

Chapter 26

Impact of Social Networks in the Exercise of Citizenship in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

In a society where access and presence in social networks is common to most of the population, it is essential to follow this form of access and sharing information, especially when it comes to publicizing the rights and duties of citizens. In this sense, the chapter focused on the analysis of the profile of Portuguese citizens that uses social networks to support the different themes that make up the concept of citizenship. Likewise, the results obtained allow to state that although most respondents do not use social networks to follow and/or support institutions, movements, or organizations associated with the exercise of citizenship, there is room for such. That is, the results suggest that it is possible to promote the exercise of citizenship through social networks in Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

Technological progress and globalization have brought several changes in the paradigms of society, namely in terms of access and sharing of information and knowledge.

The definition of information society proposed in the Green Book for the Information Society in Portugal (1997) is still current, considering that this concept refers to “a mode of social and economic development in which the acquisition, storage, processing, distribution and dissemination of information conducive to knowledge creation and to the needs of citizens and businesses, play a central role in the economic activity, wealth creation, citizens’ quality of life and cultural practices.”

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In this way and as mentioned by Coutinho and Lisboa (2011) the idea underlying the concept of Information Society is of a society inserted in a process of constant change. This change is based on the rapid advances of science and technology. Considering information as the raw material of knowledge and communication, several authors appear that have been considering that the essential is the knowledge resulted by access to information and not information itself. Similarly, UNESCO in 2005 suggested at the World Summit on the Information Society that the term would be changed to the Knowledge Society and in its World Report “Towards Knowledge Societies” considered that the term should be applied to societies which benefit their diversity and ability to encourage knowledge sharing.

Given the distinction and relationship between the Information and Knowledge Society, it should be noted that it would not have been possible to achieve the current level of ease of access and information sharing without Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

The massification of ICT contributes to greater ease and increase, not only in access to information, but also in the interaction between individuals and between individuals and institutions.

Virtual social networks are currently an effective way of communicating and sharing information, accessible to a large proportion of the population.

Mosseberg, Wu and Crawford (2013) state that “Further, social networks foster collaboration, joint learning, and the speedy exchange of information between users. Thus, social networks have the potential to provide a new platform for communication between citizens and government officials, or for deliberation and discussion among citizens.” (Mossberg, Wu and Crawford, 2013, p.352)

Given the expansion of the use of social networks, it is possible to state that the framework of civic participation in actual society has been changed, since there are no geographic barriers to the information and performance of individuals. That is, social networks enhance the exercise of citizenship, given that, according to several studies, Internet users are more often more social, have more friends and contacts and are socially and politically more active than non-users (Castells and Cardoso, 2005).

The term citizenship, mentioned above, refers to a whole set of civil, political and social rights and duties. This is a multidimensional concept and as highlighted by Alvaro, (2011) there are plenty of authors who propose different approaches and dimensions for this concept. Martim and Mogarro (2010, p. 192) propose eight themes in the constitution to the concept of citizenship:

- State and nation: laws, principles, institutions and Constitutional Body in democratic regimes;
- Religion and religions as a manifestation of culture and spirituality;
- Relationship of the human being with nature, environment and socio-economic organization;
- Diversity of races, ethnicities and cultures: multiculturalism and social inclusion;
- Family structure and role and gender roles at work and in the family;
- Health and quality of life (including aspects such as sport, food, safety, hygiene and sexuality);
- Civility, social coexistence and regulation of interpersonal relationships;
- Media and new information and communication technologies and how to use them effectively, safely, and ethically.

Considering that social networks are, as mentioned, a means accessible to the sharing of information, and can thus enhance the exercise of citizenship, it is considered relevant to analyse if this occurs in Portugal. It is also sought to verify the predisposition of users of social networks to use them to become more active citizens. For this purpose, a questionnaire was made available through the Google Forms

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