

Rebooting Digital Citizenship:

Dynamics of Digital Life

~ Sujata C



The world is witnessing an inexorable and all-encompassing march of technology. Evolving technologies have made smartphones affordable and cheap data plans have put the world into everyone's hands. What does it mean to be a digital citizen in 2020? First let's get a quick bird's-eye view of the digital world and how it works.

The Internet celebrated its 50th birthday in 2019 and the World Wide Web turned 30. According to Digital 2019 Global Overview reports, people are mostly online through their mobiles. 6 hours 42 minutes – is the exact amount of time we spend [online](#) each day during our waking hours. Google, YouTube and Facebook are the three most visited websites. More than half the world within the eligible category has some presence on popular social media channels. We are no more novices, but mature users of technology. A generation has already grown up with it (those born in the 90s) and the next generation will be faster for sure.

Most students today are digital citizens. It is likely that as kids they are given a smartphone or a tablet so that they remain engaged while their parents are busy with more important things. They not only play games, but even download apps, with or without their parents' knowing, thanks to their exposure to smart devices at an early age. This means they are aware how the Internet-based online world works while quite young. Their young brains are constantly processing new information and evolving accordingly. Familiarity with tools, however, does not mean they are using technology effectively and correctly. This is where teachers can step in to guide them become responsible digital citizens and to show them how to leverage technology to achieve their goals and be a productive part of the community.

Markers of digital citizenship

Internet petitioning: Petitioning has been around since the time of the ancient Egyptians when the slaves building the pyramids petitioned for better working conditions. Historically petitioning is an important tool for citizens' voices to reach out to the lawmakers. In the last decade, online petitions have become a popular tool available to the common man to put pressure on authorities on important issues. Many NGOs have used petitions and signature campaigns to address environmental issues or put pressure for policy amendments.

Digital activism: Technology has made a lot of things easier; activism is one of them. In today's digital age, protest is just a few taps away and a huge crowd can gather on the streets without notice or warning because people are connected and engaged digitally.



Microblogging sites like Twitter are being used to



contact leaders or persons in power to address issues by tagging them. Celebrities and leaders are also using the medium to influence or mobilise the masses. The #MeToo movement could not have reached the global proportions it did, had it not been for the power of Twitter. These movements are being used to debunk myths, bring awareness or demolish stereotypes in society to bring about change for the better. Hashtag activism is akin to armchair activism which is considered a lazy way

to protest as it can be done from the comfort of your home. It must be accompanied by an equal participation on the ground. However, it is undeniable that these platforms have provided a medium for the common citizens to voice their opinions.

Many Forms of Cyber-activism

<p>Clicktivism</p> <p>A form of armchair activism</p>	<p>Hacktivism</p> <p>A form of activism that causes disruption by hacking websites</p>	<p>Hashtag activism</p>	<p>Meme activism</p> <p>Activism that involves making memes to put across a point</p>
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Trolling: This is a new generation misconduct that is almost institutionalised. Someone who posts provocative responses with the deliberate intent of starting a fight or sowing discord in order to divert attention from something is called troll in the Internet language. Celebrities, stars and leaders often get trolled by rivals. Rude memes posted on social media may get a few laughs but trolling and hate speech are now punishable under certain sections of the IPC.

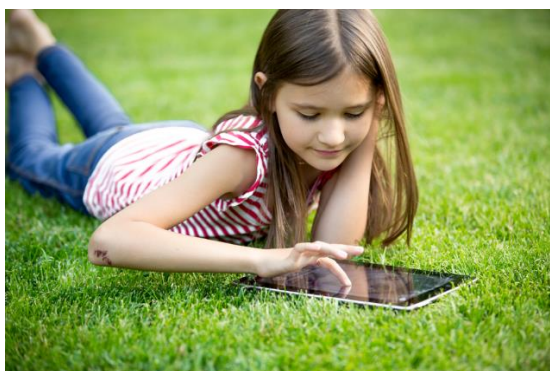
YouTube influencers: The video platform YouTube has seen spectacular growth ever since its inception in 2005. Since videos are a visually engaging medium, YouTube has become the third most visited site as netizens are using it to display their creativity and share their expertise on any topic one can think of. As a result, they have massive followers who look forward to new content from them. Some use it to educate or share an experience and others tie up with them to influence audience to promote their products.

Just for laughs: There is a place just for laughs in the digital space. Anyone between 12 and 25 is having fun with TikTok and WhatsApp videos. The China-based internet company, Tiktok is the fastest growing app. In just over a year, it has built a user base of 200 million out of which 120 million are active users who create funny videos and upload them. These videos are so popular that TV news channels often use them to wrap up their more serious

programmes and leave the audience in lighter mood. Unlike Instagram and Facebook, TikTok is refreshingly real and gives space for mediocrity.

Stand up comedies: With unabating stress levels across segments, humour is proving to be a great hit with everyone. There is a spike in the number of stand-up comedians online who are amassing a large following through their intelligent and witty shows. Depending on the fan following they gather, stand-up comedians too are wooed by politicians or marketers to garner their influence.

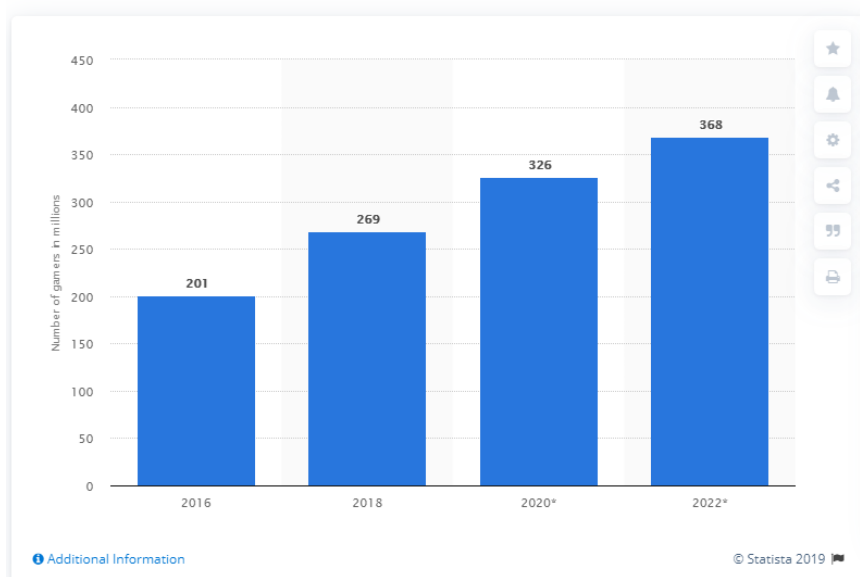
Dehumanising nature of technology: While using technology most humans tend to lose touch with their humane side and behave in ways that are less than human. Manners are the first that seem to go out of the window in device-based interactions; emails go unacknowledged, messages go unanswered, and basic courtesies take a backseat. Children must be taught that the etiquette we follow in the real world applies in the digital world too. Politeness never goes out of fashion. The technology driven new generation needs to be educated on those lines.



Responsible gaming: The digital world is a not a bed of roses. It is full of temptations that turn into dangerous addictions. India is not far behind when it comes to video game addicts. This became evident when the PUBG (Players Unknown Battlegrounds) epidemic spread and government had to step in to ban the game. [Statista](#) reports that there are nearly 270 million mobile gamers in India currently.



Number of mobile gamers across India from 2016 to 2022
(in millions)



Online games may seem like harmless pastime but it has taken on the proportions of an ailment. The WHO has categorised it as a mental health disorder and calls it – ‘online gaming disorder’. It weakens an individual’s capacity to carry out normal functions. China has recently made rules for gaming, considering its impact on eyesight and productivity. 90 minutes per day is the limit and there is a budget for purchasing weapons for online games. Until some law comes into force in India, it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to regulate the children.

Online offences involve money and sex, just like in real life. Young students want to start using mobile wallets for buying stuff online as there is heavy peer pressure. It is important to teach them the necessity of being careful about revealing sensitive information like date of birth, bank customer ID numbers, PINs and the dangers of using public Wi-Fi, so that they can make safe money transactions. If online banking details get into wrong hands, money from their account can get siphoned off before they can react.

The fact that Internet offers privacy and anonymity has led to a sharp increase in sexual crimes. A recent study on child sexual abuse imagery by Google and Thorn¹ found that India leads in child sexual content. Research says exposure to adult content while a child is mentally not prepared can have adverse effect later in their lives. It is important to educate children before letting them wander unsupervised in the digital space.

¹ A US based anti-human trafficking organisation

Honesty in digital life: The digital world makes it easy to throw away our values because of the anonymity and privacy it offers. We must decide whether we want to compromise the values for the pleasures of the digital world. Creating multiple identities to fool people is easy, but the downside to it is that over a period of time it leads to technology induced identity issues which may border on schizophrenia.

Digital friendships: There needs to be a balance between online and offline interactions for maintaining better relationships. Digital friendship tends to stay in the digital space. Online friendships are easy to form. You just have to like a few posts on Facebook or Instagram and you become BFF (best friends forever). Multiplayer games require online partners and it could be someone you have never met. Digital friendships rarely get carried over to real life. The technology takes away the nuances of human contact.

Curated lives on social media: There are studies to show that while social media keeps us connected it also may leave us feeling bitter and depressed. There tends to be comparison of lives curated to perfection for Facebook with the real world lives that are far from perfect. This takes a toll on the mental health. Fear of missing out (FOMO) on any action in others' lives gets one hooked to social media. Social media addiction has been red flagged by doctors as a mental health disorder. The wise way of using Facebook is to be aware that social media platforms are only windows into the happy moments of people's lives, but not their everyday trials and tribulations.



The digital space has all the possibilities of a utopian world because it has no boundaries, no nationalities, no perceived biases and prejudices. The connection with other digital citizens is stripped of all preconceptions and prejudgments. But we managed to foist the same foibles onto the virtual world, making it no different from the real one. It then boils down to using technology responsibly to make the community better and create the world we all aspire for.

Sujata C is a writer and editor with more than thirty years of experience. She writes on children, environment, society, as well as technology. She has also been a copywriter with advertising agencies for over fifteen years.

Lesson plan

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Digital citizenship is bound by a framework of guidelines to follow when using technology. As teachers, it is important that we create awareness about this fascinating yet dangerous world of digital space.



Here are some suggested activities for the classroom.

1. Make a list of popular hashtag movements that reverberated in India and across the world. Allow students to apply their creative skills while maintaining political correctness.
2. Create a meme campaign/competition on a contemporary issue of your choice.
3. Organise a debate and have students analyse if technology is a boon or bane and in what ways.
4. Make students take up a self-assessment activity and ask the following questions:
 - How is your digital health?
 - Are your online activities healthy or unhealthy?
 - What steps can you take to improve your digital life?
 - Trolling, cyber bullying, spreading hate speech, or fake news – are you indulging in any of these?
5. Discuss ways of implementing manners in online interactions:
 - When responding to any issue through the comments section, stay polite, do not offend or insult.
 - If you are a group admin in a WhatsApp group, do not remove people or close the group without notice.

- Write a line or two explaining why you are doing something.
 - Magic words like *please* and *thank you* are still powerful even in the online world.
6. Create a digital citizenship pledge and encourage students to prepare a poster to display in class.
7. Help students with digital literacy to become responsible digital citizens:
- Enable them to engage in respectful debates.
 - Guide them to be able to shape and change public policy.
 - Show them how to recognise the validity of online sources of information.
 - Develop their ability to recognise truth from fiction to be able to survive in this digital society.
 - Make them aware of their digital footprint and identity as nothing on the digital media is ever lost.



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