**Report of the Forum**
**'Digitalisation: social appropriation and public policies**
**from an ethical and rights perspective'**

**EU-LAC Foundation and CLACSO**
**9 June 2022**

**9th LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL SCIENCES**
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**Introduction**

On 9 June 2022, the **EU-LAC Foundation** and the **CLACSO Working Group Appropriation of Digital Technologies and Intersectionalities** organised the **Forum "Digitalisation: social appropriation and public policies from an ethical and rights-based perspective"** in the framework of the 9th Latin American and Caribbean Conference on Social Sciences, which took place in Mexico City from 7 to 10 June 2022, at the headquarters of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

This Forum aimed at addressing different aspects of the relationship between digitalisation and various areas of social life. In particular, it was of interest to generate an analysis of the relationship between education and digitalisation, with a focus on Latin America and the

Caribbean and Europe. The years 2020 and 2021 were marked by the (partial) closure of schools, vocational training and university institutions to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, and by the transition to digital tools and forms of teaching and learning. Beyond education, the forum also focused on the concerns, articulated by various social organisations, academic networks, and governmental bodies in both regions, about the risks and challenges that digitalisation poses to human rights as a whole.[1]

The purpose of the forum was to encourage reflections and proposals regarding greater bi-regional cooperation between Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Union aimed at the incorporation and management of digital technologies from an ethical, social cohesion and rights perspective, adopting the principles established by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations and the recent UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.[2]

The Forum was organised in a hybrid way, at the UNAM facilities and via live streaming, and consisted of an opening session with **Adrián Bonilla** (Executive Director of the EU-LAC Foundation), **Silvia Lago Martínez** (University of Buenos Aires, Argentina) and **Roberto Canales Reyes** (Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo Regional y Políticas Públicas, Chile); a master lecture, given by **Manuel Castells** (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain and University of California, USA); and a panel addressing the "Challenges and proposals for an agenda related to contemporary digitisation processes in the countries of the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean" with the participation of **Delia Crovi Druetta** (UNAM), **Guiomar Rovira Sancho** (Universitat de Girona, Spain and UNAM), **Susana Morales** (National University of Córdoba) and **Tristán Mattelart** (Université Paris Panthéon Assas, France). The Forum was moderated by **Ana Rivoir** (University of the Republic of Uruguay), **Anna Barrera Vivero** (Senior Programme Coordinator of the EU-LAC Foundation) and **Leonor Graciela Natansohn** (Federal University of Bahia, Brazil). This report summarises the presentations and interventions made by the panelists mentioned in this Forum.

**Opening**

The opening table of the forum was attended by authorities and representatives of the EU-LAC Foundation and CLACSO, including Adrián Bonilla, Executive Director of the EU-LAC Foundation, Silvia Lago Martínez, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Roberto Canales Reyes, Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo Regional y Políticas Públicas, Chile.

Digitalisation has been one of the most important issues on the bi-regional agenda. According to Adrián Bonilla, one of the objectives of the cooperation in this area should focus on closing the digital division in our societies, which is not exclusively a technological or technical problem, but rather has a social character, given that access – or lack of access – implies a dynamic of inclusion-exclusion that transforms it into an indicator of poverty and discrimination. Therefore, digitisation is indispensable in modern educational processes. For academic communities, digitisation is also linked to the issue of open access. In this sense, the EU-LAC Foundation, together with other actors in both regions, has been working on an initiative to promote open access to science, i.e., to rethink in strategic terms issues such as evaluation, indexing and even the very construction of what determines what is and what is not science. Finally, he stressed the importance of multilingualism and the possibility of recognising products in all languages as scientific knowledge. In this way, open access digital platforms become tools for the democratisation of knowledge, fostering the inclusive and sustainable development of our societies.

Silvia Lago Martínez also emphasised the relevance of the digital divide and public policies for digital inclusion, digital citizenship and technological appropriation through social movements. She started from the understanding that access to digital technologies is a human right and, likewise, the internet is a public good. She also presented the Network of Researchers on Appropriation of Technologies (RIAT), of which she is a member, as a group with around 100 participants from both regions that holds annual meetings, analyses and publications of interest.

Finally, Roberto Canales Reyes greeted the audience and presented the work of the Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo Regional y Políticas Públicas de Chile, which has developed outstanding lines of research in the use and appropriation of technologies for learning and good educational practices and innovation with the support of digital resources for learning. In addition, a study was carried out on the opinion and training needs of teachers in the use and curricular integration of information and communication technologies (ICT), in order to support a training proposal aimed at didactic innovation in the classroom.

**Keynote Conference: Latin America between fear and hope**

Professor Manuel Castells (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and University of Southern California) focused his lecture on the concepts of 'fear' and 'hope', applying these emotions to the complex Latin American context. Fear is the most powerful human emotion, Professor Castells explained, the one that generates the most effects of all kinds. On the Latin American continent, fear revolves around the daily violence - possible or real - that invades life, through delinquency and criminality. Another dimension of fear is related to arbitrariness and police abuse, that is, frustration due to the impossibility of resorting to public institutions. It is also relevant to highlight the fear of sexism and homophobic violence. In addition, the old fear of unlimited exploitation - when a person is forced to do any kind of work in difficult conditions - in exchange for survival, persists. According to Castells, all these forms of fear end up transforming human relations, historically founded on love.

In the face of fear, there is a compensatory reaction that revolves around indignation and anger. However, there is another possible reaction - a more positive one - which is hope. Currently, hope is being side-tracked and stifled by a number of mechanisms. For example, at the individual level, it is limited by the breakdown of social bonds between us and an exacerbated individualism, which Professor Castells characterised as destructive and competitive.

At the societal level, structural inequalities in Latin America are only increasing and are far from diminishing. The prospect –  or hope – of social mobility does not exist for most people. According to Manuel Castells, this has to do with the current crisis of political legitimacy of democratic institutions. The corruption of institutions is making it impossible for other sectors to function, and this has not been corrected. The phenomenon is further aggravated, according to Castells, by the arrogance of the elites.

With regard to the specific theme that convened the present forum, Manuel Castells expressed his appreciation of technology, stating that it "is neither good nor bad, but it is not neutral". On the contrary, he sees it as a factor of hope, especially taking into account the processes that have been facilitated by digital media since the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. His current concern, rather, relates to the widespread assault on reason, i.e., the denial of science.

Regarding his expectations about the future, he considered that we are in an alley with and without exit at the same time. In this regard, Professor Castells clarified that we must try to return to what sociologists usually call analysis to get to the bottom of problems, leaving aside – as far as possible – our own inclinations and ideologies. Lastly, he mentioned that fear can be overcome through the collective empowerment of a new autonomous politics, that is, neither left nor right. The new political projects in the region, according to him, are organic progress and he suggested waiting to see how they develop. "Another world and another Latin America are possible."

**Panel "Challenges and proposals for an agenda of European and Latin American and Caribbean countries around contemporary digitalisation processes"**

The panelists in this section of the event were Delia Crovi Druetta from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Guiomar Rovira Sancho from the Universitat de Girona, Susana Morales from the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba and Tristán Mattelart from the Université Paris Panthéon Assas.

Susana Morales started from the reflection that, for decades, technological innovation has been characterised by the production of objects for profit and implying a considerable consumption of energy and resources. As a result, gender, racial and social inequalities have deepened, as well as environmental degradation. The digital technologies sector contributes to a considerable degree to global warming, exceeding the contribution of the aviation sector, for example. Furthermore, according to the Bitcoin Electricity Consumption Index, an online tool developed by researchers at Cambridge University's Centre for Alternative Finance, in 2021 the energy needed to mine digital currency worldwide was similar to that consumed by countries such as Argentina or Norway. However, the production of technologies has not been characterised by defined environmental protection or compensation measures. Therefore, for Susana Morales, it would not be possible to get out of the pandemic by applauding the existence of digital technologies that have allowed some of us to continue our lives, without questioning whether the hyper-technological world, instead of contributing to improving the quality of life of the population, is not seriously compromising the lives of current and future generations.

Another challenge highlighted by Susana Morales has to do with the impact that digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI) have on our lives. The amount of data about human activities mediated by digital technologies has been the subject of economic value creation for platform companies. These processes, which are set to expand further with the Internet of Things, put us at increasing risk of deepening exclusion and surveillance of people. Hence, there is an urgent need for some limitations on the ability of companies (and in some cases the state) to use our data for purposes contrary to our wellbeing, or for purposes not controlled by users.

Susana Morales mentioned the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, approved in November 2021. According to Morales, it is a document whose content alerts us to the risks and informs us about the actions that it would be desirable to promote in order to mitigate the consequences of the expansion of AI, when the collective interest does not prevail over the profit motive. It is therefore necessary to demand effective public policies from governments and to accompany, from an informed and empowered citizenry, the processes of strengthening their regulatory roles.

Tristan Mattelart then opened his intervention by talking about the Global South and the "euphoria" of platforms, which reached its peak in 2010. He saw digital platforms as instruments of democratisation of authoritarian regimes in the Global South and also as a promise for reducing poverty and increasing productivity. In turn, he showed how a few US-based platforms dominate this sector and have cultural values embedded in them that would imply a form of symbolic hegemony. Tristan Mattelart acknowledged that some critics go even further and speak of data colonialism, with the aim of appropriating resources on a large scale.

Similarly, Tristán Mattelart analysed the active role of some national companies. Thus, he spoke of how social media platforms have offered, on a global scale, new spaces for expression and creation, with lower barriers to entry and access. For him, digital platforms are far from being only facilitators of content, they also contribute to the restructuring of the norms of public discourses and social processes.

For her part, Delia Crovi Druetta began by affirming that, at the present time, we are not yet witnessing a definitive closure of the pandemic confinement, but rather, we are treading a slippery path with transitory decisions. Referring to higher education, she asked, what kind of face-to-face education are we returning to? The trend today is towards hybrid, mixed or "*blended*" programmes of multiple experiences. The intensive use of educational platforms

(known as platformisation), according to Professor Delia Crovi, seeks to reposition control and repetition, concepts that oppose the Latin American contributions of educational communication or educommunication based on horizontality, dialogue and interaction. It is also opposed to the mechanisms of technological appropriation characterised as personal, situated and drivers of cultural change.

At the same time, the pandemic found digital education on the sidelines. However, it has learned - by force - to take on a leading role, opting to look for new ways to get out of the pandemic, even if they were spontaneous and sometimes improvised. Of the multiple challenges that emerged from the confinement during the pandemic and the platforming of education, Delia Crovi highlighted the following, which she characterised as nodal:

- Gaps in technological connectivity and infrastructure and in digital skills.
- The management of space-time, i.e., times without reference to external spaces, where daily routines were blurred; and boundaries between public-private - work, education, entertainment, relationships etc. - blurred. - that faded away.
- Social surveillance as a threat to autonomy in higher education.
- Unequal technological appropriations conditioned by local, regional, national and international scenarios, which do not produce cultural transformations as expected.

Delia Crovi acknowledged that the platforms also allowed many students to enter an unknown world that now, in general, they know through the repetition of routines rather than through innovation and creation. She warned that "if we repeat instead of appropriating an object beyond the technical, we give up the possibility of taking a step towards reasoning and critical reflection that lead to social transformation". Therefore, for Delia Crovi, the educational digitalisation agenda should not be opposed to technological innovations, taking into account their social power and that of the conglomerates that manage them. Rather, it is a matter of the education sector making itself heard on the basis of the need for dialogue and interaction that pedagogical processes demand.

Guiomar Rovira Sancho, from the University of Girona (Spain) began by mentioning that political influence today uses personal data that is collected, analysed and stored in databases of political groups, private companies and digital platforms. Some of the questions we are asked are: How to control data traffic, is there data sovereignty, is there technological sovereignty, is there data sovereignty, is there technological sovereignty, is there data sovereignty, is there data sovereignty, is there data sovereignty, is there data sovereignty, is there data sovereignty?

He highlighted that there were also experiences with the creation of alternative platforms and pilot projects "EU Voice" and "EU Video" launched in April 2022 by the European Union. These are decentralised, free, open source and scalable social networks, without advertisements, without profiling users' actions, without allowing the transmission of data, and where users would remain in control of the use of their data. These experiences should be analysed in more depth, to make visible how "another world is possible".

He looked at the anti-democratic uses of digital networks from the social influence industry, referring here to the industry of *bots*, *trolls* and disinformation, which also had multiple layers: from *influencers*, to the promotion of a candidate or the disruption of a country's stability. He also highlighted the role of states in digital geopolitics, for example, through the information campaigns coordinated by states on their own citizens, or on citizens of another nation, which move the debate on influence beyond elections.

To exemplify the democratic political influence of networks, Guiomar Rovira presented the strategic use of feminist hashtags or "femitags" of connected crowds that have been created in contexts characterised by experiences of violence and feminicide, such as #NiUnaMenos, #Cuentalo, and #NiUnaMas. She explained that while feminist crowds mobilise with a multidimensional communication strategy - using mass media, graffiti, flyers, performances, songs, activism and actions of all kinds, the tractability of communication on the social network Twitter is a privileged tool for social research.

Femitags allow the indexing of messages and are also an archival and semiotic process. They acquire different functions, sometimes simultaneously, both for organising and documenting mobilisations, creating archives (e.g., for denunciations), and also generating spaces for reflexivity. They serve to disseminate and link activisms beyond the local, generating bridges and shared transnational frameworks. The conversations that femitags open up occur when traditional social organisations no longer structure the communication of the feminist movement. Instead, communication itself has become the organisational infrastructure. Often, the networks are the conveners and are the convening. Women's participation in digital networks is also taking feminism beyond its own theories, groups and organisations and opening it up to new interpellations.

## Summary

From the interventions and presentations of experts from Latin America and Europe and the dialogue with the public in the Forum "Digitalisation: social appropriation and public policies from an ethical and rights-based perspective", the risks and concerns associated with the digitalisation of different spheres of human life in terms of deepened gaps and exclusions, the limitation of democratic spaces, the expansion of symbolic and cultural hegemonies, and human rights violations have been addressed. At the same time, the potential of technological appropriation, the opening of new spaces for access to education, mobilisation, the denunciation of human rights violations, and the transformation of public and democratic spaces were highlighted. Critical analyses and the presentation of the results of scientific studies led to important reflections on necessary legal and regulatory frameworks, ethical criteria and options for action for both civil society and decision-makers at national, transnational and international levels, which deserve to be deepened in future analyses and spaces for dialogue.

**Link to recorded video of the Forum:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjOVOeNLoYg

**Link to Conference website:** https://www.clacso.org/clacso2022/

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