

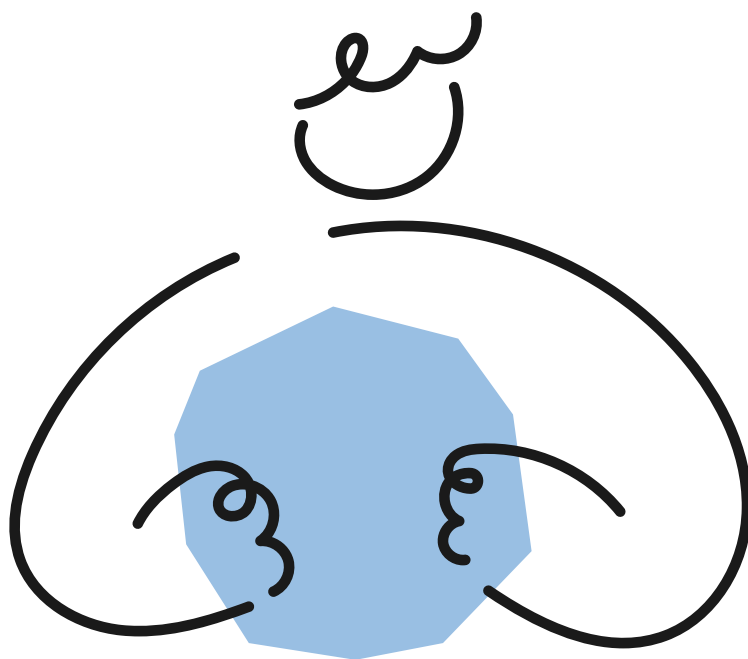


Comment on Alessandro Soriani's *On Digital Citizenship*

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Permanently Online, Temporarily Abroad:

Digital Media Use During Secondary School Exchange



When I arrived in Germany as an AFS exchange student in 2009, smartphones were not yet a fixture of teenage life. The experience of being somewhere new was accompanied by feelings of being disoriented, curious, and not seldomly overwhelmed, and all of this intense teenage mess was unmediated in ways that would be almost unfathomable to students arriving today. Since then, we have all become “permanently online, permanently connected” (Vorderer & Klimmt, 2020), not least thanks to mobile phones we carry everywhere we go. Nevertheless, teenagers today still experience quite similar basic challenges that an exchange year poses for us to master: navigating a new environment, new social norms, and new ways of belonging. Understanding what these changes in the media environment—and more specifically students’ media use—mean for intercultural learning and democratic engagement is, I would argue, one of the most important and underexplored questions AFS faces. I come to think about this question in a double function: as an AFS alumna and as a media and communications scholar whose work focuses on how people use digital media to connect to the world of shared concerns, and what this means for democratic life. It is from this vantage point that I want to reflect on what digital citizenship means in the AFS context, what the research tells us, and why AFS is uniquely positioned to help advance that research.

FROM COMPETENCE TARGETS TO EVERYDAY PRACTICE

The Council of Europe’s Digital Citizenship Education (DCE) framework, presented here by Alessandro Soriani (University of Bologna), offers a well-developed map of what we are hoping students will become. Its ten domains, subsumed under the umbrella of Being Online, Well-Being Online, and Rights Online, cover the main competences young people need to navigate digital life responsibly and actively. For AFS, this framework is a valuable orienting resource as it tells us clearly what digital citizenship looks like as a destination for different adolescent age groups.

While the DCE framework tells us what digital citizenship looks like as a competence target, these competencies are not developed only in formal and non-formal learning settings. Following the pragmatist tradition associated with John Dewey (1927) and more recently Roberto Frega (2019), democratic competence emerges from everyday practice, in encounters with difference, in negotiation of what works and what doesn’t across different situations. As such, relevant chunk of our digital competencies emerges precisely through experiential learning in the messy, fast-paced, convenience-driven reality of everyday media use, where platforms are navigated in a low state of attention (Gagrčín, 2026; Mark, 2023). While being always online, always connected and this in multiple

ways simultaneously is the ongoing reality, the exchange year—as a bounded, intense, and singular experience—creates the conditions under which many of the desirable digital competencies get stress-tested. From a pragmatist perspective, this is one of the richest available laboratories for democratic and intercultural learning. However, before we can know which DCE domains student exchange is best placed to develop and/or nurture, we need to understand something more basic: what does digitally mediated life *actually* look like for a student living inside an unfamiliar culture for a year?

AN UNMAPPED TERRAIN

Our digital devices are among the key channels through which we relate both to our **personal lifeworlds** (e.g., messaging family and friends, seeking and giving support, self-presentation, etc.) and to **the wider world of shared concerns** (e.g., following political, social, and cultural discussions; participating in or initiating debates; contributing to shared narratives, etc.) (Papacharissi, 2010). For pupils on exchange, this means managing intense emotional demands on the private side while simultaneously being immersed in a new social, cultural and political environment of the host country that they do not yet fully understand.

From research on international *university* students, we know that digital media play a relevant role in navigating these experiences by facilitating coping, support and information seeking (Zhou & Yin, 2025). Specifically, maintaining contact with family and close friends at home can reduce stress, especially early in the exchange, but students who spend extensive time connected to their home country online tend to show higher levels of homesickness, greater social disconnection in the host environment, and less motivation for cultural adaptation (Hofhuis et al., 2019, 2023). Digital media use can also facilitate expanding and strengthening social ties in ways that fosters cultural adaption in the host country (Stuart et al., 2025). In contrast, “passive” consumption (scrolling, watching videos) is consistently less interculturally productive than active engagement across both home and host country platforms (ibid.).

What this literature has mapped with much less precision is the second side of the equation: how students use digital media to



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connect to the sociopolitical life of their host country (Hasnain & Hajek, 2022). Here, social networks may serve as an informal bridge to civic information students would not otherwise encounter (Gomes, 2021), but whether happens and whether it tips toward engagement rather than retreat is not well understood. Also, all of this is not simply a matter of individual disposition but is also crucially shaped by students’ and host families’ socioeconomic and sociocultural background (Helsper, 2021), perceived peer norms (Elmore et al., 2017; Lim, 2022), and not least the digital platforms designed to reward passive consumption and reinforce existing networks rather than open new ones (Forestal, 2022).



For AFS students specifically, understanding these dynamics matters. In contrast to the vast research on international university students, most AFS students are minors who arrive knowing their stay is temporary yet intense since they live in a host family and attend a local school full time. For many, it is the first time that things taken for granted at home—social arrangements, citizenship norms, everyday inequalities—become visible, precisely because they are no longer simply the water they swim in. And while no political talk is “risk-free”, the exchange setting can paradoxically free young people to engage with their host country’s realities with a no-strings-attached kind of curiosity. Temporary residence lowers the stakes: students are visitors, allowing for a fair amount

of (strategic or genuine) naïveté, which can make encountering unfamiliar or uncomfortable political perspectives feel less threatening and more perhaps even more interesting.

My own experience offers a small illustration. Arriving from Serbia in 2009, I had no framework for the fact that people in my host country might hold strong, sometimes unflattering views about where I am from. As my German improved and I began to watch news, look for reporting about Serbia, and was actually able to converse with my host family, their friends and my school friends in German, I found myself confronted with new and if I may say negative perspectives on my home country. This was disorienting and painful, but ultimately one of the most formative parts of my exchange. I even remember writing an opinion piece about this for an online blog back then - an attempt to process the dissonance publicly that was, in retrospect, exactly the kind of active digital engagement that research now suggests is most conducive to intercultural learning. How such encounters happen in today’s media environment and how students deal with it, is precisely what we need to understand. In short: Digital media is likely one of the key channels through which this noticing happens or at least gets processed. But whether it does, and how it unfolds, we don’t know, because secondary school exchange students are essentially absent from this literature (Zhou & Yin, 2025; Stuart et al., 2025).

FROM REFLECTION TO RESEARCH, OR: WHAT AFS COULD DO

Taken together, this literature points to a clear gap: we do not know enough about how secondary school exchange students actually navigate these digital choices, or what conditions make the difference between retreat and engagement. AFS has accumulated decades of practitioner wisdom about what exchange does to and for young people. Experienced volunteers know that some students retreat into their phones while others seem to flourish without them, and that the relationship between digital habits and intercultural matters are rarely simple. What I suggest here is rather a more explicit way of thinking, talking and processing the role of digital media in pupil exchange.

There are low-cost methodological approaches could be easily integrated into non-formal learning spaces during the exchange, as part of self-reflection activities. For example, *media repertoire mapping*, where we ask students to visualize which platforms and media outlets they engage with, and how frequently, at different points in their exchange, generates both research data and a meaningful reflective activity for students themselves (Merten, 2020). It can prompt conversations around current political issues discussed in the public discourse and perhaps even diverging perspectives on those issues between home and host country, changes in media use and related habits during the exchange year, language learning progress, but also the role of popular culture in intercultural learning. Another



method that comes to mind is object interviews, in which students are invited to talk about their phone as a material object, e.g., where they keep it, when they reach for it, what feelings accompany its use, can surface the affective and habitual dimensions of media use that surveys rarely capture (Woodward, 2020). This too can prompt conversations about healthy or unhealthy coping strategies, the role of technology in how we interact with our surroundings during an exchange, and many more. Making these activities more deliberate and methodologically intentional would serve both the students and camp leaders, and the insights gained through this would become shared organizational wisdom over time.

Further, the case for more systematic research is strong, and luckily, AFS has exactly what this requires: programs operating across dozens of countries simultaneously, with natural measurement points built into the exchange structure (e.g., pre-departure, on-arrival, mid-stay, end-of-stay, and post-return). Students move through these checkpoints within a shared organizational framework, making comparative and longitudinal research unusually straightforward (cf. Zhou & Yin, 2025; Stuart et al., 2025). With such insights, we could begin to answer questions that experienced volunteers surely already theorize informally: At what point during the exchange do students' media habits shift? How can we support them in developing media habits that foster cultural learning and adaption in the host country? Are students who engage more actively with host-country media and civic life also those who report richer intercultural learning? What kind of media repertoire is most conducive for intercultural learning? How does this vary by country of origin or host context? When does staying connected to home support adjustment, and when does it hinder it?

Answering these questions would provide AFS with the organizational capacity to support intercultural learning more deliberately by meeting students where they are in their digitally mediated everyday life. Experienced volunteers already know that some students emerge from their exchange with their worldview genuinely expanded while others return having spent a year digitally at home. What systematic

attention to media use can offer is a way of understanding why and of building on what works. For an organization whose mission is premised on the transformative potential of living and communicating across difference, that seems worth the investment.

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