



Elsa Margarita Ramírez Leyva*

Digital Communities, Part of Evolution

Human beings are social by nature and, since their origins, have created communities, for which they require communication and the exchange of information. This can be seen in the vestiges of ancestral forms of communication such as cave paintings, iconic language that registers information about their world, emerging from oral and gestural languages.

Although scholars have not identified the era in which these languages emerged despite the biological and anthropological studies of fossils, we have yet to know how the social interaction of people developed to the point that our common communication system turned into language as such. To do that, a series of both biological and social conditions would have to have existed. And, when look-

ing for the origin of language, we would have to consider both the biological and social development upon which language would be based.¹

What is clear is that the need for communication emerges from communal life, which fosters the evolution of nomadic and then sedentary groups. This, in turn, gives rise to neuronal, motor, and cognitive skills for developing and innovating oral, written, and iconic languages, as well as instruments, supports, machines, apparatuses, and venues in order to register, communicate, and preserve information, knowledge, and experiences, thus also growing the possibilities for socialization beyond local surroundings and time periods.

In this process, the means and supports for communications were created and perfected over the years: tablets, papyruses, manuscripts, presses, books, newspapers, libraries, archives. This also gave rise to media such as the mail, the telegraph, the telephone, the fax, radio, and television. Then, throughout the last century, information

* Elsa is a researcher at the UNAM Library Science and Information Research Institute (IBI) and is the general director of the UNAM Libraries and Digital Information Services; you can contact her at eramirez@unam.mx.

and communication technologies were created, with which the design and launch of a network of intercommunication was put into operation where the computer began to be incorporated into different activities and spheres. In this century, these media came together in the electronic space, giving rise to digital communities. The latter have diversified and expanded through networks connected by the Internet and through mobile devices interconnected twenty-four hours a day from anywhere at all, prompting new private, local, national, regional, and global sociabilities. From here has emerged a digital citizenry that Magdalena Claro refers to as new forms of interaction and social relations based on interests, identities, and values in the digital space. Together with this appeared governance and new power dynamics, giving rise to notions such as those of the “new individual,” “new collective action,” and “new anti-citizens,” among others. We should point out that the third notion understands citizenship as the exchanges in the global village and promotes global causes in which values are shared that go beyond the nation-state.²

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a transfer of most in-person activities to the virtual sphere, even though many of them were already carried out there. In that context, many people who had not been part of the digital world had to develop skills to use their resources and carry out activities in that sphere. This accelerated and grew the creation of digital communities and, with that, digital citizenship. However, this also led to new gaps due to the lack of infrastructure and training for interacting digitally.

According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in 2022, 70 percent of the world’s population goes online.³ Mexico’s 2022 National Survey of the Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Homes (ENDUTIH) confirms that 89.45 percent of the population has access to Internet, although only 78.6 percent actually go online, and 79.2 percent have mobile telephony. Between 2015 and 2022, the Internet was used to communicate (93.8 percent, an increase of 10 percent in the period); to look at social media (90.6 percent, with a 20-percent increase); for entertainment (89.6 percent, with a 15-percent increase); to access information (89.3 percent, with a 10-percent decrease); as support for training or education (83.3 percent, with a 30-percent increase); and to read newspapers, books, and magazines (39 percent, with an almost 8-percent decrease).⁴

Replacing in-person relationships
with social media activity can
foster isolation and loneliness that
can lead to depression.

The Internet and telephony make it possible to use platforms for group meetings in real time. One example is Skype, which in 2003 launched a program for video-calls on the Internet through a computer, facilitating the connection of 25 people at a time. Smartphones with Internet capabilities also provide access to e-mail, videoconferencing platforms, social media, and other applications that make it possible to communicate through written and oral messages, images, videos, and videoconferencing person-to-person or in groups. Mobile devices are also equipped with cameras for taking photographs or recording videos, and we can share them through different digital means, among them, social media and WhatsApp messages.

Digital Communities on Social Media

Social media have contributed to the creation of digital communities since 2004. Facebook became the most popular in the world with almost three billion users. WhatsApp, for its part, has been incorporated into smartphones and links up with computers; today, it has the ability to integrate communities of five hundred persons who exchange written and voice messages, as well as photographs. Another network, Wattpad Premium (<https://wattpad.com/>), is a platform that has brought together authors who have shared their work with readers since 2006, exchanging comments, and connecting a global community of eighty-five million readers and writers through the power of their stories.

All these networks link millions of people throughout the world in homogeneous groups by age; gender; nationality; profession; kind of work; field of discipline; political, ideological, or religious ideas; cultural interests; hobbies, etc. But they also join heterogeneous, intergenerational, multicultural, or multidisciplinary groups, and, in addition to linking the social and entertainment, they have also integrated work, school, academic, cultural, family, and institutional activities. One example is their relationship with libraries, which disseminate new bibliographical items

and activities and even offer consulting and orientation services through social media.

Opportunities for Digital Communities

Technology's facility for linking people with each other and communicating in real time or a-synchronously makes it possible to create indispensable relationships for different political, labor, research, academic, cultural, entertainment, learning, and updating causes and activities. All this opens up opportunities for creating multicultural and multidisciplinary dialogue, exchanging information, broadening knowledge, understanding different cultures, learning to be empathetic, and promoting solidarity on a world scale. Edgar Morin writes in this regard, "We must link the ethics of understanding among people with the ethics of the planetary era that never ceases to globalize understanding. The only true globalization that will be at the service of humanity is that of humanity's understanding, intellectual solidarity, and morality."⁵

Regarding the advantages of Internet communication, after reviewing several studies, Sara Kiesler *et al.* stated that

extraversion is the tendency to like people, to be outgoing, and to enjoy social interaction; it is highly consistent over the life course, ... predictive of social support, social integration, well-being, and positive life events.... The perception of social support refers to feelings that others are available to provide comfort, esteem, assistance, and information or advice; perceived social support buffers the effects of stress.⁶

Social media facilitate digital communities' obtaining and sharing information about courses, events, or publications and creating clubs or circles such as reading circles in libraries and other cultural spaces, and Mexico is no exception.

What have been called "booktubers," some independent and others backed by publishing houses, promote their works by commenting on them, fostering reading for pleasure, thus favoring sociability, dialogue, the exchange of experiences, and, in some cases, individual or collaborative writing.

Other groups that make the most of social media advantages are cinema debate clubs that meet on digital

Web 2.0 puts different actors
in contact with each other, willing
to work on a common project: creating
public awareness about
caring for our environment.

platforms or exchange their opinions on social media after watching a film on television, in movie houses, or on virtual platforms. Some people with disabilities and communities that support improving the environment also use them to their advantage. Juan Carlos Fernández Miranda and Vanessa Ruiz Cristóbal state in this regard that web 2.0 puts different actors in contact with each other, willing to work on a common project: creating public awareness about caring for our environment and disseminating information through networks created to "teach-create-awareness" and "act-mobilize-protest."⁷

Another experience is the creation of networks that use institutions to collaborate in projects, join resources and work, maintain communication, and exchange information in virtual meetings to analyze, discuss, come to agreements, and foster actions in favor of these projects.

In short, digital communities contribute to strengthening education, disseminating culture, improving communication and inclusion, and protecting the environment, and their members contribute moments of satisfaction as they feel they contribute to improving their surroundings.

One study of two native communities of Mexican youths who have created groups on X found that "they have an impact in two spheres: negotiating and re-signifying local references that have made up their ethnic identities or their ideas of community and [also] developing digital skills needed for socializing and interacting through social media to share content or express themselves."⁸

Risks for Digital Communities

Occupying digital space and utilizing technologies and devices can bring with them risks depending on their uses. For example, privacy can be threatened and information, images, or recordings shared without authorization, and fake information disseminated with malicious intent or

without proving its veracity or origins. While some people think that digital activity contributes to reducing isolation and exclusion, replacing in-person relationships with social media activity can foster isolation and loneliness that can lead to depression.

In that sense, Sara Kiesler et al. state that whether the internet has positive or negative social impact, however, may depend upon the quality of people's online activities and what they give up to spend time online.... Ease of internet communication might encourage people to spend more time alone, talking online with strangers, or forming superficial "drive-by" relationships, at the expense of deeper face-to-face discussion and companionship with friends and family.... Further, even if people use the Internet to talk with close ties, these online discussions might displace higher quality face-to-face and telephone conversation.⁹

On the other hand, constant messages by group members generate disruption. WhatsApp messages have already been incorporated into work which means that they have to be dealt with immediately; this reduces concentration and attention to other activities and even interrupts and distracts from in-person undertakings. These risks increase in children's and young people's communities, affecting attention and socialization.

Another risk is people distancing themselves from the real world, that of in-person relations; interaction must be part of cognitive and social development since this is how oral, gestural, smell, and tactile languages are learned. Paulo Freire states in this regard, "Reading the world precedes reading words, which means that the latter cannot do without continuing the former."¹⁰

Isolation and little oral and affective communication in the real world have negative effects in people's emotional, social, and cognitive processes. For that reason, families, schools, workplaces, and academic and cultural spaces and libraries are committed to striking a balance between both, the real and the virtual worlds. At the end of the day, digital communities also must participate in the real world.

Conclusion

While digital media have opened up opportunities for creating communities, establishing ties among families

and friends and members of work or educational groups, tightening links or collaborating in different activities, they must not replace sociability in the real world, because it is the basis for individual and social development. However, the digital world is part of our real world and our activities. Therefore, we must know how to use it, learn to handle it responsibly and with awareness, direct it, and not let ourselves be ruled by the facility it offers to communicate with one another, use information, and be entertained. It is fundamental to strengthen human skills, knowledge, experiences, and ethical values and contribute to creating responsible communities with people, societies, flora and fauna, nature, and the environment to avoid being dehumanized. ■■

Further Reading

OECD, "How's Life in the Digital Age? Opportunities and Risks of the Digital Transformation for People's Well-being," report, February 26, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311800-en>.

Notes

- 1 Sverker Johansson, *En busca del origen del lenguaje. Dónde, cuándo y por qué el ser humano empezó a hablar* (Madrid: Ariel, 2021), p. 28.
- 2 Magdalena Claro, "Ciudadanía digital en América Latina: revisión conceptual de iniciativas," *Serie Políticas Sociales*, no. 239, CEPAL, 2021, p. 9.
- 3 International Telecommunication Union, "Measuring Digital Development. Facts and Figures 2022," ITU, https://www.itu.int/hub/publication/d-ind-ict_mdd-2022/.
- 4 INEGI, "Encuesta Nacional sobre Disponibilidad y Uso de Tecnologías de la Información en los Hogares (ENDUTIH) 2022," <https://www.inegi.org.mx/rnm/index.php/catalog/771>.
- 5 Edgar Morin, *Los siete saberes necesarios para la educación del futuro* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999), p. 56.
- 6 Sara Kiesler, Robert E. Kraut, Jonathan Cummings, and Bonka Boneva, "Internet Evolution and Social Impact," *IT&Society*, vol. 1, issue 1, June, 2002, p. 121, <http://www.ITandSociety.org>.
- 7 Juan Carlos Fernández Miranda y Vanessa Ruiz Cristóbal, "Redes sociales y medio ambiente: aliados para informar y educar," *Páginas de información ambiental*, no. 37, 2011, pp. 26-29, <https://dialnet.uni rioja.es/descarga/articulo/4891358.pdf>.
- 8 Óscar Ramos Mancilla and Gloria Flores-Fuentes, "Educación informal y entornos digitales entre jóvenes de comunidades indígenas," *Revista Electrónica de Investigación Educativa*, no. 25, 2023, p. 9, <https://doi.org/10.24320/redie.2023.25.e05.4298>.
- 9 Kiesler et al., *op cit.*, p. 121.
- 10 Paulo Freire, *La importancia de leer y el proceso de liberación* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1991), p. 11.