

Council of Europe – Thematic Dialogue on Social Media

You can use a hammer to build a house or to break someone's skull, but the hammer doesn't care either way – These were the words of philosopher Noam Chomsky, when speaking about technology.

But when it comes to social media, is technology really neutral anymore?

After all, as per a 2018 internal Meta email, the 'young ones are the best ones'.

And proof of that is that in 2022 alone, 6 major social media platforms generated nearly \$11 billion in advertising revenue from users under 18. And that is just for the US – globally, we don't even know, because the platforms don't allow that information to be available. But what we do know for sure is that social media algorithms profit off of children's addiction.

Infinite scroll, hyper-personalized feeds, streaks, push notifications, easy to bypass 'age verifications', these are not coincidences or carelessness/oversight – each and every one of them is a deliberate design choice and the impact on children is evident.

Attention spans are plummeting, there is a constant compulsion to check the phone, and boredom, so to speak, has become a concept of the past.

Children are getting into a vicious cycle of constant comparison with the carefully curated best 7 seconds – the highlights – of someone else's life. Moreover, they stop seeing themselves through their own eyes, because their self-image and self-worth starts being shaped by the likes and comments they receive. And if they even try to break away from this cycle, the FOMO pulls them straight back.

We are starting to see a generation that constantly seeks instant gratification and immediate responses, one that cannot spend even a moment alone just with their thoughts. Most alarmingly however, social media is becoming the place children go to vent. Whenever they feel stressed or angry or sad, they go online and quite literally, scroll the pain away. Social media is becoming a form of therapy, and with the advent of AI, this is only getting worse.

Oh, and all this is not because social media platforms don't care what children see, they very much do care, because what children see online is what generates them profit.

And evidently, that profit is what has made it normal for a child to see a reel about a war-torn family not knowing if they'll live to see the next day, and then just swipe up onto a 'Get ready with me' for the new Barbie movie.

This very real juxtaposition is as symbolic as it is horrifying, and it is what halts the child from emotionally processing what they are seeing. And this, coupled with the sheer amount and constant bombardment of distressing content is what leads to desensitization, and eventually, hopelessness. Children don't even realize when they become numb to things that the next generation cannot afford to become numb to, things that cannot and must not be normalized.

And perhaps worst of all, social media narrows your reality and shapes your worldview for you. It is so easy, especially for children, to find themselves trapped in an echo-chamber of the same harmful ideologies being repeated over and over again until to them, they become the truth.

Furthermore, the online world makes it so incredibly easy to forget that there is someone on the other side of the screen, and especially when a child sees how widespread online trolling and cyberbullying and extremist comments already are, it seems inconsequential to just become another one of those faceless hate accounts.

And yet that is only half the picture, so before your negative view of social media is cemented, it's worth taking a look at the glass-half full side of the story.

I was lucky. I was lucky enough to grow up in a community that would support and accept me no matter what but think of that child belonging to a minority – be it ethnic, gender-related, queer, who has no support, no understanding from those around them, no role models. For that child, social media, could be the place where they learn to embrace their identity, and in fact, up to 60% of adolescents report that social media helps them feel more accepted.

Moreover, I'm gen z – we're the first generation to be called digital natives because we actually grew up in, not into, the digital world. So for us, social media is not just a tool, it's an extension of our world, and a new avenue – for self-expression, for socialization, for connectedness.

I mean it is simply not possible to meet so many different people, to speak to someone on the other side of the world, to explore and understand so many different beliefs and opinions and cultures, and to learn so many new things anywhere else.

Moreover, my relationship with social media is a very complex one, because I've engaged with it in both a personal sphere but also for my activism and that means that yes, I have, often times, encountered criticism and cyberbullying, that I've had to learn how to deal with and yet even despite that, I still don't think there possibly could be a tool more powerful than social media to advocate. Nowhere else can you as effectively inform, mobilise, educate young people, and nowadays, it is the main medium through which youth stay updated and become civically responsible.

But then, the question you're probably asking is, where does the balance lie? Well, I'm here today as a young person who has lived social media, not as the expert who

has studied it so I cannot precisely tell you where the balance lies, but I can tell you where it doesn't, and that is blanket bans.

Because blanket bans do not change the algorithm, they do not protect the children that need these spaces, and they do not prepare children to be responsible social media users for whenever they do qualify for it.

Colleagues, it is not the children that should be banned from accessing the digital world, it is the companies that exploit them that should be banned from accessing children.

It is time we held platforms accountable and made them suffer the consequences of failing to protect young users.

Moreover, it is time we realized that bans do not stop addiction, they just make children look for other, potentially more dangerous and less regulated areas to fulfil the role social media previously had.

So what we need to do is educate children and parents, empower them to be more responsible when using social media, and make support not just available, but accessible to them.

But most importantly, we need to change the way social media is structured. And that is our job here today. To see how we can create a digital world that is safe by design and by default. A digital world that respects children's rights – but not just the right to privacy and safety, but also the right to develop with the help of the right tools, to engage with digital technology consciously, and most importantly, to co-shape the digital spaces that they interact with.

Too many times, we try to think for children, to speak on their behalf, to decide what's best for them, but we don't always need to try to put ourselves in their shoes because the current inhabitants of those shoes – children - have their own voice, they just need us to listen and amplify it.

And that is what we urge you to do today, and every day after that. You're the professionals, but we are the ones who live social media every day, through the very lens that today's discussion may change, so listen to us, give us a seat – not at a different table, but at the same one decisions are made at, and let today be the start – of holding platforms accountable, of making online spaces safe by default, and most importantly, of helping to create a digital world made for children, with children.