



Digital Citizenship: Democracy in the Digital Age



Introduction

In the 21st century, democracy no longer lives only in parliaments, voting booths, or public squares, it also thrives, or struggles, in digital spaces. The rise of social media, instant communication, and online platforms has transformed the way citizens participate in democratic life. From signing petitions to organising protests, from fact-checking politicians to engaging in public discourse, digital tools empower individuals to influence policies and hold institutions accountable like never before.

However, the same tools that facilitate civic engagement also pose serious risks. Disinformation spreads faster than truth. Hate speech, echo chambers, and algorithmic manipulation threaten informed debate. At the same time, a growing **digital divide** (between those who can access and use digital tools and those who cannot) puts democratic participation at risk for many young Europeans.

Digital citizenship is about more than just using the internet. It involves understanding one's rights and responsibilities in the digital world, being able to critically evaluate information, communicate respectfully, protect privacy, and engage ethically in digital democratic spaces. It also means understanding how the digital realm shapes democratic processes, through e-voting, digital campaigning, and civic tech tools.

The European Union recognises the importance of equipping young people with these competencies. Through its **Digital Education Action Plan**, **Code of Practice on Disinformation**, and **Digital Services Act**, the EU is actively working to build a safer, more transparent, and more democratic digital environment.

Understanding digital citizenship is crucial for young people, not only because they are the most active digital users, but because they are tomorrow's



leaders, voters, and decision-makers. If democracy is to survive and thrive in the digital age, it needs informed, skilled, and responsible digital citizens.



Key concepts and definitions

- ◆ **Digital citizenship:** The ability to use digital technology effectively, ethically, and responsibly to participate in society, including civic and democratic life.
- ◆ **Media literacy:** The capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. It is key to recognising misinformation and building critical thinking.
- ◆ **Disinformation vs. misinformation:** Misinformation is false or inaccurate information shared without harmful intent; Disinformation is deliberately deceptive information, often used to influence public opinion or undermine trust in institutions.
- ◆ **Online civic engagement:** Participation in democratic processes through digital means, including online petitions, social media activism, e-consultations, and digital voting platforms.
- ◆ **Digital rights:** Fundamental rights applied to the digital world, such as data privacy, freedom of expression online, and protection from online harassment.



Real-world examples

- ◆ The **#EUvsDisinfo Campaign:** Initiated by the European External Action Service, this project counters pro-Kremlin disinformation through evidence-based analysis and awareness-raising.
- ◆ The **Better Internet for Kids Initiative:** Provides resources for educators, children, and families to safely navigate digital spaces and become informed digital citizens.
- ◆ eParticipation Projects: EU-funded youth projects like **DIGY – Digital Youth Participation Made Easy** and **YOU(th)NET: YOUTH iN an European Think**



Tank – Empowering Young People Through Digital Democracy equip young people with tools to influence policymaking through digital means.

- ◆ European Parliament Election Campaigns: Many campaigns now integrate social media outreach, live-streamed debates, and voter education videos aimed at young audiences.
- ◆ Fact-checking Platforms: EU supports platforms like **EU Fact Check**, **EDMO** (European Digital Media Observatory), and partnerships with civil society actors promoting critical media analysis.



Data and statistics

- ◆ **90% of young Europeans** (aged 16–29) use the internet daily, yet **only 48% feel confident** identifying disinformation (Eurobarometer, 2022).
- ◆ In the 2019 European Parliament elections, **61% of youth** (18–24) used the internet as their main source of political information (European Parliament Youth Survey).
- ◆ According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), **around 44% of Europeans lack basic digital skills**, with significant disparities across regions.
- ◆ The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation has led to the removal of millions of **misleading ads and posts**, yet new threats such as deepfakes are growing concerns (European Commission Report, 2023).



Challenges and controversies

- ◆ **Digital divide:** Not all young people have equal access to digital tools or education, particularly in rural or economically disadvantaged areas.
- ◆ **Algorithmic bias and echo chambers:** Online platforms often reinforce users' existing views, limiting exposure to diverse opinions and undermining democratic discourse.
- ◆ **Disinformation campaigns:** Foreign and domestic actors continue to spread false narratives to manipulate public opinion and destabilise democratic institutions.



- ◆ **Privacy vs. surveillance:** While combating online threats, governments and companies often walk a fine line between ensuring safety and infringing on privacy rights.
- ◆ **Mental health and toxic online spaces:** Harassment, cyberbullying, and hate speech online disproportionately affect young people, especially women and minorities, discouraging participation.

Solutions being implemented include EU legislation (Digital Services Act), educational programs on digital literacy, and stronger partnerships with tech platforms for content moderation and transparency.



Further reading and resources

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- ✦ European Commission. (n.d.). *EU Youth Portal – Digital skills*. https://youth.europa.eu/home_en
- ✦ Eurostat. (2023). *Digital economy and society statistics - households and individuals*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals
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- ✦ Council of Europe & European Commission. (2021). *Young people, social inclusion and digitalisation: Emerging knowledge for practice and policy*. Youth Partnership. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/young-people-social-inclusion-and-digitalisation>

Videos

- ✦ European Parliament Multimedia Centre. (2021). *The future of democracy in the digital age: Statement by Dragoș Tudorache (Renew, RO), AIDA Chair*. https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/the-future-of-democracy-in-the-digital-age-statement-by-dragos-tudorache-renew-ro-aida-chair_1204141
- ✦ European Commission. (2025). *European Year of Digital Citizenship Education 2025*. [Video]. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/european-year-of-digital-citizenship-education-2025>

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