

# Politics, activism, and toxic behaviors online: a perspective from young people in Sergipe and Alagoas

*Política, militância e comportamentos tóxicos na rede: uma perspectiva dos jovens sergipanos e alagoanos*

*Política, activismo y comportamientos tóxicos en línea: una perspectiva de los jóvenes de Sergipe y Alagoas*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442024126en>

## Tatiana Güenaga Aneas

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5681-6215>

Universidade Federal de Sergipe, São Cristóvão, SE - Brasil

## Vitor José Braga Mota Gomes

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2377-9323>

Universidade Federal de Alagoas, Maceió, AL - Brasil

## Carina Luisa Ochi Flexor

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9597-8922>

Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, DF - Brasil

## Bianca Becker

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1175-7845>

Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, BA - Brasil

## ABSTRACT

This article investigates elements of the internet considered harmful by young people, with an emphasis on attitudes and content related to politics. To this end, it presents the results of a content analysis of semi-structured interviews with students from public schools in Aracaju-SE and Maceió-AL. A significant number of adolescents negatively mentioned issues related to political engagement on social media, particularly what they referred to as «toxic activism,» a category discussed in light of the contemporary debate on identity politics. This study contributes to the reflection on adolescent political engagement and proposes guidelines for education aimed at the safe and civic use of online platforms.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Adolescents; Toxic Behavior; Political Activism; Media Literacy.

## Introduction

In the early 21st century, social media platforms became a transformative force in adolescents' lives, significantly influencing their modes of self-expression and interaction. As noted by Turkle (2011), social media provides spaces for constructing identities and social connections, evolving— from Orkut's early days to the widespread use of Instagram, TikTok, and Discord— into an extension of adolescents' daily lives.

However, social media has also exposed adolescents to behaviors considered toxic and negative, potentially impacting their mental health and well-being (TWENGE, 2017). Enhancing adolescents' media literacy for risk prevention is crucial to help them navigate information and communication technology environments safely.

In this context, identity-focused agendas have gained prominence in discussions about inclusion, diversity, equality, and social justice, particularly on social media. These agendas address issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, and other identity facets, while conservative perspectives also find space for mobilization and visibility on these platforms.

Nevertheless, the discourse on social media is often marked by polarization, intolerance, and aggression, leading to dynamics some adolescents describe as «cancellation,» «beefing,» or «slaying,» which can deter their engagement in these discussions (LIVINGSTONE, 2017). The polarized nature of identity discussions can foster hate speech, intolerance, and harassment, creating a toxic environment on social media (MUNN, 2020).

This study investigates adolescents' perceptions of such behaviors, specifically those termed «toxic activism.» Through a content analysis of forty semi-structured interviews with public high school students in Alagoas and Sergipe, the study explores their views on toxic behaviors, whether experienced directly or observed in others.

We examine the empirical findings through theoretical frameworks from Media Literacy (SCOLARI, 2018; LIVINGSTONE, 2011), Psychology (SULER, 2003), Political Science and Communication (MOUNK, 2023;

LILLA, 2018; HABERMAS, 2023; GOMES, 2022; BOSCO, 2022; MISKOLCI, 2021). Results reveal a tendency among adolescents to withdraw from online debates associated with identity movements. These findings contribute to a broader research project<sup>1</sup> aimed at mapping transmedia competencies within the informal learning contexts of Brazilian youth.

### **On the Meanings of Online Toxic Behavior**

Efforts to define online toxic behavior must acknowledge it as a complex, evolving phenomenon that varies depending on the platform, interaction situation, and social context. Platforms such as X and Reddit are often classified as more toxic, a characterization supported by both the literature (MASSANARI, 2016; MUNN, 2020) and the empirical findings of this research. Despite their playful nature, online games are frequently identified as spaces where behaviors such as cheating, griefing<sup>2</sup>, and rage<sup>3</sup> emerge (KORDYAKA et al., 2020; KWAK et al., 2015). Events such as elections or crises encourage behaviors like the spread of fake news, intolerance, and hate speech (LEVITSKY; ZIBLATT, 2018; BENNETT; LIVINGSTON, 2020; CESARINO, 2019).

This phenomenon has diffuse boundaries, as overlapping behaviors are often observed. For example, critical comments about the appearance of users posting photos on social media may be interpreted as trolling when made by friends within certain discursive limits, but as offense or hate speech when containing discriminatory expressions. Despite the variety of terms and semantic ambiguities, conceptual distinctions are essential for analyzing specific incidents and understanding the phenomenon holistically to address it effectively. In line with Porter (2019, p. XIX):

First, we have to differentiate—distinguish the merely annoying but relatively harmless trolling, easily ignored, from more serious and systemic forms, such as group bullying, coordinated and sustained attacks, or organized efforts to promulgate fake news. [...] For many of these acts, the verb troll is too mild, too benevolent. Attack is more accurate.

It is essential to distinguish between toxic behavior—such as cheating, trolling, spamming, and griefing—and criminal behavior, such as harassment, doxxing, image appropriation, account hacking/theft, defamation, blackmail, and hate speech. Concrete situations are not always clear-cut, and what begins as playful may escalate into more serious issues, particularly for young people, whose ethical development and competencies in assessing risks and harms online are still in progress.

Due to its inherent characteristics, online communication tends to be more toxic and aggressive than face-to-face interactions (LAPIDOT-LEFLER; BARAK, 2012; WACHS; WRIGHT, 2018). Suler (2004) posits that this discrepancy arises from the «online toxic disinhibition effect,» which can lead individuals to be «rude, critical, angry, hateful, and threatening, or to visit spaces of perversion, crime, and violence—territories they would never explore in the «real world»» (SULER, 2004, p. 321). The author argues that such behaviors stem from anonymity and the absence of physical presence, suggesting that «some people view their online life as a kind of game with rules and norms that do not apply to everyday life» (SULER, 2004, p. 322).

While acknowledging the importance of fostering social-interactional skills grounded in principles and values, this perspective highlights that the specificity of online interactions requires a distinct ethical framework to guide socially acceptable behaviors. Thus, an effective media education program oriented toward ethics must take these particularities into account.

### **Digital Ethics and Education for Responsible Network Use**

With an understanding of toxic online behaviors established, it is pertinent to discuss literacy concepts, focusing on their role in developing ethical awareness for online life. Following Scolari (2016), this approach recognizes that young people informally acquire skills and competencies to deal with digital challenges. Unlike traditional media education, which assumes that young people need to be taught to critically interpret media content - a top-down approach - the notion of transmedia literacy reverses this relationship, acknowledging pre-existing knowledge and skills independent of any formal media education program. It is believed that only by engaging

1 Transmedia Literacy, Communication Practices and Brazilian Realities, an investigation carried out by the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices, which involves the Federal University of Sergipe, the Federal University of Alagoas, the Federal University of Bahia, the University of Brasilia and the State University of Goiás.

2 A typical practice in online games, which consists of deliberately disrupting a match.

3 Expressions of anger over performance in online games that may include offenses against other players.

with young people's realities can effective educational strategies be developed, taking into account the participatory, decentralized, transmedia culture in which they are immersed.

This does not imply an absence of gaps or disparities in the development of media competencies, particularly in recognizing, assessing, reflecting on, and responding to ethical and safety dilemmas online. Scolari et al. (2018) conclude that competencies in content production and curation are more advanced than those related to ideology, ethics, and risk prevention, which are essential for safe and healthy online engagement.

The development of these capabilities is inseparable from the sociotechnical context in which young people live. Competencies emerge from daily demands but are also «socially regulated, encompassing what is valued as normative and what is disapproved of or seen as transgressive» (LIVINGSTONE, 2011, p. 21). Thus, learning in an insecure and toxic internet environment may lead young people either to recognize and protect themselves, or to normalize, disregard, or even participate in unethical or violent situations.

## Methodology

Our findings are part of a broader, ongoing project titled «Transmedia Literacy, Communicational Practices, and Brazilian Realities»<sup>4</sup>, conducted by the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices. During the field research, conducted thus far with high school students from public schools in Sergipe and Alagoas<sup>5</sup>, various data collection instruments were used. A total of 242 questionnaires were distributed to gather sociodemographic information and understand adolescents' media usage. We conducted four workshops - two on Participatory Culture and two on Gaming - aimed at observing how young people engage with digital media. Forty semi-structured interviews were also conducted, covering topics such as social media use, video games, and content creation<sup>6</sup>. This article utilizes only the interview data, as this instrument allowed students to more freely express their concerns and dissatisfaction with online experiences.

We systematically organized the data using software and categorized through content analysis (BARDIN, 2012). Responses to the question “What bothers you on the internet?” were analyzed inductively, with in-depth exploration of themes based on respondents' answers. We identified patterns and built categories from the data under analysis<sup>7</sup> (AMADO, 2018)

## Results

After organizing the dataset about what adolescents consider toxic, negative, or bothersome online, the mentions were categorized based on behavior types. Then we grouped data into four categories. Table 1 provides a summary of the behaviors mentioned within each category.

**TABLE 1** - Macro categories of toxic behaviors on the internet.

POLITICAL ISSUES	HATE SPEECH	SECURITY AND PRIVACY	GAMES
Fake news	Negative comments about your content	Fake profiles	Trolling / Belittling
Activism	Negative comments about third-party content	Strangers asking to follow	Gamers who don't help / Exclude beginners
Slaying	Bullying	Strangers sending messages	Insults / Name-calling
Cancel culture	Irresponsible comments	Sending adult content	Griefing
Beefing	Criticisms / Judgments	Image exposure by thrd parties	
	Toxicity on X (formerly Twitter) and on Reddit	Stalking	
	Comparisons with other people		

Source: authors.

4 This study was conducted with financial support from the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development – Brazil (CNPq), through the CNPq/MCTI/FNDCT Call No. 18/2021 - Track A - Emerging Groups; and from the Foundation for Research Support and Technological Innovation of the State of Sergipe, through the FAPITEC/SE/SEDUC/02/2020 Call.

5 Barão de Mauá State School (Aracaju, 2022), and Princesa Isabel State School (Maceió, 2023).

6 Politics, activism, and toxic behaviors online:

a perspective from young people in Sergipe and Alagoas The project follows ethical guidelines and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee in July 2021, with registration number 50091721.9.0000.5540.

7 All supporting data for the results of this study has been made available in the Institutional Repository of the Federal University of Sergipe and can be accessed at <https://ri.ufs.br/handle/riufs/19883>

This article focuses specifically on issues related to politics. Within this category, two sets of reports stand out regarding what bothers adolescents: one involving behaviors they associate with «activism,» including cancel culture, “beefing,” and “slaying”; and another relating to the spread of fake news.

It is notable that the first set of data is more prevalent, with eleven mentions, while fake news were cited only three times. While acknowledging the results that few young people mention fake news as a concern, the analysis prioritizes data related to «toxic activism.» This focus is justified not only by its prevalence but also because it represents a specific phenomenon that has been minimally explored in previous empirical research, whereas misinformation has been widely studied. Finally, it is worth noting that there were no mentions of political discussion as something positive or of interest to the respondents.

## Toxic activism

Although this analysis is not intended to be statistically representative, it is noteworthy that more than a quarter of the respondents identify «activism» as an element of toxicity on platforms, particularly on the social media platform X, a point previously highlighted by Papacharissi (2015) and Jakob *et al.* (2023). What adolescents perceive as activism is primarily the practice of users who employ digital media to advocate for ideological values linked to minorities, referencing practices such as cancel culture (NORRIS, 2023) and call-out culture (ROSS, 2019). There are also references to activism related to conservative agendas. In both cases, the youths perceive militants as acting in an aggressive, intolerant, and/or disproportionate manner, with the intent to exclude people from the debate (cancellation) and/or to garner attention for themselves (slaying).

Like, there's a lot of toxic people on Twitter. People who want approval from others by stating the obvious. Like, people who say «Oh, I'm against homophobia because it's wrong, because it shouldn't happen,» but that's obvious—it's wrong, it shouldn't happen. They say it just to get approval from others. They want likes... what really drives the internet is the like. (Interviewee 18, male, Alagoas).

Some young people associate activism with a culture that promotes moralizing surveillance and unproductive problematization (OTT, 2017), which, at its extreme, is a disincentive to political participation online. One respondent, who mentions having been involved in this kind of behavior, explains that they no longer see any value in participating in online debates.

I've done a lot of activism, beefing... I learned after a while that it doesn't matter if you share your opinion online, people will always find a way to make it a problem. So, it doesn't really matter what people think of me, they don't know me personally. (Interviewee 08, male, Alagoas)

Although it is a native terminology, Carreiro and colleagues (2020) make an effort to conceptualize the category «beefing,» linking it to the notion of controversy, in which «actors who do not necessarily belong to the formal political ecosystem, but who interact with it in episodes that gain prominence through disagreements and mutual provocations» participate (CARREIRO; CHAGAS; MAGALHÃES; JING, 2020, p. 69). The testimonies collected in our research suggest that, in the perception of young people, these disagreements tend to be unproductive or futile.

Others assess that the actions of online activists are disproportionate and unjust. One of the interviewees provided an example with the case of a YouTuber who produced videos about the game *Hogwarts Legacy* and began to be targeted with insults following the transphobic statements made by the books' author, J.K. Rowling. Due to the cancel culture campaign, which included xenophobic attacks, the influencer ended up deleting her channel. A young gamer recounted the case of a battle game featuring among the characters basketball player LeBron James and Velma (from *Scooby-Doo*), where the latter has the ability to call a police car to take the opponent out of the match.

But the Twitter activism went crazy when they realized a white character was calling the police to arrest a Black person, to the point where the developers changed the game. I don't think that's racism, it's an exaggeration, people are just trying to slay. (Interviewee 7, male, Sergipe)

As a native category, “slaying» can be understood as a discursive strategy primarily aimed at garnering social capital for its authors, within the logic of the attention economy that characterizes digital social networks, rather than contributing to the debate or even to the cause being defended. According to Miguel and Fontenelle (2023,

n.p.), “these are contents that require little from an audience already predisposed favorably, generate immediate engagement, and convey the idea that there is nothing more to debate on that subject”.

Another adolescent mentions that some individuals may make exaggerated judgments based on mistakes made in the past, particularly by public figures.

Like, <oh, on Twitter they want to cancel everyone.> It could be some super famous guy, and he made a little mistake a few years ago, then out of nowhere Twitter digs it up and wants to cancel him, wants to ruin his life. Like, it’s horrible, it’s annoying, it’s toxic, it’s terrible (Interviewee 5, male, Alagoas)

What young people describe are networked publics driven by a flow of affects (PAPACHARISSI, 2015), guided by an identity politics that operates within a narrow normative framework and finds fertile ground for its action strategies on digital platforms, whose characteristics do not favor careful reflection or civilized deliberation. Referring to the impact of the legal dispute between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard on the internet, one of the informants labels such practices as <drama,> describing it as something that makes the network more toxic - consistent with what Lewis and Christin (2022) term «platform drama”, when analyzing practices of holding celebrities accountable that unfold on YouTube.

The cases described mostly refer to progressive agendas, but conservative activism is also classified as toxic. One informant provided an example of a case in which a teenager was being insulted for having had an abortion, demonstrating critical competence to realize that the discussion had become polarized and could affect others, including a peer who, according to her account, had also had an abortion and was deeply disturbed by the debate.

The legalization of abortion isn’t about whether someone gets an abortion or not, it’s about safety when having an abortion. I’m not gonna say I’m for or against it, but we need to look at the social and political side, which is about safety, you know? [...] So when you say something like, <oh, you didn’t use a condom, you’re trying to kill a life,> we’re forgetting something important and just pointing fingers, and that’s wrong, right? [...] So it’s not just because everyone’s posting it that it’s the right thing to post, you know? Just because everyone’s saying it doesn’t mean it’s the right thing to say.(Interviewee 05, female, Sergipe)

Finally, activism is associated with attitudes of intolerance and aggression:

I express my opinion, but I don’t attack. I try not to say things that might offend others, you know? For example, I’m Christian, and I was taught that LGBTQIA+ isn’t right, and I don’t agree with that, I don’t want it for myself. But just because of that, I’m not gonna go on social media attacking people saying it’s wrong. I don’t support it, but I do respect it. (Interviewee 14, male, Alagoas)

In this case, the young person presents a clear ideological stance, asserting that they do not use this position to judge or attack others’ actions, demonstrating ethical competence and civil skills. At the same time, they express discomfort with the <division> of opinions on the network, referring to the ideological polarization that characterizes online public debates, which frequently take a binary form (us vs. them, good vs. evil).

The perceptions of these adolescents align with what Mounk (2023) observes, who conceptualizes «identity synthesis” as a political and intellectual movement emerging in the 2010s, primarily concerned with the role of identity categories such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. According to the author, although its adherents fight against real injustices, the effects of their actions have been counterproductive, as they encourage disintegration and hatred of the <other.> By «putting ethnic or cultural identities on a pedestal, they encourage their supporters to value their group above the rights of others or universal human solidarity claims” (MOUNK, 2023, n.p.).

Bosco argues that digital networks, imbued by a logic of tribalization and identity radicalization, makes the public debate to lose as its «primary directive the pursuit of the most accurate interpretation of reality, regardless of who it may hurt, but rather sectarian automatism, laziness that avoids scrutiny, or the attack on a predefined political, ideological, or partisan adversary» (BOSCO, 2022, p. 49).

In an effort to characterize contemporary identity politics, Gomes (2022) argues that «permanent bellicosity” is one of the premises of these movements and that friction, tension, and stirred-up conflict are fundamental to their nature. The author contends that digital networks are the battlefield of those who «were supposed to be communities of moral superiority for oppressed groups, but have become, in recent decades, communities of hate and punishment

for oppressive groups” (GOMES, 2022, p. 82), adopting lynching tactics as a means to practice the «authorized exercise of hate” (Ibid., p. 87).

Quantitative data from the Intelligence in Research and Strategic Consulting Institute (IPEC) support the findings presented. A 2021 survey showed that 83% of Brazilian youth consider political discussions on networks to be aggressive and intolerant. Due to fear of being canceled, 59% refrain from participating in such conversations online. In contrast, the 2022 TIC Domicílios survey indicated that, among individuals aged 16 to 24, 97.9% claim to use the internet (almost) every day. Young people are online but do not see it as a space for debating political issues or social agendas.

The reports suggest that some young people identify this type of activism as a set of inappropriate and even unethical behaviors, making the digital environment more hostile. As a strategy for self-protection, they claim to avoid such situations, which signals two important consequences - one for the adolescents themselves and another for society at large.

As described by Noelle-Neumann (1977), regarding the spiral of silence theory, young people tend to alienate themselves from the debate in a process of self-censorship, for fear of being attacked or entering into conflict with others. As a result, they miss out on the potential of the digital environment to develop ethical competencies and deliberative skills fundamental for citizenship, such as expressing opinions with clarity and civility, evaluating arguments, and revising or reaffirming their position based on exposure to opposing ideas and participation in the public sphere.

Once self-excluded, these young people tend to disengage from political life, either because they consider the debate toxic and harmful or because they have not developed the necessary skills to participate politically. This results in a segment of society that tends to distrust the political system, which, in the long term, contributes to the weakening of democracy (RUNCIMAN, 2018; PRZEWORSKI, 2018). Lilla (2018) highlights how the U.S. left has failed to counter the rise of the radical right, in part, by abandoning a citizenship project focused on the pursuit of the common good and becoming lost in identity politics. The author argues that social media plays a role in this process by encouraging people to close themselves off in their identities.

It is a fact that individuals from minority groups face silencing through hate campaigns, and this phenomenon is perceived by the interviewees as equally problematic. However, it is worth considering whether the resistance tactics against inequalities adopted by some social movements online truly achieve effectiveness in terms of social justice, or if their main effect is to segregate users into increasingly insular tribes and alienate allies for causes whose struggles implicate society as a whole. As one interviewee stated:

Because nowadays you can't have a different opinion from others. For them, equality is basically about separating someone by their color, their race, their sexuality, and by who they're not. (Interviewee 8, male, Alagoas)

In this regard, Miskolci (2021) offers an analysis of this context in Brazil, considering the emergence of «moral entrepreneurship» movements, such as, on the one hand, activists against «gender ideology,» and, on the other, the «entrepreneurs of self in identity politics» (p. 27), operating on digital social networks, which have transformed into a «market of recognition in the technical-mediated public sphere» (p. 73). This represents «an essentialist politics grounded in identity, an authoritarian simulacrum of difference, and a questionable expression of legitimate demands for recognition and equality» (MISKOLCI, 2021, p. 72).

This trend toward differentiation based on identities is also present in the more recent reflection of Habermas (2023), who points to the formation of «semi-public spheres,» which emerge and proliferate from user interactions within platforms, but with implications that extend beyond their boundaries.

To the extent that this leads to the formation of self-sustaining echo chambers, these bubbles share with the classical form of publicness their porousness to further networking; at the same time, however, they differ from the fundamentally inclusive character of the public sphere – and from the corresponding contrast to the private – in their resistance to dissonant and their assimilating inclusion of consonant voices into their own limited, identity-preserving horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, ‘knowledge’ (HABERMAS, 2023, p. 83).

Habermas is particularly concerned with the phenomenon of the «post-truth democracy,» characterized by the degeneration of the public sphere once mediated by professional journalism, the crisis of trust regarding the press and the political system, and the spread of fake news in a deregulated informational environment driven by economic

interests. The fragmentation of the public sphere described by the author is exemplified, however, in the discomforts expressed by the interviewees based on their experiences with “communication circuits that dogmatically seal themselves off from each other” (HABERMAS, 2023, p. 62).

### Paths for Citizen Education

In light of the discussions achieved, it is important to point out potential strategies for the development of ethical competencies for online political life. With regard to discussions on identity issues and activism, young people generally consider them aggressive and unproductive, even when they acknowledge adopting such practices themselves. Hasty judgments, offenses, attacks, and the search for approval are evaluated as toxic behaviors, indicating a perception of online public debate as an environment permeated by irrationality and conflict.

While the activism portrayed by the young people uses social media to adopt accountability tactics - such as call-outs, exposure, and cancel culture - reflecting on these practices may serve as a productive strategy to encourage adolescents to consider their own actions. Pointing out injustices and demanding accountability, especially from public figures and political agents, is a legitimate practice. However, those who engage in such actions also have duties of civility, meaning that offenses to honor, harassment, and the exposure of personal information are unacceptable, even with the justification of fighting inequities. If approached pedagogically, such situations can be useful in stimulating adolescents to reflect on their civil responsibility regarding their own discourse and actions online.

Despite the playful nature of experiences on the internet, a media education program oriented toward ethics must include strategies that encourage young people to associate online and offline behaviors, especially given that, in the context of hyperconnectivity, this division makes little sense. It is necessary to construct a sense of freedom of expression that incorporates values of responsibility toward others and respect for democratic principles.

Additionally, the speed that characterizes social networks is not conducive to delayed judgment, a critical skill indispensable for civic engagement. Debates online should not reflect “an “idealistic conception of the democratic process as something like a convivial university seminar” (HABERMAS, 2023, p. 31), but rather strive for the willingness to «learn from one another through mutual critique» (ibid.), rather than encouraging entrenchment in beliefs and values of any nature.

Furthermore, one must consider the importance of emotions in generating engagement, which is necessary for participation in public debate online. Scholars who have dedicated themselves to understand youth political participation have advocated for a perspective that includes conflict and emotions as elements in the process of political education aimed at developing deliberative capacities. Lo (2017) proposes a model based on agonistic democracy (MOUFFE, 2006) that seeks to direct conflict not necessarily toward the search for consensus or compromise solutions, but toward productive forms of negotiation and political action. Keegan (2021) suggests a «critical affective literacy,» oriented toward improving emotional identification and modulation skills in situations of conflict, as a means of addressing other necessary competencies for participating in public debate, beyond traditional criteria of equality, civility, and reasonableness. A study conducted with U.S. youth showed that participants «desire calm and civilized discourse but admit to getting bored with discussions that lack passion» (PEACOCK; LEAVITT, 2016, p. 8), which highlights the need to consider the affective and contentious dimensions of these experiences.

It is, therefore, not a matter of advocating for an education model that seeks to form ascetic individuals, devoid of any emotional investment in political life, but rather of mediating emotions based on ethical criteria. The goal is to develop socio-emotional competencies that foster the recognition of otherness, such as empathy, tolerance, collaboration, and solidarity, particularly in a sociocultural context that emphasizes competition and individualism, and in a polarized political environment that encourages sectarianism. If engaging with difference is already a costly - but necessary - exercise in face-to-face interactions, education for online ethics requires a radical defense of civility, even in the possibility of anonymity, despite the physical distance that separates individuals, even in situations of hostility

### Conclusion

This article analyzed aspects of the internet considered toxic by adolescents, focusing on behaviors and content related to politics, and yielding results that point to spontaneous mentions of topics related to online activism.

The results, however, may be influenced by the sample's composition in terms of location, as well as gender, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic background. A more diverse sample, considering other contexts, could provide additional results. Future studies may explore whether exposure to these toxic contents affects young people's

political attitudes and whether it impacts civic participation and political opinions. It should be noted that the data collection method - semi-structured interviews - carries some risk of bias and is limited to the participants' accounts.

Although this research is concerned with understanding how young people perceive and deal with toxic behaviors, the platform companies play a crucial role in creating a healthier and more democratic digital environment. Various authors have critiqued the role of technology companies in the context of a platformized society (POELL ET AL., 2020; ZUBOFF, 2020; MOROZOV, 2018). The reflection presented in this article is based on the premise that any effort to provide media education for ethical use of the internet becomes a futile endeavor if the environments in which young people are immersed are not designed to foster civility.

The discussion of the limits and potential harms of identity politics to the struggle for recognition and rights is not settled and is present in the broader public debate. Campos (2024) has argued that criticism of identity politics exaggerates by comparing left-wing and right-wing identity politics, as a feminist or racial hegemony is far from being established, while the recent political history of the country clearly demonstrates the power of the far-right not only to impose itself symbolically but also to occupy institutional spaces.

Finally, aware that toxic activism and other harmful behaviors affecting young people online are multifactorial, it is necessary to avoid falling into «educational solutionism» (MCDUGALL *et al.*, 2019), understanding that the issue has social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. However, it is argued that, especially when it comes to individuals in formation, investigating strategies to mitigate risks in online experiences and promoting media education interventions aimed at ethics and citizenship are key pillars in an agenda oriented toward a more democratic, just, and humane internet.

## References

- AMADO, João Costa. **Análise de conteúdo suportada por software**. 2ª ed. Lisboa: Ludomedia, 2018. 60 p.
- BARDIN, Laurence. **Análise de conteúdo**. São Paulo: Edições 70, 2011. 230 p.
- BENNETT, Lance; LIVINGSTON, Steven (orgs.). **The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States**. Nova York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 324 p. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628>. Disponível em: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/disinformation-age/1F4751119C7C4693E514C249E0F0F997>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- CAMPOS, Luiz Augusto. Reduzir lutas por direitos humanos básicos a identitarismo é perigoso. **Folha de São Paulo** (online). 27 Jul. 2024. Disponível em: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrissima/2024/07/reduzir-lutas-por-direitos-humanos-basicos-a-identitarismo-e-perigoso.shtml>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- CARREIRO, Rodrigo; CHAGAS, Viktor; MAGALHÃES, Dandara; JING, Tsai Yi. As tretas políticas no Brasil e a repercussão em rede: proposta metodológica para captura e análise de discussão política online. **Comunicação & Inovação**, v. 21, n. 46, 2020. ISSN: 2178-0145. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13037/ci.vol21n46.6362>. Disponível em: [https://www.seer.uscs.edu.br/index.php/revista\\_comunicacao\\_inovacao/article/view/6362/3076](https://www.seer.uscs.edu.br/index.php/revista_comunicacao_inovacao/article/view/6362/3076). Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- CESARINO, L. Como vencer uma eleição sem sair de casa: a ascensão do populismo digital no Brasil. **Internet & Sociedade**, v. 1, n. 1, p. 92-120, 2019. Disponível em: <https://revista.internetlab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Como-vencer-uma-eleic%C3%A7%C3%A3o-sem-sair-de-casa.pdf>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- CETIC.br. **TIC Domicílios 2022**. Disponível em: [https://data.cetic.br/explore/?pesquisa\\_id=1&unidade=Usu%C3%A1rios](https://data.cetic.br/explore/?pesquisa_id=1&unidade=Usu%C3%A1rios). Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- GOMES, Wilson. Caminhos e descaminhos da política de identidade hoje: origem, ideologia e estratégias. In: RISÉRIO, Antônio (org.). **A crise da política identitária**. Rio de Janeiro: Topbooks Editora, 2022. 561 p.
- HABERMAS, Jürgen. **A new structural transformation of the public sphere and deliberative politics**. Trad.: Ciaran Cronin. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2023
- IPEC Inteligência. **Pesquisa Avaaz/Fundação Tide Setubal sobre Democracia e Eleições 2021**. Disponível em: <https://www.ipec-inteligencia.com.br/pesquisa>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- KEEGAN, Patrick. Critical affective civic literacy: A framework for attending to political emotion in the social studies classroom. **The Journal of Social Studies Research**, v. 45, p. 15-24, 2021. ISSN: 23522798. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2020.06.003>. Disponível em: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0885985X20300310>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2020.06.003>
- KORDYAKA, Bastian; JAHN, Katharina; NIEHAVES, Bjoern. Towards a unified theory of toxic behavior in video games. **Internet Research**, v. 30, n. 4, p. 1081-1102, 2020. ISSN: 1066-2243. Disponível em: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/intr-08-2019-0343/full/html>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.



- KWAK, Haewoon; BLACKBURN, Jeremy; HAN, Seungyeop. Exploring cyberbullying and other toxic behavior in team competition online games. In: **Proceedings of the 33rd annual ACM conference on human factors in computing systems**. 2015. p. 3739-3748. ISBN:978-1-4503-3145-6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702529>. Disponível em: <https://dl.acm.org/doi/proceedings/10.1145/2702123>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- LAPIDOT-LEFLER, Noam; BARAK, Azy. Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. **Computers in human behavior**, v. 28, n. 2, p. 434-443, 2012. ISSN: 0747-5632. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.10.014>. Disponível em: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563211002317>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- LEVITSKY, Steven; ZIBLATT, Daniel. **Como as democracias morrem**. Trad.: Renato Aguiar. 1.a ed. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2018. 270 p.
- LEWIS, Rebecca; CHRISTIN, Angèle. Platform drama: Cancel culture, celebrity, and the struggle for accountability on YouTube. **New Media & Society**, v. 24, n. 7, p. 1632-1656, 2022. ISSN: 1461-7315. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221099235>. Disponível em: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448221099235>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- LILLA, Mark. **O progressista de ontem e o do amanhã**. Desafios da democracia liberal no mundo pós-políticas identitárias. Trad.: Berilo Vargas. 1a. ed. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2018. 115 p.
- LIVINGSTONE, Sonia; NANDI, Anulekha; BANAJI, Shakuntala; STOILOVA, Mariya. *Young adolescents and digital media: uses, risks and opportunities in low-and middle-income countries: a rapid evidence review*. Report. Gage, 2017. Disponível em: [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83753/1/Livingstone\\_Young\\_Adolescents\\_Digital\\_Media.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83753/1/Livingstone_Young_Adolescents_Digital_Media.pdf). Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- LIVINGSTONE, Sonia. Internet literacy: a negociação dos jovens com as novas oportunidades on-line. **MATRIZES**, v. 4, n. 2, p. 11-42, 2011. ISSN: 1982-2073. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v4i2p11-42>. Disponível em: <https://revistas.usp.br/matrizes/article/view/38290>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- LO, Jane C. Empowering Young People through Conflict and Conciliation: Attending to the Political and Agonism in Democratic Education. **Democracy & Education**, v. 25, n. 1, 2017. ISSN: 2164-7992. Disponível em: <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol25/iss1/2/>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- MASSANARI, Adrienne. #Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. **New media & society**, v. 19, n. 3, p. 329-346, 2017. ISSN: 1461-4448. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807>. Disponível em: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444815608807>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- MCDOUGALL, Julian; BRITES, Maria-José; COUTO, Maria-João; LUCAS, Catarina. Digital literacy, fake news and education. **Cultura y Educación**, v. 31, n. 2, p. 203-212, 2019. ISSN: 1135-6405. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11356405.2019.1603632>. Disponível em: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/11356405.2019.1603632>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- MIGUEL, Luis Felipe; FONTENELLE, Alana. Laceração ou formação: modos do discurso político no Instagram. In: 10ª Edição do Congresso da Associação Brasileira de Pesquisadores em Comunicação e Política, Universidade Federal do Ceará. **Anais [...]**. Fortaleza, 2023. ISSN: 2447 – 4797. Disponível em: <http://compolitica.org/novo/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/GT-07-paper-Lacracao-redux-Luis-Felipe-Miguel.pdf>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- MISKOLCI, Richard. **Batalhas morais**. Política identitária na esfera pública técnico-midiatizada. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2021. 110 p.
- MOROZOV, E. Big tech. **A ascensão dos dados e a morte da política**. Trad.: Cláudio Marcondes. 1a. ed. São Paulo: Editora Ubu, 2018. 192 p.
- MOUFFE, Chantal. Por um modelo agonístico de democracia. **Rev. Sociol. Polít.**, v. 25, p. 165-175, 2006. ISSN: 1678-9873. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-44782005000200003>. Disponível em: <https://www.scielo.br/j/rsocp/a/k5cVrT5zZcDBcYpDCTxTmPc/?format=pdf&lang=pt>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- MOUNK, Yascha. **The identity trap**: A story of ideas and power in our time. Nova Iorque: Penguin Press New York, 2023. s. p.
- NORRIS, Pippa. Cancel culture: Myth or reality?. **Political studies**, v. 71, n. 1, p. 145-174, 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211037023>. ISSN: 1467-9248. Disponível em: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00323217211037023>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.
- PEACOCK, Cynthia; LEAVITT, Engaging Young People: Deliberative Preferences in Discussions About News and Politics. **Social Media + Society**. January-March 2016, p. 1–11, 2016. ISSN: 2056-3051. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116637096>. Disponível em: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305116637096>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

POELL, Thomas, NIEBORG, David, VAN DIJCK, José. Plataformização. **Fronteiras**. v. 22. n. 1. 2020. ISSN: 1984-8226. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4013/fem.2020.221.01>. Disponível em: <http://www.revistas.unisinos.br/index.php/fronteiras/article/view/fem.2020.221.01>. Acesso em: 04 nov. 2023.

PRZEWORSKI, Adam. **Crises da democracia**. Trad.: Berilo Vargas. 1a. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2018. 268 p.

RUNCIMAN, David. **Como a democracia chega ao fim**. Trad.: Sérgio Flaskman. 1a. ed. São Paulo: Editora Todavia, 2018. 267 p.

OTT, Brian L. The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement. **Critical studies in media communication**, v. 34, n. 1, p. 59-68, 2017. ISSN: 1479-5809. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1266686>. Disponível em: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15295036.2016.1266686>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

ROSS, Loretta. I'm a black feminist. I think call-out culture is toxic. **The New York Times (online)**, 17 ago. 2019. Disponível em: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

SCOLARI, Carlos Alberto. Alfabetismo transmedia: estratégias de aprendizagem informal y competencias mediáticas en la nueva ecología de la comunicación. **Telos: Revista de pensamiento sobre Comunicación, Tecnología y Sociedad**. Fev/Mai. 2016. ISSN: 0213-084X. Disponível em: [https://moodle4vz.unsl.edu.ar/moodle/pluginfile.php/33020/mod\\_resource/content/1/Scolari\\_Telos\\_educacion%20informal%20y%20transmedia.pdf](https://moodle4vz.unsl.edu.ar/moodle/pluginfile.php/33020/mod_resource/content/1/Scolari_Telos_educacion%20informal%20y%20transmedia.pdf). Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

SCOLARI, Carlos A.; MASANET, Maria-José; GUERRERO-PICO, Mar; ESTABLÉS, María-José Transmedia literacy in the new media ecology: Teens' transmedia skills and informal learning strategies. . *El profesional de la información*, v. 27, n. 4, pp. 801-812. 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2018.jul.09>. ISSN: 1699-2407 Disponível em: [http://transmedialiteracy.upf.edu/sites/default/files/files/TL\\_whit\\_en.pdf](http://transmedialiteracy.upf.edu/sites/default/files/files/TL_whit_en.pdf). Acesso em: 15 nov. 2023.

SULER, John. The online disinhibition effect. **Cyberpsychology & Behaviour**, v. 7, n. 3, p. 321-326, 2004. ISSN: 2152-2723. DOI: 10.1089/1094931041291295. Disponível em: [https://johnsuler.com/article\\_pdfs/online\\_dis\\_effect.pdf](https://johnsuler.com/article_pdfs/online_dis_effect.pdf). Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

WACHS, Sebastian; WRIGHT, Michelle F. Associations between bystanders and perpetrators of online hate: The moderating role of toxic online disinhibition. **International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health**, v. 15, n. 9, 2018. ISSN: 1660-4601. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15092030>. Disponível em: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/15/9/2030>. Acesso em: 10 nov. 2024.

ZUBOFF, Shoshana. **A era do capitalismo de vigilância**. A luta por um futuro humano na nova fronteira do poder. Trad.: George Schlesinger. 1a. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca, 2020. 798 p.

## About the authors

**Tatiana Güenaga Aneas**  
*tatianeas@academico.ufs.br*

Professor at the Department of Social Communication and the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Sergipe. PhD in Communication and Contemporary Culture (Federal University of Bahia). Postdoctoral researcher at the National Institute of Science and Technology in Digital Democracy (INCTDD). Member of the Research Group on Visuality, Narrative, and Technology Analysis Laboratory (Lavint and the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices. Coordinator of the Academic League of Representation and Political Participation (LARPP/UFS).

**Vitor José Braga Mota Gomes**  
*vitor.braga@ichca.ufal.br*

Professor with a PhD in the Journalism Program at the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL) and the Postgraduate Program in Communication at the Federal University of Sergipe (PPGCOM-UFS). Conducts research in the field of communication and digital culture, focusing on interaction processes in social media. Member of the Research Group on Interactions, Digital Technologies, and Society; the Laboratory of Studies in Technology and Society; and the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices.

**Carina Luisa Ochi Flexor**  
*carina.flexor@fac.unb.br*

Professor at the Faculty of Communication, the Graduate Program in Communication (PPGCOM), and the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts (PPGAV) at the University of Brasília (UnB). PhD in Art and Visual Culture from the Federal University of Goiás (UFG). Member of the MediaLab Research Group – Group for Research, Development, and Innovation in Interactive Media, the MediaLab – Laboratory for Research in Computational Art, and the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices.

**Bianca Becker**  
*biancabecker@ufba.br*

Psychologist. PhD in Psychology. Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Education (FACED) at the Federal University of Bahia. Leader of the Study and Research Group on Developmental Processes, Education, and Contemporary Cultures (PRODECC). Researcher with the “Education, Sociotechnical Networks, and Digital Cultures” (EDUTECC) group and the Play and Cultural Contexts Research Group. Member of the “Toy, Learning, and Health” Working Group of the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Psychology (ANPEPP) and the Research Network on Media Narratives and Social Practices.

Received on: 04/18/2024  
Accepted on: 11/12/2024

Responsible editors:  
Marialva Barbosa and Sonia Virgínia Moreira



This article is published in Open Access under the **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY)**. The authors retain all copyrights, transferring to Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação the right to carry out the original publication and keep it updated