

# **“It is the best Tool we have, but that doesn’t mean it’s a Good Tool”: Czech Civically Engaged Youth Actors on Tackling the Ambiguity of Using Digital Media**

## **“É a melhor Ferramenta que temos, mas isso não significa que seja uma Boa Ferramenta”: Jovens Checos Engajados Discutem como Lidar com a Ambiguidade do Uso dos Media Digitais**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the ambiguities of using digital media in youth’s civic engagement, acknowledging the unprecedented transformation of the senses of public and private, and the pivotal role of the digital context in shaping citizenship. It presents results from a thematic analysis of post-sorting interviews conducted within a Q research study of civically engaged actors aged 13-18 (n=20) from Czechia, mapping their experiences with digital media. The study identifies six key themes that point to the ever-present balancing of the risks and opportunities in pursuing the participants’ agendas online. The results reveal a high level of online resilience and digital literacy of the participants, exposing coping strategies they adopt while navigating the online spaces. The study also reflects on the transformed sociality, pointing to the glocal implications for active engagement in the digital age, which allows garnering support from peer groups and communities on a transnational basis.

### **Keywords**

youth active engagement, glocal experiences, citizenship, digital media, interviews

## Resumo

Este artigo explora as ambiguidades do uso dos media digitais no engajamento cívico dos jovens, reconhecendo a transformação sem precedentes do público e do privado, e o papel crucial do contexto digital na formação da cidadania. Apresenta resultados de uma análise temática de entrevistas conduzidas com uma pesquisa Q entre jovens engajados civicamente, com idades entre 13 e 18 anos (n=20) da Chéquia, mapeando suas experiências com os media digitais. O estudo identifica seis temas-chave que apontam para o constante equilíbrio entre os riscos e oportunidades na busca das agendas dos participantes. Os resultados revelam um alto nível de resiliência online e literacia digital dos participantes, expondo estratégias de adaptação que usam ao navegar nos espaços online. O estudo também aponta para a transformação da sociabilidade, apontando para implicações glocais para o engajamento ativo na era digital, que permite obter suporte de grupos de pares e comunidades em uma base transnacional.

## Palavras-Chave

engajamento ativo dos jovens, experiências glocais, cidadania, medias digitais, entrevistas

## Introduction

The digital age represents a new context for the active engagement of children and young people in social and political life, notably since the mainstreaming of participatory digital media. Research has pointed to the numerous affordances with which young people have been endowed through digital platforms (García Galera et al., 2017; Kahne et al., 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020; Loader et al., 2014; Middaugh et al., 2017; Tsaliki, 2022), but has also addressed the many risks (Amnesty International, 2023; Ólafsson et al., 2014; Priebe et al., 2013). When actively engaged through digital media, youth actors are confronted with stereotypes and discouraging reactions reverberating in the online environments (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Bosi et al., 2020; Jacobsson, 2021), also in relation to the prevalent tendencies in the discursive construction of youth (Mazzarella, 2003; Trültzsch-Wijnen & Supa, 2020). At the same time, the digital context is increasingly ambiguous for actively engaged young people due to the glocal implications of digital communication. The local experience intertwines with global expectations and aspirations of activism, particularly concerning activist networks operating on a transnational scale. These networks are a part of what is often referred to as the “global civil society” (Dahlgren, 2016) which represents a significant reference point for many of the local actively engaged young people.

Situated within the critical paradigm of the new sociology of childhood (Eßer et al., 2016; James & Prout, 2015), the present study focuses on youth agency and the sociocultural and subjective understanding of young people as political actors (Pickard, 2019). It seeks to explore the role of digital media in the political life of young people by adopting a “bridging” attitude, connecting the focus on risks and harms with a focus on opportunities (Cortesi et al., 2020). The study forms a part of a larger project researching the role of online media in constructing, negotiating, and practising youth

active citizenship in Czechia (see e.g., Kárníková, 2024, Vochocová, 2023). It draws upon Q methodology-based post-sorting interviews with twenty local youth actors actively engaged in civic and political activities and explores their reflections on various statements regarding the role of the Internet in their engagement. Providing an in-depth view into their subjective experiences, the paper's goal is to illustrate the role of digital media in the participants' public and private lives and discuss the "glocal" dimension of youth engagement in the digital age, as well as its implications for the notion of citizenship. By doing so, it contributes to the debates about the complex and multifaceted role of digital media in children and youth's active engagement in social and political life.

## 1. Youth engagement and digital citizenship

The concepts of "civic engagement" and "political participation" have been often used interchangeably in research or theorized to explore their proximity (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). Both concepts are linked to agency and describe the ability of members of society to contribute to the determination of the social and political goals of a society (Clark, 2000). The differences usually concern the scope and type of action subsumed under the notions: "Civic" engagement is habitually directed more broadly than "political" participation, which refers to addressing issues through political institutions or processes (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). In contrast to "participation", which is usually understood as a deliberate, overt action, i.e. a behavioural matter, "engagement" can but does not have to include behavior; it can also manifest only at the cognitive level, as interest, knowledge or paying attention to political or civic matters (Zani & Barrett, 2012). This understanding is supported also by the UNICEF definition formulated within an *Adolescent and youth strategic framework* report, characterizing civic engagement as a subset of engagement and referring to activities as "individual or collective actions in which people participate in public spheres to improve the well-being of communities or society in general" (UNICEF, 2017).

Another term used for theorizing active engagement in social and political life is activism. As a typically engaged, voluntary and behavioural form of participation (Klar & Kasser, 2009), activism has been often resorted to by youth for the lack of access to formal modes of participation, or for an actual preference for non-formalized modes (Fisher, 2012; Weller, 2007). Particularly protest has become a highly popular mode of engagement for young people, also since the shift towards a "social movement society" (Earl et al., 2017). Activism usually refers to activities that transcend forms of public involvement set up by official political institutions (Clark, 2000). For the very same reason, it is prone to be criticized, disregarded, or outright dismissed for exceeding the limits of legitimate involvement. In the Czech context, the label "activist" has been often weaponized against young actors, rendering the chosen means of engagement illegitimate and unacceptable, while the negative response is largely politically motivated (Vochocová, 2023). Analogously to the broader European context (Dergić et al., 2022), the negative reaction to youth's active engagement in public affairs in Czechia is fueled by the upsurge of conservative right-wing backlash and the related abnormalisation of social justice claims (Cammaerts, 2022).

On the general level, young people's active engagement in social and political life has been often delegitimized by foregrounding reductionist understandings. The restricted approach is apparent, especially in the discussions on citizenship. In its traditional legal understanding, citizenship is a typically exclusionary concept, and as such is used to exclude young people from participating based on their non-adult status and below-legal age (Weller, 2007). Young people's repertoires of civic engagement have been more casually associated with the anthropological understanding of citizenship, which sees political agency broadly and understands citizenship as a lived experience (Kallio et al., 2015; Lister, 2007). This understanding is based both on a different sense of the self and the community, as well as on a different approach to what counts as a legitimate action.

In recent years, youth civic and political engagement, including activism, has been extensively studied through the concept of digital citizenship. The earliest conceptions were characterized by a strong normative framing, typically outlining for young people the appropriate and responsible ways to use digital technologies for participation and deliberation (Cortesi et al., 2020). The latter approaches have moved from focusing on norms to attempting to understand how the forms of social and political engagement of young people are different from the previous generations, including the differences in citizenship norms (Hooghe & Oser, 2015). Gradually, the digital landscape came to be approached as the essential context in which youth citizenship is shaped (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). In the online environment, among other factors, citizenship becomes entirely manageable for young people, allowing them to "personalize citizen identity and expression" (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 398).

## **2. Youth, digital media, and the private and public**

The digital era has significantly influenced the practice of active engagement in social and political life. Already in the early ages of the Internet, digital media technologies started to play a crucial role in the political socialization of young people (Lee et al., 2013). The advent of participatory digital media has led to the proliferation of online practices in everyday life and has augmented the progressive mediatization of politics (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). It has broadened the repertoires of engagement through the participatory nature of online life, as the most routine activities on social networks indicate the blurring of active and passive consumption of media content (Lemish, 2015). Research has, among other things, focused on the role of digital media in boosting or endangering participatory patterns and motivations (Cammaerts et al., 2016, p. 29; Carpentier, 2011).

At the centre of their digital interactions, young actors navigate social media, developing strategies tailored to particular media ecologies (Tsaliki, 2022; Yuen & Tang, 2023). Corresponding to the observations mentioned above, a recent meta-analysis of youth engagement in the digital age concluded that online and offline civic engagement is highly correlated, rejecting the theories of clicktivism or slacktivism (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Moreover, the argument that digital media distract young people from offline engagement is refuted, as their involvement in offline and online environments is interconnected (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). In Czechia, a

study focusing on both younger and older cohorts has highlighted the variability and diversity of participatory actions. The repertoires are becoming increasingly “colorful” as the age of respondents decreases (Macková et al., 2016), while “the uses of new media (...) draw one of the lines between the politically active respondents and the passive respondents” (Macková et al., 2016, p. 61).

On the broader level, the advent of Web 2.0 has had a far-reaching impact on the senses of private and public. Particularly the many-to-many architecture of Web 2.0 and the rise of prosuming within participatory culture have reshaped the practice of public deliberation (De Blasio et al., 2020; Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009). The public and the private blend together particularly in the lives of young civically engaged people. The digital turn has had a tremendous impact on young people’s sociality, which has become “complicated and contradictory” (Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). Many studies point to how the online and the offline permeate the social worlds of contemporary children and young people (Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018), while some refer to an actual “onlife” of contemporary youth (Floridi, 2015). Epistemologically, the opposition between digital and real is actually rejected. As Boellstorff suggests, online spaces are “real places that must be understood in their own terms” (2016, p. 395).

The new connotations of the public result also from overcoming the local-global divide, as a symptom of globalization that the digital age entails (Lemish, 2015). The blending of the local and the global has allowed new ways of how communities of common interest can be formed. Children and young people have benefited from the possibility of building their own social networks and self-identifying beyond the pre-determinant social factors such as family or school (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). It has also given rise to new civic identities and allowed engaging in issues on a cross-national basis. An important effect of globalization has also been the rise of a “global civil society” (Dahlgren, 2016), leading to a growingly glocalized activists’ work through appropriation and adaptation of transnational methods or discourses to the local context (Cammaerts, 2006). Further, the broad terrain of trans-national networks (non-governmental organizations, interest and advocacy groups or various social movements) that operate on a cross-border basis is now directly accessible through digital media. This accessibility represents an additional boost for young people’s civic and political engagement, as affiliation with youth organizations has traditionally been a primary facilitator for the engagement of young people (Cicognani et al., 2014; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). Through an exploration of the Czech engaged young actors’ subjective perspectives on and experiences with digital media, we will illustrate the multilayer ambiguity embodied in youth’s glocal experience of active engagement in the digital age.

### **3. Materials and methods**

The study was conducted as a part of a broader Q methodology mixed-methods research study (McKeown & Thomas, 1988) exploring the role of online media in constructing, negotiating and practising youth active citizenship in Czechia. In the latter phase, the actual experiences of youth civically and politically engaged actors were explored. The full study consisted of 39 statements (*concourse* in Q methodology) that the participants first sorted into an inverted pyramid (Gallagher & Porock,

2010). They were then interviewed about their sorting decisions and their understandings of the statements. The statements were developed on the basis of qualitative analyses of media representation of and digital users' comments on selected Czech teenage actors engaged in various areas (see Kárníková, 2024; Vochocová, 2023). The resulting statements were formulated to reflect the experience of civically and politically active youth in Czechia, as well as the underlying social meanings ascribed to them and their actions.

This paper was developed through a focus on one particular group of the statements themed as "online experience" – see *Table 1*. We deliberately used the term "Internet" in these statements, rather than "online" or "digital media", as it permitted us, within the Czech context, to address the dual nature of digital media and online communication. This terminology enabled a more comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted and complex role that digital media play in the civic lives and engagement of young people. The Internet as an umbrella term refers both to digital tools that enable communication and the promotion of the interests of different population groups and to spaces and places, sites of public debate, where issues are discussed and communities or audiences are created. Furthermore, the youth involved in our previous ethnographic research themselves often used this term.

**Table 1**  
*Online experience statements*

The Internet plays an important role in our activities.
The Internet is more about who we are than what we say.
How we are talked about on the Internet can hurt us.
Our activities and opinions spark heated arguments on the Internet.
People threaten us on the Internet.
Thanks to the Internet, we can get support.
We have to deal with condemnation and ridicule.

Source: Authors

The research involved twenty young people from across Czechia aged 13 to 18 (mean age 16,7), who explicitly identified themselves as "civically engaged" and "activists", i.e., they fall under the category of civic-minded youth who are "more goal-oriented in their use of the Internet to pursue civic interest" (Lemish, 2015, p. 187). The interviews were conducted with 11 girls and 9 boys who were active in international, national or local organizations, or who pursued their individual agendas. As for topics, their focus ranged from human rights, and climate protection, to domestic or foreign policies. We addressed the participants through social media platforms, namely Instagram and Facebook, and used the snowball technique. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, decision number 63/2023. Consent was obtained from the participants and, where necessary, from parents following GDPR. All participants were again informed at the beginning of the interview about the possibility of ending the interview at any time. At the end of the interviews, most participants mentioned

that participating in the research had been a truly interesting experience and they were glad to see the topic being addressed.

The sorting and interviews were conducted online through Zoom software and lasted an average of one hour. The interview process was video and voice recorded, safely stored, and anonymised upon transcription to ensure the privacy of the participants. For the purpose of this paper and its research question, we openly coded and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) parts of the interview transcripts related to online experiences. We identified six key themes that explain the role that digital media played in the lives, thoughts, and actions of the interviewed civically and politically active youth while addressing the glocal implications as well.

#### 4. Results

The online experience statements were often listed by participants as the ones with which they most strongly agreed or disagreed. When sorting statements about the Internet, all participants placed some of the statements in position 2 (-2), with 16 of the 20 participants placing some of the statements in position 3 (-3), and 13 of the 20 placing at least one in position 4 (-4). This shows the high relevance of the online experience statements to the research participants' lived experience of activism and digital media.

The participants perceived the Internet and its role in their civic and political engagement in a very ambivalent way, reflecting on its benefits and limitations to both their private and public lives. In their experience, the Internet was both a tool and a public space, in which they interacted with like-minded or contrary-minded users and where the social construction of youth activism was taking place. The theme of the ambiguity of the Internet ran through all the six core themes identified:

1. *Informing about their activities and promoting themselves.* The Internet enables these young active people to promote and inform the general public about their activities.
2. *Socializing, supporting, and gaining confidence.* The Internet allows these activists to be in contact with like-minded people, socialize, get support, and, consequently, gain self-confidence, both on a local and trans-local basis.
3. *Interacting beyond the social bubble.* On the Internet, they can meet or interact with people with different views and from different generations, beyond their social bubbles.
4. *Being confronted because of group, class, or appearance.* On the Internet, young activists are often dismissed for belonging to a particular group, or class or for their appearance, without reflecting on what they are actually saying.
5. *Encountering online threats.* On the Internet, young activists may encounter abusive reactions and threats aimed at harming or intimidating them.
6. *Considering withdrawing, but deciding to stay.* Encountering online threats could lead to withdrawal from the online space and, by extension, disengagement. Our participants observe this in their environment, although they themselves report on strategies for coping with negative feedback.

Although all the participants mentioned both positive and negative aspects of the Internet as inseparable, each participant had slightly different experiences with varied degrees of positive and negative interactions and felt that it played various roles in their public and private lives. The individual themes are described more fully next, including quotes from participants translated from Czech into English. To preserve anonymity, we used pseudonyms.

## I. Informing about their activities and promoting themselves

All participants mentioned that they see the Internet as a tool for spreading awareness of their activities and it is important for their work and its success. This is related to the fact that our participants had, in their own words, a high level of digital literacy. At the same time, a higher level of digital, and therefore media literacy, is a prerequisite for the ability to act and use digital media for civic engagement and activism (Mihailidis, 2024). “We’re like the Internet generation so... it’s something we know how to work with best” (Denis). Some participants perceived the Internet, specifically social media networks, as the only place to learn about events organized by various movements or organizations. “Yeah, so since the Internet is basically the biggest information medium of the time, I don’t think there’s any other way, to put it really radically, to get the attention that’s going to support it” (Alfred). At the same time, they hardly pay attention to any particular distinguishable sources, as they take the Internet as “the medium”. One of our participants thematized the ambiguity of the Internet, which he considered the most important tool for disseminating information: “Even though the media often hurts us, the Internet and social networks are the only, like the biggest, way that we can spread the word about activism or how to get involved” (Pavel). Other participants mentioned that thanks to the Internet, they can also receive tangible support, such as financial resources for their activities. The direct access to diverse audiences reflects in the augmented reach for the activists, as an important aspect of the transformation of the public. The extended sense of public also meant an extended size of a supportive network, often on a trans-local basis.

## II. Socializing, supporting, and gaining confidence

Some participants reflected on the Internet as a place for them to meet and interact with like-minded people, peers, but also adults with similar opinions, such as parents, teachers or politicians. One participant mentioned that thanks to the Internet she can meet like-minded peers wherever they live and get their support: “...people like us, we can connect today, right, with people who do similar activities just on the other side of the country, we can somehow gather and I think we can get the support of a lot of young people” (Marie). Overcoming the geographical limits through digital media enables the broadening of the network, and therefore augments its reach and relevance. They also said the Internet, and particularly social media networks, is a great space for informal learning and a way to reach students and other young people who agree with them and would like to be involved, which ultimately benefits their goals.

"If we can combine that fun and educational form, it has exactly the benefit we want: it gets to those students and we can, in some sort of a hyperbole, move that society forward" (Diana). Some participants themselves learned about the movement they are involved in through social media. The opportunity to learn from each other, support each other, and be in contact with like-minded people, ultimately led to a greater sense of belonging and self-esteem for the participants. This is related to the way sociality has been transformed through digital media, facilitating self-organization.

### III. Interacting beyond the social bubble

At the same time, some participants mentioned that the Internet allows them to get outside their social bubble and, for example, have a dialogue with contrary-minded people or people from a different generation. As one participant put it, for young active people, social networks are "another political battlefield" where they can express their opinions just as they can be expressed by people who disagree with them or by politicians who can take advantage of them. These clashes can be both beneficial and unpleasant for young activists. The diversity of responses was described, for example, by Milada: "Well, the Internet is important, of course, we all exchange opinions there. We've had a few times where we've made a mistake and someone corrected us. Of course, we can learn from this ... then there are people who swear at us just because we do something they don't like". Other participants said that meeting people with different views can be a source of enrichment. Thanks to the Internet, it is possible to get out of the "bubble" of like-minded young people and meet people with opposing views, which they see as beneficial. Another important effect is reaching out to adults in power: our respondents often mentioned politicians with whom they could make direct contact through an online discussion. In this respect, digital media facilitates contact and horizontalizes the public sphere. Interestingly though, the Internet is rarely explicitly reflected as a source of information – it is entirely automatic that information is available online. They do reflect, however, on the broadening of the horizon in the sense of confrontation with the attitudes and opinions of wider social groups and audiences.

### IV. Being confronted because of group, class, or appearance

The participants reflected on how online audiences often dismiss them based on their group affiliation, social class, or appearance, becoming oblivious to the actual topics the young activists aim to highlight. For example, one participant described how some discussants were more concerned with their personal lives and their background than the message they wanted to convey: "All the comments or discussions under [interesting post] always seem to me [to be about] how we look how we dress and as a result, it's a shame because the discussion just isn't really about what we're trying to communicate" (Tereza). Other participants felt that online discussions often focus on who the young actors are and what they have done, rather than on the problem they are trying to solve or point out. Some said this was particularly evident with

climate activists, whose actions may be labelled as radical or escalatory, but people online are less aware of what these activists were trying to highlight. They also linked this phenomenon to the way the mainstream media frames these events. "It seems to me that the news is almost always about how... their (activists') actions don't make sense but they don't describe what they are about or what triggered their action" (Pavel).

## V. Encountering online threats

Since the activities of the interviewed participants are often discussed online, particularly on social media, where they encounter people with differing opinions, the young actors may also face negative or even threatening reactions. These reactions can discourage them and lead to withdrawal from the online space or from civic and political engagement altogether. All of our respondents have encountered negative online interactions directly or indirectly. Some were themselves direct victims of unpleasant comments or abuse, and others heard about these experiences from people around them. Threatening comments are not uncommon. "How many times have we really encountered comments like, 'At the next demonstration I would throw a bomb at you,' ... or, 'I would shoot you all'. So we've encountered comments like that that really aren't nice and I think it can hurt a lot of people and it can discourage them from doing what they want to do" (Simona). Other participants had similar experiences with threatening comments. However, they told us that they do not make much of such comments and try not to take them personally, or laugh at them if they can because they believe such comments do not reflect reality. Sometimes, they also classify such behaviour as typically toxic, and hence not worthy of attention: "Often these are just those haters, who really just want to hate whatever there is to hate" (Tereza). At the same time, they expressed the thought that such comments can hurt other young active people. "Everyone has a different attitude to negative responses and I personally don't care. But on the other hand, I know that it can hurt some people a lot, maybe ... when a comment is directly related to them" (Zita).

## VI. Considering withdrawing, but deciding to stay

As much as the Internet, and social media in particular, can be a beneficial environment, participants reported substantial experiences of negative aspects impacting their mental health, as well as their level of engagement. One participant described social networking as a "toxic environment where extremes meet" that does not reflect the true opinions of the majority, but of a minority, whom she called "haters". Others expressed similar sentiments. The topic of digital well-being and mental health was important and urgent for young actively engaged youth. Therefore, some spoke about the fact that it often takes courage to be visible online and to present one's views there. Some mentioned cases from their surroundings where such abusive responses had indeed led to less activity in their community or even to withdrawing from the public online space and abandoning activities altogether. However, our participants have different reasons to stay present in the online space. "I think a lot of people go into this without thinking this through beforehand, that just being told they're stupid

will actually hurt them. I go into it thinking that ... the fact that it's going to hurt me still carries less weight than the fact that I'm going to express myself" (Marian).

The naturality of how online and offline blends is reflected in the way our participants approach the digital phenomena. At the same time, involvement in public affairs represents another level of social exposure that is notably challenging, particularly in the digital context where the senses of the public have broadened, including the extension of audiences. For this reason, active engagement in social and political life remains a marginal activity among youth (see Bedrošová et al., 2018), no matter the facilitations the digital media provide. This is clear from the way our participants reflect on the stories of withdrawal among people around them, albeit none of them personally withdrew.

## 5. Discussion

Through this study, we captured the contradictions of digital media in the lives of actively civically and politically engaged youth in Czechia, while considering what it meant to their public and private lives and to their sense of belonging. On the level of declared affordances, the participants reported a high level of security that comes with the naturality of their "onlife" (Floridi, 2014). It makes the Internet a fairly safe space for them, associated with a strong feeling of control over the level of physical exposure and high control over communication, and other positive values such as ease in locating like-minded people, accessibility and availability, or the feeling of equality (Amichai-Hamburger, 2017). Moreover, all of our participants were fairly digitally literate, possessing a varied set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes resulting in the ability to use digital media in a "critical, responsible, and creative manner" (Hatlevik, Gudmundsdottir, & Loi, 2015, p. 346). Digital literacy is closely linked to media literacy (De Abreu, 2019), while one of the five essential components of media literacy is the ability to act (Hobbs, 2010). Mihailidis (2024) argues that media literacy is where "civic activism" is rooted and represents a "key driver of participation in contemporary digital culture" (p. 5). Civically and politically active youth's uses of digital media therefore are, or should be, one of the essential outputs of contemporary media and digital literacy practices. However, more attention should be paid in media literacy research and practice to the sociocultural and political glocal context within which youth exercise their civic or political agency and voice.

The feeling of control and confidence that our participants experience stems also from the sense of belonging to a community which is augmented through digital media, as previous research equally suggests (Conner et al., 2023, Tilleczek & Campbell, 2019). Digital media allowed young actively engaged actors to connect to a transnational civil society (Montague & Eiroa-Orosa, 2018) and reach out to the public in a wholly new sense, as the notion of the public was also transformed (Jenkins & Purushotma, 2009). The extended sense of public also means an extended size of a supportive network, also with regard to the "glocal dimension" of social media (Manca et al., 2021). The glocal aspects are, however, implicit and fairly automatic for our participants. They reported that they greatly value the affordance of connectivity and accessibility, as they can reach out to like-minded people through various transnational activist networks that are accessible online. These networks as well as various other organizations aimed at social and/or political change represented an

important context for the participants' active engagement in public affairs. The responsive and supportive audiences which are accessible online also helped overcome negative feedback or disapproval from counter-attitudinal audiences. Such support represents a factor for online resilience in general, as previous research conducted among older youth activists also demonstrated (Klar & Kasser, 2009).

Nonetheless, active engagement in public affairs does carry inherent risks (Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020) and these are augmented online. This is particularly true for young people in their teenage years, who, as the oldest cohort among school children, are generally more exposed to online risks due to the increasing amount of time spent with digital media and the heightened sensitivity associated with this developmental period (Bedrošová et al., 2018). As our participants reflected, they were frequently confronted with phenomena typical for online interaction, such as toxicity, hostility, and affective polarization (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Macková et al., 2023). By communicating their agenda and claims outside their primary circles, they became confronted with counter-attitudinal online audiences. While such confrontation can be productive, negative or outright offensive feedback may also be harmful and discourage young actors. Our participants often operated within a politically conflictual context and were thus exposed to more risk of online harm, as online political communication in particular has become vastly conflictual, toxic, and flooded with personal attacks (Coe et al., 2014). In particular, the affiliation of a number of our participants with particular transnational activist networks often sparked online hate in the context of cultural wars (Cooley, 2015). A study focusing on Czech digital audiences' reaction to young civically or politically engaged actors has confirmed the growing impact of anti-liberal tendencies that have "penetrated the public imagination" in Europe (Vochocová, 2023). This combines with the tendencies to make young activists hypervisible online while building on the strategy of "singling out" their personal characteristics and identities (Dergic et al., 2022).

Our participants, however, were rarely helpless in the situations described above. When discussing their online experiences, they casually mentioned an internalized and naturalized set of principles, behaviours, and skills they had mastered, which guided them in adopting different strategies to avoid negative experiences. In addition to the presumed and self-reported high level of digital literacy, participants also demonstrated resilience, reflecting on the ability to employ various coping strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of harmful online experiences, in correspondence with other research findings (Vissenberg et al., 2022; Coleman & Hagell, 2007). Despite the frequent exposure to online risks inherent in activism and/or civic engagement, our participants felt relatively confident and well-oriented in dealing with such situations.

## **6. Conclusion**

The ambiguous role of digital media in youth active engagement in civic or political affairs that our research explored illustrates the close relationship between opportunities and risks, for example, in terms of support from like-minded peers, adults, individuals or networks, or in terms of confrontation with prejudice and hate. As our participants mentioned, they relied on support which they leveraged online. However, other civically or politically engaged young people may find it difficult to garner su-

port in this way. Likewise, young people who are less resilient could potentially be discouraged from active engagement by negative online responses and hate.

Since the participants for this research were primarily reached through social media, namely Instagram and Facebook (see Method section), the selection process was limited to young people active on these platforms and often connected to larger transnational organizations. Consequently, we reached a specific group of participants, excluding young individuals who operate independently or do not use social media. It is, therefore, necessary to be sensitive to these barriers and to acknowledge openly that the conclusions we have reached in this study emerged from interviews with actively engaged young people who reported being resilient and digitally and media literate, which is a prerequisite for civic activity (Mihailidis, 2024). Their experience represents a “success story”, which highlights the argument that civic engagement remains a relatively exclusive online activity among children and young people (Lemish, 2015), reported only by a fraction of respondents in the context of Czechia (Bedrošová et al., 2018), mirroring general patterns of the activities performed online by the youngest cohorts (Šmahel et al., 2020).

As is evident from our findings, the young actors we interviewed act locally while they tend to leverage glocal “resources”. They engage in a global media experience that significantly influences their active engagement in the local context. Our research was limited in this regard by its synoptic focus on overall experiences with digital media, while the glocal implications emerged from the findings only. The glocal dimension of using digital media for youth active engagement in social and political life could be addressed in more detail by future research. Despite the shortcomings, the paper offers a comprehensive understanding of the ambivalence that young actively engaged people experience with digital media.

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## **Conflict of interest | Conflito de interesses**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.  
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