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Youth and the media

Report[1]
Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media
Rapporteur: Ms Fiona O'LOUGHLIN, Ireland, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe

Summary

The report provides an overview of the key media challenges facing the youth in Europe. The digital environment offers a wealth of information and a potential for knowledge-sharing that are as yet unrivalled in human history, but this opportunity is not without risks for the young, nor without responsibility for the public authorities and economic operators in the field.

The Parliamentary Assembly must call on operators to ensure the protection of young people's data and privacy and to regulate illegal content, and, in particular, unlawful pornographic material, which is a major problem for young people. There is also a need to ensure that young people's creative potential in the digital environment is not hindered nor economically exploited.

The balance between freedom and regulation is fundamental. The recommendations which appear in the draft resolution seek to respect such a balance. Through new media, young people are networking, thinking and acting together, building their own identity and shaping our societies, and it is the duty of States, regulators, educators, civil society and private platforms to ensure that the young people of today are the informed and responsible adults of the future.

1. Reference to committee: Doc. 15222, Reference 4564 of 19 March 2021.

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A. Draft resolution[2]

1. Through new media, young Europeans are developing social relationships and expressing their concerns, aspirations and expectations in a way that is quite different from previous generations. The Covid-19 pandemic and measures taken to combat its spread had a huge impact on their lives: they suffered, probably more than adults, from social distancing and lockdowns; at the same time, they show a greater readiness to turn to the digital world and new media to communicate with close family, friends and peers.

2. The Parliamentary Assembly considers it vital to ensure safe social media use for young people and to promote youth participation in social, economic and political life via the media.

3. Whether people use traditional media or non-mainstream digital media, their habits and practices in accessing news and seeking information are largely influenced by their age. Online and social media platforms are the prime sources of information for young people. There are two patterns of news consumption: on the one hand, and more often than not, an accidental exposure to news, which is consulted in a piecemeal fashion on digital platforms; on the other hand, deliberate news consumption on social networking sites, with a degree of interest and engagement that varies greatly from person to person.

4. With regard to the news, the major challenge is to ensure that all sources – whether digital-born, non-mainstream news platforms or traditional media – provide young people with high-quality news reporting and encourage them to play an active and deliberate part in civic and political life.

5. By design, technologies are likely to trigger addictive user behaviour, especially among the young. For the latter, constant connectivity and immediate responsiveness have become the norm, leaving them vulnerable to problems such as digital stress, fear of missing out and “technoference” – constant interruptions in interpersonal interactions caused by technological, digital and mobile devices.

6. Children and young people face information overload on the internet. They are exposed to a multitude of material and narratives promoted on social networks by influencers, TikTokers, YouTubers and video bloggers with sway over young audiences grappling with a complex world. Such social network influencers are often disseminators of misinformation, toxic advertising and harmful, or even unlawful, content.

7. Some young people may also be drawn in by online incitement to violence and radicalisation, although many are quick to speak out against hate speech and discrimination. Abusive and harmful content for young people also includes non-consensual pornography, which must be tackled through regulation.

8. The challenge of a sustainable regulatory approach is to strike a balance between ensuring minors’ safe social media use and digital self-determination and, at the same time, protecting them from potentially harmful behaviours and other dangers.

9. One major source of concern relates to digital identity and online reputation, namely the need for safety measures and data privacy protection for young people, who are not always aware of the risks linked to digital technologies. In this respect, it is crucial to take into account minors’ cognitive abilities and to effectively uphold the right to have one’s personal data erased (“right to be forgotten”).

10. Young people’s participatory and collaborative culture is influenced by their internet, social network and digital technology usage patterns. Young people’s degree of trust in the media affects their interest and engagement.

11. Through new media, young people are networking, thinking and acting together, building their own identity and shaping our societies. Participatory media have formed a landscape that is conducive to participatory politics in which young people do not just follow elite-driven information. Media platforms create opportunities for young people to express their views on today’s crucial issues like human rights, environmental protection, sustainable development and peace. They have a legitimate desire to be influential in making crucial choices.

12. However, there is a substantial disconnect between institutional politics and the daily lives of certain groups, especially young women and young people from minorities, which is reflected in their perceptions of politicians. Some young people do not feel listened to or represented in institutional politics and there is a “technological disjunction” between traditional political media and other types of information technology.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 24 January 2023.

13. New approaches need to be found to make young people's voices more audible in traditional media too, to converse with them in order to tap into their way of contributing to the social fabric, to better protect those who may be more exposed and vulnerable to harmful content online and to empower the many who are seeking to build a better future.

14. In the digital environment, young people are the main drivers behind both the dissemination and the production of information. The digital ecosystem thus provides young people with the tools and spaces to be both active and creative consumers and producers of culture. Their data, attention, culture, labour and creativity, however, are being commodified to generate profits that media operators do not share equitably. Such participation in the digital economy entails power relations: through "aspirational labour", young people create and produce content for free in the hope of a future career, thereby forming a class of data workers who are subject to asymmetrical relationships and even exploitation of their skills.

15. The Assembly therefore calls on member States to develop a media ecosystem that ensures the provision of high-quality news reporting and digital safety for young people and strengthens their democratic engagement. In this respect, it is necessary to:

15.1. better protect the media's editorial independence and enhance the role and visibility of professional journalists;

15.2. support public service media and independent and local media outlets by providing them with adequate financial resources so that they can encourage responsible news consumption and democratic engagement among young people;

15.3. support the presence of news media on social networks to disseminate news that takes into account the diversity and specific needs of certain groups of young people, in particular those from minority backgrounds, for example, young migrants;

15.4. fund and promote research on safety and well-being online;

15.5. provide financial support for fact-checking initiatives to counteract mis- and disinformation;

15.6. promote (publicly and privately-run) media literacy programmes aimed at countering the trend among young people for intermittent "news snacking" and at strengthening young users' digital and critical thinking skills so that they are better equipped to tackle information disorder and harmful content and to identify and challenge abusive content and advertising practices on the internet;

15.7. strengthen the role of data protection and competition authorities; in particular, ensure compliance with data protection rules for young people under the age of 18 and enforce appropriate measures to make corporate platforms comply with all the relevant requirements in terms of surveillance and the protection of privacy;

15.8. consider a voluntary or compulsory digital identity system and strengthen young people's capacity to protect their own online reputation;

15.9. align their national legislation with the standards set by the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS No. 108, "Convention 108") and its modernised version (ETS No. 181, "Convention 108+"); in particular, introduce strict penalties for major social media platforms when they engage in unfair commercial practices and collect and use data about minors for commercial purposes, including targeted marketing and personalised advertising;

15.10. enhance the role of national media and advertising regulatory authorities and ensure compliance with measures to protect users, especially the most vulnerable, from online harassment and harmful content on video-sharing platforms and social networks;

15.11. step up efforts to prevent and combat online harassment by disseminating research and education on media ethics and by requiring health-care professionals and educators working with children and young adults to routinely screen for cyberbullying;

15.12. regulate pornography platforms in Europe and impose harsher penalties on intermediary services that do not comply with the requirement to remove non-consensual imagery, including revenge porn, fake porn and deepfakes;

15.13. implement appropriate measures to ensure that advertisements on video-sharing platforms comply with specific advertising requirements around transparency, prohibited and restricted products and other general advertising requirements; promote uniform approaches to social media regulation on limiting or banning advertisements aimed at children, including those for harmful foods.

16. The Assembly also calls on member States to promote the participation of young people in social and economic life via the media, bearing in mind that digital transformation may lead to structural inequalities and reproduce existing ones, including through the invasion of privacy, exploitation of free labour and surveillance. In this respect, it is necessary to:

16.1. stimulate youth civic development and political engagement by tackling incivility in online political discourse and by adapting the way politicians engage with young people;

16.2. develop metrics to measure online economic value created by young people and fund research on the development of their economic understanding;

16.3. adopt regulations to tackle the new forms of youth labour exploitation that have emerged in digital economy ecosystems;

16.4. ensure that youth educational programmes raise awareness of and teach digital financial literacy and promote young people's input into the changing digital economic landscape.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Fiona O'Loughlin, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. The internet and digital platforms have become the most widely used means not only of accessing and disseminating information, but also of communicating in a broader sense. The digital environment, with its wide variety of information sources and constant stream of news, may be used for research or for keeping up with professional and personal contacts. The benefits, in terms of accessibility and instantaneous availability, are undeniable.

2. For younger generations, social media are their preferred means of communication and creative expression and their go-to source for information, games and entertainment in general. They are also a tool for young people who increasingly want to have their say in today's crucial issues and global challenges such as human rights, environmental protection, sustainable development and peace. Clearly, the development of digital networks has opened up a wealth of creative, educational, inclusive, diverse and revolutionary opportunities for youth empowerment.

3. Technological change does not only bring advantages, however. It also throws up risks and challenges such as information disorder and regulatory gaps in digital spaces: mis- and disinformation, manipulation, incitement to violence, online harassment, isolation in "filter bubbles" and belief in conspiracy theories. These all leave adults at risk – and young people even more so. We need to be aware of these dangers and develop strategies to counter them while upholding young people's fundamental rights.

4. As many young people have not been taught media literacy and do not have good news consumption habits, they are unable to manage their information intake by selecting reliable news sources. The way social media are driven by algorithms helps to spread divisive, polarising and sensationalist content that is potentially dangerous for young people.

5. The safety issues related to illegal content, including cybercrime, pornography, cyberbullying and violence, are wide-ranging. In addition, there is a real risk that some content may have harmful effects on the self-perception, body image and health practices of children and young people.

6. We must protect the young from these risks by enabling them to use social media in a safe, healthy and creative way. As noted in the motion for a resolution underlying this report,[3] new approaches need to be found to make young people's voices more audible in traditional media too, to converse with them so as to enhance their ability to contribute to the social fabric, to better protect those who may be more exposed and vulnerable to harmful content online and to empower the many who are seeking to build a better future.

7. There is a wide range of patterns as regards young people's interaction with mainstream and non-mainstream news media. Using a qualitative approach lets us focus on two aspects: young people's safe social media use and their social engagement through the media.

8. Key issues of practical interest to the various stakeholders include identifying what young people value in the news, their underlying needs and motives for consuming and engaging with news media, their relationship with mainstream news programming, their overall trust in professional media reporting and the perceived value of quality journalism in the current mis- and disinformation crisis.

9. In terms of communicating online, watching videos and keeping up with the news, a fast pace has become the norm, with all the attendant safety, digital privacy and reputational issues. Revelations that Facebook repeatedly made misleading statements about the size of its audience should be a wake-up call to us as legislators responsible for upholding people's rights, whether online or offline. In the light of such threats to young people's digital self-determination, education about data protection and online safety must be stepped up. Teaching digital citizenship includes equipping young people with the skills to understand and protect their data privacy and safety when interacting with artificial intelligence, developing education and awareness about the short- and long-term consequences of the digital footprint or "shadow" left by their online activities and ensuring young people are better informed about the commercial data practices used by social media platform providers.

10. Influencers act as intermediaries between young people and their complex environment, but in the absence of proper regulation they also pose threats in terms of misinformation, misleading advertising and harmful content including pornography, the sexualisation of minors and gender stereotypes, in particular.

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3. "Youth and the media", motion for a resolution (Doc. 15222), 9 February 2021.

11. Media ethics should be an integral part of interdisciplinary programmes combining formal and informal learning, educational programmes and awareness-raising campaigns run by both traditional and digital media. Young people need to be taught about editorial independence, the role of public service broadcasting and journalistic codes of ethics so as to counter the spread of harmful content and fake news.

12. A media environment combining traditional and new media offers young people many perspectives, experiences and opportunities to engage individually in society or their community. The various forms of social participation via the media should be explored, taking into account the barriers faced by some categories of young people, especially young women and people from minority groups.

13. Social engagement can also include political involvement and participation via the media. Digital technologies afford a means to participate in democratic activities and promote democratic citizenship, but that, in turn, requires certain rules of civility to be observed in online discourse and adaptation on the part of policy makers. This is an issue of crucial importance for the elected representatives of the member States and for the functioning of our democracies in the future.

14. Lastly, young people are involved in a variety of paid and unpaid economic transactions on the internet, including "aspirational labour" through creative expression on social media. These forms of free labour generate power asymmetries in the digital economy that lead to structural inequalities. Combating this kind of labour exploitation is vital.

15. This report has two aims: firstly, to assess the current challenges and opportunities associated with the access, exposure and engagement of young audiences with a wide variety of mainstream and non-mainstream digital news sources; and secondly, to present member States with specific conclusions and recommendations in this respect.

16. My analysis draws on the report by Ms Adriana Mutu, lecturer and academic director at ESIC Business and Marketing School in Barcelona,[4] whom I would like to thank for her excellent work. I have also taken into account the contributions of other experts who participated in the committee hearing on 9 May 2022: Mr Pasquale Stanzione, president of the Italian Data Protection Authority (Garante per la protezione dei dati personali), Italy; Ms Mariek Vanden Abeele, lecturer in Digital Culture at the Department of Communication Sciences of Ghent University, Belgium; and Mr Vittorio Gattari, board member of the Italian Youth Council, member of the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe.

17. In the report, the terms "youth" and "young people" are used to refer to all minors (namely, in general, persons under the age of 18 in the European Union). The report also addresses the patterns of both digital and mainstream media consumption, participation and engagement of the following age groups: Generation Z (digital natives aged 18-24) and Generation Y/millennials (aged 25-35).

2. Young people's safe social media use

2.1. Young people's news media usage and consumption habits on social media networks

18. Ever-changing news ecosystems and unprecedented access and exposure to a wide variety of mainstream (legacy media) and non-mainstream digital news sources (particularly social media platforms and news aggregators) call for increased awareness and scrutiny of young people's news media usage and consumption habits and behaviours. Such habits and practices follow certain patterns, of which age is one of the most predictive factors.[5]

19. Geographical location is another predictive factor, since young Europeans' browsing and news media consumption habits vary from country to country. There is, however, a growing general trend: online social media platforms and networks are their primary news sources. Young audiences mix news consumption with social networking, problem solving, social action and entertainment. It is not young people who try to find news, the news comes to them via social networks. Young adults often read news recommended by their peers on social networks, as well as via group texts and instant messaging.[6] In the digital environment, young people do not follow the news: it follows them.

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4. AS/Cult/Inf (2022) 05, restricted.
5. See "News in social media" (2018).
6. A 2018 survey by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that in six countries – Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom – social media was young people's main news source. See https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/private-sector-news-social-media-distribution-and-algorithm-change.

20. The fact that social media is becoming the primary gateway to news and information reflects a shifting dynamic between traditional news outlets, which are directly connected to their audiences, and social media platforms, where young adults are more likely to come across news *incidentally*, as they do not actively seek it out themselves. In addition, young people with low levels of trust in the media tend to prefer non-traditional news sources such as social media and blogs.[7]

21. Understanding this phenomenon and above all, taking it into account, could help media organisations and journalists make their products and formats more appealing to young audiences so as to engage them, restore overall trust in professional media reporting and build brand loyalty.

22. There are four key news moments which depend on external variables such as personal habits, work lives and the medium in question: a moment "dedicated" to news consumption, a moment to get "updated" and catch up with the latest news, a moment when checking the news is a "time-filler", and a moment when attention is "intercepted" by news. In addition, four types of news consumers have been identified: "Heritage News Consumers", "Dedicated News Devotees", "Passive News Absorbers", and "Proactive News Lovers".[8]

23. The habits and behaviours of these different types of news consumers are influenced by the extent to which news brands form the epicentre of the individual's news experience (self-led to brand-led) and the level of engagement an individual has with news items in general (low consumption to high consumption). Self-led consumers consult what they deem relevant, whereas brand-led consumers see news brands as the gatekeepers of news.

24. Young people's news consumption habits are also influenced by a number of key elements such as the news agenda, content, format and tone, as well as differences between platforms, between traditional media, between age groups and between different payment methods. The young often feel that consuming news is "a chore",[9] which in turn feeds into the perception that traditional news content is not attractive or appealing enough.

25. With regard to social networking sites, the difference between incidental news exposure and deliberate news consumption is an interesting point to consider. Incidental news consumption in the online media environment means that young people may be exposed to information or news they did not actively seek out. They literally stumble upon news without having deliberately set out to find it. "Encountering" news in this way can be regarded as a by-product of other activities, something occurring within the habitual use of a certain medium, channel or content. Researchers[10] refer to this phenomenon as a "checking cycle", in which one constantly checks one's phone to stay on top of what is occurring both in one's personal life and in the world at large, and as "news snacking", which describes the consumption of brief news pieces and a lean-back way of news processing.

26. Young people's incidental or deliberate news consumption on social media was measured in relation to how news is viewed on their social media networks feeds and the role played by friends and followers. There has been a decrease in the use of legacy news media on traditional platforms, whereas social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are an increasingly significant source for news. This means that while social networking sites are not a primary source themselves, they are an important distributor of current affairs from legacy media companies and other conventional sources.[11]

27. Our challenge, and that of the media, is to ensure that digital-born news sources, non-mainstream news platforms and traditional media outlets are providing young audiences with high-quality news reporting and encouraging them to engage with news media actively and deliberately. Indeed, despite increasing rates of news consumption on social media and declining audience ratings for traditional media, the latter are still perceived by young people as reputable and reliable sources delivering quality journalism. As might be expected, very low trust in the news media is associated with a preference for non-mainstream news sources, while audiences with very high trust in the media organisations are most likely to consume news from traditional sources.

In Austria, 60% of the young adults taking part in a study in 2020 claimed that "they encounter[ed] news incidentally as they engage[d] with their online networks or community of friends." Just 39% said that news was something they actively sought out on their own. See https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/13774.

7. See also "The Impact of Trust in the News Media on Online News Consumption and Participation" (2017).
8. These categories come from a study by Reuters Institute "How Young People Consume News and the Implications for Mainstream Media" (2019).
9. Ibid.
10. In particular, Bergström, Belfrage, Meijer and Kormelink.
11. See the study on young people in Sweden, "News in social media" (2018).

28. The role of journalists as information providers and as professional gatekeepers has changed over time. The fact that professional journalists are not always perceived as relevant news sources is concerning. Young people are less attached to specific media channels and pay little attention to professional journalists. However, there are ways to raise the profile of independent, community and local media projects by providing public funding to reduce reliance on advertising.[12]

29. The media should bring their news formats, products and delivery up to date and find new ways of engaging and interacting with young audiences, who are either deliberately looking for quality news reporting and accountable journalism or incidentally coming across news items that match their interests.

30. Incidental news consumption might also be addressed and countered by working with the various stakeholders to develop media educational and literacy programmes.[13] Young people need to understand the media's agenda-setting role and be encouraged to actively participate and make individual and collective decisions based on quality information so that they can democratically engage in the public sphere.

31. Lastly, it is important to take into account the attitude to news consumption of young people from minority backgrounds, for example young migrants born outside their current country of residence, who are deliberately turning to social networks because they want to keep up with current affairs in general and with civic and political issues.[14] Accordingly, news media organisations should use social media networks and platforms with a real potential for high audience engagement so as to promote international current affairs and showcase their brand, especially among culturally diverse younger audiences living outside their country of origin.

2.2. Safety, digital privacy and reputation: digital self-determination

32. In recent years, legal action has been brought against social media platforms – including tech giant TikTok – on several occasions for violating children's privacy and consumer rights.[15] In 2021, whistleblower Frances Haugen's revelations that it was Facebook policy to mislead investors about the company's safety approach and audience sizes triggered a call for greater awareness and better education about the data safety, protection and privacy measures implemented in Europe by tech giants and other stakeholders at national and international levels.

33. To raise awareness of such worrying issues and fight back, it is crucial to ensure that young people are informed about the importance of the privacy and safety issues around the personal data they share online when using social networking and online shopping platforms, mobile applications, sensors and trackers. It is also vital to continue research into digital self-determination.

34. Much of the public conversation around young people and digital technologies has focused on weighing up the dangers and understanding the damage that might be done by these technologies, while also recognising that younger audiences' use of digital media may have its benefits. It is necessary to look beyond risk-oriented public policies and towards the challenges and opportunities digital technologies present for young people and their interests. This includes the conditions in which young people have access to the internet, their level of agency when using digital technologies and degree of experience in that respect, their rights and responsibilities, the types of activities they engage in and how they do so in creative, meaningful, ethical, responsible and participatory ways.

35. In order to build such digital capabilities[16] and ensure "digital well-being",[17] young people must be given access to training and education to acquire the necessary skills for making better use of digital technologies. Concepts such as digital citizenship, digital literacy, digital determination and new media literacies have been used to group and organise these skills into educational programmes that may be implemented in formal, informal and connected learning environments.[18]

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12. In France, a scheme running from 2009 to 2011 funded half the cost of a one-year newspaper subscription for 18-24-year-olds to encourage them to get into the habit of purchasing news and information.
13. For example, in Spain, the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia launched the Platform for Media Literacy Education in 2019, bringing together representatives from universities, research groups, companies and professional associations to teach young people to apply critical thinking to media content.
14. "News in social media" (2018).
15. In 2020, legal action was brought against TikTok in the UK by an anonymous 12-year-old girl, and in 2021, further legal action was taken there on behalf of all children who had used TikTok since 25 May 2018. In 2021, in the Netherlands, TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, was also taken to court. According to the associations bringing the case, the company had been unlawfully collecting the personal data (date of birth, phone number and email addresses, as well as information on sexual orientation and religious beliefs and even biometric data) of 1.2 to 1.6 million Dutch children for years and trading this information for targeted advertising.

36. The fact that internet use leaves a digital footprint or "shadow", how to minimise this and manage digital identity are all issues that need to be addressed by stakeholders, including public institutions and educators. Young people should be taught about digital footprints and their advantages and disadvantages, develop an understanding of the issue of privacy loss on the internet and learn who is tracking users online and in what way, and how privacy laws in various parts of the world may affect their digital footprint. Consideration should be given to introducing optional or compulsory digital citizenship education to empower young people to understand privacy and safeguard their own data while online and to improving education and awareness about the short- and long-term consequences of digital footprints or "shadows". Young people should also be better informed about the commercial data practices used by social network platform providers.

37. Today's digital threats include the collection of personal data and commercial data practices, online surveillance tools and facial recognition technology used by social media platform providers. It should be noted that the European Union has adopted a new regulation – the Digital Services Act – that will come into force in 2023.[19] It bans certain types of targeted advertising on online platforms when children are concerned or particular categories of personal data are used, such as ethnic origin, political opinions and sexual orientation. It would be a good idea to extend this legislation to non-EU countries in Europe.

38. Further research is needed on the various aspects of digital self-determination, from control over personal data to self-expression, participation in civic life and the digital economy, relationship-building, health and well-being, so as to initiate critical dialogue on how to define and understand the problems and potential of digital self-determination. It is important to ensure there is funding for research into online risks, including cyberbullying, sexual harassment, impersonation, exposure to pornography, violent or aggressive content, harmful speech, content about drugs and racist content.

2.3. Youth-based networks and exposure to toxic advertising

39. Platforms and social networks facilitate access to news, providing means to engage in the news process through commenting, sharing and posting online. Young people are therefore exposed to advertising largely on the basis of the interests and behaviour of those they connect with via these platforms and social networks. In particular, young people are exposed to a wide variety of discourses and practices promoted by social media influencers, TikTokers, YouTubers and video bloggers who increasingly act as "interpreters" or "guides" for younger people, by helping to distil the complexity of daily news streams, pre-selecting topics and posting comments that reflect their own personal opinions.

40. Social network influencers also hold great sway over young people, however. They are often the primary peddlers of misinformation, leaving young people exposed to harmful material and unsavoury advertising practices. For example, harmful material may feature pornographic scenes, the sexualisation of minors and gender stereotyping in advertising for children's toys, etc. In addition, TikTokers often do not clearly indicate or disclose that they are advertising or promoting certain brands.[20]

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16. These include: ICT proficiency, information, data and media literacies, "new media literacy"; digital creation, problem solving and innovation; digital communication, collaboration and participation; digital learning and development; digital identity and well-being. See https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/6611/1/JFL0066F_DIGIGAP_MOD_IND_FRAME.PDF.

17. The expression refers to the impact of digital technologies on what it means to "live a life that is good for a human being". It has implications in terms of health, education, governance, social development, media and entertainment. The expression is used broadly here to encompass: access conditions, level of digital technology use, level of experience in using digital technologies, rights and responsibilities, the types of activities young people engage in and how they do so in creative, meaningful, ethical, responsible and participatory ways. See https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/6611/1/JFL0066F_DIGIGAP_MOD_IND_FRAME.PDF.

18. For example, in 2019 in Spain, the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia, the Catalan Broadcasting Corporation and la Caixa social welfare centre launched the "#AMiNoMenganyen" (#TheyCantFoolMe) campaign to foster digital skills and media literacy. It sought to promote critical thinking and responsible use of technology, news information and social networks, while warning about the dangers of cyberbullying, fake news and threats to online data privacy.

19. See decision of the European Council, 4 October 2022: www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-package/.

20. In Spain, research published by the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia shows that in more than 93.8% of cases, TikTokers do not indicate that their video content contains advertising. Children and teenagers are very frequently exposed to ads and subliminal advertising messages on YouTube channels and products/brands are not clearly identified, which confuses consumers. Three out of four Youtubers (77.2%) build advertising stories loaded with gender stereotypes. Minors are exposed to pornographic content in audiovisual programmes and on the internet, for example playlists showing sexualisation of minors on video sharing platforms such as Dailymotion, Vimeo and YouTube. Minors are also exposed to digital content that peddles hatred and violence against women. See www.cac.cat/informes-del-cac-internet.

41. Such practices call for more robust regulation and for the protection of children and minors, including regulation of online advertising, product placement, branded content and covert advertising. Video sharing platforms that are liable to be accessed by children should also ensure that they meet data protection requirements.

42. Some European countries have started to introduce legislation on the role of online influencers. On 8 July 2022, Spain adopted a general law on audiovisual communication that includes influencers as audiovisual service providers.[21] In 2021, Norway passed regulations targeting manipulated images, requiring social media influencers and advertisers to attach a disclaimer label to retouched images. The legislation, which has been in force since the summer of 2022, also applies to images shared by influencers and other public figures who post edited photos of themselves to advertise products or services. Lawmakers are therefore well placed to tackle such abusive practices.

43. Media regulators also have a role to play in setting out specific advertising measures for providers of video-sharing platforms. For example, OFCOM, the UK media regulator, published a guide for video-sharing platform providers in 2021 setting out specific advertising measures, including a requirement to provide the functionality for anyone uploading a video to declare whether or not it contains advertising.

44. Despite the existence of such best practices, member States do not yet have a uniform approach to video-sharing platform providers to ensure that they understand the wide-ranging requirements in terms of data protection or harmful content that apply to online advertising aimed at under-18s. There is an urgent need to act.

2.4. Youth and cyberbullying

45. In the digital ecosystem, online harassment, cyberbullying and cyberaggression come in various forms including impersonation, hacking into others' accounts, disseminating photos or videos online, spreading defamatory material online and other intentional behaviour via electronic devices that aims to inflict harm on victims.

46. Cyberbullying aimed at young people (or among young people) is a widespread phenomenon in all European countries[22] and its effects on children's mental health have been well-documented in medical literature, with evidence of higher rates of depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation among victims. A study on the various kinds of toxic and hateful comments and how they proliferate on videos by and for young people on YouTube revealed that one in 20 comments is inappropriate and that an initial hateful comment opens the door for others.[23] These findings are all the more striking given that children are still drawn to YouTube and are keen to make a career out of creating videos on this platform.

47. It is therefore necessary to address the problem of cyberbullying in all its complexity and examine what possible new solutions and approaches exist to help stakeholders reconceptualise, prevent and mitigate this phenomenon more effectively. Initiatives should be implemented alongside the existing provisions of the revised EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive aimed at strengthening the protection of minors and the general public against cyberbullying victimisation, harmful content including sexism, incitement to racism and other discriminatory content.[24]

48. Measures have already been introduced in member States either through regulation[25] or in the form of guidelines.[26] This approach should be scaled up, either through the transposition of the revised EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive or through specific regulations for non-EU member States. The issue of how to deal with online comments is vital. Big tech platforms responding rapidly to remove potentially harmful comments is a crucial factor, whether their detection relies on algorithms or user alerts.

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21. See the text of the Spanish law: www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2022-11311.
22. A study published by Harvard University on "Youth and Cyberbullying", found that in Romania and in Greece, 37.3% and 26.8% of young people respectively had been victims of cyberbullying. Germany, with 24.3%, and Poland, with 21.5%, followed. The lowest rates were recorded in the Netherlands (15.5%), Iceland (13.5%) and Spain (13.3%). A study of 2 872 Czech children aged 9-17 found that 35% had been bothered or upset by something online during 2018. Older teenagers (ages 15-17) and girls were more likely to report those experiences than boys and younger children (ages 9-10). See http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:41672537.
23. See "As content booms, how can platforms protect kids from hateful speech?" (2022).
24. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2707.
25. For example, when transposing the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive into Spanish law, various national public or private entities strengthened the protection of minors and people with disabilities from hate crimes, hate speech and cyberbullying. In May 2019, the Audiovisual Council of Catalonia asked YouTube to remove 12 videos that featured cybercontrol in teen dating. YouTube responded and took down 11 out of the 12 videos.

49. Pornographic content is sadly a distinct part of cyberbullying and pornography platforms and intermediary services play a major role in the dissemination of non-consensual pornography.[27]

50. Non-consensual material includes upskirting, spycam, hidden cam, revenge porn and leaked or stolen images. They also include fake porn and deepfakes, where digital face-swap technology is used to map the faces of celebrities or private individuals on to explicit sexual material, which is then circulated online. This is a rapidly growing phenomenon in Europe.

51. Although major platforms have taken steps to tackle the issue, non-consensual material remains easily accessible, free and even organised by genre and category. The readily available and non-consensual pornography legitimises and normalises such abuse. Regulation is therefore justified in view of the frequency and impact of non-consensual images on the networks, to the extent that almost a third of all women in the EU fear that fake intimate images of themselves could be shared online without their consent.[28]

52. A path forward may again be found in EU legislation on digital services, which includes new provisions to ensure that intermediary service providers comply with the requirement to reduce the amount of non-consensual pornography on their sites, notably through a "trusted flagger" mechanism whereby entities (who have been awarded that status in their member State on the basis of their expertise) submit notices that are treated as a priority.

53. Beyond regulation, current and future stakeholders' endeavours to prevent and tackle online harassment depend in part on their being aware of and having access to scholarly work on media ethics for a public audience. This in turn requires that governments fund research projects that aim to address cyberbullying and provide practical guidance on preventing and responding to this phenomenon. Research on cyberbullying should also take into account risk factors for victimisation such as disability, ethnic group, gender and sexual orientation. Lastly, health-care providers and educators dealing with children and young adults play a key role in identifying online harassment. However, the availability of training funding for such providers is a matter for the member States and varies from country to country.

3. Young people's social engagement through and with the help of the media

3.1. Youth participation and engagement in a convergent media environment

54. The degree of trust in the media greatly influences interest, engagement and participation. Forms of online participatory behaviour, seen as a feature of civic engagement in democratic societies, include accessing, producing, sharing and commenting on news, voicing opinions on matters of public concern, exchanging information, expressing emotions, taking part in debates, educating others, fact-checking and providing balance in discussions.

55. Online news participation behaviour varies from country to country, depending as well on levels of trust in the news media as opposed to in other non-traditional sources such as social media, blogs and digital-born providers. Youth participatory and collaborative culture is particularly influenced by the patterns of usage of such non-traditional sources. Other variables also come into play, including individual demographic characteristics, lifestyles, life cycles, types of new formats, content, means of engagement, tone and storytelling.[29]

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26. The United Kingdom's regulatory authority OFCOM has video service platform rules requiring: the protection of under-18s; terms and conditions that if a person uploads a video containing any restricted material, it must brought to the attention of the video service platform provider, systems for obtaining assurance as to the age of potential viewers, parental control systems, systems allowing viewers to rate harmful material, terms and conditions prohibiting the upload of videos containing relevant harmful material, mechanisms for viewers to report or flag harmful material and provide explanations to users about action taken etc.

27. In Ireland, for example, more than 100 000 images of women and girls were leaked online in 2020, and in Italy, a Telegram page sharing sexual images without consent, also involving minors, was consulted by an average of 40 000 people a day.

28. See HateAid survey: https://hateaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HateAid-Report-2021_EN.pdf.

29. For Spanish young people aged 12 to 18, social networks are mainly used for leisure and socialising. 94.5% of teenagers mainly use the internet at home, with 59.2% of them reporting having a connection in their own bedroom. Entertainment (95.1%) and information (80.2%) are the two main functions attributed to the internet, but participation is also important. By using these technologies, "young people generate support, sociability and recognition spaces which are also collaborative learning spaces, undoubtedly informal and supported by their close social circle, wherein there is ample

56. Safe internet use is paramount to youth participation in and engagement with news ecosystems. Young people create spaces of support, sociability and recognition that are also spaces for collaborative learning. This helps them to develop social, cultural, professional and technical skills. The policy challenge therein is the crucial question of who listens to young people's voices when they are raised in this way.

57. Credible information also depends on credible journalists. In this respect, public service media play a crucial role in fostering professional journalism. Public broadcasting media, after all, are still perceived as more trustworthy than private media channels, even by young people.[30] There are also correlations between levels of education, exposure to television news and newspapers and trust in the media. It is imperative therefore that member States commit to ensuring adequate levels of public service media funding, while providing safeguards for editorial independence in order to restore young people's trust in professional journalists.

3.2. Media ethics, youth, news and democratic engagement

58. Teens and young adults are exposed to a wide variety of political discourses, which may influence their civic and political engagement and participation – both online and offline. Having the opportunity to explore and exchange ideas with others provides a critical mechanism for young people to form and hone their own opinions.

59. The term participatory media was coined by researchers to define the uses of digital media that are more interactive, social and collaborative than broadcast or print media – the so-called traditional media – which are considered elitist. Digital media have had an impact on youth civic development.[31] They have formed a landscape that is conducive to participatory politics in which average citizens do not just follow elite-driven information and wait for opportunities for political action, but actively participate in defining issues of public concern and creating pathways to civic action.

60. Democratic engagement, however, is dependent not only on age, but also on gender, social background and ethnicity. A study of young British women from low socio-economic status backgrounds found that they did not feel represented or listened to in institutional politics or the public sphere; they used a different type of technology to access information and to communicate with their social networks and were disengaged from institutional politics.[32] These findings suggest that the current approaches of public-sector civic websites for young people in general are ineffective in reaching these young women.

61. In the political sphere too, exposure to conflict and incivility in online discourse is an area of concern that young people face when participating in online debates. The more young people participate in interest-driven online communities, the more they are exposed to conflict and the more likely they are to receive a hostile comment, which is not the case with friendship-driven communities (where young people are more likely to have a personal, real-life relationship with group members).

62. The civility or uncivility of online discourse may thereby affect young people's civic-mindedness and degree of political engagement. If we want to engage young people in policy discussions, we need to manage disagreements and avoid aggressive language in the media, so as not to undermine trust in politics and institutions.

63. Although young people are not all politically disengaged, they do feel distanced and alienated and are critical towards institutional politics. To use the categories drawn up by researchers, there are four factors on which young people's voluntary participation and contribution depend: technology, public representation, education, media genres and language.[33] Lawmakers themselves have a role to play in overcoming young people's sense of indifference to politics; it is our responsibility to adapt the political communication process by using innovations in technology, communication and education. In Ukraine, the Ministry of Digital Transformation has launched an educational course for young people called "Media Literacy in Time of

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opportunity to develop very diverse abilities at a social, cultural, professional, or technical level". See "Messenger and social network sites as tools for sociability, leisure and informal learning for Spanish young people" (2012): https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0267323111432411.

30. According to the findings of a study of young people in Austria. See "News Consumption and Trust in Online and Social Media: An In-depth Qualitative Study of Young Adults in Austria" (2020).

31. By 2012, US studies had already found that 46% of young people were getting news and information through social networks, 44% were speaking out about social or political issues online and 67% were "politically active" on social network sites. See: "Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action" and "Civic Engagement in the Digital Age".

32. See "Lost in translation: Why civic online efforts in Britain have failed to engage young women from low socioeconomic backgrounds" (2010).

33. Ibid.

Pandemic"[34] involving various youth opinion makers such as singers and bloggers. This is an example of an innovative media literacy tool aimed at a young audience, which public service media could be encouraged to follow.

64. Given young people's alarming lack of interest in the news, ensuring opportunities for democratic political engagement and exposure to reliable political information on both traditional and new platforms poses a major challenge, as noted in the motion for a resolution underlying this report. News consumption via online news aggregators, social media and blogs raises, *inter alia*, questions as to who should monitor and tackle mis- and disinformation in the information ecosystem and how. Journalists should continue to act as professional gatekeepers in hybrid news systems, provided that fact-checking initiatives are also funded to combat misinformation and disinformation.

65. In response to the emergence of echo chambers[35] and the risks associated with the rise of online mis- and disinformation, fact-checking initiatives have sprung up, including at European level,[36] to counteract the impact of potentially harmful information and to limit the spread and impact of disinformation.

66. In addition, creating safe online communities is a priority. This approach may be implemented alongside existing provisions of the revised EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive. As with harmful advertising or pornographic content, big tech platforms should act swiftly (including with the help of algorithms) to remove comments that could be detrimental to the political debate.

3.3. Youth, aspirational labour and new power asymmetries in the digital economy

67. Advances in the new digital media ecosystem have drastically changed content creation and general media consumption habits and patterns. The main trend is the growing rate of audiovisual media consumption on video-sharing platforms, social media networks and instant messaging systems. Time spent online also comprises carrying out a variety of paid and unpaid economic transactions, often associated with content consumption and production. This includes creative expression on social media, interactive gaming, collaboration, video or written blogging, photography, music and podcasting, etc.

68. Young people are contributing to a changing economic landscape, providing labour for free in the hope of a future payoff. This is known as aspirational labour, or hope labour, which encourages young people to take risks and provide unpaid or underpaid labour, with no guarantee of future earnings. Aspirational labour in the digital media workforce is all the more challenging as influencers promote a narrative that the online environment offers endless possibilities and that patience is all that is required until content reaps its financial rewards.

69. Young people are empowered by the digital ecosystem because it provides them with the tools and spaces to be both active and creative consumers and producers of culture. Corporate platforms, however, commodify the young people's data, attention, culture, labour and creativity for profits that are not equitably shared. New categories of consumption and production have emerged but their role and interplay remain fuzzy, especially in terms of "prosumers" and "playbour".[37] The ecosystem of commercial and non-commercial platforms that offer young people opportunities to learn, socialise and play also expose them to risks including invasion of privacy, exploitation of free labour and surveillance.

70. The advent of new digital careers such as "data workers" and the like should thus trigger debate about the role played by young people in the networked ecosystem of the digital economy. The digital transformation may lead to structural inequalities and reproduce existing ones, for example the imbalance in power relations between platforms and users. It may also create a digital divide in the form of unequal access to technologies, unequal development of the relevant skills needed to flourish online and the disparate benefits of technology usage according to socio-economic status. Young people produce personal, transactional, and user-generated data that are then commodified by corporations — by trading, monetising, and/ or converting data into financial capital — without compensating young people for their product in an equitable way.

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34. https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/en/courses/mediagramotnist-u-casi-pandemii.
35. The echo chamber effect was first described in 1998 by John Scruggs, a lobbyist for the tobacco company Philip Morris. Today it resonates in digital spaces (online political bubbles) that bring together a majority of like-minded people and amplify their opinions, locking these users into partisan or erroneous viewpoints.
36. For example, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) project, which supports an independent community of fact-checkers working to combat disinformation: https://edmo.eu/.
37. "Prosumers": a portmanteau of the words producer and consumer to describe young people as both consumers and producers in the market for media products. "Playbour" refers to the blurring lines between leisure (play) and work (labour).

71. Council of Europe member States could and should develop strategies to encourage and enable young people to participate creatively, healthily and safely in active social life, notably through and with the help of the media, and address the risk of the young being exploited through aspirational labour. Regulatory frameworks should be developed to correct these so-called new power asymmetries, namely the unbalanced power relationships between young people and corporate platforms with for-profit business models, which are so popular with the young.

72. Such strategies could include educational programmes and frameworks to increase youth awareness and knowledge of the digital economy in which they as users produce data that are then traded and mined by corporate platforms with for-profit business models.

73. At present, the member States have no uniform approach to commercial data practices, data privacy, surveillance and targeted advertising. The same is true for terms and conditions that amount to unfair competition. Yet a uniform approach to young people's economic understanding of the digital environment (taking into account age, ethnic origin, gender, education and time spent online) is precisely what is required. The overall aim is to better understand aspirational labour and, if young people are genuinely being exploited, to tackle this new form of exploitation.

74. The lack of clear metrics to assess and measure the different forms of value creation makes young people's creative and affective labour on digital platforms invisible and must therefore be addressed. An analytical approach could be implemented in parallel with entrepreneurial and regulatory initiatives to support young people involved in the digital economy who are consuming and producing content.

4. Conclusions

75. My report provides an overview of the key media challenges facing youth in Europe while bearing in mind that the digital environment offers a wealth of information and a potential for knowledge-sharing that is as yet unrivalled in human history. This opportunity is not without risks for the young, nor without responsibility for the public authorities and economic operators in the field.

76. Many stakeholders have a role to play, starting with the media themselves: their independence, professionalism and adaptation to technological changes are prerequisites for quality information and young people's civic engagement.

77. The balance between freedom and regulation is also fundamental: the Assembly must call for operators to ensure the protection of young people's data and privacy, as the European Union recently did in its Digital Services Package adopted in 2022. The regulation also covers illegal content, and, in particular, unlawful pornographic material, which is a major problem for young people.

78. Lastly, we must ensure that young people's creative potential in the digital environment is not hindered or economically exploited.

79. The recommendations in the draft resolution seek to respect such a balance between autonomy and responsibility. It is the duty of States, regulators, educators, civil society and private platforms to ensure that the young people of today are the informed and responsible adults of the future.