

Article

## Digital Rights, Institutionalised Youths, and Contexts of Inequalities

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### Abstract

In this article, we aim to discuss digital rights and media literacy in the context of socio-digital inequalities experienced by institutionalised youths. In the case of these digitally disconnected youths in detention centres, there is evidence of multiple life-course disadvantages that will resonate throughout their future lives. They see their present and future lives deeply challenged by the fast pace of technological innovation and its social impacts while living in environments that we see as digital deserts. The data we bring to the discussion results from the Portuguese participatory project DiCi-Educa. We worked for three years with institutionalised youth on digital media production and critical thinking regarding digital citizenship, participation, and otherness issues. This article is organised around two research questions: What were youths' practices regarding media and digital environments before institutionalisation? How did they discuss these digital environments and their digital rights during the project? Early findings point to (a) the importance of implementing critical methods to help them to think about technologies in diverse daily life contexts, (b) the need to provide venues for institutionalised youth to build critical thinking and communication skills, and (c) the necessity to widen their worldviews and promote positive behaviours.

### Keywords

detention centres; DiCi-Educa; digital citizenship; digital disadvantage; digital disconnection; digital divide; digital rights; institutionalised youth; juvenile delinquency; youth-at-risk

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Institutionalised youth who are deprived of physical liberty, digital autonomy, and internet access face problems that challenge their digital rights in their present and future lives. This article builds on data collected in the participatory project DiCi-Educa, held in Portugal. The project is anchored in digital workshops with institutionalised youth who do not have access to digital media or the internet, except in particular situations and with adults' close supervision. The research focuses on youth living in detention centres (in Portugal, these institutions are called educational centres, and hereinafter we refer to them as ECs). Using a participatory action research methodology, we stimulated the youths to widen their worldviews and reflect on their digital rights and acts of

participation. We used digital media production and critical thinking regarding issues such as digital citizenship, participation, and otherness.

We will shed light on the discussion surrounding digital rights and media literacy departing from the context of socio-digital inequalities (Helsper, 2021). We will bear in mind critical and collaborative approaches to media literacy education to empower youths in the creation of their own media texts and narratives (Kellner & Share, 2007).

We argue that the response to these digital disadvantages faced by institutionalised youth would benefit from a deeper consideration of digital access and rights, adopting a more collaborative and co-deliberative educational approach. These youngsters see their present and future lives deeply challenged by the acceleration

of technological innovation and the increasingly related social inequities.

For three years, we worked with 48 institutionalised youth on two levels: (a) digital media production and (b) critical thinking, as part of a critical media literacy approach. We addressed digital citizenship topics, namely online and digital rights, participation, and otherness, with interconnections with how they receive, process, and create their own media narratives (Kellner & Share, 2007). DiCi-Educa recognises that social and digital inequalities are indissociable, and its work concerns social groups that can easily be left behind. The project focuses on reducing inequalities by developing critical, communicative, and digital competencies to achieve tangible outcomes (media production of photography, podcast, and videos) that can benefit these youths' everyday lives in the EC.

Given this, two research questions guide our analysis and discussion:

RQ1: What were youths' practices regarding media and digital environments before institutionalisation?

RQ2: How did they discuss these digital environments and their digital rights during the project?

These questions will guide our analysis in multiple dimensions, including their experiences before the ECs and their reflections during the research project. We used a holistic approach, followed a triangulation-inspired methodology, used complementary data sources and data collection techniques, and pursued continuous reflection on the data. We will not only reinforce the youths' voices but also bring their views on digital contexts (before and during life at the ECs) into the discussion; this entails hearing the perspectives of the professional staff who work at the ECs. These informants were key to helping us to understand the youth's contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Digital Inequalities

Considering the ample context of living on the margins, societal and digital scopes of promoting and protecting digital rights cannot be overlooked (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017; Lim & Suhaila, 2021). We chose the concept of digital inequalities as it considers the layers that go beyond simply distinguishing those who have access and those who do not (first layer or level of digital disadvantage). It urges us to look deeper into youths' socio-digital resources and opportunities as temporally relative (Helsper, 2017). The second layer of digital inequalities concerns how access is translated into skills, uses, and participation. The third layer or level refers to the outcomes and benefits one can achieve from succeeding in the first and second levels (Helsper, 2021; Massimo, 2018). In this case, we have to con-

sider that these youths are at a different level of disadvantage compared to other individuals and contexts (Helsper, 2017). Thus, we look at the causes of these digital inequalities "as either coming from macro-level structural constraints which lead to inequalities between socio-economic and cultural groups or deriving from individual micro-individual level factors such as personality and skills" (Helsper, 2017, p. 2). We opted to use the concept of digital disadvantage over digital exclusion, in line with the proposal of Helsper (2021) in which "disadvantage' suggests a more agentic, dynamic process where persons and organisations in different positions can overcome inequalities through action" (Helsper, 2021, p. 8).

We live in a time where a diverse range of media is omnipresent, escalating the digitisation and datafication of our everyday lives. The reconfiguration of human and digital rights needs to incorporate the increasing digitisation of youths' living environments. This assumes particular significance when considering institutionalised youths who are kept aside from digital possibilities because ECs privilege youths' security. In this case, we could argue that the lack of attention to digital rights (e.g., access, use, acquisition of skills, and benefits) also challenges the right to (media) education. This happens primarily because digital technologies and the internet play a key role in their lives as learners and citizens.

As Buckingham (2021, para. 2) states, "the ability to critically evaluate media, and to understand the broader social, political and economic dimensions of communication, is surely a basic prerequisite for informed citizenship." In the same line of thinking, Black and Cap (2016, p. 2214) emphasise another dimension: "Rather than shy away from topical, important and difficult human rights themes, we recommend that educators...address them with all the benefits in mind."

The digital inequalities these youths face are exacerbated by the rapid pace of technological change and are embedded in deep social inequalities (Reisdorf & Jewkes, 2016; Underwood et al., 2013; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2014). Research in different countries highlights digital disadvantage as a central component of social inequalities (Reisdorf & Rhinesmith, 2020) and demonstrates a strong link between children and youth's offline vulnerability and risky digital experiences (El Asam & Katz, 2018; Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017; Lim et al., 2012; Reisdorf & DeCook, 2022; Stevens et al., 2017). Thus, intervention should be applied to prevent the use of the internet and social media as a way to return to risky and criminal behaviours (Bulger & Burton, 2020; Lim et al., 2013). Critical media literacy and participatory media projects can help these youths succeed in an increasingly digital society. The main point is that these educational approaches must take a critical model in which youth have access to inclusive educational content that presents forms to widen their views of the world and, at the same time, raise awareness about the risks and opportunities that may come with it (Lim et al., 2013).

## 2.2. Digital Freedoms at Stake

Participation rights are highly challenged by the digital provision driver (Covid-19) and the protection surveillance policies in place at the ECs (security concern). In the context of these rights, we include freedom to access information, freedom to have an opinion, and freedom to express it, as shaped in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Articles 12 and 13) and applied to digital environments since February 2021 (United Nations, 2021). Historically, rights have always depended on the social context in which citizens live: “rights depend on making (and now, in digital environments, remaking) discursive claims in particular contexts rather than constituting pre-given and universally recognised fact” (Livingstone & Third, 2017, p. 11).

As Vissenberg and d’Haenens (2020) uphold, digital rights are better perceived and incorporated in contexts of access and use, rich social exchange, and collaborative knowledge. In the case of these institutionalised youths, their digital experiences before the ECs align with the results from the latest national survey carried out by EU Kids Online (Ponte & Batista, 2019).

Non-formal educational proposals and participatory media projects can be the best options to better tackle digital rights (Ravenscroft et al., 2020). Pedagogical practices grounded on technology use can improve capabilities such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking (Moreira & Dias-Trindade, 2020). Bermejo-Berros (2021) emphasises the essential encouragement of dialogue and audiovisual products as educommunicative models for media competence and critical thinking. Educommunicative research—at the intersection of communication and education (Bermejo-Berros, 2021)—promotes better communication competencies and the enhancement of personal competencies for autonomy, creativity, critical attitudes, and social participation. Critical dialogue (Bermejo-Berros, 2021; Ravenscroft, 2011; Ravenscroft et al., 2020) favours a dialectical perspective on work with different communities.

## 3. Methodological Context

DiCi-Educa (funded by Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian and Academias do Conhecimento) is a digital media production, critical media literacy, and digital rights-based project. Its implementation was firstly authorised by the national Directorate-General of Reintegration and Prison Services, which became a partner in the project, and then approved by each EC. The ethical protocol and procedures were an ongoing reflexive work across the project to tackle changing conditions (e.g., Covid-19), the specificities of the ECs, the youths, and field constraints. The ECs decided to recruit the youths, taking into account the goals of the project and the youths’ needs. The project followed the ethical research guidelines used in Portugal. Having obtained the consent of the Directorate-General of Reintegration and Prison

Services and the ECs as the youngsters’ guardians, the youths also had to assent to participate in the project. They were also informed that they could withdraw at any time. For security reasons, the implementation of DiCi-Educa followed the ECs security protocol. As a result, we planned to consider that these youths would engage in critical debates on issues regarding the internet, social media, and the overall digital landscape from a disadvantaged point of view in which they were deprived of internet access. Between March 2018 and April 2021, 48 participants aged between 12 and 17 years, 44 boys and four girls, participated in DiCi-Educa. The low number of girls participating in one group does not allow us to address gender differences in this research. Most youths have a history of dropping out on their academic record (more details in Section 3.4). They come from families with low educational, social, and economic conditions and have precarious professional situations (a large majority worked in the cleaning and construction sectors). Five of the youths’ mothers and three of their fathers were illiterate, nearly a third of the mothers were unemployed, and three fathers and three mothers were imprisoned. Almost half of the youths were already in the institutional system, namely in children’s homes, before the ECs.

### 3.1. Methodological Design Justification

Different sorts of data and complementarity of methods were applied to gain a broader understanding of the participants, their subjectivities and complexities, and to ensure the quality of our interpretation and analysis of the data. To analyse and interpret the empirical data, we privileged thematic analysis. We began by organising data to fit codes driven by the research questions. This enabled us to get a panoramic view of the topics. After that, with more refined readings and reflection on the codes, we reached a more inductive, complete, unbiased look at emerging themes.

Both research questions depart from discussions that were recurrent during the workshops. What their life was like before the EC, and what their life was like in the EC. They often gave some clues about their family contexts and connection to crime. Although the activities in the workshops did not ignore this, they remained centred on the digital realm, rights related to those environments, and the balance between opportunities and risks.

The complexity of the context and the constraints described in this article demand a triangulation methodology, using complementary data sources. We privilege the youths’ perspectives, but in some cases, the inclusion of the staff’s views clarifies the understanding and interpretation of the data. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 address RQ1 and RQ2.

### 3.2. Workshops Details

DiCi-Educa paid attention to the group’s singularities. The fieldwork was based on thematic and technical

workshops involving the institutionalised youths (six groups and a minimum of 25 hours per group) in three ECs. The locations and names of the ECs will not be disclosed for ethical reasons. We will refer to them as EC1, EC2, and EC3. EC1 targeted both sexes; ECs 2 and 3, only boys. The training involved the collaboration of the DiCi-Educa multidisciplinary research team (education, psychology, sociology, journalism, and communication) composed of five researchers and two consultants. The workshops used a bottom-up participatory approach, meaning that all the work was prepared and revised to meet the youths' needs identified by the ECs in the online questionnaires and during the workshops.

The workshops promoted critical thinking and making in a very dialogical and hands-on fashion. The subjects of the thematic workshops covered digital citizenship, being online, digital rights participation, and otherness. The technical workshops offered theories on the making of photography, podcasts, and 360 videos.

The youths explored digital equipment and its possibilities to create media products such as videos, photographs, and podcasts emulating radio programmes. To the ECs, the project offered access to high-quality equipment with digital cameras, 360 cameras and accessories, headsets, laptops, and media production software.

At the end of the workshops, we opened space to have a feedback session with the youths so that they could share their experience of the project. They were also invited to play a board game (Castro & Brites, 2021) produced for research and validated with other research groups beforehand. The game's main goal is to foster a balanced "onlife" (Floridi, 2015, p. 1). The game recognises the entanglement of our physical and digital worlds. It builds on activities that relate to well-being in digital and offline life (e.g., breathing exercises, health facts, what should be done to solve digital problems, or what the players know about more technical subjects, namely the internet of things, algorithms, and cookies).

### 3.3. Ambassadors

During the project, we continuously revised the training content and strategies to meet the influx of youths and their specificities, interests, and needs (e.g., privileging more dialogical daily life examples and audiovisual content). From the third to the fifth group, we had youths who returned to repeat the workshops of their own volition. These youngsters had their contributions credited as authors in the workshop's contents following their wish to see their names on the first PowerPoint slide along with the names of the research team; this was fair, and it recognised their involvement. We believe this involvement resulted from the stimulating and balanced informal environment we were able to provide in an institution with stringent rules. The opportunity to use digital technologies was an added value to keep them excited about the project. We gave them an active

role in peer-to-peer education and their involvement in the process as active participants (Higgins et al., 2007). This illustrates the positive impact the experience had on their daily lives. We observed their progress as they revealed more elaborated arguments, informed reasoning, and leadership competencies in the tasks. This was the most rewarding achievement of the project. For this reason, the project continues due to the positive feedback from the staff (EC2, Focus Group 2 [FG2]) and the youth (field notes EC1, EC2, and EC3), and considering that there is a continual flow of youths through the ECs.

### 3.4. Sample and Data Collection Details

During the DiCi-Educa lifecycle, we collected data from the youths and the staff in three ECs. We began by collecting youths' data using two online semi-open questionnaires with closed and open questions. These questionnaires were applied before and after the workshops. During the workshops, we collected data from participant observations and field notes on the perspectives they shared during the workshops. The media products they envisioned and made, as well as their reflexive processes, were also registered in the field notes and participatory action research dimensions. At the end of the project, we collected data using a final semi-open questionnaire.

The questionnaires were answered online using Google Forms with a duration of 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the cognitive profile of the participant. The online questionnaires were applied outside the workshops, and the ECs' staff assisted in this data collection. The data collected from participant observation was captured by the researchers during the workshops. The initial online questionnaire aimed to collect information about demographics and socioeconomic status (Part I) and their perspectives and uses related to themes that were developed during the project (Part II). For ethical reasons, Part I of the questionnaire was separated from the second part. This first part was filled out by the staff with the institutional information. This decision was implemented to avoid feelings of stigmatisation, namely, information about the participants' demographics and family contexts, such as their family education, parents' job situation, if their parents had ever been imprisoned, and their marital status, as well as and particular demographics about the youths. The first part of the questionnaire was also filled out separately so that we could not establish any correlation between parts I and II and the participants. This measure ensured complete anonymity. The second part of the online questionnaire covered their digital experiences (what devices, frequency of use, kinds of use) and self-reported digital competencies (acquisition of skills, with whom, skills to search for news, participation, self-expression, content creation). After the workshops, the final questionnaire had two sections: one about self-reported digital competencies and the other for the project's feedback (with no collection of demographics or socio-economic status details).

The data collected with the staff began in our first contact with the ECs' through focus groups. These sessions helped us to obtain a context-based view of the institutions and the youngsters' lives. For the staff's data collection, we did six 50–60-minute focus groups (FG). These were held at the beginning and end of the project with 12 professionals from areas such as education, psychology, and social work. Other data collection came from participant observation and field notes taken during the workshops. The data is organised into around 80 text pages. The researchers made the focus groups' transcriptions.

As was the case with the youths, the staff involved in DiCi-Educa were selected by each EC, considering their professional profile, their work with the youths, and the digital competencies required to give continuity to the project afterwards. It is essential to add that, despite the goodwill of the staff, the ECs suffer from a scarcity of human and digital resources, so participation was not as regular as they/we would have wished.

During the workshops, we had at least two researchers switch roles to conduct the session and register observation notes on paper. For the whole data collection and subsequent analysis, at least two researchers were actively engaged in the tasks.

### 3.5. Covid-19 Implications

DiCi-Educa was temporarily interrupted in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdowns. This situation changed the internet usage at the ECs as they were unable to maintain their state of almost total digital disconnection and were forced to adjust to a new digital reality. The digital medium was the bridge to remote schooling and communication with the family. These uses always happen under adult supervision for security and protection reasons. Covid-19 also impacted the continuity of the project's implementation. The first five workshops took place on-site, in-person, and outside an internet connection context. The sixth workshop happened during the lockdown, and for this reason, it was entirely remote and online, with an impact on the bonds and social proximity we were used to creating with the youngsters.

This change implied making some adjustments before the workshops. For instance, the EC staff became our hands, and we had to give them training beforehand so they could operate the digital equipment and support the youths during the technical workshops. With this final group, we faced technical difficulties regarding sound and broadband connection. The group was seated around one computer. This impacted the development of the debates, their sharing of views, and the collection of data.

## 4. Analysis

Considering the context presented here, the societal and digital scopes of promoting and protecting digital rights

cannot be forgotten. This article aims to reflect on that complexity by looking at how institutionalised youths deal with digital environments and how their digital reality before and during institutionalisation can impact their digital rights. To answer our research questions and to deeply reflect on the insufficiency of only considering digital and internet access to exercise digital rights, we organised this section around two topics: digital attitudes and practices before institutionalisation, and digital access and digital rights in the ECs.

### 4.1. Digital Practices Before Institutionalisation

As previously stated, digital rights are better perceived in contexts of access and use. However, access per se does not guarantee the climbing of the digital ladder of opportunities and benefits, nor does it ensure the full exercise of digital rights. According to the youths' own answers collected in the initial questionnaires on their digital autonomy, access, and uses before the EC, four trends stand out:

1. Their media habits revolve around the daily use of the internet on their smartphones and watching television (in this order and with over 90%). The internet and the smartphone are the preferred means to hang out and stay in touch with friends and family, serving the needs of a digital nomad generation, which also shows less interest in searching for news online.
2. Very few respondents ever used a digital book or a kindle, and half had never read a physical newspaper. Only three youths mentioned the habit of reading print newspapers before being institutionalised. As we highlighted above, the online environments were always at the top.
3. More than half used to listen to the radio.
4. A quarter had never used a computer/laptop before the EC, which clearly points to digital inequalities that transcend the digital context.

The field notes pointed to similar results about habits before the EC, cross-checking what was collected in the questionnaires. Most of the digital activities were related to online gaming (including games such as Grand Theft Auto [GTA], a very popular open-world action game in which players assume the role of criminals: "We all played GTA before the EC, although it is not for our age," boy, EC2 field notes), illegal downloading ("in the past, it was easier to download videos from YouTube," boy, EC1 field notes), and consuming habits, namely shopping online, listening to music, watching movies online, and using social media. Almost all respondents considered that digital media facilitated communication. Besides social media, videos and other digital environments (e.g., gaming communities) were among the most suitable means of self-expression, even if they sometimes showed inappropriate content. This is echoed in

youths' accounts. One boy (EC2) shared that he had "posted a video online and couldn't get it down," another talked about a video posted on Instagram where "someone kicks a dog" (EC1 field notes), and a third one mentioned having filmed and posted a video on Instagram about "a girl being racist" (EC3 field notes). In the questionnaires, a quarter of the youths in DiCi-Educa indicated they had created false profiles and offended other people online. These results match the research that addresses how youths cope with fragile access to digital devices in low-income areas (Brites & Ponte, 2018).

#### 4.1.1. Multiple Levels of Life-Course Disadvantages

The multiple levels of life-course disadvantages that start even before institutionalisation point to these media and digital disadvantages experienced by these youths. In situations of institutionalisation, internet access is poor, digital rights lose prominence, and youths turn to old media—allowed in slots during the day, namely television, radio, and newspapers—for information and entertainment purposes. Often, among different channels, they choose a tabloid television news channel to watch the news. The vulnerability faced in their daily context (social, economic, cultural, and personal) has implications for what they do in the digital realm, demonstrating that it is "difficult to escape a situation of disadvantage" (Helsper, 2021, p. 181) that has to do with the second level (skills and engagement) and third level (benefits) of socio-digital disadvantage.

Nevertheless, a sign of the alleviation of digital inequalities comes from the youths' recognition (both in the initial questionnaires and in the field notes) of the internet and its potential (which relates to outcomes that come with the third level of digital disadvantage explained before) to improve their living conditions. They identified as an added value using the internet for searching for job opportunities, health information, or academic purposes, and half of them for reading news online (initial questionnaire). On the question related to news consumption, their answers emphasised searching for news on diverse online platforms, followed by television. Their news interests focus on local news, sports, crime, justice, security, and *fait divers*, whereas political news, economy and business, arts, and science and technology are considered dull.

In the case of these institutionalised youths, there is an evident lack of social support (parental and school mediation). More than 80% stated that they learned to use digital media alone or with friends; few mentioned their parents. This idea was often confirmed during the workshops, where they self-reported being more technology savvy when compared to the adults in the family (EC1 field notes).

However, socio-digital disadvantages must be analysed deeper and beyond the division have–have not (first digital level). At one point, a staff member gave some context to help understand how digital is valued

by the youngsters and shared the case of one boy with a cognitive impairment who does not own a smartphone but knows everything there is to know about it (Professional 2, EC2). This episode substantiates the power these cultural objects have and how they communicate a collective understanding while, at the same time, they mirror the modern technological way of life (du Gay et al., 1997). Youths' views on digital participation (the second level of digital disadvantage) boil down to giving their opinion on social media and YouTube channels. They see these as positive channels for interacting and talking "with my mother who lives in another country," says a boy. Another shared that he helped his grandmother "use the webcam" (EC2 field notes). None indicated participating, for instance, in an online forum to express their opinion or sign an online petition. The least identified digital activities were related to politics and online campaigns (initial questionnaire).

The subjectivities of these youths' socio-digital disadvantages are central to understanding how other vulnerabilities interconnect towards preparing adequate responses. This is evidenced by both youths and staff. In one focus group, the staff discussed that these youths need to be prepared to build their confidence and resilience by overcoming small challenges because "they are frightened by the idea of failing in front of their peers" (Professional 1, EC3 FG). As Lim and Suhaila (2021) indicate, their developmental stage is marked by the accentuated need for peer acceptance and identity construction. Thus, they need to be constantly encouraged to follow new (positive) challenges (EC1, EC2, and EC3 FGs and field notes): "These kids didn't have many opportunities, so nobody stops them when they do. I think the project has this dimension of providing discovery" (Professional 3, EC3 FG).

Youths' digital proficiency is also disclosed in the initial focus group with EC staff. As all of them agreed that about half of the institutionalised youths do not possess the expected critical, social, creative, or even technical digital skills: "They don't have as many skills as all that...for them, photography is simply using the smartphone" (Professional 1, EC3 FG).

#### 4.2. Digital Contexts of Access and Rights in Institutionalised Disconnected Settings

In the previous subsection, we reflected on these youngsters' practices in their everyday digital routines before institutionalisation, using the voices of the youths and the views of the staff to give consistency to our analysis. The picture may or may not be influenced by their life trajectories, but we cannot disregard it. Consequently, there is a regression of rights. This reinforces our argument that institutionalised youths who are digitally disconnected while in the ECs fall back to the first level of digital inequality. They face these constraints to their digital rights along with the multiple inequalities they face in their lives. So, it could be asked how their situation

can be improved while they are institutionalised and on the path toward acquiring their digital rights. In this section, we will shed light on this reflection using the data and discussions of the DiCi-Educa project and processes of co-deliberation and collaboration.

#### 4.2.1. Digital-Deserted Environments

As we pointed out before, the ECs face technological difficulties because these institutions are themselves taking small steps to climb the ladder of digital opportunities: They have poor internet connections and lack digital human resources and up-to-date technical resources, which are crucial to taking full advantage of digital opportunities and rights as well as developing digital skills and literacies. These difficulties impact youths' quality of internet access and, consequently, their digital rights. During the project, we faced several technical impediments working with the ECs' laptops during the on-site workshops and using an unstable internet connection for the online workshops. This situation was highlighted by the staff and by the institutionalised youths.

Regarding the internet, the youths and the ECs' staff consistently demonstrated their (a) preoccupation with safety and (b) the need for better media and digital infrastructures. This reveals ambivalence and tension between security and freedom to use the internet autonomously, challenging both online safety and digital rights. The staff predict that as youngsters are increasingly online, aggressions and convictions of youths involving actions in the digital realm will rise in the future. This concern was present in the focus groups and the field notes: "I want to reinforce the security issue and the need to use technologies safely. We don't yet have any situation related to digital crimes yet, but I believe this will soon change, either as aggressors or as victims" (Professional 3, EC2 FG). This account is relevant as it may justify the digital protective measures in the EC by anticipating future problems that may arise in digital environments, which from their point of view, represent a medium with increased potential for crime. In this case, DiCi-Educa was perceived as a preventive opportunity to learn about internet-related risks and how to deal with the internet, which primarily prioritised safety. However, this comes at the expense of disregarding opportunities for the youths to exercise their digital rights and develop digital citizenship skills.

From life before the EC, youths particularly miss having access to their smartphones and online games (EC3 field notes). Focusing on youths' voices regarding digital environments, rights, and challenges, we argue they would benefit from better digital conditions at the ECs. However, most of all, they would benefit from a more profound, co-deliberative, and collaborative approach to their digital environments and rights. In line with the ECs' cultures, there was a constant balance between promoting a co-collaborative and deliberative position in the project and the need to ensure the ECs' security. The workshops took place in a dialogi-

cal and co-collaborative environment. Thus, the ambivalence between internet access vs. security was a recurrent topic raised by the youths and staff. Some of the issues brought into the discussion were, for instance, fake news, 21st-century competencies, or acts of digital venues for participation. Despite the youths' limited options to take advantage of digital opportunities, they proclaimed themselves "digital natives," a benefit related to being born with the internet. As one boy observes: "Even small children know how to operate them [devices]" (EC1 field notes). But, above all, these were enriching opportunities to discuss internet access inside the ECs, in particular digital autonomy vs. safe behaviours and security. Interestingly, along with the conversations, the youths could understand arguments to support both sides of the argumentation. They recognised the importance of having a set of rules to guarantee both their digital rights and the ECs' security, namely having a limited time of use per day, using software to prevent illegal downloading, and supervision (EC2 field notes). However, these fruitful discussions with our mediation were interrupted because of the pandemic.

#### 4.2.2. "Internet as a Right? Is That True?" They Asked

During the thematic workshops, we perceived that, for these youngsters, the concept and the relevance of digital rights were not always easy to understand (compared to human rights). They were not always aware of their digital rights, being sceptical about considering internet access as a right. Thus, we began the discussion by bringing definitions built by other youngsters through the 5Rights Foundation as a starting point. In this regard, the discussion was inspirational. They paid particular attention to the right to remove online information aligned with previous accounts. However, when confronted with the implications of digital reputation and digital footprint, they expressed some concerns and fears of losing, for instance, job opportunities if a future employer checks their social media accounts: "I will never get a job, then," stated a boy (EC2), or as a girl added one might "suffer the consequences of a photo posted online" (EC1). They also ignore settings related to privacy and personal information storage on social media or the possibility that someone might save what they post online even if they erase it (EC1, EC2, and EC3 field notes).

Furthermore, as a result of their reflections, youths feel that they lack technical knowledge and a place to learn about it (EC1, EC2, and EC3 field notes and initial questionnaires). This lack of social support may explain why they typically learn using the internet and devices autonomously or with their peer group instead of drawing on their parents. By social support, we refer to the parental and school mediation that is also pivotal in the second level of digital disadvantage to facilitate the acquisition of skills and to take full advantage of the digital medium. They also demonstrated a deficit in terms of digital vocabulary and literacy. When playing the board

game during the feedback session (EC3 field notes), and although the board game (see Figure 1) was a joyful moment, it was likewise another piece of the puzzle to support our analysis. To complete the tasks and move forward in the game, they had to make decisions based on given problematic situations (e.g., online gaming addiction, mediation, digital bullying, and online privacy), but they also had to understand what geolocation, the internet of things, cookies, algorithms, and the filter bubble effect are.

Discussions around risk and risky behaviours often arose explicitly and implicitly in the workshops. For the youths, the virtual world, as they often call it, is associated with words like “destruction, pollution, and sadness,” and the dystopian future lack of technology access is linked with “poverty,” negative behaviours, such as “cyberbullying” and “loneliness” (EC2 and EC3 field notes). They also reported on moral panics, internet challenges, and hoaxes when talking of high-profile phenomena like “MOMO” and “blue whale,” and they talked about illegal downloading; yet few youths mentioned taking careful consideration of friendship/followers’ requests; in fact, in their own words, social media “are an addiction” (EC1 field notes).

#### 4.2.3. Hands-On Activities, Facilitating Learning

One of the most rewarding parts of the research process was the practical side of the project and the hands-on

approach because this was a vivid experience and the most welcomed part for the youths. All the media products created included reflections (decided by them) about their past, present, and future life. So, this was a means to critically place themselves at the centre of their own lives and express their thoughts, regrets, hopes, and dreams through the media. Three boys (EC1 and EC2) and a girl (EC1) pointed out that “DiCi” made them reframe what they wanted to do in the future.

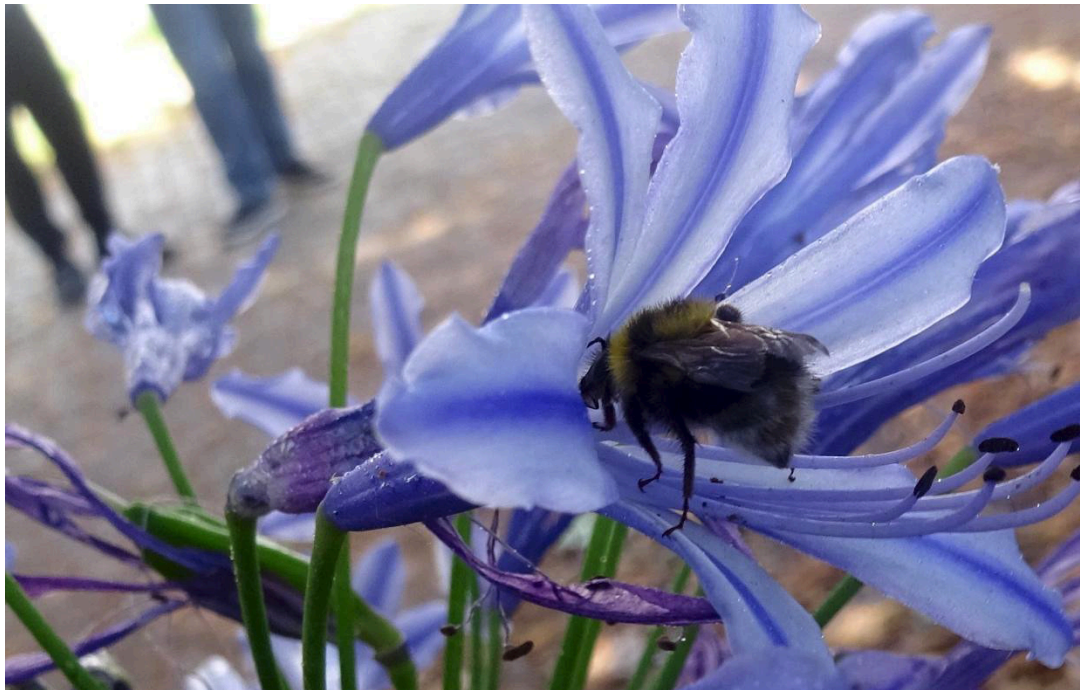
The hands-on tactic of learning by doing was an approach that allowed the youths to open up on these sensitive topics in a relaxed yet secure environment. They had the opportunity to work on 360 videos, digital photography, podcasts (content production and technical editing), and music/lyric production. This article offers examples from the photovoice approach and music production.

The digital photography sessions captured their attention easily and motivated them to action. Very few participants had ever used a camera like the ones employed in the project. They were more familiar with taking pictures just using their mobile phone. Very few understood composition rules or believed that photography could allow them to express feelings and perspectives (EC1, EC2, and EC3 field notes and initial questionnaires). They were challenged to document their everyday lives in the EC with pictures. The three pictures depicted here illustrate that. Some of these pictures (e.g., Figures 2 and 3) allowed them to look at details



**Figure 1.** Boardgame. Source: Photo taken by an institutionalised youth.





**Figure 2.** Nature at the EC. Source: Photo taken by an institutionalised youth.

that used to go unnoticed. The photographs revealed a high standard of technical and compositional quality. In cases where that did not happen (for instance, with youth with cognitive impairments), we still could find a strong message in the pictures. The use of the cam-

eras also enhanced their organisational and collaborative skills. From the point of view of digital expression, this was one of the most exciting parts of the workshops, as they told us in the feedback session (EC1, EC2, and EC3 field notes).



**Figure 3.** The idea of freedom. Source: Photo taken by an institutionalised youth.


Having taken the pictures, all the groups were challenged to collaboratively edit and select the best photos, paying attention to critical and technical aspects. They organised and categorised the pictures by themselves into the following categories: friendship/companionship, nature, self-portraits, and freedom. Some pictures represented moments of friendship, daily tasks, how they see their friends, or their gaze to capture the life happening beyond the walls. The process of taking photographs demanded creativity and self-expression. In the final questionnaires, when asked about the best tools to express themselves, they put video in first place, followed by photography, and in third place podcasts, and only then came social media.


Music production was also a very powerful, creative, and critical media production process in which the youths took advantage of the different skills in the group. The lyrics they wrote for the project strongly reflect their present and future life contexts, such as the example we share below.


Through media production, they voiced their feelings about their lives before the EC (e.g., about their family, deviant or risky behaviours, and drug consumption) and about their plans and dreams for the future. One of the groups had previous experience writing, producing, and publishing music on YouTube. They saw it as a form of civic participation: “I write about what goes on in my mind. I write for me and for others” (boy, EC2 field notes).


The following excerpt (DiCi-Educa Rap) is one of the lyrics produced for DiCi-Educa. We translated the lyrics from Portuguese, but we kept the emojis they inserted in the lyrics, which resembles how these younger generations talk in chats. This music talks about the strength of friendship ties, in which a friend can be like family. To keep this relationship solid, respect and loyalty are central requirements for nurturing that bond:


**DiCi-Educa Rap** 

So now I’m going to tell you about what friendship means to me 

A little respect mixed with loyalty 

A friend is a brother, and a brother is a family 

But I must tell you one thing, and of this I am sure 

Being human is the best thing that exists in nature 

4.2.4. Changes Imposed by Covid-19

Given what we said about Covid-19, it is not surprising that the ECs had to let the youths use the internet. All communications with families and schools became digital by default (provision). Still, as previously stated, these uses are limited and fall under the EC’s surveillance (protection), meaning the youths’ digital autonomy (Pasquier, 2008) is not straightforward.

The youths’ deprivation of digital media and the internet is not recent in Portuguese ECs. However, the Covid-19 pandemic also brought about winds of (digital) change. Before the pandemic, internet access was reduced to specific situations: when required for academic tasks, school applications, and communication with parents who lived abroad, and, in all cases, supervised by the EC staff. In the staff’s view, concern regarding supervision and the lack of trust in letting the youngsters explore digital opportunities without adults’ control is central in their narratives: “We can’t get distracted. If we look away, they’re already on Facebook or Instagram. We must control it. They are motivated by entertainment. If we try to introduce digital tools for other purposes, they are not so interested.” (Professional 1, EC3 FG). This account also reveals a lack of understanding of the mediated world in which children and youth are growing up and reinforces the generation (digital) gap.

5. Final Notes and Future Perspectives

This article is guided by two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). Our findings indicate the diverse constraints these youths face before being institutionalised that can negatively impact their (digital) rights. Findings point to an interrelation of measures that need to be taken into account: (a) the need to provide venues for institutionalised youths to build critical and communication skills, (b) the necessity to widen their views of the world and promote positive behaviours, and (c) the importance of implementing critical methods to help them to think about technologies in diverse daily life contexts. Besides the debate around digital inequalities, digital rights (Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017; Lim & Suhaila, 2021; Livingstone & Third, 2017), and media education, the results we present are consistent and show evidence that can inform important stakeholders, the guardians of these youngsters, and policymakers in order to change these youths’ future lives. The present is already digital and comes with challenges and complexities that all of us, researchers, citizens, teachers, and policymakers, need to reflect on, learn about, and act upon. Thus, these results are important for different stakeholders to take decisions about social and educational policies for these institutions and these youths with multiple levels of life-course disadvantage.

In line with the intersection of communication and education (Bermejo-Berros, 2021) to promote personal competencies for critical dialogue, creativity, critical

attitudes, and social participation, we focused our gaze on the antecedents that may explain socio-digital disadvantages and the contexts that, instead of tackling them, sometimes, for diverse reasons (as pointed out), make these youngsters' role as digital citizens of the 21st century more difficult.

The results highlight the digital response of these institutionalised youths as it widens their digital disadvantage (Helsper, 2021) and, because of this, it demands a more collaborative and co-deliberative educational model (Ravenscroft et al., 2020) that will provide deliberative and constructive environments. Moreover, youths and staff pointed to the need for school transformation to allow these subjects to be addressed with students. But this also implies having a powerful and flexible curriculum to catch the train of digital innovation with equally well-equipped digital and human resources.

The discussions about (a) the ECs' digitally disconnected life that leads to them being digital deserts, (b) the need to be a 21st-century digitally-competent citizen, and (c) the learning relevance of non-formal settings of education were often discussed with both the youth, and the staff at different points, and with both groups at the same time. These are constant and unsolved concerns, and their discussion reinforced the project.

Considering future research in this context, we can point to the need to, first, further longitudinal participatory research with institutionalised youths—This is one of the most evident conclusions of the project. The interests of the young participants were mostly related to its participatory dimension, enhancing the contextual dimension of their lives (Vissenberg & d'Haenens, 2020). Second, we also point to the need for further research, particularly addressing their (dis)connection with news environments, especially online (which is our current focus with the Foundation for Science and Technology-funded project YouNDigital—PTDC/COM-OUT/0243/2021). There is a lack of research about news consumption in institutions and its repercussions for democratic life. As we saw from the youths' answers to the initial questionnaires, they revealed very low interest in traditional news. However, they responded very well to the journalistic-oriented methodologies, namely taking photographs, recording podcasts based on radio shows, and thinking about their lives in a reflexive way, expressing themselves through music lyrics and photography. Further research could better inform how they make contact with the world and democracy, moving beyond traditional views.

Third, we point to the training delivered to the staff working with youths in the ECs. Fake news has become a central concern regarding its dissemination since the Covid-19 pandemic. This is an opportunity for training that needs to be addressed with these populations that work directly with the young people, most of them unskilled, to assist them in news and media literacy-related issues.

Nevertheless, training initiatives must be considered but may not be taken up by the ECs, which still privilege old media and are reluctant toward new media. As we used to say during the workshops, this DiCi-Educa approach is a small seed that needs to be nurtured in a complex and difficult environment. As we hope to have clarified, their lives face multiple challenges beyond the digital deserts in which they live. This kind of intervention benefits from a longitudinal follow-up. Despite the difficulties, we would highlight that the discussions over digital rights were long-lasting and valuable, along with the use of digital opportunities to make these youths' voices heard.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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