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Media transformation in the digital age: a documentary review on ICT, social networks, streaming and video games

Transformación de los medios en la era digital: revisión documental sobre TIC, redes sociales, streaming y videojuegos

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to critically analyze the transformation of the media structure in the digital age and its impact on contemporary sociocultural dynamics. The methodological strategy consisted of a descriptive-analytical documentary review based on 25 academic documents and statistical reports on global connectivity, use of virtual social networks (VSNs), video streaming platforms, and video games. The findings highlight the consolidation of a new media ecology characterized by interactivity, diversity of formats, and algorithmic mediation. Likewise, structural tensions associated with disinformation, audience fragmentation, the concentration of communicative power in global platforms, and the psychosocial impacts of hyperconnectivity are identified. It concludes that digital transformation is not only a technological phenomenon, but also a complex sociocultural process that requires the strengthening of digital literacy, the development of regulatory frameworks and policies aimed at platform governance, and the design of educational strategies that promote ethical and reflective digital citizenship in the face of the challenges of the network society.

Keywords: Mass media, information technologies, digital literacy.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar críticamente la transformación de la estructura de los medios de comunicación en la era digital y su impacto en las dinámicas socioculturales contemporáneas. La estrategia metodológica consistió en una revisión documental de carácter descriptivo-analítico, fundamentada en 25 documentos académicos y reportes estadísticos sobre conectividad global, uso de redes sociales virtuales (RSV), plataformas de streaming de video y videojuegos. Los hallazgos destacan la consolidación de una nueva ecología mediática caracterizada por la interactividad, la diversidad de formatos y la mediación algorítmica. Así mismo, se identifican tensiones estructurales asociadas a la desinformación, la fragmentación de audiencias, la concentración del poder comunicativo en plataformas globales, y los impactos psicosociales de la hiperconectividad. Se concluye que la transformación digital no solo constituye un fenómeno tecnológico, sino un proceso sociocultural complejo que exige el fortalecimiento de la alfabetización digital, el desarrollo de marcos normativos y políticas orientadas a la gobernanza de plataformas y el diseño de estrategias educativas que promuevan una ciudadanía digital ética y reflexiva ante los desafíos de la sociedad de red.

Palabras clave: Medios de comunicación masiva, tecnologías de la información, alfabetización digital.

Introduction

Today, profound changes are reshaping how people communicate, entertain themselves, and access information. Driven by the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), these changes have given form to what is commonly called the “digital age.”

The research problem is that, despite the rapid adoption of digital technologies, critical understanding of how media structures have shifted from traditional, one-way models to new media environments remains limited. These environments reconfigure identity and social bonds within spaces that are anything but neutral (Jódar, 2010; Romansky & Noninska, 2020).

The relevance of the topic stems from the fact that digital environments are sites where inequalities are reproduced and subjectivities are transformed. The study is therefore justified by the need to examine how global connectivity converges with new forms of interaction, which bear directly on the construction of digital identity and on contemporary culture.

The article rests on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework. It draws on the theory of performativity by Judith Butler (1993) and on Erving Goffman’s account of the presentation of the “self” in everyday life to explain online identity as a constant “staging” on virtual social networks (VSNs). It also builds on the concepts of media ecology and the evaluation of cultural artifacts, treating video games and streaming platforms not merely as leisure tools but as new media that inform, educate, and persuade (Soto de la Cruz et al., 2023).

As for previous studies, recent research shows that video-on-demand consumption has displaced traditional television because of the convenience and personalization the service offers (Pérez, 2021). Video games, in turn, have been documented as shifting toward two-way interaction platforms and complex virtual worlds enhanced by artificial intelligence and augmented reality (Chalmers, 2022). This work adds to that literature an integrative view that links these three strands (social networks, streaming, and gaming) through the lens of the structural transformation of media.

Finally, the study is set in a global context defined by hyperconnectivity and the consolidation of the platform economy. Against this backdrop, the general objective of this article is to critically analyze the transformation of media in the digital age, with emphasis on virtual social networks (VSNs), video streaming, and video games, and to reflect on the ethical, social, and regulatory challenges that emerge from this sociocultural process.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative, documentary-analytical approach, with a systematic review design that followed the guidelines of the PRISMA model (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). Statistical data from reliable secondary sources, namely Statista and DataReportal (2024–2025), supplemented the review for descriptive and analytical purposes and supported the theoretical discussion.

Source selection procedure (PRISMA Flow)

The evidence was selected in four phases:

1. Identification: An advanced search was run in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the following Boolean descriptors to refine the results: ("digital transformation" OR "digital media ecosystem") AND ("social media" OR "streaming platforms" OR "video games") AND ("identity" OR "digital culture" OR "algorithmic mediation"). This phase yielded 47 initial records, supplemented by 4 reports from official bodies.

2. Screening: After duplicates were removed, the titles and abstracts of 42 documents were examined, and 9 were excluded for lack of topical relevance or because they fell outside the established time frame (2020–2025), except for foundational theoretical sources.

3. Eligibility: A total of 33 full texts were assessed against criteria of academic rigor.

4. Inclusion: The final sample comprised 25 sources, which make up the corpus for the synthesis.

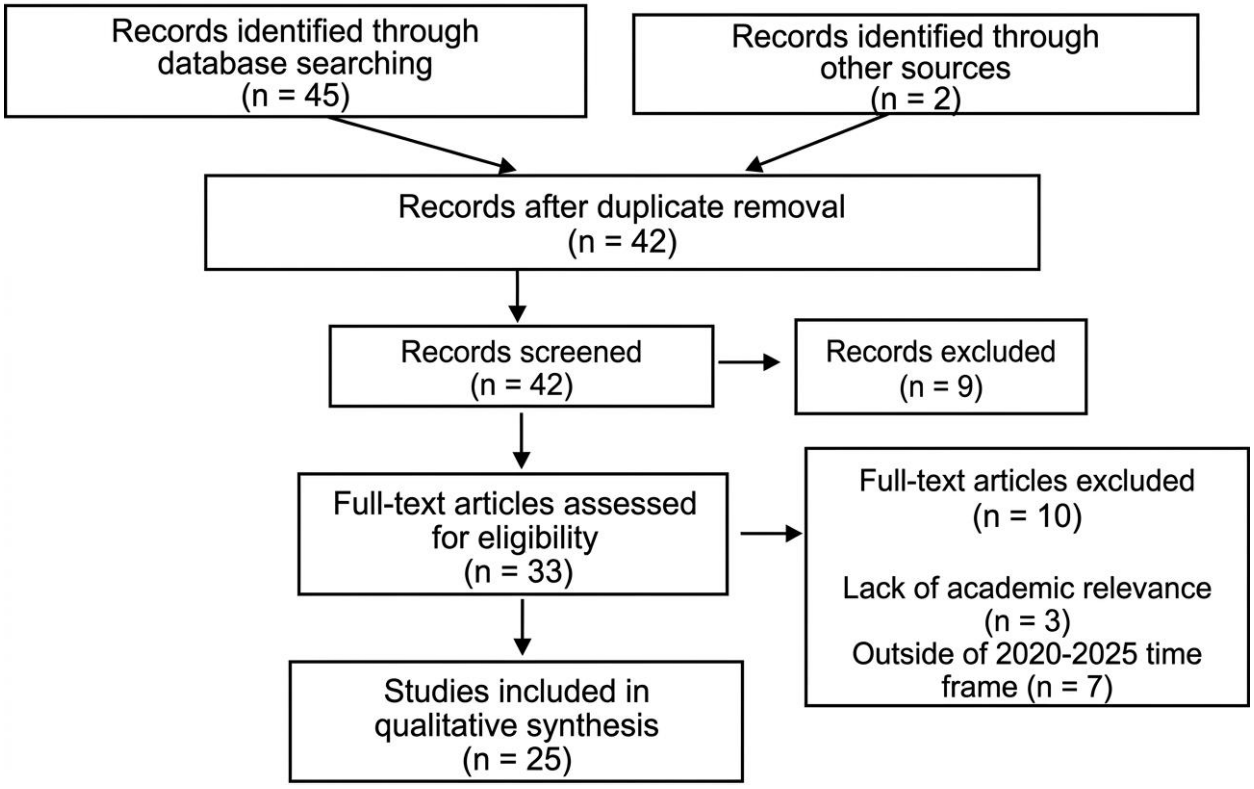
Techniques and instrument

Content analysis served as the analytical technique. Information was gathered through a document registry matrix, and the findings were organized under four categories: (1) global connectivity; (2) virtual social networks; (3) video streaming platforms; and (4) video games.

Ethical considerations

The study respected intellectual property rights through rigorous citation in accordance with APA 7th edition. The authors declare that this article is a product derived from the doctoral research titled *"Critical Thinking as a Pedagogical Strategy in Response to the Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Among High School and University Students."*

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram



Results and discussion

Growth in global connectivity

Internet access has grown steadily worldwide over the past decade, evidence of a structural transformation in patterns of communication, participation, and digital consumption. As Table 1 shows, most of the world's population is now online and relies almost entirely on mobile devices. Connectivity, then, is more than a technical tool: it has become a social infrastructure of everyday use, one in which socioeconomic, cultural, and political practices emerge.

According to Castells (2021), this expansion marks the consolidation of the "network society," in which the flow of digital information structures not only the economy but also culture and social relations. Mobile technology amplifies this environment through what Levin and Mamlok (2021) call "technological portability," that is, the capacity of individuals to remain connected to the web at all times. Portability has significantly affected social participation, the informal economy, entertainment, and education, particularly in countries of the Global South. From this perspective, it blurs the boundaries of the classroom and calls for a redefinition of pedagogical space beyond face-to-face instruction.

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2022) describe this scenario as a shift from the "audience" to the "interface": people no longer simply consume information but interact within a digital environment that is ubiquitous, mobile, and multiform.

Growth in global connectivity, however, has not been even across the world. Although internet access keeps rising, substantial gaps persist in some regions, which shows that technological expansion has not produced the same experience for every population group. Connection rates are higher in the Global North than in the Global South, for example, and a similar divide separates urban from rural populations.

It should also be noted that permanent connection to the web has produced forms of emotional and cognitive exhaustion. This trend is consistent with the effects of constant hyperconnectivity described by Turkle (2011), who warns that continuous connection can erode social interaction and foster fatigue and relational dependence, with consequences for mental health and for the quality of social exchange. The balance between digital (online) and face-to-face (offline) life is thus put under strain, with implications for mental well-being, particularly in educational and work settings.

Tthe continued growth in users, the dominance of the smartphone, and shifting patterns of internet use point to a new sociotechnical ecology in which the digital has become an intrinsic part of everyday life.

This situation calls for critical reflection on the notion of digital citizenship and invites consideration of public policies designed to ensure not only access but also ethical, healthy, and equitable use of information technologies (UNESCO, 2023; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2022).

Table 1. Connectivity and sociocultural change

Empirical trend	Sociocultural reading
More than 6 billion people connected (73%)	Connectivity acts as basic social infrastructure, not an optional tool
More than 2.2 billion people unconnected	Digital experience remains structured by social inequalities
Urban (85%) and rural (58%) penetration	Connectivity reproduces socio-territorial hierarchies

Mobile access predominates (96%)	Digital life permeates everyday routines and redefines social experience
Steady growth in users	Expansion is not uniform and does not eliminate deep social tensions

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024), the World Bank (2024), and DataReportal (Kemp, 2025).

Virtual social networks: evolution, uses, and sociocultural challenges in the digital age

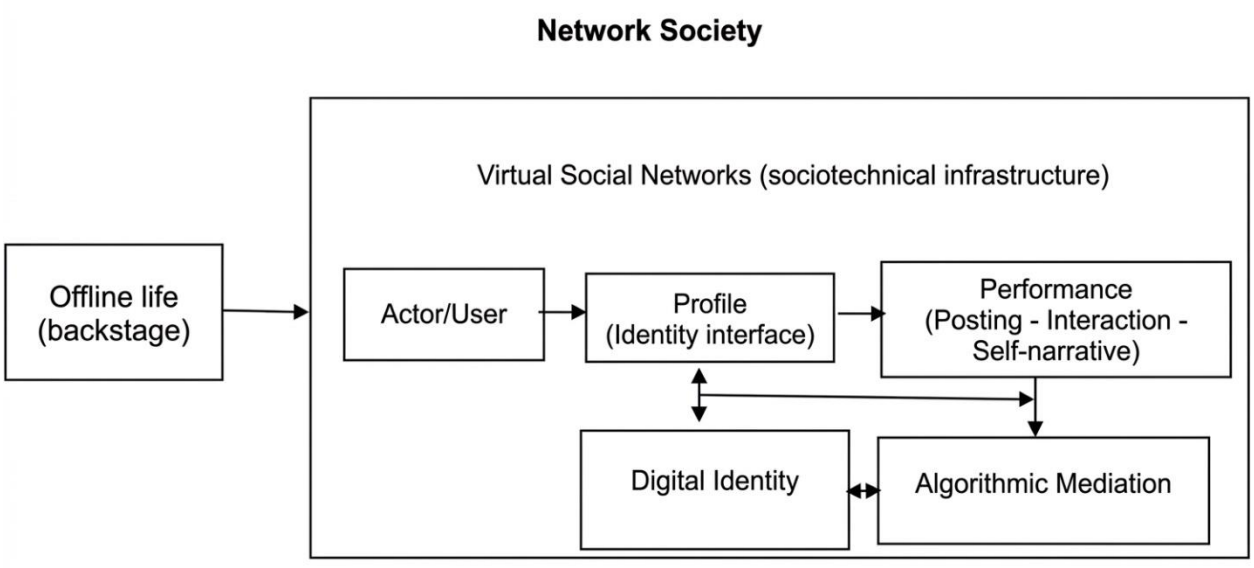
Over the past two decades, virtual social networks (VSNs) have become established as key spaces for contemporary digital interaction.

The evolution of social networks, from Facebook to TikTok, has transformed virtual relationships and consolidated diverse logics of interaction and civic participation within the digital ecosystem (Levin & Mamlok, 2021).

As Table 2 shows, the massive user base and the time spent on these platforms each day confirm that VSNs have reached a stage of sociotechnical maturity and now stand as central arenas for interaction, identity construction, and symbolic production.

As Fernández (2024) observes, "the twenty-first century has driven not only a change in social norms but also the creation of new ways of interacting that are largely tied to the development of the Internet and communication technologies" (p. 1, authors' translation). Social, emotional, and political forms of bonding have accordingly migrated to digital spaces, giving rise to a hyperconnected, multitasking, global internet user. This confirms the central role VSNs have played in transforming social dynamics in the digital age. They are thus more than communication channels: they are arenas where identities are configured, claims to legitimacy are contested, and new narratives are built.

Figure 2. Dynamics of the construction of the "self" in VSNs



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The figure above shows the dynamics through which the "self" is constructed in VSNs from a sociotechnical perspective. In this model, the actor/user enters the digital environment from offline life and builds a profile that serves as an identity interface within the VSN infrastructure. Once the profile is in place,

a public performance unfolds (interactions, posts, and narratives), the visibility of which is mediated by algorithmic architectures, all within a contemporary digital ecosystem structured by the logic of the network society.

Given this complexity, analysis of these environments brings two key scenarios into view. On the one hand, VSNs contribute to access to information, civic participation, and the creation of virtual communities. On the other, they raise challenges related to disinformation, privacy management, and the algorithmic manipulation of content.

This underscores that the challenge posed by VSNs is not only technical but also political and educational (Zuboff, 2020). In an ecosystem that conditions the perception of reality, a shift toward digital literacy grounded in critical thinking is urgent, one capable of decoding the invisible logics that govern how information circulates.

Table 2. Virtual social networks and sociocultural reading

Empirical trend	**Sociocultural and interpretive reading**
More than 60% of the world's population uses social networks	Social networks are consolidating as central spaces of socialization and meaning-making in everyday life, beyond their original communicative function.
Average daily use of more than 2 hours	Social interaction mediated by digital platforms reorganizes time for attention, leisure, and social participation, favoring dynamics of constant but fragmented presence.
High penetration among young people and adolescents	Social networks serve as privileged settings for identity construction, self-representation, and symbolic validation at key stages of subjective development.
Sustained growth in mobile use	Digital social experience becomes ubiquitous and permanent, blurring the boundaries between public and private and between online and offline life.
Traffic concentrated in a few global platforms	Communicative and symbolic power is centralized in technology corporations that control infrastructure, data, and visibility algorithms.
Algorithmic mediation of content and interaction	Social experience on these networks is conditioned by algorithmic logics that shape the visibility of discourses, polarization, and the reproduction of power relations.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data of DataReportal (Kemp, 2025), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024), and international bodies reporting on social network use.

Transformation of television consumption: from the traditional model to video streaming

Traditional ways of watching television have changed markedly over recent decades, propelled by technological development and innovation and by the global expansion of the internet.

These changes have reconfigured patterns of audiovisual consumption, displacing the model of linear, real-time programming in favor of a digital ecosystem built on demand, personalization, and the ubiquity of content.

According to Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2022), the ease with which digital platforms let users adapt and personalize content free of scheduling constraints has become a determining factor in the

preferences of today's viewers, especially young ones. The transition reflects not just a technological mutation but a cultural one, in how audiovisual content is accessed, selected, and consumed.

This shift shows most clearly in the rise of on-demand consumption. Statista (2024) reports that subscription video on demand (SVOD) has become a dominant pastime worldwide, offering unlimited access to content for a monthly fee. The trend has nonetheless produced tensions, among them market fragmentation, dispersion of content, rising subscription prices, and possible effects on cultural diversity.

Television consumption in the digital age is thus framed by a logic that commodifies time and attention. The displacement of editorial control by recommendation algorithms does more than ease content selection; it conditions the cultural trajectories of individuals. Consumers' choices increasingly depend on automated choice architectures rather than on their own independent decisions, which poses a challenge to cultural diversity and individual autonomy. On this premise, the television set is no longer the transmitter of a single signal but the central node where new forms of mediated sociability and global consumption dynamics converge.

Table 3. Transformation of television consumption: from the traditional model to digital streaming

Empirical trend	**Sociocultural and interpretive reading**
Steady growth in users of streaming platforms	Audiovisual consumption moves from the logic of mass broadcasting toward individualized, on-demand, personalized practices.
Progressive decline in traditional linear television viewing	Television loses its centrality as a collective ritual, giving way to fragmented, asynchronous audiovisual experiences.
Predominance of audiovisual consumption on personal devices (mobile, tablet, laptop)	Viewing becomes part of everyday life in a mobile, ubiquitous form, transforming the spaces and times of cultural leisure.
Widespread use of recommendation algorithms	Content selection ceases to be an editorial decision and becomes an automated process that steers tastes, habits, and cultural trajectories.
Market fragmentation across multiple platforms	The audiovisual experience becomes dispersed, conditioned by logics of subscription, exclusivity, and audience segmentation.
More time devoted to on-demand consumption	Streaming reorganizes the attention economy and redefines the relationship among leisure, rest, and productivity in everyday life.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data of DataReportal (Kemp, 2025), global audiovisual consumption reports, and international bodies reporting on digital culture.

The expansion of video games as a space for social interaction: transformations, devices, and audience in the digital age

Technological innovation in recent years has driven the expansion of video games, with change fueled by several key factors: sustained growth of the industry, the development of mobile games, the strengthening of online play, and the arrival of immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR).

This transformation has widened the market and, at the same time, redefined the relationship between players and platforms, establishing video games as a cross-cutting cultural practice tied to entertainment, socialization, and identity (Bogost, 2021).

The reports of Kemp (2025) show that video gaming has reached a stage of global maturity and become a predominant activity among internet users. As Table 4 shows, age and intensity of play are inversely correlated; even so, the high penetration that persists among the youngest users suggests that video games have become the native language of socialization for new generations.

It is also notable that the phenomenon has begun to break down traditional generational barriers. Although participation is highest among young people, sustained growth in older age brackets points to a market expansion into demographic groups that were previously beyond the reach of this technology.

This reflects a change in how video games are perceived: they are no longer seen as products aimed exclusively at children or teenagers and are coming to be regarded as a legitimate form of intergenerational leisure and self-expression (Consalvo & Dutton, 2020). According to Hodent (2019) and Isbister (2016, as cited in Soto de la Cruz et al., 2023), the multiplatform format, streaming, virtual communities, in-game chat, and virtual, augmented, and mixed reality have made it possible to build an entertainment platform that can host millions of people simultaneously, without geographic obstacles.

Beyond play itself, video games have evolved into an expanded cultural experience marked by a transmedia ecology (Jenkins, 2020), turning the game into a “space of presence” in which consuming content matters as much as the match itself. This spectacle of play adds a new dimension to digital citizenship: users no longer seek only a technical challenge but belonging to virtual communities where narratives and forms of social legitimacy are contested. Video games thus become an identity laboratory in which the online and the offline blend for good.

Video games, in short, are no longer viewed as a recreational activity and have become a central practice in the contemporary digital ecosystem. Their advance reflects not only technological change but also a cultural redefinition of leisure and networked participation. No longer merely a consumer product, they have grown into an expanding form of cultural, social, and communicative expression.

Table 4. Video games and digital culture

Empirical trend	**Sociocultural and interpretive reading**
75% of internet users (aged 16–64) are gamers.	Consolidation as a mass, intergenerational cultural practice; end of the stigma of gaming as a marginal phenomenon.
Participation above 90% among people under 35.	Video games serve as the primary language of socialization and identity for digital natives.
The smartphone is the main access device.	Leisure becomes integrated into everyday life in a ubiquitous way, blurring the boundaries between routine and free time.
Daily average of 2.62 hours per user.	Reorganization of the attention economy and emergence of new forms of digital presence.
High engagement on *streaming* platforms (Twitch/YouTube).	Play goes beyond the ludic act: it becomes a social event and a spectacle of identity construction.
Growth of microtransactions and reward systems.	Leisure is transformed into a space of continuous consumption, raising ethical tensions over player autonomy.

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on data of DataReportal (Kemp, 2025), global video game reports, and studies on contemporary digital culture.

As the empirical trends analyzed in the preceding sections show, the results confirm that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have evolved and radically changed traditional forms

of communication. The change has not been purely technological: it has driven a reorganization of social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics at both the individual and collective levels. This transformation is characterized by the digitization of information, ubiquitous connectivity, and the automation of processes, which have reconfigured everyday practices across many spheres of social life (Castells, 2021; Levin & Mamlok, 2021).

In this context, virtual social networks (VSNs) and video streaming platforms have taken on a central role in mediating informational and cultural experience, establishing themselves as the main channels for interaction, entertainment, collective organization, and identity construction. Castells (2021) argues that these new virtual spaces are transforming the traditional ways of being in the world and relating to it, profoundly altering worldviews. Because of its networked structure and global reach, the internet supports a communicative fabric conducive to intercultural dialogue and fosters spaces of autonomy that favor individual empowerment and the collective organization of peoples.

ICT thus shape environments that mediate communication, access to knowledge, and symbolic production, and they influence how collective meaning is constructed. Virtual social networks, video streaming platforms, and video games alike have become central actors in the new dynamics of communication in the digital age, since together they concentrate much of the circulation of information and culture.

As Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2022) note, these platforms do more than widen the channels of access to information; they transform the processes through which people engage with the news, public opinion, and social debates.

These ICT transformations nonetheless raise ethical and social tensions of considerable importance. The main challenges include disinformation; the algorithmic manipulation of content; the loss or lack of privacy for data circulating online; and technological dependence, which today significantly affects young people. The latter echoes Turkle's (2011) warnings about the risks of constant connection and growing technological dependence among youth, with the weakening of spaces for deep reflection and meaningful conversation as the main outcome.

This raises serious concerns about mental health, sleep quality, and socioemotional skills, particularly among school-age and university populations (Digital Wellness Lab, 2024).

VSNs have likewise shown a double edge. On one side, they are spaces for leisure, entertainment, interaction, and civic participation that facilitate empowerment and the creation of social movements; on the other, they can easily be used to spread xenophobic and hateful discourse, digital exclusion, and mass surveillance (Jenkins, 2020; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2022). This ambivalence demands a critical and proactive response.

In this global scenario, advancing digital literacy from a critical perspective is indispensable, one that pairs access to technology with an ethical, empathetic, and reflective understanding of how to use digital environments in a humane way. Achieving this requires public policies and legislation that guarantee responsible use of ICT and promote inclusive, safe, and healthy digital environments, especially for young people, who face the highest levels of exposure and vulnerability.

Such policies should go hand in hand with pedagogical strategies that build information skills, socioemotional skills, and the capacity for critical thinking, thereby redefining the individual's role in the network society (UNESCO, 2023).

Conclusions

The transformations of media in the digital age are a structural phenomenon that has reconfigured how symbolic content is produced, distributed, and consumed.

1. A new media ecology has emerged, characterized by interactivity, portability, and the convergence of formats, in which social networks and video streaming act as the new axes of contemporary socialization.

2. Communicative practices have moved beyond one-way transmission into digital environments that facilitate civic participation and collective empowerment, albeit within architectures of control that often go unseen.

3. Emerging challenges such as disinformation, technological dependence, and the erosion of privacy are not system failures but inherent features of the attention-based business model, and they call for urgent intervention from the standpoint of algorithmic ethics.

4. Digital literacy must evolve toward a critical approach that goes beyond the technical and fosters reflective thinking as a tool of autonomy for an informed citizenry.

5. Public policies and strategic alliances are needed to secure a more equitable and safe digital culture and, above all, one centered on human well-being in the face of the automation of social processes.

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