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Titel: **Hate speech and cancellation phenomena and the impacts on young people's communication in digital environments.**

Abstract:

The ICT Domicílios 2021 survey reveals the growth in the use of the internet in Brazil compared to periods prior to the Covid 19 pandemic. However, this expansion is not reflected in the percentages of self authored content posted by users: only 31% reported that they share something of their own creation, be it a text, image, photo, video or music. Among young people from Salvador (Bahia, Brazil) who are interested in politics, Silva (2022) revealed that only 34% claim to publish authorial content. Among the reasons given by young people, they mention fear of cancellation and hate speech. This article analyzes data from this survey in the light of discussions on info communicative literacy. We conclude that public policies in the country need to advance in terms of guaranteeing the right to the internet associated with education for the ethical, critical and democratic use of information and communication.

Resumo:

A pesquisa TIC Domicílios 2021 revela um crescimento da internet no Brasil em comparação com períodos anteriores à pandemia da Covid 19. No entanto, essa expansão não se reflete nos percentuais de postagem de conteúdos de autoria própria pela população conectada: apenas 31% declararam que compartilham algo de sua criação, seja texto, imagem, foto, vídeo ou música. Entre jovens de Salvador (Bahia, Brasil) que se interessam por política, a pesquisa de Silva (2022) revelou que apenas 34% afirmam divulgar conteúdo autoral. As razões indicadas pelos jovens incluem medo do cancelamento e do discurso de ódio. Este artigo analisa os dados das pesquisas mencionadas à luz das discussões sobre as competências infocomunicacionais, concluindo que as políticas públicas no país precisam avançar em termos de garantia ao direito à internet associado à educação para o uso ético, crítico e democrático da informação e da comunicação.

Agenda:

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Introduction 1

The internet is already so present in our daily lives that there are scholars who question the separation between life *on* and life *offline*, suggesting that the digital experience is ubiquitous due to immersion in permanent connection (GOMES, 2020). In fact, in everyday life in Brazil, access to social benefits for the most economically vulnerable population now depends on digital technologies. Although it is increasingly rare to find people on the margins of the world online, such people do exist, they are not connected and cannot use it.

According to ICT Households 2021 (CETIC.BR/NIC.BR, 2022), 35.5 million people still do not have internet access in Brazil and we know that the quality of connections vary greatly. There are those who use broadband and those who only have limited data packages, for example.

In addition to this issue of access and given the inequalities in Brazil, there is another concern that is equally or more alarming, namely the use made of these technologies and digital environments. In this article we deal with a specific one: aggressiveness in digital social networks and the consequences on the behaviour of young people.

Hate speech and cancellation movements on the internet have inhibited the online communication of young people interested in politics in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil) according to Silva's doctoral research (2022). People aged 18 to 29 with a declared interest in politics were interviewed and only 34% of them posted a text, image, photo, video or music of their own authorship. This reflects the numbers for Brazil as a whole as according to ICT Households 2021 (CETIC.BR/NIC.BR, 2022), 31% of Brazilians who use the internet publish their own content, while 68% of them claim to share a text, image, photo, video or music.

When an individual accesses the internet just to transmit what s/he already finds *online*, at the very least, s/he is missing the opportunity to exercise their capacity to build and dialogue based on their own arguments. This limitation of communication is incoherent with the original logic of the internet: an environment for expression and dialogue.

Digital technologies and environments not only involve the issue of access to the internet (although this remains important as there are people without access or have poor quality access) but also the use made of it. This is of particular concern considering the exploitation of the internet for different types of violence and violations of rights.

In this article, we discuss the potential of info communicative literacy against hatred and in favour of social ties. These competences can be understood "[...] as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that the subject develops throughout his/her life to inform himself and communicate in society"[1].

Inequalities of uses 2

ICT Households 2021 (CETIC.BR/NIC.BR, 2022) shows that there was stability in *online content sharing* by 68% of network users over time and it associates this result with the intense use of social networks. However, it points out that the 31% who said they posted a text, image, photo, video or music of their own authorship is even smaller when considering the entire population in the analysis: this percentage drops to 26% (or 48 million Brazilians), a result similar to that of 2019.

This research captures the profile of these individuals who share their own content: the youngest predominate (16 to 24 years old, 39%), people with a higher level of education (Higher Education, 34%) and who belong to the upper classes (A, 49 %, and B, 32%). This portion of the population usually posts images (24%), videos (15%), texts (11%) and music (3%).

There are 6 age groups considered by the ICT Households 2021 (CETIC.BR/NIC.BR, 2022): from 10 to 15 years old, from 16 to 24 years old, from 25 to 34 years old, from 35 to 44 years old, from 45 to 59 years old and from 60 years old and over. It is precisely the 16 to 24-year-old group that stands out among internet users, representing 94% against 81% when the survey considers the total population.

When analysing the purposes of shared content, the survey identifies everyday situations as the most frequent (17%). Next, the intention to interact with people with common interests (13%) and, in third place, expressing opinions on topics of interest (13%), all usually done through social networks. It is notable that two eminently communicational aspects - interaction and the exchange of opinions - are only exercised by 13% of the people who use the network, relatively low given the possibilities of a large communication network.

Other communication activities that do not require the construction of authorial content are very present in the lives of Brazilians. According to ICT Households 2021 (CETIC.BR/NIC.BR, 2022), 93% of Brazilians exchanged instant messages, followed by 82% who spoke via voice or video call and 81% who used social networks.

In a survey carried out with young people from Salvador who are interested in politics (Silva, 2022), among the 280 interviewees, only 34% said they published texts, photos, videos, songs or memes of their own authorship, against 44% who say *they rarely* or *never do*. Another 40% stated that they *rarely* or *never* change and disclose their own content, a percentage that is also higher compared to the 35% who *always* or *often do this* (Graph 1).

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[1] Borges et al.: 2022. 23.

Graph 1 – Young people from Salvador: creation and dissemination of own content

Never 🟩 Rarely 🟨 Sometimes 🟧 Often 🟥 Always 🟪
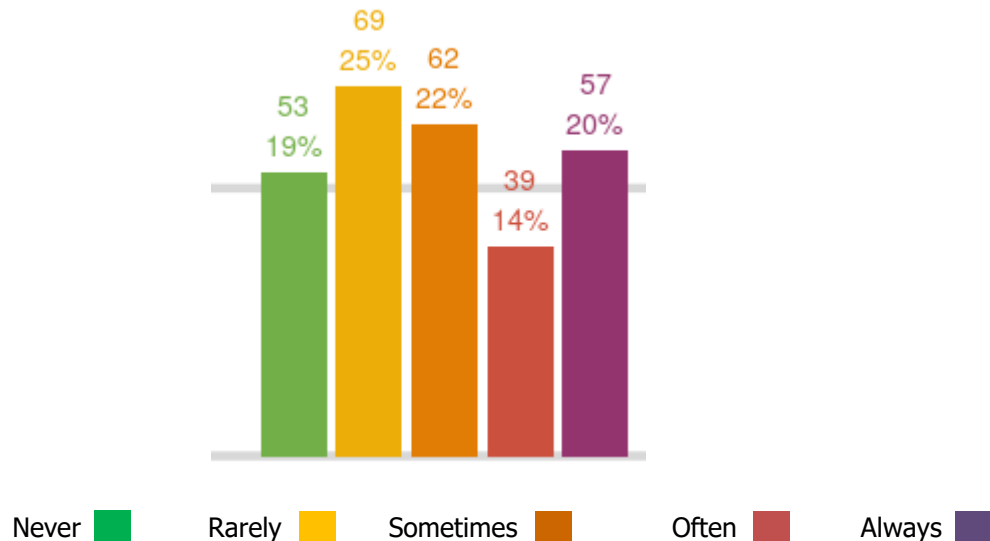
Source: Silva (2022); Art: Oliveira (2021).

These findings show a low production of content to share *online* by this public, that is, they prefer to interact more with what is already available on the network.

> "*The creation and dissemination of online content expand forms of participatory culture, learning opportunities, diversification of cultural expressions and development of digital skills, change traditional patterns of production and distribution of cultural content and enable innovations, which can even be appropriated by the cultural industry*"[2].

Considering that Silva's research (2022) involves young people with an interest in politics, the fact that this public does not have much *online* interaction using their own content is also a concern due to the restriction of the practice of argumentation. By avoiding pronouncing and interacting with complementary or discordant ideas, young people miss an opportunity to contribute to the improvement of thinking and knowledge that can enrich the political arena and interfere in their own decisions and in those of third parties as political agents. In the following section, we will explore the reasons why these young people - despite being active politically – shy away from the production of content.

Silva's research (2022) even reveals data on specific content with a political content. An *online questionnaire* applied to young people assessed whether they produced and disseminated political content during the 2018 (for president) and 2020 (for mayor) elections. In response, only 30% of respondents created and published political information, whether in text, video, *podcast* or meme in the 2020 elections, and another 36% in the 2018 elections.

The percentages associated with political content increase when it is produced by third parties: 51% of young people say they shared such content in 2020, and 64% in the presidential elections in 2018. In the national survey of TIC Domicílios 2020 (CETIC.BR/NIC. BR, 2021), there was a reduction from 39% to 31% in the percentage of those who claimed to have posted authorial content, whether texts, photos and videos during this period of the survey carried out with young people in Salvador.

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[2] CETIC.BR/NIC.BR: 2022. 87

Both surveys (national and with young people from Salvador) show that having internet access does not guarantee competence to production of authorial content but rather consumption. A similar result was observed in the research by Brandão et al. (2020), where the uses of information related to the production of content were the least mentioned among the surveyed public. For these authors "This demonstrates a behaviour more inclined towards content consumption compared to production"[3].

Research by Marta Pinheiro in the 1990s warned of the absence of public policies for content in the information society. Based on interviews with people close to or active in programs related to the inclusion of European countries in the information society, Aún (1999) pointed out that already in that period there was dissatisfaction with the priorities established by European countries, influenced by the United States. This is because government investment in infrastructure and computer materials was huge to the detriment of investment in the so-called intangible domain, that is, in content in the information society, although there was already concern about socio-cultural problems. Later Moraes, Almeida and Alves (2020, p. 13) reinforced this perspective. They suggest encouraging "questioning and interpretation and not just a sudden click to agree or disagree" with the production of the ideas of others.

In the case of the survey in Salvador based on semi-structured interviews, the results demonstrate that young people have avoided posting for fear of cancellation and hate speech. The unsubscribe phenomenon occurs when someone is judged by a group of people *online* who decide on what is correct or objectionable, unfollowing the author of the "error" as a form of punishment.

Cancellation can have consequences for life outside the network, often causing damage to someone's personal or professional life. This in turn may harm mental health, in addition to causing image and financial damage, among others. Also at a company level, cancellations can be acts of protest for some discovered irregularity, for example, however, in this article the focus is on people and when there is the intention to harm someone.

Aggressiveness in the network and the impacts on young people 3

The possibility of being attacked by hate speech and being cancelled has led young people who live in Salvador and are interested in politics to change their behaviour in digital environments. In interviews conducted by Silva (2022), young people said that they were active on the networks, disseminating their own content, but they reconsidered these actions for fear of suffering aggression.

Some have even given up the use of digital media.

> "Right now I just uninstalled all my social networks and I only have WhatsApp because of the toxicity of social networks. Sometimes you publish something, and another comes along with problematization that has nothing to do with it. Twitter, for example, is a land where you post a simple thing and, out of nowhere, people attack you. You post an opinion, people come and disagree in a very aggressive way, it is not open to debate, it is aggression and that's it. Besides, on the internet, you can create an anonymous profile and do whatever you want. It makes anyone uncomfortable. You're there talking to someone and you don't know who he is, where he's from"[4].

Another young man commented on the discomfort he suffers with judgments made by his own family when monitoring his posts on the networks. He also reports the impact generated in terms of behaviour and mental health.

> "First for the judgment, right? People judge others a lot and there is also the issue of family members, how I am being seen by my family members. People shouldn't be judged because of their opinion, it's

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[3] BRANDÃO et al.: 2020. 684
[4] Young 8 *apud* Silva: 2022. 211-212

their way of expressing themselves and it's complicated for you to say something, what you feel or think and be judged. Many times when you receive the judgment, you shut up and cannot express yourself back, so people close themselves off and this generates many mental health complications. It is really difficult to express yourself on social networks" [5].

The attitude of unfollowing someone as an orchestrated movement, the so-called unfollowing, is another reason why young people are avoiding posting their own content on the internet: "I'm afraid [...] because, if you put it the wrong way, the internet today, nowadays there is this habit of cancelling, you know? This cancellation is painful"[6].

Another young woman agrees with the other interviewees and reinforces: "This network environment is sometimes very toxic, especially for those who produce content, who need to preserve their psychological, private life"[7]. For Silva (2022, p: 212),

> "*The fear of being attacked on social networks and being cancelled for not pleasing someone demonstrates that the young person feels intimidated and, in order not to run the risk of being judged violently, they prefer not to be the author of the posted content, taking refuge in the comments or retweets".*

The results of Silva's research (2022) reinforce data from a national survey carried out by Ipec (Intelligence in Research and Consulting, formerly Ibope) in September 2021[8]. Among the 16 to 34 year olds interviewed, six out of ten do not talk about politics on social media for fear of intolerance and cancellation. The Democracy and Elections study heard 1,008 young people and was commissioned by the Tide Setubal Foundation in partnership with Avaaz.

Almeida (2020) warns that "the cancel culture is anti-politics par excellence. It is the refusal of education and, even more, of confrontation. Their sole purpose is to deny the existence of the other. Cancellation is the triumph of irresponsibility." The author also notes that there are traditional communities that, in the face of a person's mistake, gather to praise the good things that person has done and, with that, support the process of repairing the error, a reality very different from that experienced today.

The phenomena of cancellation and hate speech are strongly connected. Normally, a person is cancelled after facing a true lynching in the digital environment, with aggression of all kinds, translated by expressions of anger, hatred, offenses and even threats.

For those who face episodes like these, feelings involve shame, pain and fear, which can lead to sudden changes in their lives: "[...] the hate campaigns have led parliamentarians, personalities, researchers and scientists to leave the country, when persecuted by what is generically called 'digital militias', who threaten, persecute and even commit physical violence at various times", says Ana Regina Rêgo, interviewed by Christofoletti (2021: p. 350).

Rêgo, who coordinates the National Network Against Disinformation (RNCD),[9] understands that there is a hybrid process between agents of disinformation and agents of hate speech, which is complex and dangerous and which has already led to extreme actions. The professor cites as an example the murder of the member of parliament Jo Cox, who defended the permanence of England in the European Union during the Brexit campaign in 2016. She "was murdered by a sympathizer of the British extreme right, incited by the narratives that distilled

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[5] Young 9 *apud* Silva: 2022. 212
[6] Young 1 *apud* Silva: 2022. 212
[7] Young 3 apud Silva: 2022. 220
[8] Democracy and Elections Survey, by Ipec, is available at: <https://www.ipec-inteligencia.com.br/pesquisas/>. Accessed in: 20 Feb 2024.
[9] More information about the National Network Against Misinformation is available at: <https://rncd.org/>. Accessed in: 20 Feb 2024.

hatred in the campaign of those who defended leaving the EU", comments Rêgo, interviewed by Christofoletti (2021: p. 349).

The current challenge is the rescue of non-judgmental listening that favours dialogue.

> *"It means letting the other talk about their anguish and concerns, to later verify what was based on negative experiences, on misinforming narratives and/or hate speech, with the intention of opening the way for dialogue. Sometimes, the most important thing is to act strategically, passing on content that can contribute positively to the debate without going into direct confrontation"*[10].

In parallel to the individual effort to facilitate dialogue, there is a need for regulation in terms of standards established for a sector and regulation in terms of creation of agencies to oversee standards of platforms. These need to be more collaborative, agile and efficient against misinformation, against hate speech and against cancel culture. As explained by Bucci, interviewed by Alves et al. (2022: p. 5),

"Democratic regulation monitored by equally democratic regulatory agencies does not increase censorship. But it honors the diversity of voices, free competition between companies, preventing monopoly or oligopoly, and this favors an environment of much more freedom. [...] We can and should think about these norms based on the defense of freedom of expression and of the press and the defense of the right to information".

For one of Marta Pinheiro Aún's (1999) interviewees, Du Castel, the culture of deregulation was another influence of the United States, especially with the advent of the internet, which weakened the perception of the importance of national policies focused on informational content. "The emphasis on the technological aspect destabilizes the process of constructing information policies, generating, according to the opinion of most interviewees, a lack of awareness of the values of informational content, with a sociocultural perspective", says Aún (1999).

The issue, the interviewees pointed out in the 1990s, was not the new technologies, but the lack of political care with choices, use and the problems resulting from them, such as unemployment and informational exclusion. With the lack of regulation, these aspects have been left to the control of the market, which sees technologies only as a commodity.

Currently, the regulation and regulation of large digital technology companies are challenges faced by countries around the world, with some at a more advanced stage. This is the case of the European Union who in August 2023 started to frame the so-called "big techs" in the Digital Services Law. This determines stricter rules for controlling the services of companies such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook.

In the United States, several states are suing digital platforms for content that is harmful to the health of adolescents and young people, but they have not yet moved towards more consistent regulation. Here in Brazil, there is pressure from civil society and the federal government to resume discussions on Bill 2630, known as the Fake News Bill, which began to be debated in the National Congress. However, it remains stagnant, even in the face of several cases of crimes and human rights violations on the internet.

It should be noted that the phenomena of hate speech and cancellation are not unique to digital culture. However, the internet gives a speed and a dimension of visibility to them like never before. Currently, the culture of cancellation, with perverse ends, is so present in digital environments that the Macquarie Dictionary chose the expression as the term of the year for 2019. The institution responsible for the Macquarie Dictionary invites a committee of linguists, specialists and theorists to select the terms of the year and also submits them to popular vote.

Faced with this context of violent attacks on the internet, in addition to legal actions, where appropriate, it is increasingly necessary to invest in public education policies for the ethical, healthy and critical use of the

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[10] *RÊGO interviewed by CHRISTOFOLETTI: 2021. 352*

internet. An approach that is part of this is teaching info communicative literacy, which promote the development of skills, abilities and attitudes that support the preparation of young people to face challenges and, above all, to be the actors of qualified, relevant and ethical use of networks.

In addition to the qualitative interviews by Silva (2022) revealing that young people are changing their behaviour on the network for fear of aggression, data from the author's quantitative research also show, on the other hand, that young people evaluate themselves very well in terms of info communicative literacy. More than 80% consider that they have information literacy, such as knowing how to evaluate the content they access, and more than 60% feel capable of communication literacy, such as knowing how to dialogue and argue.

However, this very positive self-perception of the research participants is of concern when analyzing the testimonies of the interviewees who are inhibited to use the network to share their own content and constructive dialogues. This reinforces the importance of schools, universities and other less formal training processes supporting young people to become truly capable of contributing to healthier and more ethical environments, in addition to knowing how to act in the face of uncomfortable and/or threatening situations.

Info communicative literacy against hate and in favour of social ties 4

Cancellation in digital environments can be equated to lynching. As a consequence, the chances of exercising their ability to argue are being restricted, inhibiting the spirit for exchanges and opportunities for debates that favour thinking and broadening of perspectives on a topic or situation, for example.

All of this undermines opportunities for developing information and communication literacy. "In addition to these impacts, the phenomenon of cancellation compromises, at some level, the willingness of young people to participate in politics, in addition to being able to weaken the mental health of this public" (Silva, 2022: p. 212). As Bucci says, interviewed by Alves et al (2022: p. 8):

> "We need to train children, teenagers and young people to live in a world where communication goods have been used as if they were trenches in a cultural war, in which one side wants to end democracy"[11].

To make individuals more prepared to face and prevent these phenomena, there is the idea of info communicative literacy, "not as a means of simply solving problems, but as socio-cognitive knowledge and practices that enable a more critical, reflective and more autonomous approach to information and the communication process"[12].

Among the categories of communication behaviour, defined as part of info communicative literacy, Brandão et al. (2020) highlight the ability to establish communication, make choices regarding content sharing and means of developing social ties, something to motivate participation in digital environments. By establishing social ties, people tend to act in a more collaborative, empathetic and supportive way in their relationships with others. This is what is expected of everyone's behaviour when they are online, or at least the vast majority, in a healthy, ethical and democratic digital culture.

As Martín-Barbero (2011: p. 123) advocates, "talking about communication means, first of all, recognizing that we are in a society in which knowledge and information have played a fundamental role, both in the processes of economic development and in the processes of political and social democratization".

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[11] *Bucci, apud Alves et al: 2022. 8*
[12] Borges et al.: 2022. 23

Working with young people on info communicative literacy is therefore an opportunity to sharpen criticality in the use of information and communication, understanding the responsibility involved, improving ways of looking at it, speaking about it, listening to information and acting as a citizen.

Info communication skills also promote training to adopt strategies for searching, evaluating, checking, using and producing content. The idea is to develop healthy processes of exchange, argumentative and reflexive constructions that favour political behavior in a society that depends on the continuous strengthening of democratic and ethical processes.

The attitudinal aspect highlighted in the promotion of info communicative literacy focuses on the ethical, critical and reflective dimension in relation to information and communication. For example, getting young people to reflect on their role in disseminating misleading information: who cares about that? who benefits? which group loses? In other words, info communicative literacy departs from a more instrumental perspective - how to teach people to do active research as opposed to passive content consumption - but enable reflection on the social, political and economic implications of each subject's actions in the info communicative environment.

As pointed out by Aún (1999): "To have access is to know how to analyze, select, filter, and then absorb the information and then be able to transform it into knowledge. In order to realize oneself in the information society, to know how to absorb, or jump stages, as Confland pointed out, requires a much higher level of competence and training than those required at the beginning of the industrial age, when, as Queau recalled, the world population had to become literate."

These types of learning require the mediation of teachers and educators, in formal or informal education processes. Educational environments need to make room and be increasingly prepared for the teaching-learning relationship on the use of information and communication. This educational process, however, needs to occur in parallel with the strengthening of quality critical education, considering the challenges that still exist in terms of access, permanence and learning in basic education. For example, almost 10 million Brazilians or 5.6% of the population cannot even read the title of this article, according to the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (Continuous PNAD, 2022), from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

The research with young people in Salvador also points to another concern related to the distancing of educational institutions from the demands of digital culture. When respondents were asked about ways of learning in relation to the use of internet resources, most indicated that they learn alone (46%), fewer with friends (23.6%), while at school/university was reported by only about 14%. 'When we want something, like, for example, learning a tool, we search, watch videos on YouTube'[13].

Although young people mainly highlight individual or peer learning, they say they would like to have more opportunities at schools/universities to learn about the use of the internet, highlighting the importance of these spaces.

> "Nowadays, the internet is everyone's life, it's like a part of a person's body. Obviously, there should be this subject at school. [...] The school is the best place for you to have the space to form your opinion, have access to the correct information and, from there, you can form your opinion"[14].

In the testimonies of the interviewees, it is also possible to notice that they are able to distinguish between the intense use (in terms of the number of hours connected per day) and the critical use of digital media in order to contribute to the development of the individual and society.

> "Young people access more information and more internet, but that does not mean that the person is generating knowledge. There are people who will spend 20 hours a day on their cell phone or

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[13] Young 2 apud Silva: 2022. 242
[14] Young 8 apud Silva: 2022. 243

computer and will not generate any knowledge. This person was not prepared to deal with this tool, so the person does not have training, an education that is critical"[15].

Therefore, the young people themselves identify critical education, advocated by Paulo Freire (1986), as a way to face the challenges present in digital environments and promote a more engaged and committed use for the well-being of society. These competences in information and communication point precisely in the direction of this type of teaching-learning relationship. We know that the promotion of info communication skills is not enough to solve all the problems of access and use of information and communication in contemporary times. Their roots also lie in the gaps in training in basic education.

However, aside from literacy, digital technologies and media are part of the socialization agencies of young people today. The more knowledge, skills and attitudes developed to deal with information and communications in these environments, the more common the behaviors of citizens committed to democratic values will be.

In the same way, when faced with threats, young people will be more prepared to neutralize or denounce them, stopping their spread or compromising the very potential of using these spaces, which are social and also political.

Conclusion 5

The phenomena of cancellation and hate speech have characterized aggressive behaviour in digital environments, with dimensions of cruelty. The impacts are difficult to measure in the lives of those who face them. If facing something like this is already difficult and complex for any individual, for young people, the consequences can be even more intense due to the challenges they already experience.

For young people who live in Salvador and who are interested in politics, as we have seen, their response has been to stay away from media and digital environments or limit the type of use they make of them. The fear of being attacked has led them to avoid sharing their own content, restricting themselves to interacting only with what they already find on the net.

Phenomena such as these (hatred and cancellation) are complex and require multiple combat strategies, with intersectoral public policies and, above all, education for information and communication in digital environments. Schools and universities can and should be allies in dealing with and preventing this. Above all, their work should be based on problematizing issues, inviting reflection and encouraging the critical teaching-learning process, increasingly connected with ethical and democratic principles.

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