Media Literacy for Strengthening the Public Sphere. Case: Students at Universities in Mexico

Alfabetización mediática para el fortalecimiento de la esfera pública. Caso: Estudiantes en México

Alfabetização midiográfica para o fortalecimento da esfera pública. Caso: Estudantes Universitários no México

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Abstract: The public sphere, understood as a symbolic social space where citizens deliberate on matters of common interest, is essential to articulate the relationship between civil society and the state. Its construction requires guaranteeing rights such as freedom of expression and access to information, which are crucial for ensuring the quality of public debate. With the rise of digital media, citizens not only consume content but also produce and disseminate it; however, this does not necessarily mean they have critical skills in the face of disinformation. This article presents the results of a quantitative study with university students in Mexico City, which reveals a preference for consulting information through digital media and highlights the need to promote digital media literacy as a strategy to strengthen the public sphere.

Keywords:
Critical Citizenship, Digital Media, Disinformation, Citizen Participation, Democratic Public Sphere, University Students

Resumen: La esfera pública, espacio simbólico social donde los ciudadanos deliberan sobre asuntos de interés común, es esencial para articular la relación entre sociedad civil y Estado. Su construcción requiere garantizar derechos como la libertad de expresión y acceso a la

información pues ello será crucial para la calidad del debate. Con los medios de comunicación digitales, los ciudadanos no solo consumen contenidos, sino también los producen y difunden, pero ello no significa que tengan habilidades críticas ante la desinformación. Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio cuantitativo con universitarios en la Ciudad de México que revela la preferencia de consultar información en medios digitales y destaca la necesidad de promover la alfabetización mediática digital para fortalecer una esfera pública.

Palabras clave:
Ciudadanía crítica, medios digitales, desinformación, participación ciudadana, esfera pública democrática, estudiantes universitarios

Resumo: A esfera pública, entendida como um espaço social simbólico no qual os cidadãos deliberam sobre questões de interesse comum, é essencial para articular a relação entre a sociedade civil e o Estado. Sua construção depende da garantia de direitos como a liberdade de expressão e o acesso à informação, elementos cruciais para a qualidade do debate público. Com as mídias digitais, os cidadãos não apenas consomem conteúdos, mas também os produzem e disseminam; contudo, isso não implica necessariamente que possuam capacidade crítica frente à desinformação. Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo quantitativo com estudantes universitários na Cidade do México, que revela uma preferência pela consulta de informações em mídias digitais e destaca a necessidade de promover a alfabetização midiática digital como estratégia para fortalecer a esfera pública.

Palavras-chave:
Cidadania crítica, mídias digitais, desinformação, participação cidadã, esfera pública democrática, estudantes universitários

1. Introduction

Jürgen Habermas (1962/1982ab), in his book The History and Critique of Public Opinion, points out that during the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in London and Paris, coffee houses were centers where the aristocracy and parts of the bourgeoisie met to discuss political, literary, and social issues. This increased the number of coffee houses, and they became key

places where public discussion took place. For this discussion, their main source of information was the press (newspapers and magazines) and also through personal letters, as we recall that radio and television appeared towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

For Habermas, the task of a public sphere is to enable all citizens to participate in critical public debate. However, from contemporary perspectives such as Fraser's (1992/1999), they view this public sphere with biases as predominantly male, bourgeois, and exclusionary spaces, thus proposing multiple subaltern public spaces. In this regard, Keane (1997) agrees that "Today, the ideal of a unified public sphere [made up of] a complex mosaic of public spheres of varying sizes, which overlap and interconnect, has become obsolete" (p. 57).

This allows us to identify that the times (and other elements such as technology, cultural practices, the political system, among others) are influencing the way people participate in public spaces of discussion.

Therefore, we agree with Lindón (2024), that while studying debate and opinion is related to public space, it must be studied and linked to the social: "Integrating the complex relationship between subjects and space is a way of penetrating a dimension of the social that has been largely rendered invisible by spatial approaches" (p. 1086).

Comparing that 17th and 18th century society with today's digital society, we observe that the forms of socialization and discussion of public—and private—issues are changing. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism think tank, in its Digital News Report-2024 (Reuters, 2024), notes that traditional mass media (press, radio, television) are currently facing declining public credibility, the spread of false information, instability in their economic models, and competition among themselves, but also with respect to digital communication options.

However, for citizen participation to occur in shaping the debate on issues of public interest, as Fuchs (2017) indicates, freedom of expression and freedom of association are required, issues that are "limited by unequal access conditions (money, education, age, etc.) and by the dominance of visibility and attention by large economic and political organizations" (p. 78). In addition, citizens must have information, whether through their own experience, through participation in public forums, as well as access to information in traditional or digital media. In the global context and considering the variations across countries, it is noted that, although some people continue to prefer news from major newspapers like the New York Times or renowned magazines like The Guardian, there is an upward trend toward news on digital platforms. A

Reuters study (2024) indicates that the most consulted digital platforms are YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and Threads. These platforms coexist alongside "traditional" mass media (press, radio, television), and even show trends toward digitalization by offering their content in digital versions, encouraging new forms of participation now in digital cyberspace. This is, the virtualization of public spaces for debate, whether on local or international topics.

Digital social networks amplify a problem: the viral distribution of fake news, which can generate public opinion based on misinformation. Gómez and Núñez (2021) indicate:

> News consumers of all ages struggle to interpret information and distinguish between what is real and what is false. In today's world of fake news, content consumers run the risk of making decisions and communicating flawed information based on false information. (p. 23)

Access to media, whether digital or traditional, does not guarantee that the information is accurate, and even if it were, it does not automatically contribute to building a strong public sphere that generates critical positions.

Therefore, this article addresses the importance of promoting media education—also known as media and information literacy—as a citizen's right. This approach strengthens democratic participation by providing people with tools to analyze and interpret information, including producing messages that favor the inclusion of diverse voices in public debate, combating misinformation and recognizing the interests behind the production of fake news. Understanding and developing critical skills to appropriate these digital environments will strengthen citizen deliberation and contribute to strengthening the public sphere by promoting a debate based on informed judgments.

Furthermore, without critical skills, citizens can fall into reproducing dominant, fallacious discourses that seek to influence citizen action without realizing it. Therefore, media and digital literacy is important, as it can strengthen democracy among citizens, promote social inclusion, and strengthen a critical citizenry that allows them to express their real interests and problems.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Citizen Rights and Participation

Lefebvre (1968/1978) conceives the right to the city as a fundamental right of citizens to actively participate in the life of the city: "The right to the city cannot be conceived as a simple

right to visit or return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a right to urban life, transformed and renewed" (p. 138).

Researchers González and Covarrubias (2007) echo Lefebvre to complement his position regarding the right of citizens, which entails "actively participating in the life of the city, accessing its resources, and influencing decision-making that affects its environment" (p. 3).

Harvey (2008) adds to this vision that "the right to the city is much more than the individual freedom to access urban resources: it is the right to change ourselves by changing the city" (p. 23). Which leads us to the question: how can we change it when we observe that these trends of change are in the hands of large private and government interests? Now, if citizens have rights to the city, they have the right to participate in its proposals and solutions, requests to the State, and therefore, demand their participation in the public sphere.

Fraser (1992/1999), when speaking of the arenas of public discourse, echoes Habermas when he indicates that in modern societies, "political participation takes place through dialogue. It is the space in which citizens reflect on and examine their common affairs and is therefore an institutionalized arena" (p. 141). He also indicates that even in this space, one can be critical of the State, since for Habermas, there is a clear separation between State and society. He then considers the public sphere to be "a group of individuals gathered to discuss issues of public concern or common interest" (p. 142).

However, for Fraser, Habermas idealizes the public sphere and fails to examine other public spheres that rival the dominant ones (bourgeois or state). Therefore, she points out that participation in these spaces is not democratic, as there are differences in participation that marginalize the participation of minority and subaltern groups. The author indicates that these minority groups will demand their rights to participation, even if they seek to be excluded from the public sphere (as is the case with women and their street protests against gender discrimination, or immigrant struggles, or demonstrations demanding public safety).

Thus, while Habermas conceives of political participation based on rational dialogue, Fraser (2008) incorporates the existence of conflicts as a constitutive part of such participation. In this way, citizen action is seen as a broader and more diverse phenomenon that can take multiple forms. Communication will be the element that articulates this dialogue, and as Gumucio-Dagron (2018) indicates, it not only refers to the exchange of information, but is also a sharing of knowledge. This is why it is called the right to communication, which "encompasses a

set of other rights such as access to information, freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, and freedom of dissemination" (p. 209).

In our country, these rights (right to freedom of expression, right to information, and right to freedom of dissemination of opinions and ideas) are reflected particularly in arts. Articles 6 and 7 of the Mexican Constitution emphasize that "the freedom to disseminate opinions, information, and ideas through any means is inviolable" (Article 7). In turn, Article 6 states that "the expression of ideas shall not be subject to any judicial or administrative inquiry." The same article also refers to the right to information, stating that there are norms and laws that ensure society's right to be adequately informed in a plural and free manner. The Constitution also guarantees the right of access to Information and Communication Technologies, as well as to broadcasting and telecommunications services, including broadband and the internet (Const., 1917/2020, Articles 6 and 7).

A clear example of the significance of the right to information, the importance of its veracity, and the impact it can have on both public opinion and citizen actions, can be seen during the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Mexico, where protests were reported in various communities. Resistance, in some cases even violent, to prevent the entry of healthcare personnel, motivated by mistrust and misinformation. At the same time, conspiracy theories proliferated, such as the one claiming that Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, had spread the Covid-19 virus because he planned to implant tiny microchips through vaccines to track the population. This theory circulated not only in Mexico but throughout the world, a product of digital social networks that were themselves integrated with a lack of critical analysis, based on prejudices and ignorance, and supported by cultural factors and religious beliefs.

2.2 Media and New Modes of Citizen Participation

Currently, living in a city, and especially a megalopolis like Mexico City, entails various multicultural conflicts and disputes over public space, services, and media channels, among others. Consequently, there are multiple scenarios and studies that refer to the media and the city (Winocur, 2008; Aguilar, 1996Nel; García Canclini, 1995, among others) that examine the transformations that the media provoke in the public and private spheres.

García Canclini (1995) goes beyond citizen participation, far from merely participating in debates or testimonies, and states:

> These electronic media, which brought the masses into the public sphere, shifted citizen agency toward consumer practices. New ways of obtaining information, understanding the communities to which one belongs, and conceiving and exercising rights were established. Disillusioned with state, partisan, and union bureaucracies, the public turns to radio and television to achieve what civic institutions fail to provide: services, justice, reparations, or simple attention. (p. 23)

Califano (2015) indicates that, in modern societies, deliberation does not necessarily occur "face-to-face" (p. 68), as debate is currently mediated by mass media. The media not only collect and disseminate information, but also interpret it, giving certain perspectives on that reality. Citizens, for their part, can access different points of view to form their judgments and participate in public life.

In recent decades, it could be thought that young people, especially those who are on digital social networks, have become apathetic toward civic participation. According to Torres and Ortiz (2019), this phenomenon has been called a crisis of modern democracy, but this study also indicates that high levels of youth involvement in civic affairs have been recorded through these platforms. The authors note that "participation has transformed; that is, we are witnessing new modes of participation, in which new media linked to technology play a relevant role" (p. 52).

Thus, the concept of digital citizenship emerges:

> It can be understood generically as the capacity of political subjects to participate in the globally connected society to exercise and defend their rights and freedoms. (Bustamante, 2010, cited in Torres and Ortiz, 2019, p. 55)

Cáceres et al. (2015) consider that digital technologies can favor citizen empowerment, but this is not automatic, every citizen can collaborate in proposals to improve urban services, public policies, request accountability, that is, have an active participation but for this, it is necessary to have adequate information for decision-making and actions: "it is important that subjects become active digital citizens, but minimum involvement in substantive actions must be guaranteed so that this participation obtains verifiable results at the individual and social level" (p. 655), therefore, participating in any digital network is not synonymous with citizen participation. Fuchs (2021) indicates that the digital public sphere is emerging, referring to “a dimension of the public sphere where published knowledge takes on digital formats and informs critical public debate [but] not all digital knowledge and not all digital communication is part of the public sphere” (p. 28). The author argues that, unlike public media, commercial media respond to obvious economic and ideological interests, and consequently, they do not promote the formation of critical positions and tend to offer dizzying and superficial content.

In this regard, the media also have their responsibility. Luis Ramiro Beltrán (1998) indicates that "their mission is to raise awareness and unleash the patriotic energy of all citizens to rescue the country from backwardness" (p. 8). From the perspective of Media and Information Literacy, this approach can be associated with an advanced level of skills, as it involves the responsible production of content and proposals for action to influence the development of critical and participatory citizens. However, a deeper analysis of this topic requires considering the political and economic interests of media owners, government influence, mechanisms of power and censorship, as well as other structural factors that exceed the scope of this article. Why is the study of digital participation worrying? According to We Are Social (2025), the agency specializing in social media, internet use, and technology, in its report, The Global State of Digital in February, and in accordance with the National Units, there are approximately 8.2 billion human beings living on our planet today. Of these, approximately 5.56 billion people use the internet (approximately 68%), while the rest remain without access to the internet, which demonstrates the marked digital divide between users and non-users.

According to this study, the greatest motivation for connecting to the internet in early 2025 is to "find information" (approximately 62.8%), and almost exactly the same percentage, users indicate that they connect to the internet to stay in touch with friends and family (We Are Social, 2025). Evidently, each country and region respond to different causes for technological penetration. In Mexico, the 2024 National Survey on the Availability and Use of Information Technology in Households (ENDUTIH), conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2024), found that 83.1% of the population used the internet, a very high figure. However, the report also indicates that 86.9% of urban areas use the internet, while in rural areas it is 68.5%. Its main uses include sending and receiving messages, using social media, entertainment, searching for information, and educational support (each with a percentage greater than 80%).

The observed panorama shows the high penetration of digital technologies, a matter that will of course affect the forms of citizen participation, which, as we mentioned previously, are very different from those analyzed by Habermas in the 17th century. From other perspectives, such as Fraser's, we could speak of the excluded as those who lack access to these technologies, forms of communication, and information. However, this isn't the only problem, because just

because people have a smartphone with an internet connection and multiple programs doesn't mean they know how to use it and that citizens automatically have digital literacy.

2.3 Digital Literacy

Decades ago, it was essential, and still is, for people to know how to read and write, an aspect assessed through literacy. Today, this concept has been expanded, and we speak of digital literacy, understood as "the set of sociocognitive skills through which one can select, process, analyze, and report on the process of transforming information into knowledge" (Gros and Contreras, 2006, p. 109). However, just because a person uses digital technologies does not mean they have the aforementioned skills, and we are not talking about sending greetings to friends or family; the focus is on the context of citizenship and social participation.

For Gros and Contreras (2006), citizens are required to have the following digital competencies:

1. To be informed citizens and able to play an active role in a democratic society.
2. Inquiry and communication skills.
3. Development of skills for participation and responsible action. (pp. 113-116)

Continuing with the aforementioned trend, there is also what is known as Media and Information Literacy (MIL), which refers to digital literacy, but specifically to the use and evaluation of information from different media outlets, including digital ones. In this regard, how many times have we been exposed to information that appears online and, without checking its authenticity, we share it with our acquaintances or discuss it at work, school, and family. Later, we realize it was fake news. On other occasions, we may feel outraged by certain information received on a network (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook), which we consider insulting to citizens, and we fail to consider that it may be a lie or exaggeration by opposing political groups. Or vice versa, we feel satisfaction with the actions of a party that may even be accompanied by images, photographs, or videos of supposed political achievements, when they may have been from another period, country, or created with artificial intelligence, without considering that it may be a political strategy to generate followers.

This doesn't only occur on social media; it also occurs in newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs. Furthermore, by participating in the comments on a post, one might think that one is contributing to the debate. However, bots now exist, automated computer

programs that simulate human behavior to perform specific tasks, including interaction on social media, which can be used to manipulate public opinion. This manipulation is neither new nor unique to modern societies. Hannah Arendt (1993) indicates that, since the time of the Greeks, discourse has been "understood more as a means of persuasion" (p. 40).

Given this, the development of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) becomes essential. Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012) consider that "media education should be the responsibility of all citizens" (p. 77).

2.4 Media and Information Literacy

An alternative to prevent media misinformation would be the creation of standards to regulate information and guide better ethical practices in the field of communication. The problem is that this task is complex due to the need to safeguard the right to freedom of expression, especially when it involves ideological, political, or even economic positions. It is considered ideal to provide training (even from the early school years) that allows citizens (or future citizens) to develop digital skills.

This literacy and the implications of not doing it, is part of the concerns of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1982), in Grunwald, Germany, where the Grunwald Declaration was issued, a document that raises the importance of media literacy, since it recognizes the role that the media have in the formation of critical citizens in modern democracies and in educating citizens to exercise their responsibilities and invites them to integrate them into their educational systems. This was the founding document of MILs, but there are updates such as the Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning (UNESCO et al., 2005), Paris Declaration on Media and Information Literacy (UNESCO, 2014), and the work on the UNESCO (2021) Competency Framework on Media and Information Literacy, which includes the Global Standards on Curriculum Guidelines for Media and Information Literacy. This document establishes a set of skills that enable people to access, understand, evaluate, and use media information and content critically, ethically, and effectively.

The UNESCO document considers that following these recommendations would generate active citizenship and foster participation in the public sphere, as it promotes informed decisions and responsible content production. This MIL document contains four key dimensions: access to information, critical evaluation, content creation, and civic participation. For its part, the

European Union has developed the Digital Competence Framework for Citizenship, known as DigComp, with the purpose of establishing indicators on the digital skills necessary for today's digital society. In its DigComp 2.2 report (European Union, 2022), 21 skills are considered, grouped into five areas: 1. Searching for and managing information and data, 2. Communication and collaboration, 3. Creating digital content, 4. Security (digital data and privacy), and 5. Problem-solving. Each skill identifies eight levels of proficiency, ranging from basic (levels 1 and 2), intermediate (3 and 4), advanced (5 and 6), to highly specialized (7 and 8).

Another similar study is that of Deutsche Welle (DW), specifically the DW Akademie, in its document Media Development: Media and Information Literacy. A Practical Guide for Trainers (Braesel & Karg, 2018) indicates that MIL is developed in five steps in the following order: 1. Access, 2. Analyze, 3. Create, 4. Reflect, and 5. Act.

This demonstrates that MIL is not a dichotomous state (you either have it or you don't), but rather a continuum of progression that encompasses different degrees of ownership.

We agree with Pérez Rodríguez (2007) when he states:

> Communication education is becoming increasingly necessary, starting with the discovery of the values the media convey, learning how to receive messages more actively, and unveiling the "social construction" they create, far from the cliché of the "open window to the world" that transpires as reality. This concern is endorsed in manifestos and declarations that are signed from time to time. All of them reiterate the constant need for action for literacy. (124)

Consequently, in today's society, it is impossible to analyze the formation of public opinion without considering the media, and even more so, digital media, hence the importance of their convergence.

We complement this vision with a reflection by Rabotnikof (2008) that links the issue of public space and the media:

> Public space (understood as the public sphere) seems to be detached from its adherence to the State or civil society, to be thought of, in more general terms, as a space of global communication. A space where national and global media, public opinion, social and political actors, and the State (in a broad sense) converge. (p. 44)

For people to participate in a better, more informed, and more critical way in the public sphere, they must be digitally literate, and the most appropriate thing in this regard would be to have a State policy in accordance with this real need.

3. Methodology

In order to identify a situation where subjects would seek information to comment on, data were collected from a descriptive study on COVID-19 and the media conducted by the authors between 2021 and 2022.

As Bacher (2024) states: “During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation campaigns and hate speech increased exponentially. This trend has continued, leading some to claim that we are facing a ‘disinformation pandemic,’ a matter of concern primarily among young people” (p. 77). Hence the choice of this topic and population.

The methodology used was quantitative, based on a case study at a Mexican public university, the Autonomous University of Mexico City, with students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Communication and Culture who, due to their degree, were required to consult the media. The total student population of this program in both shifts (morning and afternoon) was 2,460 students (ANUIES, 2021), between the ages of 18 and 49, both men and women, who could be full-time students or combine work and study. To calculate the sample size, William Cochran's (1977) formula was used with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 9, yielding a total of 114 questions to be administered. The study was conducted among university students because it is expected that these students have acquired basic reading, writing, and digital technology skills, and have constant access to digital environments and social media where information about health and the COVID-19 pandemic circulates. This allows for the avoidance of other factors that could affect the comparison, such as race, age, educational levels, ethnic or rural groups, among others, that could generate differences between different population groups regarding the use of media and digital technologies to obtain information about COVID-19.

As university students, the population is 18 years of age or older; therefore, according to the Mexican Constitution, they are considered citizens. This also means that the information they access could be shared with family, peers, and communities, and could influence their decision-making regarding health, vaccination, and preventive measures. Furthermore, this population requires a level of autonomy in their search for information, making them an ideal group for assessing digital skills. According to the documents consulted from UNESCO, DigComp, and the DW Akademie, the study was based on identifying the competency of Information Searching

and Management. No other competencies were assessed, as this primarily required identifying whether participants possessed the aforementioned competency.

Subject selection was based on selective, non-probability sampling, taking the sample when study subjects were available, at a specific time. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire with closed questions for quantitative coding.

This instrument was used to investigate the media (traditional and digital) used to obtain information about COVID-19. The data was systematized using Excel, allowing for organization, visualization by creating graphs and tables, and cross-referencing results, which allowed for analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Although the sample size indicated 114 questionnaires, 117 students were administered the questionnaire. The sample was composed of 54% men and 47% women.

Among the main ages, it was found that 35.9% were between 25 and 29 years old, 35% between 20 and 24 years old, and 14.5% between 30 and 34 years old. The remaining age ranges were less than 13%, with only one student between 40 and 44 years old and another between 45 and 49 years old.

Regarding the frequency with which students search for news about the Covid-19 pandemic, the following was found:

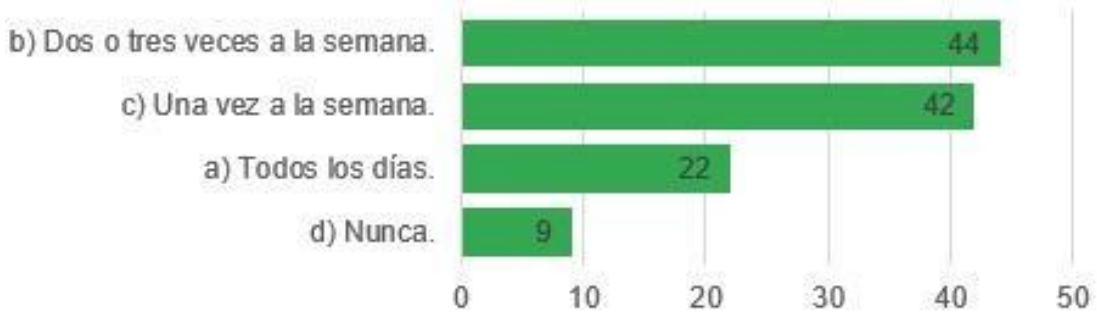


Figure 1. Frequency with which students search for news about the Covid-19 pandemic. (Source: Own elaboration)

Figure 1 shows that 37.6% of students search for news about the COVID-19 pandemic two or three times a week, followed by 35.9% who do so once a week. It is noteworthy that 7.7% of them indicate that they never search for news about it.

Figure 2 shows the main media outlets through which students obtained news about COVID-19.

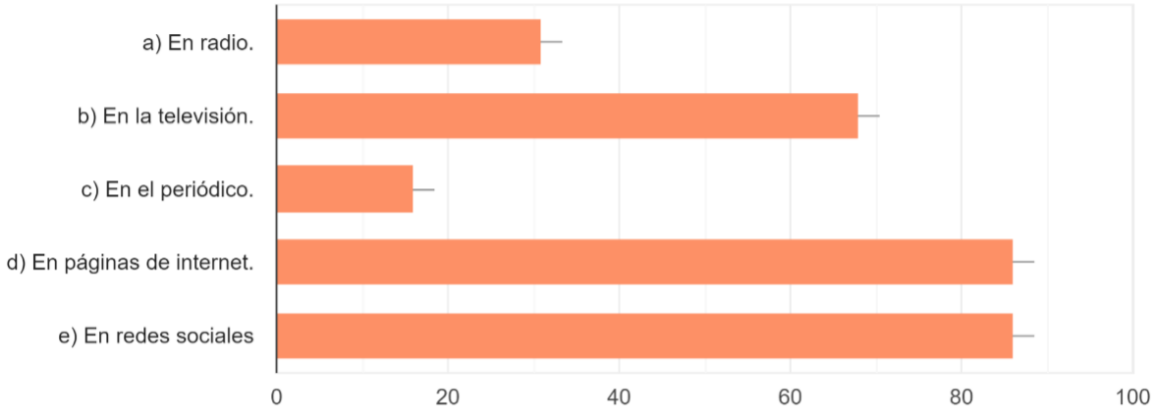


Figure 2. Media through which students obtain news about the COVID-19 pandemic (in frequency). (Source: Own elaboration)

Figure 2 clearly shows that students prefer news they can find on social media and websites, followed by television, then radio, and finally newspapers.

Figure 3 shows where they find news, highlighting that they primarily do so from home.

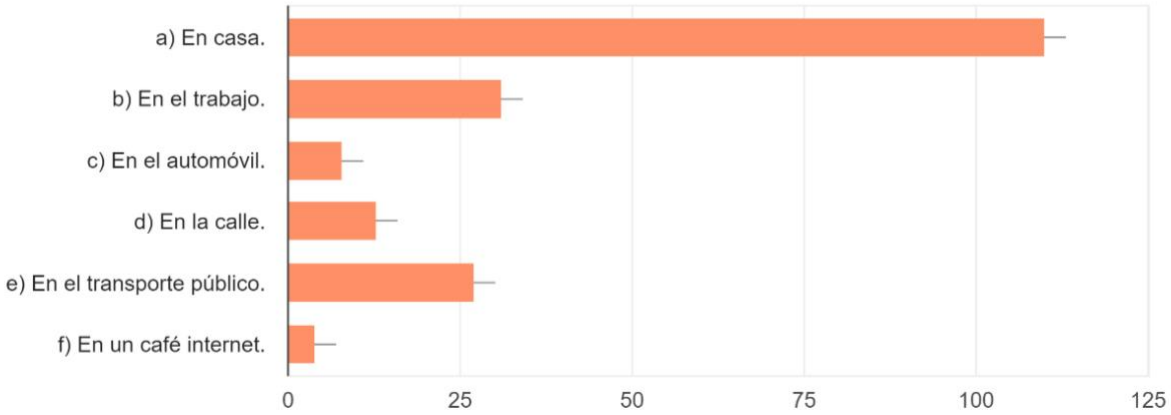


Figure 3. Where students look for news about the COVID-19 pandemic (in frequency). (Source: Own elaboration)

In another question, it was observed that 36% of students prefer to search for news about the COVID-19 pandemic during the day. They do so in the evening (8 p.m. to midnight), with less than 25% searching in the morning, and the remaining percentage distributed throughout the day.

Figure 4 shows that the selected topic, COVID-19, did increase the number of people searching for news about it.

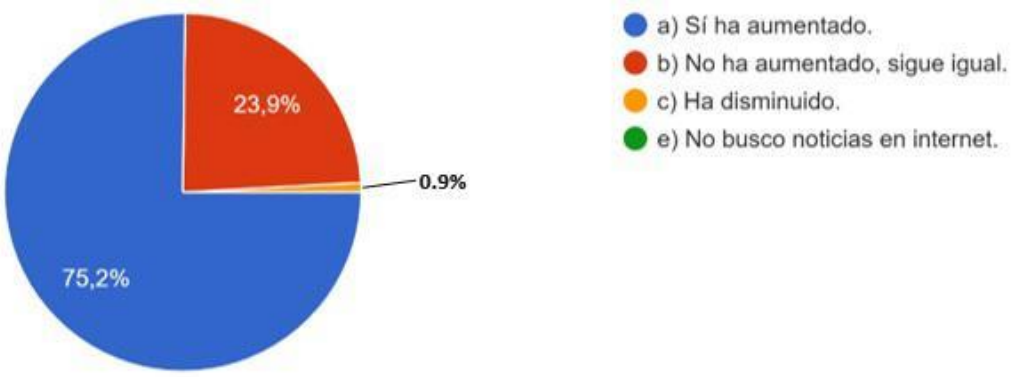


Figure 4. Increase in internet news searches due to the COVID-19 pandemic (percentage). (Source: Own elaboration)

Figure 5 shows that the preferred social network for information was Facebook, followed by Twitter and YouTube. This question allowed for more than one option, resulting in a total of 221 responses.

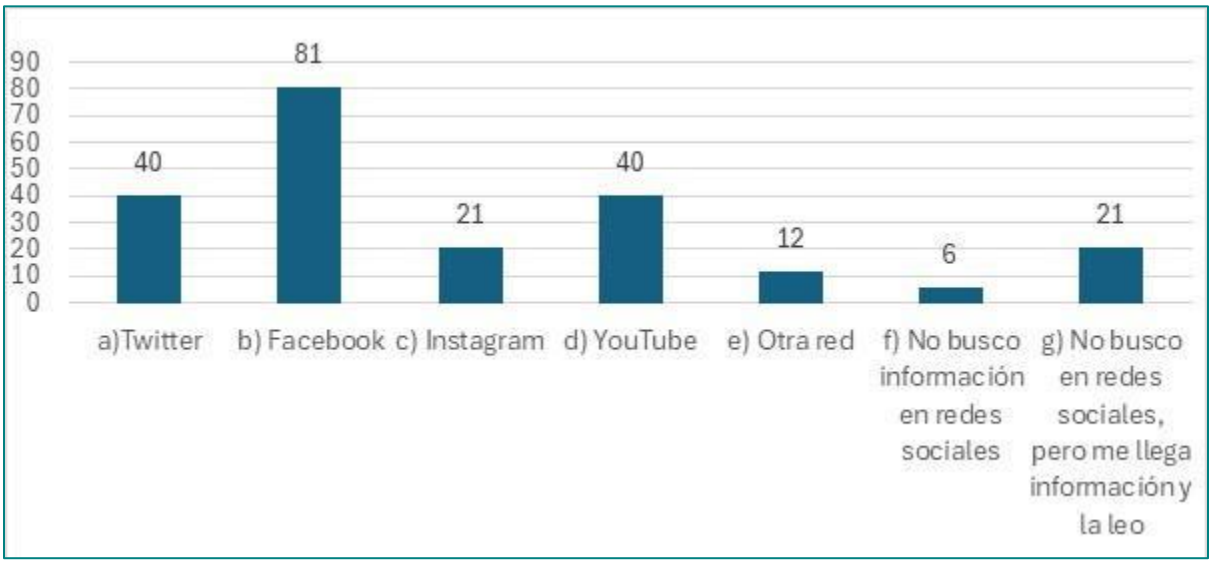


Figure 5. Preferred social networks for information/news about the pandemic (in frequency). (Source: Own elaboration)

An interesting question is shown in Figure 6, which shows whether or not students verify the information they receive through social media:

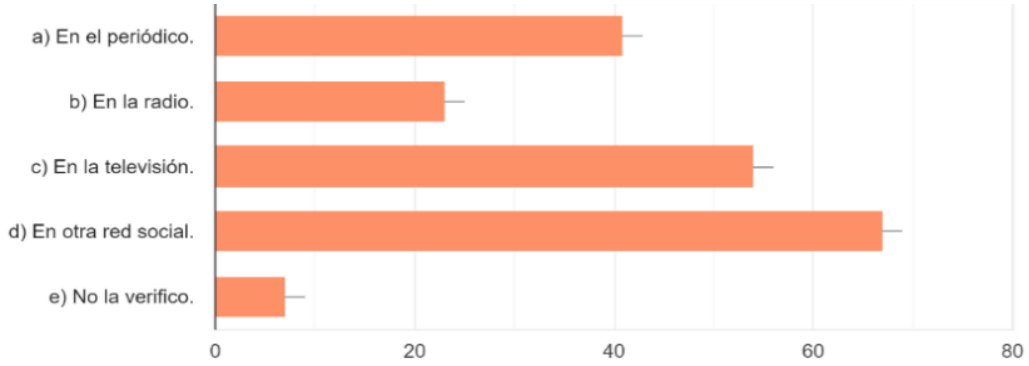


Figure 6. Where students verify the information they receive through social media (in frequency). (Source: Own elaboration)

In Figure 6, we see that although a minority of participants stated they did not verify information, it is significant that the main form of verification mentioned was checking it with another social media platform, followed by television.

However, when asked why students primarily search for information on social media, the responses can be seen in Figure 7.

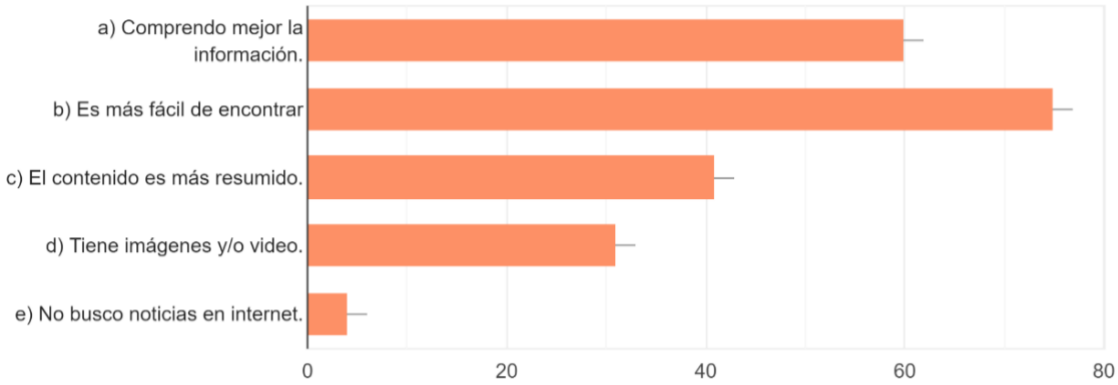


Figure 7. Why students search for news about the COVID-19 pandemic on the internet (frequency). (Source: Own elaboration)

In Figure 7, participants indicate that they find it easier to find information on the internet because they understand it better, it is summarized, and it includes images or videos.

Although the original study is broader (Rodríguez, 2021), we conclude this section with the main reasons why students primarily search for news on their mobile phones, which they indicate they prefer for information over other digital media (see Figure 8).

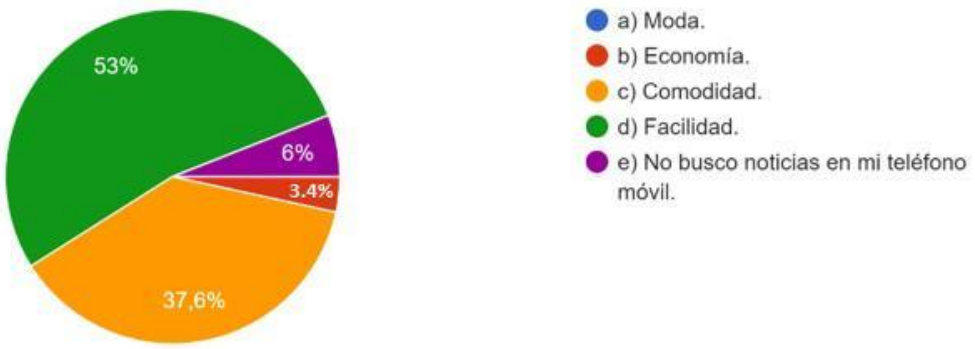


Figure 8. Main reasons why students search for news about the COVID-19 pandemic on their mobile phones (percentage). (Source: Own elaboration)

Looking at Figure 8, participants' preferred responses indicate that they find accessing information on their mobile phones easy and convenient.

It is noteworthy that age, gender, and occupation do not show significant differences in the analyzed results, except that the mobile phone is the most commonly used digital device for obtaining information about the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the younger the students, the greater the use of this device compared to other ways of obtaining information about COVID-19. Furthermore, when comparing variables, it was found that Communication and Culture students at UACM who are both studying and working are the ones who most frequently search for news in the media, including the internet, to stay informed about the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this research show that the tendency to consult news has diversified, between traditional and digital media, decreasing in traditional media, while online media consumption has increased, thanks to the emergence of devices such as cell phones, which allow students to easily access media. Students prefer the internet and social media for their information.

The results reveal a worrying fact: although the majority of students say they verify the news they receive about the COVID-19 pandemic, they do so primarily through other social media and television, which demonstrates a lack of solid skills and digital media literacy. It was also found that participants share information they consider relevant regarding COVID-19 with their family or friends. However, if this information is not rigorously verified, they themselves can become agents of disinformation. At the same time, they noted that, rather than discussing content in person, they tend to digitally forward information they consider important, which confirms the prevalence of the digital public sphere as a new form of interaction.

5. Conclusions

The case analyzed, although it focused on a high-priority issue such as COVID-19, where the available information directly guided decision-making, highlighted the need to develop Media Information Literacy (MIL) skills. This challenge is relevant in today's digital society, characterized by the proliferation of technologies that facilitate access to information, but where content verification was observed to be limited to consulting other social media platforms.

In this analyzed context, misinformation circulating in media outlets (whether digital or not) has a direct impact on people, especially when they lack the skills to detect it. This situation can lead to erroneous decisions. As observed, young people prefer to obtain information through social media, primarily through their smartphones, but they do not verify or question the interests that may be behind such information, whether political, economic, ideological, or simply entertainment, that may be behind the circulation and management of such content.

The MIL approach is not so recent, but it remains relevant and necessary, as its implementation in our country has not yet been finalized. The truth is that the actions carried out in Mexico and in our city should be accompanied by public policies, as it is the duty of the Mexican State to guarantee access to information and technology, but with adequate training that allows citizens to responsibly use information with critical capacity to identify trends.

Once citizens are involved in Media and Information Literacy and exercise their civic rights, they will then be able to participate responsibly and critically in the public sphere.

The results show that the level of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) competencies in the study population is low. However, this is not a homogeneous group, but rather a distribution on a continuum of progression that reflects different degrees of mastery of these competencies. This finding indicates that contact with social media and digital technologies, although frequent in the study group, does not in itself guarantee the development of a critical stance supported by information analysis, as proposed by the AMI, which is essential for participating in the public sphere in an informed and responsible manner. Consequently, it is recommended that future research delve deeper into the study of more advanced competencies in both young people and other population groups, with the aim of identifying appropriation processes at later stages and the factors that influence them.

This study concludes that, although participants exercised their right to information and accessed content through traditional or digital means, this does not guarantee that they possess

Media and Information Literacy skills. University students are frequent users of the internet and social media, indicating that they have access to infrastructure and basic digital skills to access information. However, MIL goes beyond the mere availability of technology, as it requires the critical analysis skills necessary to participate in debate in public spaces.

These skills are not innately developed, nor do they develop automatically even with access to information, the right to communication, or digital inclusion. Their development involves developing transversal skills in citizens, taking into account the social and cultural context in which they live. Hence, it is important to adhere to international guidelines, such as those of UNESCO and the European Union, as well as regional and national needs. Thus, it is essential to implement actions aimed at preventing digital illiteracy in spaces for public deliberation, as informed and critical participation is a fundamental condition for the debate of ideas. Only in this way is it possible to aspire to decisions that respond to the common interest and prevent a small group of people from concentrating decision-making power on matters that affect the majority.

In summary, this study shows that Media and Information Literacy is an essential component for strengthening the public sphere, by providing university students with critical skills to analyze, evaluate, use, and even generate information in various spaces for citizen participation, both digital and traditional. This is especially relevant in a hybrid environment, where the digital realm reaches levels of use and complexity that increase daily.

It is not enough to guarantee access to information or technological infrastructure; the development of transversal and contextualized skills is essential to train citizens capable of contributing in an informed and responsible manner to strengthening the public sphere and to collective decision-making.

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