 and June 10, 2018.² 95% of the participants were between 18 and 24 years old, with a mean of 24 years and a mode of 21 years. The distribution by gender of the sample is 39.70% men and 59.50% women, while 0.80% preferred not to specify.

With a confidence level of 95%, the obtained results cannot be extrapolated to the entire Argentine university population due to the exploratory nature of this study.

To collect the qualitative data, a non-probability sample was designed using the snowball technique. The representativeness in the gender and in the academic school of origin of study of the respondents was achieved by putting together, in the first instance, a set for convenience of one male student and one female student for each school. This initial sample of eight students in total was the beginning of the linear sampling to access the definitive sample of n=132 interviews. Half of the interviewees identified themselves as female and the other half as male.

3.1 INSTRUMENTS AND VARIABLES

3.1.1. QUESTIONNAIRE

To assess the relevance of the questions included in the questionnaire and the convenience of the digital format of the survey as a data collection tool, the design of the tool was tested in a group of 30 students (N = 30) selected from a convenience sampling. With the obtained results, the questionnaire was examined in detail to make the necessary adjustments, questions and response options were corrected. Finally,

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² UNNOBA is constituted of the following faculties: Technology, Agriculture, Natural and Environmental Sciences, Economics, Jurisprudence and the Institute of Human Development.

the designed survey included closed questions with a single answer and on objective aspects related to: the informative habits of undergraduates, the identification of social networks as a source of news and the use of interaction tools in relation to the news content that the participating group consumes in digital spaces, such as sharing and commenting.

The thematic axes included in the questionnaire that the participants answered were related to:

- Sources used to access news.
- The device or medium used to access digital news.
- Frequency of news consumption.
- Depth of news consumption.
- Consumption of news shared by contacts.
- Sharing news on social networks.

In all the questions included, the range of options was constructed from the answers obtained in the test carried out before the application of the final questionnaire to the study sample (N=1243).

After the questionnaire was presented by the research team prior to the class, the students answered the questionnaire in digital format and anonymously through their mobile phones during the period between May 20 and June 10, 2018. The response time was between 7 and 10 minutes.

3.1.2. THE INTERVIEW

For the interviews, a guide for interviewers was used with exploratory questions on various topics of the research project and from which the results included in this article arise.

The interviews conducted by the author and ten other members of the study group were executed face-to-face and recorded with the participants' oral consent. The average duration of the interviews was 34 minutes. In a second stage, they were recorded entirely by project participants. To guarantee anonymity, false names were used. Interviews were conducted in common institutional spaces such as hallways, library, dining room, and other meeting places of the academic community. The sampling was performed by saturation of the information collected rather than in the representation of the number of determined individuals (Mejía Navarrete, 2000)

The analysis of the interviews began with the review of the transcripts. From this individual coding, recurring themes were identified regarding the informative habits of young people, as well as the participation of this group in digital spaces.

In both instruments, it was indicated that news was understood as "all information about events and topics that involve more than just the lives of their family or friends" (MESO, 2018, p.16).

4. RESULTS

Regarding the RQ1 on which is the source that university students choose to inform themselves, the data obtained indicates that 46.10% (n = 573) prefer digital environments to access informative content. This participation includes the incidental encounter with the news while consulting and browsing social media walls (Karnowski *et al.*, 2017; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017). It also includes the fact of investigating the details of those informative contents of their interest and whose first access could be made through different channels: digital adver-

tisements, notifications, a post shared by their contacts or television news. This practice could be observed in previous studies (Antunovic et al., 2018). Alicia, an engineering student, explained this practice in the interview conducted in this study commenting the following: "I get informed by checking twitter or watching television, and if there is any news that interests me I look for it on the internet in some online newscast that explains it better because there are times that they don't explain it very much on television. So if it interests me, I look for it."

This first access to the news is considered in some previous studies as quick and vigilant monitoring (García Jiménez et al., 2018), while others describe it as incidental consumption of the news (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017). This is synthesized by Melina, a design student, when she explains: "I get informed with what appears, with advertising in general. I do not follow any means of communication like El Clarín or Infobae. But if I'm interested in what appears, I go in and read it." The same happens to Jazmín, a law student: "I generally do not visit news sites, but the news appears to me on Facebook, Instagram or Google ads on the phone. If I'm interested, I'm going to get involved, but I don't particularly look for them on an online site, I find them."

Traditional media continue to be an option for undergraduates when it comes to staying informed, although with uneven percentages: almost 37.80% (n=470) of those surveyed still prefer television to consume news, while reading the newspaper is an informative practice represented only with 1.80% (n=22) of university students. These results are close to the parameters observed at the global level of traditional media, while the newspaper and radio have lost audience partly due to the migration of their followers to digital versions of these media. Television still holds the public's attention

when it comes to reporting routines (Newman et al., 2019).

Watching the television news program at noon and at night remains a family news habit among the population group studied, despite the fact that the media ecosystem has changed: "I watch TV at lunch or dinner from Monday to Friday, and well, on weekends not because there is no newscast," says Morena, a student of economic sciences. The newscast is watched as a family, it is a custom that has been sustained over time and has been observed in previous studies (Martínez Costa et al., 2019). Jana, a computer science student says: "At 12 noon we watch *Telefé* and at night we watch the newscast while we eat as a family." Likewise, the TV always on also affects the high percentage of students who inform themselves by this means: "I get information from the newscast at dinner, with the family, but also because it is what is always on at home," says Matías, a nursing student.

The response of Nicolás, a mechanical engineering student, synthesizes this convergence of media and practices to stay informed: "I put the TV on in the background mainly in the news channels, in TN, *Telefé* and especially when I have dinner or lunch. I watch and listen, and based on that I will find something that interests me on the internet. My source of information is the internet, because it's all there and you can read many things."

A significant figure is 5.80% (n=72) of the respondents who get informed through WhatsApp on a behavior of audiences in the consumption of news that has begun to be studied in the academia, especially in electoral scenarios and the incidence of this practice in the diffusion of false news and scenarios that collaborate in the disinformation of the citizen (Bounegru et al., 2017; Guess et al., 2018; Tuck-

er et al., 2018). When inquiring in the interviews about these habits, the participants explain that they usually dismiss or check the news they receive on WhatsApp: "If I am interested, I investigate or go deeper. If I do not, I ignore it. Sometimes they are nonsense, I am not interested," says Damián, a law student. Alejo, from engineering, says that he usually receives news via WhatsApp but it is local news from his town, and related to traffic accidents. María, from the nursing school, says that the news she receives via WhatsApp are related to her degree: "some discovery or vaccine, always related to health issues." 8.90% (n=110) of the sample said that they do not consume news, demonstrating the importance that this population group gives to being informed.

Regarding the RQ2 that examines the media chosen to access news in the digital space, the results indicate that the smartphone is the most used device by students to access the digital world in general and the world of news in particular. 88.41% (n=1090) prefer this device to browse online, while the remaining percentage is divided between notebooks (6.22% n=77), desktop computers (4.90% n=61) and tablets (0.47 %, n=5). This almost universal use of the mobile phone, identified in previous reports (INDEC, 2018), is synthesized by Georgina, a law student that states: "The phone is an extension of my body." "It is my everything," confesses Pedro who studies administration.

The studied population group uses their smartphones to access their social network profiles, get informed and, secondly, look for more information about those contents that motivate and interest them. For this reason, Juana, from the nursing school, identifies her mobile as something that accompanies her everywhere and lets her navigate everywhere. Thus, the smartphone is that part of the body that the youngest use for their daily practices, among which

information consumption is included (Tarullo, 2020).

Regarding the research question about the frequency and depth of news consumption, the findings of this study reveal that 50.70% (n=630) claim to consume news every day, 41.70% (n=518) some days a week and 3.70% (n=46) get informed only once a week. Likewise, almost 57.90% (n=720) read the complete note, 25.30% (n=314) read the first five lines and 13.50% (n=166) read only the headline. When inquiring about this practice in the interviews, the complete consumption of the news is related to the particular interest, which is consistent with the first search for news content that is related to individual preferences. "If I am interested, I read them to the end," says Alberto, a law student. Lola expresses the same thing: "If the news reaches me and interests me, I look for it. And if I find it and I'm interested, I read it in its entirety. If not, I just leave as I get bored."

Regarding RQ4, 15.51% (n=192) share news with their contacts on social networks, while the percentage amounts to more than double (33.36% n=416) of those who say they do not share news content on these platforms. 48.48% (n=602) of the population group studied said that they only do it sometimes and 2.65% (n=33) revealed that they do not read news on social networks. Regarding the consumption of information content shared by contacts on social networks, 14.30% (n=178) preferred not to access this content, while 82.90% (n=1030) chose to consume the shared news. If sharing is not a widespread practice among young people, neither is the expression of comments: Facundo, although he shares the screenshots he publishes in his stories on Instagram, says that he never comments: "I share news, I read what others think, but I do not share. I do not like it." Andreína, from the Faculty of Agronomy, prefers non-virtual and face-to-face meetings

to make comments and express her opinion: “we talk about politics in meetings with family and friends, I chat a lot and I try to get informed by family and acquaintances. I try to draw conclusions and find something positive in the news, but I do not have an opinion on social networks.” Pedro also prefers the presence and intimacy of his closest contacts to give his opinion: “I don’t feel like sharing my opinion on certain news. I discuss them with my friends, I have some friends with whom I can share like ‘did you saw what happened with such...’, but in some meeting, face to face, not on social networks.”

And just as reading what is shared is more common than sharing, the studied group claims to read the comments but prefers not to comment. The matter of reading the opinions of others is related to two topics: curiosity and fun. Ernestina, from the law school, says that she is not interested in giving public opinion but that she does read the comments that others leave: “I do it to see what people think about this issue, the views they have on a subject.” Jana reads for fun: “Yes, and I laugh a lot at the comments. I think I spend more time there than reading the news, I read them for fun.” Katia does the same because she says: “there is always a joker who publishes a gag in the middle.”

Paradoxically, the reasons for not participating in public discussions and conversations in digital spaces are related to the violence that they observe in most interactions: “People fight a lot, they are very violent. I don’t want to go through that,” said Juana, a nursing student. “Once I tried, I left a comment on Twitter, but deleted it. They started to attack me so much that I left,” José confessed.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

University students from central Argentina access the news in two stages (Antunovic et al., 2018). First, they find the news incidentally on the walls of their social networks (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2017; Serrano-Puche et al., 2018), they receive notifications on their mobile devices, they are offered advertising from some journalistic medium while browsing digital environments or watch it on the television newscast. This causes the young people studied here to consider that they inform themselves daily, although this is not a practice that they carry out in a conscious or reflective way, at least in this first moment. In a second phase, if the content of the news found through browsing or in the newscast is related to their interests, they carry out a search consistent with these motivations (Antunovic et al., 2018), carefully and thoughtfully.

In this two-step information diet, television continues to be the protagonist, a fact verified by other studies (Antunovic et al., 2018; Martínez Costa et al., 2019). Young people continue to reproduce a habit that resists the passing of the years and the changes in media ecosystems: the television newscast is watched as a family and while having lunch and dinner. However, this practice is complemented by the second stage of the informative routine of the studied group, characterized by the search for those news topics with which the students say they feel attracted or motivated. It remains for future studies to determine what these topics are and if the topic affects the channel chosen for the search.

As observed in previous studies on information habits and political participation of university students (Barredo Ibáñez et al., 2018), the use of digital interaction tools is not frequent in the

studied group, at least in the case of informative content. This unequal relationship between those who consume the news shared by their contacts on one of the social networks they regularly use and the practice of sharing seems to indicate that young undergraduates continue with informative habits that refer to traditional media, based on a model of communication in which the public remains in its role of receiver despite having devices and platforms that enable the exchange of content and roles (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2014).

This passive rather than active observation intervention was also identified in the qualitative approach when investigating the participation of young people by commenting on the informative content: students read what others write, comment and think on social networks about topics of public interest but choose not to make their own comments public. Although they use social networks for their daily practices (INDEC, 2018), sharing visions and issuing comments remains for the face-to-face sphere in meetings and encounters with an intimate circle of friends and family where there is no aggression or violent discussions, which turn out to be expellers and inhibitors of youth participation practices in digital environments. We ask ourselves in light of these results, if the moment of the family television newscast turns out to be the meeting in which comments are shared and opinions are made public. This concern may motivate future studies that allow us to continue understanding the phenomenon discussed here.

As the smartphone is the screen from which young people enter the world of news, it would

be enriching to investigate how the attention with which content is accessed is molded from the use of these devices to recognize the degree of incidence of the mobile in the attention provided by the university student to the analysis and interpretation of news related to public affairs of common interest (Dunaway et al., 2018).

Therefore, the particular interest in the formation of a personal and individual informational diet based on searching for those contents with which they empathize, plus the scarce participation and digital interaction with informative contents puts into question the role of social networks in expanding public space (Couldry et al., 2014; Dahlgren, 2011). It remains to investigate in future research what are those issues with which young people empathize and how many of these coincide, or not, with topics of public interest, attending to the need to be informed to collaborate in the construction of a society based on democratic values (Bauman, 2012; Couldry et al., 2014; Pariser, 2017).

This study has its limitations. Due to its exploratory nature, its results cannot be extrapolated to the entire Argentine university population. On the other hand, it would be enriching to study in depth other forms of political participation in digital environments of young people beyond those studied here. It would also be important to delve into the issues related to the conversations on issues of public interest that the youngsters said to carry out in face-to-face meetings and encounters and their possible interaction with the digital participations of the studied group.

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