

## A model for a conscious digital citizenship

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### Abstract

This article, in the form of an essay, proposes a new model of digital citizenship starting from ethical-social assumptions and bases, an alternative point of view through which the development of digital skills and new technologies is supported by anthropological and cultural paradigms. This becomes the only possible context where to develop a sustainable, shared and egalitarian digital citizenship, epitome of the transformation of today's society, which is increasingly connected to the world of technological innovations. The synergy of different activities, in fields and contexts not always linked to each other, develop a fertile network on which to enhance the attitude to a positive and critical use of digital tools. The proposed model aims to establish six key points, six focuses: governance, prevention, network and social ethics, education and research, all operating within a conscious sharing of real ethical-social rules, recognized as a primary source by society. The represented sectors of intervention move simultaneously, in a circular, dynamic, centripetal convergence; only the joint effort of all areas of intervention will be able to achieve a real digital citizenship permeated by a conscious and active ethical awareness. The discussion also focuses on training and on the disparities relating to accessibility and use in the technological field, detecting the inequalities still deeply rooted in the territory and identifying Universal Design for Learning as a possible inclusive model.

**KEYWORDS:** Digital Education, Conscious Digital Citizenship, Equal Accessibility, UDL, Ethical and Social Context.

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nineteenth century in Europe, arrived in Italy almost at the turn of the century,

*“The mouth of Time has eaten me alive,  
A stiffened body underneath the snow;  
When every refuge on the turning globe  
Is lost to me, and every passion flies,  
Come, Avalanche, and rip me from the heights!”*  
(Baudelaire, 1893, LXXX, vv. 11-15)

### 1. An ethical-social starting point

The alienation already described in the decadent period clearly indicated how human relationships were crumbling within the loss of identity, intended as the impossibility of self-representation as a function of the existence of otherness. In the last century, the anthropic need to create a community, to be part of a whole, man's own need to communicate, to relate and, only thanks to interaction, to be fulfilled in an ontological sense, became manifest difficulties of a society that imploded in a rare form of self-isolation. Self-alienation, inner suffering, inadequacy for existence, that had indissolubly been expressed in the second half of the

The discomfort of decadent society and the impossibility of governing the unconscious triggered the birth of psychoanalysis, therefore the attempt to manage the nature of the soul, *both divine and human* (Plato 370 BC), to explain the human irrational, to investigate the unconscious, the unknown. The inner battle between the rational and the hidden ego became a path of investigation for contemporary analysis, a continuous passage between the emotionally elusive and the rational awareness. The governability of the conflict was resolved in Freud through the management by the ego of a functional unconscious, which represents the needs of

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the species, and a social unconscious, where the needs of society are found. The ability of the ego to govern and search for a point of balance between the two unconscious, to repress the drives in the name of a social function, therefore, allows us to find a point of stability (Galimberti, 2011). Within this scenario, modern sociology, e.g. Durkheim (2008), shows us how the individual is a product of society and depends on it through the implementation of his conscience and his collective rules. It is a clear view on the man-society relationship, where the whole produces a society, but the latter shapes and regulates its participants, to the point of aligning or even extinguishing them.

The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli. There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the *blasé* attitude. The essence of the *blasé* attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as is the case with the half-wit, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the *blasé* person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other. (Simmel, 1903)

Therefore, the indifference of man in the society of the twentieth century, in which everything moves quickly, where the metropolises run and the individual pursues them without ever grasping the moment, without cultivating his own essence, the self that escapes; a primordial impossibility to know through the senses, to use them, an anthropic ontological paradox. Here is the society of the twentieth century, a community of individuals absent from each other, but all co-participating in the development of social complexity, intended as a reticular development of actions and reactions, of deep invisible bonds that regulate and self-determine themselves. At the end of the twentieth century, the study of society, and more generally of civilization, could only take place by studying the phenomenon through the simultaneous analysis of actions and reactions, of the context in space/time, of the transdisciplinary interconnection of knowledge, of habits and customs, and only within an idea of the complexity of existence, where each element involved produces something new, different, where the whole, generated by the individuals, becomes a completely new, different, unrepeatable reality as well as the dialogic dynamics of factors that generated it. The whole is more than the parts that compose it, because the components, interacting with each other, produce something new and unpredictable, which is indeed the result of those interactions (Morin, Cotroneo, & Gembillo, 2001).

The complexity of existence, in the awareness of being active citizens and at the same time of being fundamental for the production of a culture of belonging

where what is generated never corresponds to the sum of the generating parts. An idea of citizenship that today's society still struggles to understand, a global community in which everyone tends to protagonism, individualism, prevarication, the massification of oneself in the name of an existential vanity. Will we ever be able to share the idea that planetization now means community of destiny for all humanity. Nations consolidated the consciousness of their communities of destiny with the incessant threat of the external enemy. Now, the enemy of humanity is not external. He is hidden in it. The conscience of the community of destiny not only needs common dangers, but also a common identity which cannot be the only abstract human identity, already recognised by all, and not very effective in uniting us; it is the identity that comes from a paternal and maternal entity, concretised by the term "homeland", and which brings to fraternity millions of citizens who are not at all related. This is what is still missing for a human community to take place: the awareness that we are children and citizens of the Earth/homeland. We still fail to recognize it as the common home of humanity (Morin, 2002).

Will this vision of common identity be feasible in this technological age, in which virtual communities live outside space/time, where manifestations and communications are almost always lacking awareness and disconnected from any type of critical and conscious – forgive my oxymoron – partnership and sharing?

Where is it possible to find a civic sense of belonging in today's communities? How can Freudian impulses be redeemed if anthropic needs have undergone a profound metamorphosis? In what social media could the *blasé* man ever be placed? How can the Durkheimian idea not be transfused into the virtual reality of the world wide web? How can the complexity of Morin be rethought in the virtual society?

## 2. Perspectives for a shared model

### 2.1 Social context analysis

The epochal transition has already begun, the current society lives in a double context placed on two parallel tracks which will hardly become synergistic, despite being generated by their interconnection. On the one hand there is a real life built around its own social rules, based on civic virtues clearly delineated and shared through the millennial evolution of historical processes, cultural and scientific revolutions (Khun, 1962), consolidated by the birth of new paradigms; on the other, a new virtual, global society was born, detached from civic laws and ethical rules, in which space/time does not seem to be incisively present. However, it is essential to understand how the social media virtuality does not phenomenologically develop in an abstract, non-existent and virtual world, but it acts and manifests within the real life of individuals, deeply affecting emotions, self-efficacy, awareness, self-management, mood and social relations. My purpose is to depict how the transposition

of what happens on social media deeply affects people's real life, their way of acting, thinking, and even generating a sense of belonging to the chosen community of which we feel an integral part. Being digital citizens also means being citizens in a community that develops through the digital world but which is ultimately real, which lives, creates, establishes rules and uses. Digital citizenship, therefore, not only implies technological competence, that is using the digital world with conscience and awareness, but also a shared and universally recognized competence of digital civic rules. Nevertheless, if in real society the civic virtues are - so to speak - legitimised by the community that shares and elects them as an ethical form of representation, in a feeling of common belonging, in the digital community, which by its very nature is polymorphic, ubiquitous, individualistic, where could we find a common civic sense that can be shared and eligible as a recognised ethical source?

The main problem, therefore, lies in not having a circumscribed, defined community, as a society or a state can be; the web community, as already said, is not trapped in space/time, the stratification of interactions is infinite and difficult to control. Virtual relationships stratify with extreme speed and quickly overlap in a multitude of interconnected levels. How distant are Milgram's *small-world* and *six degrees of separation* theories (1967), according to which each individual manages to be connected to another within a maximum of 6 contacts. The creation of a network today, through the web and social networks, demonstrates how the average distance between two people is reduced to 4.74 (Fig.1) or, within the same country, even to only 3 contacts (Fig.2) (Boldi et al., 2011).

Thus in our technological and digital age, social networks reduce distances, easily increase the possibility of developing contacts and acquaintances, quickly establishing new social and communicative relationships. The first social network, born in 1997, sixdegrees.com (a clear reference to Milgram), reached more than a million users in just 4 years, clearly foretelling how the possible relationships among individuals on planet earth were irrevocably changing. The life of the first social network was very short, since it was not clear that the creation of a social network could be profitable. Nowadays, through YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, record profits are generated, both for owners and users. Today the third sector has been completely invested by marketing strategies and job opportunities conceived and produced through the network: YouTube channels, social profiles and blogs become an easy source of income and a clear and easy redemption opportunity, but at the same time they are a source of risk and danger for inexperienced users who are not yet aware of the use of the web. Hidden traps often risk escalating in phenomena such as cyberbullying, vandalism, stalkerisation, manipulation and other manifestations related to the areas of use (Salamone, 2021). Freudian impulses return within the digital society; plus, the above said phenomenologies

produce emotional disturbs, social condemnations, prevarication, depression, fear, hatred towards others and towards oneself and other serious psychic pathologies that can sometimes degenerate up to extreme forms of self-harm such as suicide (Boccia Artieri, 2015).

Mass culture today feeds on the web and, through it, it continuously launches messages, ideas, rules, superstructures, warnings, information and yet continues to remain hooked to a logic of superficial appearance, of media exposure of its individualisms in an empty and sterile race to get more likes or followers. This is the new social model of the 21st century, if it is true that mass culture is a culture: it includes symbols, myths, images concerning practical life and imaginary life, a system of specific projections and identifications, which is added to national culture and humanistic culture, entering into competition with them (Morin, 2008).

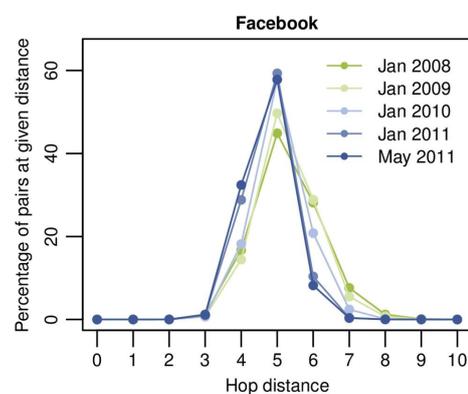


Figure 1 - Distance on Facebook.

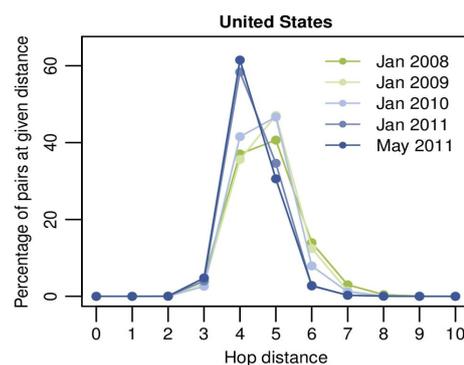


Figure 2 - Distance in the USA.

### 3.2 Theory and model

Therefore, a social phenomenon investing all knowledge and disciplines from an epistemological point of view, should also awaken consciences and encourage to find shared and convergent solutions to generate an ethical and deontological substrate for a peaceful and constructive use of the network.

Certainly the legislative apparatus, firstly EU, and the governance of Member States are making a great effort to regulate its use and consumption, drawing up its guidelines and adopting increasingly strict and attentive regulations for minors and education. However, significant differences remain in the various regulations, such as in the creation and management of accounts and in the ability to verify the truthfulness of information entered by the registering user. Even if the EU draws a common line about the key competences and the educational objectives for the achievement of community standards in digital skills and competences, there is no intermediate definition of them, and moreover each Member State is autonomous as regards the legislation and structuring of investments aimed at achieving a conscious digital citizenship (European Court of Auditors 2021). Even the Italian institutions have employed several tools, resources and commitment to accompany citizens in this digital transformation: from the PNRR (National plan of recovery and resilience), to the Agency for digital Italy (AgID), from the Privacy Guarantor to the Guarantor Authority for childhood and adolescence, and, locally, the Guarantor for the minors' rights and protection within regional governments. Furthermore, there is a high involvement of other national institutions, such as the Postal Police, the Ministry of Education and the Commission for internet rights and duties (Declaration of internet rights, 2015) which, in synergy, fight for the development of the country in the digital field and at the same time for the safeguard and protection of minors, who undoubtedly represent the weakest age group and are the most exposed to the dangers of the web.

Within the new DigiComp 2.2 report, integrated with new examples of knowledge, skills and attitudes that help citizens engage confidently, recently published by the European JRC, edited by AgID in the Italian version, 8 levels of mastery are detailed for each of the 5 areas of competence; it is therefore a document shared at European level, that represents the reference framework for Italian citizens' digital skills (JRC European Commission, 2022).

All the resources described seem to intercept, on the one hand, the push towards the acquisition of technological and digital skills in order to use them within real and virtual societies with ability and competence, and, on the other hand, the need to safeguard, protect, control and monitor the digital context, a vast and dangerous environment. The perplexities about the real and effective application of these directives and prospective frameworks lie above all in the evident differences among the Member States and, even more, within the various socio-economic-cultural contexts in the same country. Furthermore, it would also be necessary to move on an even more primordial level. It is certainly correct to intervene on deviances, but it would be more useful to intervene on the education of individuals, on the delivery of a civic awareness which, far beyond the digital field, is a fundamental pillar of real coexistence, of the permanent formation of a civic sense that actively

permeates all human manifestations, therefore also that which develops through the digital world and virtual sociality.

The moral rules moving the behaviours and choices of individuals should represent a status of belonging to the human species, that is valid tout court regardless of the field of application. Therefore, planning the conscious acquisition of an active digital citizenship, in the epistemological contents, rules and forms, means ensuring humanity a full and conscious digital citizenship, starting from the epistemological foundations of culture. Digital competence is not digital citizenship: the first develops within the functioning and the use, the second is instead based on ethical reasons, starting from the need to be aware citizens, within shared rules applied in social behaviours in a community which is real before being virtual. Legality, respect for man as well as for nature, sense of democracy, sustainability, enhancement of culture, equality of rights and resources become founding paradigms in the search for digital citizenship. Only in this way the civic sense of belonging to a community, to a culture, to human history can be able to develop digital citizenship. Managing the complexity of social differences through shared ethical rules realizes a favorable substrate for the development of active and conscious citizenship (Sennet, 2019). Differences, while present, must not become inequalities; real community, as well as digital community, lives and thrives on relationships. Shared ethical rules fight against the isolation of individuals and promote the equality of those who are different. The creation of thinking against individualist ideology results in a sharing of purpose that develops democratic, fair and equal individualism (Urbinati, 2011).

The model (Fig.3) for the realisation of a global digital citizenship proposed here develops a conscious, multiform, transdisciplinary, multicultural construction starting from a shared ethical-epistemological dimension, from which everything is born and takes shape.

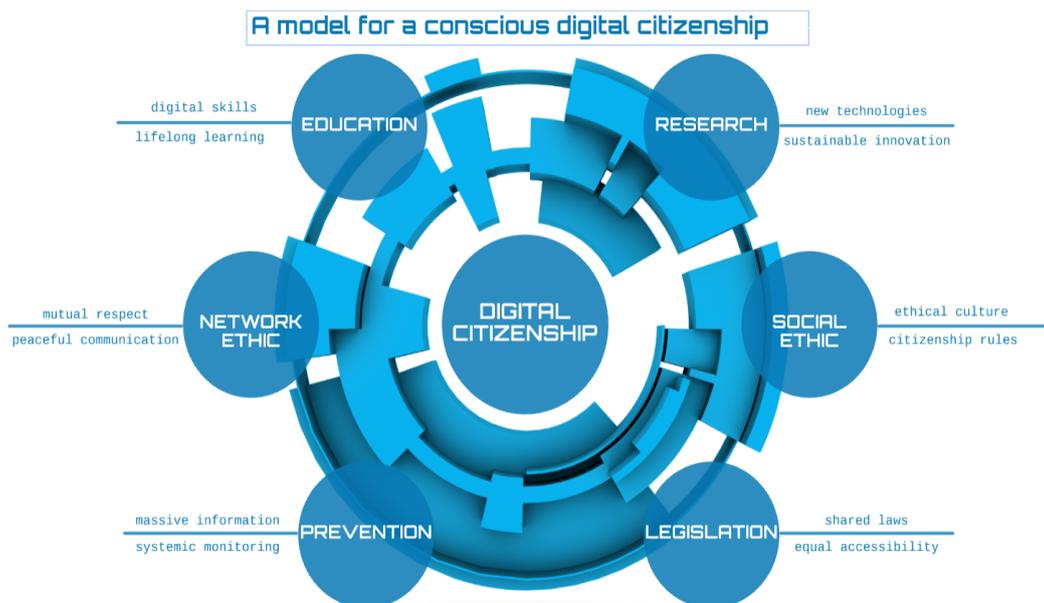
### 3. Conclusion

The proposed model aims to establish six key points, six focuses: governance, prevention, network and social ethics, education and research, all operating within a conscious sharing of real ethical-social rules, recognised as a primary source by society.

The above described sectors of intervention move simultaneously, in a circular, dynamic, centripetal convergence; only the joint effort of all areas of intervention will be able to achieve a real digital citizenship permeated by a conscious and active ethical awareness. The governance of the States becomes fundamental: it senses the possibilities of using digital technology and imposes its constraints and freedoms, moving through shared and universally recognized laws.

The prevention dimension affects two sectors at the same time, mass information and continuous monitoring. The first aims to ensure everyone's full awareness of the network's risks and deviations; the second, entrusted to experts from the institutions (e.g. the Italian Postal Police), pursues the tracking of shares and incorrect or misleading uses, traces digital deviations reporting them to the law, preserves privacy and protects citizens. The ethical rules of the network, starting from those pertaining to universal moral conscience, epistemologically based on peoples' culture, mutual respect, equality in the use of digital resources (Rivoltella, 2020), non-violent communication, on the freedom to exist together with the other and not in place of the other, are integrated and inserted within a code of the network, which creates them through its own means of mass communication, through social media, the web and all the other phenomena related to the network (Buccieri, 2004). Furthermore, within the proposed model, the research sector acquires an important relevance: thanks to it, technological tools such as devices, connections, web browsing, can be improved, and through it unsafe and deceptive external attacks, fake news and fake social profiles can be easily identified. In short, it is a research which aims to make the virtual world more and more reliable and sustainable, and the web becomes a protected resource, a window on the world that is both free and safe. Research also becomes the driving force of digital development in all fields of use, from robotics to domotics, from the development in the pedagogical field to innovations in the medical-health field as a support to the citizen's well-being: a digital citizenship which permeates all fields of knowledge and tends to and promotes a universal and universally accessible smartliving.

Certainly, the massive increase of technology within various social practices leads to a rethinking of the ethical paradigm of the human race; artificial intelligence and machines slowly produce a radical change in social operations and practices and propose new forms of social interaction that must be well-structured and universally shared (Nida-Rümelin, & Weidenfeld, 2019). In addition, the world of education plays a role of fundamental importance as a source of knowledge and skills. It has the task of projecting young people into this digital transition and of educating them to a correct and conscious use. A renewed school encourages them to see the web as a resource for individual and collective growth, illustrating its infinite possibilities and capabilities, giving them solid and safe skills which can be spent in their life as lifelong learning. Consequently, the transmission of these skills will produce the development of critical and metacognitive skills, so as to allow a careful analysis in the use and management of social networks and of the web. Finally, attention should be paid to the world of lifelong learning for all educators, teachers and operators in the digital field, to increase the level of mastery of digital skills and facilitate their transmission to the new generations in an effective and professional way, to give life to a global digital citizenship, universally shared, aware, safe and sustainable (Calvani, 2010, 2013). In this perspective, I believe it is possible to detect a global methodology of priorities aimed at the acquisition of permanent knowledge. I am referring to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) whose epistemological bases contain the characteristics analysed in this article; in fact, the seven principles of the UD (Mace, 1985), proposed as paradigms within the educational practices for UDL learning (McGuire et al., 2003), allow the creation of a



**Figure 3** - A model for a conscious digital citizenship.

permanent and shared e-learning (Guglielman, 2011), in order to represent an inclusive strategy for the realisation of a universal digital citizenship (Calvani et al., 2011). If universally accessible, information technologies (Baroni & Lazzari, 2013), indispensable facilitators for breaking down barriers, can allow a free and effective implementation of a unitary and conscious model of digital citizenship.

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