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Sónia Pedro Sebastião

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## NOTA DO EDITOR

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## Introduction

- 1 In Western and well-established democracies, the connection between citizens and those seeking to govern is severed, displaced by a culture of consumerism and an obsession with celebrity culture. The decline of party membership, trust in political actors and institutions and participation in democratic processes is visible in nations across the world. As a consequence, the concept of citizenship needs to be re-conceptualized or understood from an altered perspective. “In the context of neoliberalism”, as Susen argues, “citizenship appears to have been converted into an increasingly privatized affair of capitalist society” (2010, p. 261). Moreover, the intensification of global flows of people has led to complex processes of cultural hybridization and fragmentation which transcend the known frameworks of citizenship.
- 2 The growing interconnection and predominance of mediated discourses, as well as the commoditization of everyday life tend to pose the question of whether “global” societies require new forms of citizenship, or at least, have developed new forms of citizenship expressions, since Western democracies are often portrayed as having low engaged people.
- 3 However, this apparent disengagement does not appear to signal the death of engagement as we find a variety of types of political participation occurring,

demonstrating that, under the right conditions, citizens can be mobilized for political activism. The most expressive examples are the “Arab spring”, “occupy wall street” and “the outraged”. However, this activism has new configurations and has been using different instruments, namely, digital tools.

- 4 Some points have to be questioned: Is there a movement towards alternative mechanisms for having a voice? Due to the asymmetry of power and influence between politicians and citizens, is democratic politics under threat from alternative protest movements and, looking out into the future, can developments in technology be used to enable relationships and partnerships in the political arena?
- 5 This article is a theoretical contribution to understand the efforts to broaden political participation and knowledge about citizenship using information and communication technologies. As such, it starts with the introduction of the main perspectives about internet and politics, followed by an approximation to the concepts of e-democracy, citizenship and political participation. The final section aims to present the concept of *digitania*, relating political participation with web tools.

## 1. Internet and Politics - Perspectives

- 6 The influence and potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for political participation have been debated since the 1970s, with the use of conference video calls, portable video cameras and interactive cable television, for media production with the involvement of community groups (Chadwick, 2006, p. 83).
- 7 When internet studies started to map the contributions of the internet to democracy, the perspectives were optimistic. Authors like Rheingold (1995), Toffler & Toffler (1995) and Rash (1997) believed that the internet would renew the interest of citizens in democracy, thanks to their empowerment<sup>1</sup> and increased proximity with political decision-makers. The new *medium* would allow the creation of new spaces for debate, pressure and influence in the political policies process and communication, since it would have no centre and no gatekeepers. In other words, the internet would fulfil the democratic principle announced by Lincoln: the government of the people by the people and to the people. This would mostly be due to key features of the digital media such as: anonymity and reduced social cues (Witschge, 2004, pp. 113-117); interactivity (communication in a many-to-many reciprocal basis); a global network free of boundaries; free speech and lack of censorship from authorities; the free association in “neo-tribes” with common interests; and the amateur production of information that increases the number of producers (voices), which all combined challenge the “traditional” professionals and officials as far as public opinion information is concerned.
- 8 In addition, and with the increasing number of investigations that related internet and democracy, researchers started to realize that the range of influence of the internet to improve the democratic debate and to gather citizens and politicians is limited (Hague & Loader, 1999; Norris, 2001; Wilhelm, 2000; Carpini & Keeter, 2002; Howard & Jones, 2004;

Chadwick, 2006; Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007; Mirandilla, 2009) and somehow dangerous (Wilhelm, 2000).

- 9 So, and considering previous researches summed up in Park & Perry (2008, pp. 192-193), three kinds of perspectives about the relationships between internet and politics can be identified:
1. the optimistic, according to which electronic tools are envisaged as vehicles of civic engagement, political debate and participatory *fora*;
  2. the skeptic, that recognizes the potential of internet as a means of communication, but states that it does not necessarily improve or destroy civic engagement (the relation is socially shaped);
  3. the pessimistic, that sees internet as a means to reinforce the existing power relationships and patterns of political participation. This perspective states that, on the one hand, the internet is dominated by the young, well-educated, affluent and powerful; on the other, only the already motivated and involved citizens benefit from internet use in the political arena, which leads to the reinforcement of digital inequality.
- 10 The internet is different from the other media. According to Oates & Gibson (2006, pp. 1-2), it is a virtual sphere where all levels of the political world (political officials, mass media and citizens) can be involved simultaneously. It breaks down physical barriers, it overcomes traditional forms of connection and it offers new areas of civil expression managed electronically (Maria & Rizzo, 2005, p. 76). However, it is not the *medium* that determines its use; it can involve all the political actors, but that does not imply that it does.

## 2. E-democracy

- 11 The debate about electronic democracy (e-democracy), that is, about the use of digital communicating instruments to improve the democratic government and civic engagement (political interest, political discussion and political knowledge), is framed by several factors, namely:
1. The crisis of the Western/liberal democracies provoked by: corruption processes; lack of professionalism of the politicians; detachment between citizens and political agents; low participation and turnout rates; and so on. Citizens are less interested in the life of the *polis* and more self-centred on their own problems; they do not mobilize for political actions, litigation, protest or support, at a national level, in other words, they do not engage civically; and they participate less in the deliberative processes.
  2. The generalization of web use in everyday life and also in political campaigns (Carpini & Keeter, 2002; Akdogan, 2006).
  3. The emergency of the “content nation” defined by the content production by anonymous people (Blossom, 2009).
- 12 E-democracy is considered a set of communicative political practices with the aims of expanding, diversifying and strengthening citizens’ engagement through effective and two-way information exchange channels, to increase political knowledge and the diversity of political information sources.
- 13 Nevertheless, the increasing rates of digital technologies use does not explain how this use contributes to citizens’ knowledge in general and, for the purposes of this article, to political knowledge. Web instruments allow for a greater volume of available information

about the candidates, the parties, the political and social organizations, and the political issues, due to reduced costs of access, production, distribution, sharing and debate. Besides, there is a rising number of “producers”, that is, every web user can contribute to the amount of circulating data in the internet. This “amateur” production is encouraged by the speed in gathering, retrieving, editing and transmitting information; and provoked by the decentralization of media and the rising control of consumers over the information that is produced and shared (Blossom, 2009). However, technology is information-based rather than knowledge-based, and most online political discussions tend to lose focus or to break down in “ugliness” (Hurwitz, 2003, p. 105) or emptiness.

- 14 According to Hurwitz, this may due to a lack of ethical, social and even legal dispositions which define acceptable online behaviour, rhetoric and debate; the anonymity and absence of face-to-face constraints and the high value placed on instantaneous and quick answers that lack reflection and concern for bad consequences (2003, p. 106).
- 15 On the one hand, the easiness of production and circulation of information has the side effect of information overload. Too much information transforms the citizens in information generalists since it would be too demanding to be a specialist (Carpini & Keeter, 2002). On the other hand, this scenario can be harmful for political actors since the internet also amplifies the possibilities of losing control over the information, which can be edited and used out of context. Moreover, and thanks to the interactivity feature, it is difficult to monitor the user generated content and its effects on what is said about the political campaigns, actors and other issues; and therefore respond to it. Finally, there is also the peril of the digital platforms with official political information (websites, social networks, forum, and so on) being hacked (Samuel, 2004).
- 16 Political knowledge allows citizens to become more engaged citizens, and citizenry can be improved with digital tools that are used to communicate and interact with representatives and political actors (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007). This citizenry would be “less dependent on official voices of expertise and authority” (Thornburn & Jenkins, 2003, p. 2). Nonetheless, the website technology used in political communication improves the access to information, but websites are minimally interactive and both citizens and political actors do not use it to interact or in the deliberative process. As such, websites are one more instrument to “expert audience”: journalists, opinion makers, lobbyists and political institution, which supports the persistence of the political knowledge gaps associated with problems of technology access and literacy (Ferber, Foltz, & Pugliese, 2007; Mirandilla, 2009).

17

### 3. Citizenship and Political Participation

- 18 Citizenship is both a set of practices (cultural, symbolic and economic) and a collection of rights and duties (civil, political and social) that define an individual’s membership to a state-nation. To understand citizenship we need to account for the social complexity of four dimensions: the normativity of different contents of citizenship (access to rights and imposed duties); the contentiousness of different types of citizenship (that is, the way in which political and social participation are organized in institutions); the flexibility of the conditions of citizenship (historical organization of political participation; the cultural

politics); and the legitimacy of citizenship arrangements (institutionalized forms of the distribution of social and political benefits) (Susen, 2010).

- 19 In this essay, citizenship is used as a democratic principle and understood as sense of belonging, investment and involvement in certain territory and includes duties, responsibilities and rights of the individual as a member of a nation or state. Citizenship has several dimensions, namely: the legal one defined by a legal framework; the political dimension, since the citizen has a word to say in the state's government; the civic dimension, because it presumes the involvement of the citizen in public discussion of issues; and the economic dimension given that it gives permission to his holder to work in a determined territory and contribute to the state's affluence.
- 20 Over the past years, the participation of citizens in the political life of their states has been eroding in well-established democracies. The lack of traditional participation of citizens in Western democracies and the avoidance of politics may have several causes, to name just a few (Witschge, 2004, pp. 111-113):
- Disillusion: the view that it makes no difference which party one supports;
  - Apathy: the general lack of interest in politics;
  - Impact: the view that individual messages will not make a difference;
  - Alienation: the view that politics is not for common people, but only to politicians;
  - Knowledge: not knowing enough about politics to express an opinion or not having the technological skills to make online registration and post messages;
  - Inconvenience: user generated content is too time consuming and so it is to follow the political campaign in media and on the streets; besides, this content tends to be "locked into the commercial dynamics of the mediascape" (Dijck, 2009).
  - Wavering: citizens' lack of commitment and debt of civic duty.
- 21 Apart from these causes, some constraints to citizenship associated with the ways citizens tend to occupy their time can also be identified. Most of citizens' time is spent: (1) working for long and irregular schedules, in multiple jobs, or traveling-like employments; and (2) consuming goods and services, especially entertainment and media. Besides, social capital and personal constraints related to the lack of support provided by communities, lack of confidence and fear of judgment from other community members, can be added.
- 22 The main focus of this theoretical essay is the political e-participatory culture, more particularly, citizens' motivations to participate in political life, using digital media. Political e-participatory culture is understood as a culture with low barriers for citizens' expression and civic engagement using digital media. In this kind of culture, strong support for the creation and the sharing of data with the other; with whom the "creator" feels connected can be found. Citizens are encouraged and motivated to participate because they believe that their contribution matters, not only at an individual level, but mostly at the level of the community they feel connected with. However, there are several levels of participation, expressed in the kinds of actions developed by the citizen in online environment (see figure 1).
- 23 In short, the participative culture allows every person to have a voice, despite the remaining interrogation about who is listening to that voice or if that voice is being listened at all.
- 24 Katz (1997), Coleman (1999), Wilhelm (2000), Dahlgren (2001), Shane (2004), Chadwick (2006; 2009); Herrnson, Stokes-Brown, & Hindman (2007); and Mossberger, Tolbert, &

McNeal (2008); have written about the importance and the limitations of internet technological instruments to deepen the relation between citizens and the political actors and its implications in e-participation. As a potential way of escaping from the «top-down» politics of mass democracy, in which political parties make policies with citizens low level participation and involvement, the web provides means for high differentiation of political information and ideas, and (at least) theoretical possibilities of participation and high level of involvement in negotiations and feedback between leaders and followers (McQuail, 2000, p.135).

- 25 The lack of electors' interest and the crisis of confidence in the democratic institutions and in the political actors are still significant limitations to this online involvement. Even if electors have access to web and its new communication tools that does not mean that they will spend time in the political debate, because most people simply do not bother or do not trust the political and governmental institutions, due to their failure in engaging them. This engagement is only possible if the political actors inspire trust, reliability and concern with citizens; and if citizens perceive that their opinion and participation does matter and is taken into account.
- 26 As realized by Norris (2001; 2002), the internet only reinforces the *status quo*, that is, only the citizens already involved will be motivated and only the wealthiest will have access to the information and communication technologies (ICT) to participate in the new environment. As such, and as noted by Norris (2001) and Krueger (2002), the internet only reinforces “the existing patterns of political inequality”. Besides “the use of digital network technologies to shape public policy is generally met with incredulity by most politicians, public servants and citizens” (Chadwick, 2009, p. 12).
- 27 Finally, one must inquire if the unengaged citizens want to be included or feel motivated to an active participation in something in which they do not trust: political institutions and political actors; and in which they do not believe to have a voice: political debate and deliberation.

## 4. Digital Citizenship and Digitania

- 28 In a global context and with the development of the ICT, digital communities offer the individual countless opportunities related to education, learning, interaction, participation, civic involvement and self-expression. Therefore the expression “digital citizenship” is widespread to designate the possibility that the individual has to participate in society using electronic means (Morgado & Rosas, 2010). It requires “both skills and access for regular and effective use” which includes reading, writing, comprehending, navigating and broadband access (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008, p. 140). Digital citizenship points out the individual's duties and responsibilities while member of a virtual community and it defines the communicative behaviour that the same should adopt in this environment. The digital citizen uses technology frequently for a large array of purposes, such as: political information, work, education, entertainment, socialization (Serra, 2012).
- 29 According to Ribble (2010), digital citizenship has nine dimensions. However, we consider that the digital rights and responsibilities of the individual in the digital environment are

included both in the digital etiquette and in the digital law. As such, we identify eight dimensions of the digital citizenship:

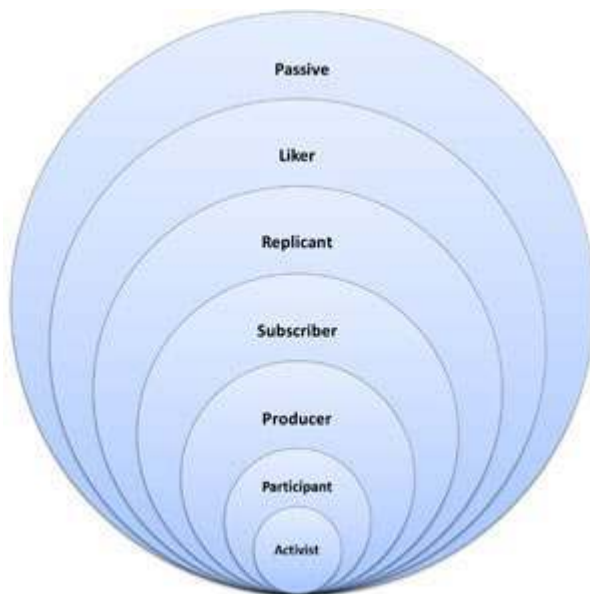
1. Digital etiquette: standards of conduct and proceedings in digital environment;
  2. Digital communication: exchange of information; multi-flow of information;
  3. Digital literacy: process of teaching and learning on technology and its use.
  4. Digital access: participation in society through the use of electronic means that are accessible to the citizens. The digital access is not only about access to ICT, but also access to: digital information; community networks; and decision makers.
  5. Digital commerce: buying and selling of goods and services in the digital environment.
  6. Digital legislation: regulation of responsibilities, rights, duties and actions in the digital environment.
  7. Digital health and wellness: physical and psychological health and wellbeing in the digital environment.
  8. Digital security: electronic precautions to guarantee the individual's safety in the digital environment.
- 30 Digital citizenship has been studied by several authors, with more or less optimistic perspectives as Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury (2003); Shane (2004); Howard & Jones (2004); Howard (2005); Cardoso, Nascimento, Morgado & Espanha (2005); Chadwick (2006 and 2009); Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal (2008); Morgado & Rosas (2010); Serra (2012), among others. However, all of them agree that for the existence of a digital citizenship we need to have an electronic democracy, and for that the access and the use of ICTs must be more egalitarian.
- 31 The positive view defends that the ICT use deepens the democratic vitality and legitimacy because it allows the citizens' participation in the decision-making process. Yet, the cyber realist school warns that the use of ICT depends on the individual and of their political, social, economic and cultural context. Therefore, the individual's relationship with ICT is contingent.
- 32 As citizenship is a privilege of the existing democracies, one would expect the same feature in the "digital citizenship". However, the observation of the global context allows us to argue that digital citizenship requires the existence of electronic infrastructures, citizens' access to it and digital educational skills that equip the individual with the capacity to use technology. Consequently, problems like poverty, illiteracy, and unequal access to education, prevent the exercise of citizenship and, more markedly, of digital citizenship. In other words, to be a digital citizen you must: have regular access to technology; know how to use the technology; and have an interest in using technology to find information, educate yourself, serve yourself and produce. Moreover, the active and deep civic involvement of individuals depends on political knowledge; interest in public affairs; and the discussion of political issues.
- 33 The consumption of online political information helps citizens to achieve higher levels of political knowledge and in becoming more interested in them. Furthermore, the internet provides opportunities and spaces for discussion. But is the circulation of a larger amount of political information changing the behaviour of citizens? Is it helping them to be less apathetic, more participatory and involved in decision making / policy-making?
- 34 Inspired by Shirky's (2009) classification of involvement levels: share, collaborate (collaborative production) and act collectively and through the use and observation of



the web-based social network, seven types of users according with their level of involvement and participation in Facebook can be identified (see figure 1):

1. Passive or lurker (online): the user observes the group activities without getting involved.
2. Liker (online): the user that only presses “like” whenever he sympathizes with content or wants to be part of a group, or cause.
3. Replicant (online): the user that shares the content he likes or he feels important to other people. He acts like a gatekeeper, choosing the information he feels relevant to distribute.
4. Subscriber (online): the user that is interested in getting more information and to know what is going on about a theme or group activity.
5. Producer (online): the user that gets involved in producing content about what they feel relevant. They have a certain level of political knowledge and have a word to say about something.
6. Participant (online and offline): the user that is informed about the activities of a group and that participates in these activities in the offline environment. Most of the time, they get information online and engaged face-to-face.
7. Activist (online and offline): the user with the highest level of involvement. The activist organizes activities for a group both online and offline.

Figure 1 – Classification of users according with their level of political involvement online



ADAPTED: SHIRKY'S (2009)

35

- 36 The internet may facilitate the consumption of political content; yet, it does not enhance the desire to consume it. Therefore, the digital only introduces one more way to have the individual to express and use it, that is, one more means of information and communication. It is the individual, influenced by society and particularly by the "tribes" to which they belong, that chooses to use and how they use the technology.

- 37 Citizenship comes with the right, the duty and the responsibility of continuous participation in the life of the *polis*. This notion of citizenship is closely related to public opinion formation, which in turn is nurtured by news and communication. As such, with digital means of communication we may not be facing a “new citizenship” however ICTs provide new citizenship practices and ways of expressing it (Hermes, 2006).
- 38 The term "digital citizenship" may merely be a *digitania*, that is, an optimistic euphoria (mania) about the digital that could boost the interest of the citizens' participation, as if it were only driven by the need of instruments. Still, the political and civic involvement is not just an issue related with technological means; it is also - and perhaps above all - a matter of mindset, attitudes and behaviours of citizens, at the bottom, a matter of participatory culture.
- 39 Digital technologies alter the way governments collect, process, and disseminate information and give citizens the power to find alternative ways to solve their problems. Political actors have been using the internet to: search for policy issues of interest to the public ("poll" public opinion); collect money for their campaigns, capture and organize volunteers and actions; know their opposition; provide controlled information about the politicians and the party; manoeuvre public opinion, engaging in lobby and stealth communication actions.
- 40 Despite all this potential, the political players fear the digital space. According to Stromer-Galley (2000b) and Chadwick (2009), political actors (elected officials and appointed bureaucrats) have been reluctant in introducing digital consultation in their routines due to a number of factors, such as: lack of resources and time for monitoring citizens' comments in online *fora* (including their social networks, websites and weblogs); the fear of litigation; the fear of losing control over the definition of the political agenda; the effects the citizens' destructive criticism of and the possible exploitation of these comments by journalists out of the context; the possible lack of representativeness of participatory citizens involved in the online environment; and the manipulation of these environments by organizations and unveiled interests.
- 41 Park & Perry (2008) also realized that politicians are likely to provide only favourable information, especially to the target audience that support or may support them. As such, online campaigns tend to reinforce rather than transform the political campaign patterns; it is a lengthiness of the offline campaign.
- 42 A democratic ideal scenario - a strong democracy - would mean that citizens would no longer look at areas such as national security, personal safety, commercial law, education, resources and development, social exclusion and environmental protection; waiting for a solution that comes from the top (government). Instead, they should look at the top waiting for this to provide them with information and resources that enable them to organize themselves and find ways to become more autonomous citizens (Barber, 1999). But reality falls short from Barber's desire. The internet really does not change what citizens think about politics, contributing only with some procedural and organizational innovation. In addition, it raises other issues related with inequality of access and increasing domination of the powerful (Chadwick, 2006).
- 43 ICT bridges the public and private spheres; gathers entertainment and raises serious political issues. Additionally, it presumes several levels of participation and involvement. As a consequence, web communities serve different types of citizenship from the more solemn (vote) to the most silly (tittytainment). Or using Haythornthwaite's (2005)

dichotomy: weak and strong ties. After all, the internet is a technical means of connecting people. It provides an easy way for individuals as well as groups and organizations to adopt peer-to-peer communication, as such, weak ties can emerge based on interest, common need, or commercial enterprise, discussion groups; online universities, courses, and degree programs; and activist groups. But these weak ties can grow into stronger ties, for example, in virtual communities, and via community networks when virtual contacts are “transferred” to offline environments as meeting face to face, street protest and actions. The strong ties include higher involvement, engagement and private sharing.

- 44 With digital, political information becomes: “highly marketable, easily collected, quickly distributed” (Howard, 2005, p. 167). Similarly, the free flow of political information, contributes to the fact that citizens are faced with an overload of data in which accurate information is distributed alongside rumour, opinion and personal (mis)information. This overload confuses, deludes and inhibits citizens, especially, those who are not literate in digital technologies or in digital media features. Finally, this digital political information only gives the illusion of information about politics. ICTs are an easy way that is made available to the citizens’ expression of their political opinion; it does not demand the individual’s engagement, involvement and pondered information, it may only raise what Howard (2005) called “a thin democracy”. Because participation is more than just having access to information or being informed, it is also about motivation and, ultimately, about willingness.
- 45 For example, and as previously realized, technological progress does not change the way Portuguese people feel about politics (Magalhães & Moral, 2008; Sebastião, 2010). Following Quan-Haase & Wellman (2002) insight on positive civic engagement, it is not the web interactivity, costs, speed, features and «omnipresence» that motivates citizens’ political participation, but the message, acts and actors, and previous offline involvement, in the very end, the essence and structure of the Portuguese politics.

46

## Final Remarks

- 47 The belief that democracy can be revitalized by a new citizenship – the digital citizenship – suffers from inconsistencies and false assumptions. The existence of means does not enhance its use and people’s involvement. As stated by Shirky, a “revolution does not happen when society adopts new technology, it happens when society adopts new behaviours” (2009). Besides, the discontent with political actors, regime institutions and governing systems in general are not solved by deliberation and participation. On its own, ICT serves the purpose of incidental and temporary rather than structural citizenship practices. It is a useful tool for organizational, social and subversive purposes (for example the social revolutions in the Middle East), but it cannot change the cultural patterns of Western non-participatory model of representative democracy.
- 48 ICT development improves information political sharing and spreading. Citizens have now access to innovative forms of opinion expression and political content co-creation. In this “*e-polis*” citizens may take advantages of ICT facilities, like: interactive tools, multimedia, network-based instruments, to access, improve and control the decision making process.

- 49 Nevertheless, and as an example, in Portugal, e-democracy and citizens' online participation level, have often proved disappointing, mainly due to three fundamental aspects: the lack of adaptation of traditional forms of government policy making; the political organization based on centralised and hierarchical structures; and the many-to-many forms of communication that overload the decision-making process.

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## NOTAS

1. Understood as the possibility to make meaningful decisions in the civic context, and being able to comprehend the choices made and their implication in political terms (Jenkins, Purusotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009, pp. 12-13).

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## RESUMOS

This article is a theoretical contribution to the understanding of e-democracy, that is, of the efforts to broaden political participation and knowledge about citizenship using information and communication technologies. Digital citizenry practices are envisaged as an addition to traditional practices such as voting and party membership. Though digital environment is recognized as an important contribution to public life, its limits are also emphasized which implies to propose a realistic view about the existence (or not) of a new type of citizenship: digital citizenship that is classified as a *digitania*.

Este artigo é uma contribuição teórica para o entendimento da e-democracia, ou seja, dos esforços para ampliar a participação política e o conhecimento sobre a cidadania utilizando as

tecnologias da informação e comunicação. As práticas de cidadania digitais são consideradas como um complemento de práticas tradicionais como o voto e a filiação partidária. Embora o ambiente digital seja reconhecido como uma contribuição importante para a vida pública, os seus limites também são enfatizados o que implica a proposta de uma visão realista sobre a existência (ou não) de um novo tipo de cidadania: a cidadania digital, que é classificada como uma *digitania*.

## ÍNDICE

**Palavras-chave:** cidadania, web, participação, cidadania digital

**Keywords:** citizenship, web, participation, digital citizenship

## AUTOR

**SÓNIA PEDRO SEBASTIÃO**

Centro de Administração e Políticas Públicas

Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas

Universidade de Lisboa Pólo Universitário da Ajuda

Rua Almerindo Lessa

1300-663 Lisboa, Portugal

Tel: (00) (351) 21 361 94 30

ssebastiao@iscsp.ulisboa.pt