

Young Human Rights Professionals’ Contributions on the Topic of Children and Social Media

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Introduction

By Juliette Hudson

In January 2026, we convened a trainee-led informal brainstorming event at the Council of Europe to reflect collectively on a question that is becoming increasingly polarising in public debate: how should Europe respond to the growing presence of social media in children's lives? The discussion brought together colleagues from across different units to exchange perspectives, knowledge, and potential responses. The conversations made clear both the urgency and the complexity of the issue.

This compilation was developed as a follow-up to that exchange. It brings together reflections written by young professionals aged 23 to 27, at the early stages of our careers in human rights. We are trainees, researchers and practitioners working within European institutions, NGOs, and related organisations. While we do not claim or aim to speak for children, we write from a position that is both professional and generational. All of us grew up using the very platforms which we now analyse in our work, witnessing first-hand their evolving influence on children's lives across the globe. This proximity shapes our perspective, our engagement with the topic, and our understanding of its importance and urgency.

This introduction serves within itself as a contribution. It aims to set the scene, to explain why we, as young professionals, felt the need to create space for further discussion. It begins from a concern about the direction of current policy debates. Across Europe, proposals to ban access to social media for children under 15 and 16 are gaining traction and increasingly taking concrete form. As reflected in recent parliamentary discussions, Commission initiatives,¹ and national debates,² the political appetite for age-based restriction is growing.³ These proposals are often framed as decisive responses to rising anxiety around social media's potential impact on children's mental health, and its risks surrounding addiction and online exploitation.

The apparent simplicity of these responses must not be mistaken for effectiveness. Banning children from social media does not dismantle algorithmic amplification of harmful content. It does not reform business models built on maximising engagement and exploiting users' data. It does not increase transparency in recommender systems. Nor does it address the structural incentives that produce addictive design. Instead, it shifts responsibility onto children themselves, treating them as the problem to be removed from the system, rather than recognising flaws within the system that must be addressed.

A rights-based framework requires a different starting point. Children are not merely vulnerable users in need of restriction. They are rights-holders. They hold rights to protection from violence and exploitation, but also to freedom of expression, access to information, participation in public life, cultural engagement, education and association. These rights apply

¹ *EUROPE 13732/9*, Digital majority - MEPs approve an age limit of between 13 and 16 for access to social networks (2025); *EUROPE 13732/11* Six Member States want European Commission to draw inspiration from their national initiatives to establish a digital majority in EU.

² West and Robinson (2025) : [Too young to scroll? Why governments are cracking down on social media age limits](#), OECD.

³ Jahangir and Hendrix (2026) [Tracking Efforts To Restrict Or Ban Teens from Social Media Across the Globe](#), TechPolicy Press.

online as much as offline. The digital environment is not external to childhood; it is part of the contemporary architecture of growing up in today's world.

The central question, therefore, is not whether children should be online. It is whether digital environments are being designed and governed in ways that respect, protect and fulfil their rights.

Youth and child participation must be at the centre of that governance. Policies developed without the meaningful involvement of young people risk misunderstanding both the harms they face and the value they derive from digital spaces which move and change much faster than our abilities to track their impacts and effects. Social media can expose children to hate, manipulation and exploitation. It can also provide community, creativity, solidarity, political voice and access to information, particularly for marginalised groups.

To treat these spaces as purely corrosive is to ignore their social reality. Protection and agency are not opposites. Our responses to this ever-growing problem must regulate platforms rather than childhood. We must address systemic design rather than defaulting to exclusion. And we must treat young people not as passive recipients of digital policy, but as participants in shaping it.

Each of the following contributions approaches this issue from a distinct thematic perspective, examining the broader argument through different lenses and in relation to different groups of children and societal dynamics. Rather than offering definitive answers, their purpose is to pose critical questions, stimulate reflection, and encourage dialogue. Together, they invite us to engage with children's rights in the digital environment in all their complexity, nuance and evolving possibilities.

Youth cultural practices in the age of social media

By Ludivine Briain

This text aims to highlight the relationship between youth, social media, digital technology and culture. It attempts to summarise how these relationships are intertwined, or not, and to offer some thoughts on the role of social media in the cultural practices of young people. Most of the data and examples presented here will be French and focused on adolescents, as there is little or no research on children.

Social media is now part of everyday life. For young people, especially teenagers, it is a place for socialising. Its role is such that Claire Balleys (2025) states that teenagers are now at the centre of a hybrid form of socialisation, 'between the physical and digital worlds'. While young people are criticised for their presence and overuse of social media, this criticism fails to question the place that is given to them and allowed to them in the public sphere (Balleys, 2025). Social media presents itself as a real place where young people can express themselves and be heard. It is a space for exchange and mobilisation (Cortés-Ramos, 2021), but also for participation and creativity. When discussing culture, digital technology and social media, it is necessary to distinguish between digital culture and culture in the digital age in order to fully understand the examples and reflections presented. The first, according to L. Bolka-Tabary and F. Thiault (2021), is more broadly integrated into information culture, which encompasses computer culture (coding, algorithms, etc.) and digital culture (uses, practices, behaviours related to technologies). The two are intertwined and refer to the knowledge we have and may or may not use in our digital practices. The second refers to all the transformations in the cultural sector (creation, production, distribution and marketing of cultural, artistic and heritage content) in a digital world.

We can begin by illustrating IT literacy education with various examples. First, UNESCO and Kids Code Jeunesse⁴ offer the 'Decode Algorithms and Data' programme. The aim of this programme is to educate children about the influence of algorithms in digital experiences. This is achieved through video games that can be played in class or individually, or through discussions with the teacher thanks to the publication of educational guides. In the same vein, we can mention Colori⁵. Colori is a French company that introduces children to technological literacy, coding, algorithms and responsible digital practices without using screens. These examples illustrate formats for teaching computer literacy and enable children to understand how the digital world works so that they can embrace it. In these examples, as is often the case, the cultural sector is a tool for raising awareness of these issues through the creation of fun and interactive games.

Information and digital literacy seems to be mainly achieved during adolescence through media and information training programmes. These can take place in schools through the involvement of teachers, professionals or journalists during residencies, or in extracurricular settings. Le BAL in Paris, through its educational programme La fabrique du regard⁶ (The Making of the Gaze), works with children and adolescents during school hours or at leisure centres, offering image education through 'seeing' and 'doing'. Other creative spaces are emerging, such as Sound and Vision in the Netherlands, MarsMedialab in Marseille, and La

⁴ [L'UNESCO et Kids Code Jeunesse unissent leurs efforts pour promouvoir](#)

⁵ [COLORI](#)

⁶ [Créations des jeunes | La Fabrique du Regard](#)

Maison de l'Image in Grenoble. These French examples are described by E. Vergès (2020) as medialabs, spaces for learning and experimenting with information production and dissemination practices. The projects carried out there can give rise to genuine cultural projects. Labo148 in Roubaix, an artistic and journalistic production agency bringing together around fifteen young people, fits this definition. The Labo places co-construction at the heart of its project, extended here to participatory governance. To this end, the group of young people, aged between 15 and 30, chooses a theme each year which will be the subject of an exhibition. Throughout the year, the group works on producing all the materials, formats and objects presented during this evening event. Although they are accompanied by two adults, the latter describe themselves as 'facilitators' and are not there to dictate but to encourage and facilitate the success of the project. These medialabs enable young people to learn how to produce media, whether through writing, sound and image recording, storytelling, etc. In addition to professional training, these medialabs offer spaces for exchange, creation, innovation and expression, while educating young people about the creation of information, all generally taking place in a democratic setting. In this example, empowering young people in the choice and implementation of the cultural season strengthens their self-esteem by raising awareness of their personal and professional qualities and skills, promoting their agency and thus their empowerment (Maury & Hedjerassi, 2020).⁷

These initial examples demonstrate how culture can be a tool and a resource for better understanding and apprehending the media and social networks. However, it seems necessary to remember that creativity and cultural participation do not only take place within schools or associations, and to reposition social networks as places and spaces for cultural creation and dissemination.

In response to concerns that young people are turning away from cultural activities, statistics from the French Ministry of Culture for 2018 show that 88% of 15-19 year olds listen to music every day, and that attendance at libraries, cinemas and live performance venues (theatre, dance, circus, etc.) remains constant, and that only reading is declining, not only among teenagers, but among all 15-39 year olds. These figures seem to indicate a change in cultural practices. Indeed, it appears that social networks are strengthening the relationship between culture and sociability in the sense that the socialising, relational value of culture is becoming paramount. Thus, the social experience seems to be the ultimate goal of cultural outings (A. Djakouane, 2024). In this sense, traditional cultural venues remain popular, but cultural venues that promote sociability (such as festivals) seem to be preferred by this age group. Furthermore, according to H. Jenkins, M. Iro and D. B (Arnaud, 2018), the media implement the new participatory value of culture by being a space where participation "in something" and interaction "with something" overlap. Thus, writing and acting, dancing, video and photo editing, and reading and writing fan fiction are all amateur cultural practices. However, the creations produced on these platforms are difficult to label as culture, and young people themselves struggle to identify them as such (Lyon G, n.d.). This could be explained by a kind of confrontation between youth culture and mainstream culture. The latter is becoming increasingly integrated into social media through the emergence of cultural content creators who, through their content, can promote cultural democratisation by highlighting artists, heritage or content that has been overlooked (Ballarini, 2023). These creators can become professionalised and collaborate with cultural institutions to encourage their audience to

⁷ Further information and additional examples can be found in the appendix.

discover these places and their collections, enabling the venues to attract a new audience, as the latter, and the cultural content it offers, is validated and legitimised by the content creator (Ballarini & Bastard, 2023). all of which reinforces the idea that culture is realised and created in labelled, institutionalised places. This content is part of a process of cultural democratisation of legitimate culture, while social networks, through their participatory nature, are part of a process of cultural production, dissemination and sharing by all,⁸ and therefore of cultural democracy.

This reflection sought to highlight the relationship between culture, social media and young people. The first part showed how cultural and artistic projects, relying on the participation of children and teenagers, provide informal education and raise awareness of how digital technology and social media work. The second part opened up the discussion on productions created directly within social media. By considering them as genuine forms of artistic expression, it invited us to move beyond the idea that these spaces are necessarily impoverishing and highlighted the space for creativity, expression and discovery that they offer.

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⁸ Specialised social networks, such as PACO, are emerging and aim to bring together art and culture enthusiasts so that they can share their artistic references and discover new ones.

Djakouane A. (2023), « Un portable sinon rien ? Les pratiques culturelles des jeunes à l'ère numérique », *L'Observatoire*, 60(1), p. 21-27, disponible à l'adresse <https://doi.org/10.3917/lobs.060.0021>.

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Experiences of LGBTI children and young people on social media

By Emma Huet

Online hate speech and discrimination among children and young people in Europe is widespread.⁹ However, these aggregated figures conceal important differences in how children experience digital environments. Factors based on real or perceived characteristics such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation influence both how children engage online and the risks they face. Vulnerabilities observed offline frequently extend into digital spaces, suggesting that uniform policy responses may be insufficient.

LGBTI children and young people illustrate these differentiated and intersectional risks particularly clearly. Social media occupies a prominent role in the daily lives of many LGBTI youth, with 34% reporting that they use social media “almost constantly”.¹⁰ Evidence, notably from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA),¹¹ the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)¹², OII¹³ and civil society organisations, consistently shows that LGBTI minors are disproportionately exposed to online hate, threats, and discrimination. Social media can also, however, provide spaces for identity exploration, self-expression, community-building, and peer support.¹⁴

Research by Children and Screens¹⁵ shows that LGBTI specific social media is associated with lower internalised stigma, stronger community connectedness, and improved well-being, with 74% reporting that social media helps them feel less alone, compared with 52% of non-LGBTI youth. It indicates that social media enables young people to build relationships, engage with community, and find refuge from discrimination, particularly in rural areas. LGBTI youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to access health and LGBTI news, including sexual health information, and to share or engage with personal health stories online. Moreover, engagement in fandoms helps some young people recognise their sexual and gender minority identities and transgender and gender-diverse youth report using the internet to experiment with their identity (60%) and to navigate social transition (88%).

On the other hand, the same digital environments are associated with heightened risks.¹⁶ Research indicates that sexual and gender minority (SGM) children are more likely than their

⁹ UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (2023), *Children’s Exposure to Hate Messages and Violent Images Online*, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), [UNICEF-Children-Exposure-Hate-Violence-Online.pdf](#)

¹⁰ Children and Screens (2025). *LGBTQ+ youth and digital media use*. [LGBTQ+ Youth and Digital Media Use - Children and Screens](#)

¹¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2024). *EU LGBTIQ Survey III: LGBTIQ equality at a crossroads - progress and challenges*. [Link](#)

¹² European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) 6th monitoring cycle. See in particular: Sixth report on Iceland (2023) <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-ecri-report-on-iceland/1680ac8c43/> and Sixth report on Slovenia (2025) <https://rm.coe.int/sixth-report-on-slovenia/4880291ae8>

¹³ OII Europe (Organisation Intersex International Europe) (2025). [Policy Brief on Cyberbullying & LGBTQI Youth: Priorities for the EU Action Plan – OII Europe](#)

¹⁴ Chan, R. C. H. (2022). *Benefits and risks of LGBT social media use for sexual and gender minority individuals: An investigation of psychosocial mechanisms of LGBT social media use and well-being*.

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¹⁵ Children and Screens (2025). *LGBTQ+ youth and digital media use*. [LGBTQ+ Youth and Digital Media Use - Children and Screens](#)

¹⁶ Children and Screens (2025). *LGBTQ+ youth and digital media use*. [LGBTQ+ Youth and Digital Media Use - Children and Screens](#)

non-SGM peers to encounter negative online experiences that contribute to mental health burdens. 35% of LGBTI young people aged 13 to 17 reported experiencing cyberbullying in 2024. They also report higher exposure to online discrimination, including both explicit and subtle forms of anti-LGBTI bias, with 94% experiencing subtle forms of anti-LGBTI bias online and 97% reporting exposure to anti-LGBTI web-based discrimination during the previous month. Studies also find that sexual minority adolescents are more likely to experience cyberbullying, sexual orientation or gender-based victimisation, unwanted sexual attention, and sextortion. Reported consequences of cyberbullying include adverse psychological, emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes.

These findings suggest that social media should not be characterised as either inherently harmful or protective. Rather, digital platforms constitute ambivalent environments in which the same tools may support resilience and connection while also amplifying existing inequalities and forms of discrimination, particularly for marginalised groups.

In this context, regulatory approaches require careful consideration. Content moderation systems that rely predominantly on automated filters and keyword detection may inadvertently restrict supportive, educational, or identity-affirming LGBTI content through misclassification. Indeed, the GLAAD Social Media Safety Index Report 2025¹⁷ indicates that platforms both broadly under-moderate anti-LGBTI hate content and over-moderate content from LGBTI individuals. For example, teenage users of Instagram were unable to search for LGBTI terms, including #gay, #bisexual, #trans, #queer, and #nonbinary, for several months in 2024 due to, according to Meta, accidental misclassification as “sexually explicit or suggestive.”¹⁸

This highlights the need for moderation practices that are more nuanced, context-sensitive, and inclusive, ensuring a clear distinction between harmful content and legitimate expression or information. Research by Saper Vedere¹⁹ indicates that combining algorithmic detection with human moderation can reduce the risk of wrongful removals and identified a set of metadata correlated with hateful content that could contribute to improving algorithmic detection. Similarly, UNESCO recommends that platforms provide accessible and effective appeal mechanisms for users whose content has been removed.²⁰

Platform regulation and accountability should further address the influence of algorithmic recommender systems in reinforcing discriminatory stereotypes and prejudices. On 7 January 2025, Meta introduced revisions to its Hateful Content policy, permitting, according to GLAAD²¹, certain narratives that characterise homosexuality and transgender identity as mental illnesses, as well as derogatory descriptions of LGBTI individuals. The policy referred to “transgenderism”, a term commonly used by anti-trans activists to suggest that trans identity is ideological rather than a natural human expression.²² French associations have also

¹⁷ GLAAD (2025). *Social Media Safety Index*. [2025 Social Media Safety Index | GLAAD](#)

¹⁸ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (2025).

[Investigation | Five-year overview of the online and offline anti-LGBTQ+ landscape - ISD](#)

¹⁹ ReputatioLab (2023). [Messages de haine et réseaux sociaux : la difficulté de la modération | ReputatioLab](#)

²⁰ UNESCO (2021). *Addressing Hate Speech on Social Media: Contemporary Challenges*, discussion paper (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), [Lutter contre les discours de haine sur les réseaux sociaux : difficultés contemporaines - UNESCO Bibliothèque Numérique](#)

²¹ GLAAD (2025). [GLAAD RESPONDS TO META'S LATEST ANTI-LGBTQ CHANGES TO CONTENT POLICY AND DEI THAT WILL HARM USERS | GLAAD](#)

²² Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (2025).

[Investigation | Five-year overview of the online and offline anti-LGBTQ+ landscape - ISD](#)

filed complaints against Meta for refusing to remove “hateful” comments from users about transgender people, deleting content and accounts, “limiting the visibility” of posts, and “refusing to promote LGBTI accounts and content”.²³ Such developments underscore the importance of ensuring that platforms adequately assess and mitigate systemic risks, including those related to discrimination, safety, and the rights of vulnerable groups.²⁴

In addition to regulatory safeguards, a range of good practices identified by the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the European Union and civil society organisations highlight the importance of a comprehensive and child-centred approach to tackling online hate speech and discrimination.

Strengthening digital and media literacy represents a key preventive measure. Supporting children and young people in understanding platform dynamics, recognising hate speech, protecting personal data and developing critical thinking skills is essential to fostering informed, resilient and responsible participation in digital environments.²⁵

Equally important is the availability of child-friendly reporting and support mechanisms. Reporting systems should be accessible, safe, confidential and age-appropriate, and include clear links to support services and, where appropriate, law enforcement authorities. Good practices include dedicated hotlines for reporting and the removal of child sexual abuse material, helplines for children and the general public, zero-rated chat applications managed by child helplines, and safe, free-of-charge points of contact enabling children to report violence, exploitation and abuse online.²⁶

Effective mechanisms are also required to prevent, investigate and address online hate speech across all grounds of discrimination, as well as related forms of online abuse on social media, including grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, doxxing, and AI- or self-generated child sexual abuse material. Addressing these research gaps remains essential.²⁷ Greater support is also needed for studies on children’s exposure to online hate speech beyond cyberbullying, alongside the systematic collection of disaggregated data, in order to better capture intersectional risks and inform evidence-based policymaking.

Finally, children’s participation²⁸ should be promoted in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies, programmes and digital tools that affect them. This should be complemented by sustained support for non-governmental organisations and initiatives combating online hate speech, including cultural and educational projects that promote inclusive, safe and rights-based use of social media.

This contribution does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of existing initiatives, recommendations, or research in this field, particularly given the inherent difficulties in

²³ Libération (2025). [Discrimination LGBT + : des associations françaises portent plainte contre Meta et Mark Zuckerberg – Libération](#)

²⁴ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (2025). [Investigation | Five-year overview of the online and offline anti-LGBTQ+ landscape - Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#)

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²⁸ Council of Europe (2022). [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2022\)16 on combating hate speech. CM/Rec\(2022\)16](#)

comparing studies, which often rely on differing age groups, timeframes, countries, and methodologies. Rather, it aims to highlight the complexity inherent in addressing online hate speech affecting children and young people, who are too often perceived as a homogeneous group. Efforts to protect minors from exposure to harmful content must therefore be carefully balanced. While safeguarding children from online hate and discrimination is essential, it is equally important not to overlook the positive dimensions of digital environments, nor the diversity of experiences, needs and vulnerabilities among different groups of children. Recognising these nuances is critical to ensuring that regulatory, educational and protective responses are proportionate, inclusive and firmly grounded in children's rights.

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Integrating Children's Rights in Digital Rulemaking: A Procedural Positive Obligation under Article 10 of the ECHR?

By Magnus Rotevatn

Abstract

This reflection note advances the proposition that, within the Council of Europe framework, States are subject to procedural positive obligations to assess, consider, and integrate children's rights when designing and implementing rules governing the digital public sphere. The argument rests on three converging elements: (i) the ECtHR's recognition that Article 10 ECHR has a structural dimension and may require States to secure an adequate framework for effective pluralism; (ii) the Court's procedural scrutiny in cases engaging children's interests, particularly as regards the quality of decision-making and the adequacy of balancing; and (iii) Council of Europe standards requiring best-interests balancing, child participation, and impact-oriented lawmaking in the digital environment. The resulting obligation is therefore best understood not as a freestanding duty of content restriction, but as a duty of reasoned, rights-based digital rulemaking.

Introduction

The digital public sphere has become a central environment for children's expression, participation, learning, and access to information. At the same time, it exposes children to manipulation, harmful content, and structural risks associated with platform design and algorithmic curation. This creates a recurrent legal tension: regulatory intervention may be necessary to protect children, yet overbroad measures may also restrict expression, reduce access to information, and impair children's participation and autonomy.

This tension reflects a deeper difficulty in applying the best interests of the child in digital governance. The principle may be invoked to support stronger State intervention to protect children in the public sphere, but also to support the protection of children's rights to self-determination, participation, and the development of their own views. In practice, however, consideration of children's rights often becomes a question of how far children's access to the internet should be limited, rather than how digital platforms and regulatory frameworks can be designed to accommodate children as rights-holders.²⁹

The resulting challenge remains insufficiently resolved: how should children's interests be assessed and integrated when designing and implementing legal frameworks that regulate digital public debate? The following reflections address this question through a procedural lens and examine the extent to which Council of Europe standards and ECtHR jurisprudence may be understood as supporting a procedural obligation to integrate children's rights into digital regulation.

The Positive Dimension of Article 10 ECHR

The ECtHR's jurisprudence under Article 10 ECHR establishes that freedom of expression is not limited to a negative duty of non-interference. In certain contexts, the effective exercise

²⁹ See the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, Shout Out on 23 February 2026: [Regulate platforms, not children – Commissioner urges caution over social media bans](#).

of Article 10 may also require positive measures, including the establishment of an adequate legal and administrative framework.

This is particularly clear in the Court’s media pluralism case-law. In *Centro Europa 7*, the Court held that, in a sensitive sector such as audiovisual media, the State may be under a positive obligation to put in place an “appropriate legislative and administrative framework” to guarantee effective pluralism.³⁰ In *Manole*, the Court reinforced this structural approach by linking pluralism to the functioning of democracy and characterising the State as the “ultimate guarantor of pluralism”.³¹

This framework-oriented logic is directly relevant to digital governance. In *Cengiz*, the Court recognised the internet’s central role in facilitating access to news and the dissemination of information.³² As digital platforms and intermediaries increasingly shape visibility, access, and participation in public debate, the legal rules governing these actors affect the practical enjoyment of Convention rights.

The Court’s case-law also leaves room for positive obligations where private control over communicative spaces creates effective barriers to expression. In *Appleby*, the Court accepted that such obligations may arise where restrictions prevent the effective exercise of freedom of expression or destroy the essence of the right.³³ This is particularly relevant in the digital environment, where private intermediaries exercise significant control over communicative infrastructures.

Article 10 ECHR may therefore require States not only to refrain from unjustified interference, but also, in certain circumstances, to secure the conditions for effective participation in public debate. The question, for present purposes, is how such framework obligations should be discharged where children’s rights are specifically engaged. If the Court’s pluralism-oriented approach is to remain inclusive in the digital public sphere, it must also account for children as rights-holders: their particular vulnerability cannot justify treating exclusion from digital environments as the default regulatory solution.

Consideration of the Child in the Digital Environment

The ECtHR’s Approach to Securing Children’s Rights

The Court has yet to develop case-law specifically on imposing procedural positive obligations to assess and integrate children’s rights in digital rulemaking.

However, what is clear in the Court’s case-law is that Convention compliance in child-related matters is not assessed solely by reference to the final outcome. The quality of the decision-making process also matters, including whether the relevant interests were properly identified and balanced. In *X v Latvia*, the Court in the Grand Chamber emphasised the requirement to

³⁰ See ECtHR, *Centro Europa 7 Srl and Di Stefano v Italy*, [no. 38433/09](#), 7 June 2012, para 134.

³¹ See ECtHR, *Manole and Others v. Moldova*, [no. 1936/02](#), 17 September 2009, paras 95 and 107.

³² See ECtHR, *Cengiz and Others v Turkey*, [no. 48226/10 and 14027/11](#), 1 December 2015, para 52.

³³ See ECtHR, *Appleby and Others v. the United Kingdom*, [no. 44306/98](#), 6 May 2003, para 47.

effectively consider the best interests of the child in relation to assessing the fairness of domestic decision-making processes.³⁴

A particularly relevant Article 10 authority is *Macatė v. Lithuania* (GC), which concerned the suspension and warning-labelling of a children's book depicting same-sex relationships as allegedly harmful to minors.³⁵ The Grand Chamber held that the measures violated Article 10 and found that they were intended to restrict children's access to information portraying same-sex relationships as equivalent to different-sex relationships;³⁶ crucially, the Court concluded that such restrictions did not pursue a legitimate aim acceptable under Article 10 § 2. The judgment is important here because it demonstrates the Court's readiness to scrutinise child-protection justifications closely and to reject measures that, under the guise of protecting children, undermine pluralism, tolerance and children's access to information.

Although *X v Latvia* arose under Article 8 ECHR, and *Macatė v. Lithuania* concerned a distinct Article 10 context, their methodological significance is apparent. Taken together, they support the proposition that where children's interests are strongly affected, Convention compliance requires more than invocation of a legitimate aim in the abstract: it requires demonstrable, structured reasoning as to the interests at stake, the evidentiary basis for intervention, and the adequacy of the balancing undertaken. Applied to digital rulemaking, this supports a procedural requirement to identify child-specific impacts and to explain how protection concerns are balanced against children's rights to expression, information and participation.

Council of Europe Standards on Children and Digital Governance

Council of Europe soft-law standards give concrete procedural content to the proposed obligation. Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers CM/Rec(2018)7 is the key child-specific instrument: it frames children as rights-holders in the digital environment and is expressly designed to guide States in formulating legislation, policies and other measures affecting children's rights.³⁷ It also specifies the required method of decision-making. In all actions concerning children in the digital environment, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration, and States must seek to balance and, where possible, reconcile protection with children's rights to freedom of expression and information and participation rights.³⁸ The Recommendation further requires meaningful child participation in devising, implementing and evaluating legislation and policies³⁹, and it expressly requires *ex ante* assessment of laws and policies at the drafting stage, followed by periodic review and updating of legal frameworks.⁴⁰

³⁴ See ECtHR, *X v. Latvia*, [no. 27853/09](#), 26 November 2013, para 102.

³⁵ See ECtHR, *Macatė v. Lithuania*, [no. 61435/19](#), 23 January 2023.

³⁶ See ECtHR, *Macatė v. Lithuania*, *op. cit.*, para 190.

³⁷ See Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)7](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment, Appendix, para. 1.

³⁸ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7, *op. cit.*, Appendix, para. 2.1.

³⁹ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7, *op. cit.*, Appendix, para. 2.4.

⁴⁰ Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7, *op. cit.*, Appendix, para. 4.1.

Recommendations CM/Rec(2018)2⁴¹ and CM/Rec(2020)1⁴² complement the beforementioned CM recommendation by setting out the general regulatory architecture for intermediary and algorithmic governance. CM/Rec(2018)2 affirms that States retain the ultimate obligation to protect human rights in the digital environment and requires regulatory frameworks to include oversight and redress, as well as transparent and inclusive lawmaking with prior human-rights impact assessments.⁴³ It also calls on intermediaries to conduct regular human-rights due diligence, including impact assessments of current and future policies, products and services, with follow-up and evaluation.⁴⁴ CM/Rec(2020)1 extends this logic to algorithmic systems by highlighting risks from large-scale tracking and personalised manipulation and requiring lifecycle consideration of adverse human-rights effects from the proposal stage onward⁴⁵, continuous assessment and documentation⁴⁶, and monitoring, review, redress and precaution where risks are severe⁴⁷ alongside transparent, accountable and inclusive legislative processes and ongoing review.⁴⁸ Together, these instruments support a procedural model of digital rulemaking based on impact assessment, balancing, participation, oversight and iterative review.

While not binding, the Commissioner's intervention is normatively significant and particularly consistent with the methodological claim advanced here: before adopting sweeping age-based bans, governments and parliaments should pause, consult experts, civil society and children, and ensure that proposed measures are human-rights compliant, with regulatory attention directed at platform design and incentives rather than children as the primary object of restriction.⁴⁹

Concluding remarks

This note has argued for a procedural reading of children's rights integration in digital governance within the Council of Europe framework. Its central claim is not that the ECHR imposes a freestanding duty to restrict content in the name of child protection, but that it supports a duty of reasoned, rights-based digital rulemaking where children's rights are foreseeably affected.

The argument rests on three connected propositions. First, Article 10 ECHR has a framework-oriented positive dimension: in certain contexts, the State must secure conditions for effective

⁴¹ See Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2018\)2](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries

⁴² See Council of Europe: Committee of Ministers, [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2020\)1](#) of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the human rights impacts of algorithmic systems

⁴³ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2, *op. cit.*, Appendix, para. 1.1.3-1.1.4.

⁴⁴ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2, *op. cit.*, Appendix, para. 2.1.4.

⁴⁵ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)1, *op. cit.*, Appendix, Part A, para. 4

⁴⁶ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)1, *op. cit.*, Appendix, Part A, paras. 9-10

⁴⁷ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)1, *op. cit.*, Appendix, Part A, para. 15.

⁴⁸ See Recommendation CM/Rec(2020)1, *op. cit.*, Appendix, Part B, paras. 1.1-1.2.

⁴⁹ See the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Michael O'Flaherty, Shout Out on 23 February 2026: [Regulate platforms, not children – Commissioner urges caution over social media bans](#).

participation in public debate, not merely refrain from interference. Second, although the ECtHR has not yet recognised a specific procedural positive obligation in digital rulemaking, its child-related case-law supports an inferential argument from method: Convention compliance depends not only on outcomes, but also on the quality of decision-making, including whether relevant interests were properly identified and balanced. Third, Council of Europe standards give concrete procedural content to this approach by requiring impact-oriented lawmaking, structured best-interests balancing, participation, oversight, and ongoing review.

The practical implication is therefore methodological rather than censorial. A rights-compliant approach to digital regulation requires transparent, reasoned and reviewable rulemaking that demonstrates how protection concerns have been balanced with children's rights to expression, information and participation.

For additional insights the [Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2022-2027\)](#), provides both a broader perspective and several in-depth analysis of aspects touched upon in this reflection note. A broader comparative analysis could extend this framework through UNCRC materials, but this note has deliberately focused on Council of Europe sources.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ See, *inter alia*, Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art 3, para 1) [UN Doc CRC/C/GC/14 \(29 May 2013\)](#); Marko Milanovic, 'Human Rights Treaties and Foreign Surveillance: Privacy in the Digital Age' (2015) 56(1) Harvard International Law Journal, pages 81-119 and Roberta Greco, 'Children's Right to Privacy in the Digital Age: Is the ECtHR's Current Approach up to the New Challenges?'

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Autism, Learning Disability, and Physical Disability in the Social Media Environment

By Bente Aretz

Children with disabilities are often grouped together in policy discussions about digital media, but in reality their online experiences can look very different depending on the type of disability. The Council of Europe explicitly warns against treating disabled children as a single category, noting that barriers and risks in digital environments vary widely depending on individual needs and impairments (Council of Europe, 2019). This matters when thinking about social media, because platforms that help one group participate more easily may create new challenges for another.

Autism and social media

For many autistic young people, social media can actually make social interaction easier rather than harder. Online communication removes some of the pressures of face-to-face interaction; things like interpreting body language, responding immediately in conversation, or coping with sensory-heavy environments. Because messages can be written, edited, and sent at a controlled pace, digital communication often gives autistic users more time to process information and respond. European research on children's rights in the digital environment highlights that online spaces can expand opportunities for communication, participation, and self-expression for children with disabilities, including those with social-communication differences (Lundy et al., 2019).

At the same time, autistic young people face distinct risks online. Studies show that autistic adolescents report higher levels of cyberbullying and online victimisation compared with many peers (Macmillan, 2022). Some research also suggests they may be more vulnerable to manipulation, scams, or unwanted contact because online social cues can be harder to interpret (Macoun et al., 2020). These risks align with broader Council of Europe concerns about hate speech, discrimination, and online harassment targeting vulnerable groups of children (Council of Europe digital environment programme).

Again, what makes the situation complex is that the same platforms that expose autistic youth to risks can also provide some of their strongest sources of support. Social media communities centred around neurodiversity allow young people to connect with others who share similar experiences, reducing isolation and helping with identity formation. In other words, social media is not simply a danger or a solution for autistic young people: it often functions as both at the same time.

Young people with learning or intellectual disabilities

Young people with learning or intellectual disabilities face a slightly different challenge. In their case, the main issue is often not online interaction itself but unequal access and support.

Research reviewing social media use among individuals with intellectual disabilities finds that although many want to participate online, structural barriers such as lack of training, restrictive supervision, or inaccessible digital design frequently limit their engagement (Borgström, 2019). Another study found that adolescents with intellectual disabilities often use social media at similar rates to their peers but tend to start later and engage in more restricted ways (Begara Iglesias et al., 2019).

This reflects a wider pattern identified by the Council of Europe: simply providing internet access does not automatically ensure meaningful digital participation. Their report on children with disabilities stresses that financial barriers, lack of adapted software, limited teacher expertise, and insufficient accessibility tools can all prevent children from benefiting fully from digital technologies (Council of Europe, 2019).

Young people with learning disabilities may also face heightened exposure to online bullying or exploitation, especially if they receive limited digital-literacy support. Because of this, European Union policy discussions increasingly emphasise supported digital participation, meaning children should not be excluded from social media for safety reasons alone, but instead provided with education, guidance, and accessible tools that allow safer engagement (Council of the European Union, 2025).

Children with physical disabilities

For children with physical disabilities, social media often plays an especially important role because it can remove barriers that exist in offline social life. Limited mobility, transport challenges, or inaccessible public environments can restrict opportunities for in-person social participation, but these barriers matter much less online.

The Council of Europe notes that digital technologies can enable children with disabilities to communicate, socialise, and access information in ways that may not be possible in their offline environments (Council of Europe, 2019). In this sense, social media can sometimes function as an equalising space, allowing interaction that is less shaped by physical limitations.

However, this only works when platforms are properly accessible. Many digital systems still lack adequate captioning, screen-reader compatibility, adaptable interface design, or simplified navigation options. European inclusive-education policy repeatedly stresses that accessible ICT infrastructure is essential if disabled learners are to participate equally in digital environments (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

For physically disabled children, then, the central issue is often not willingness to participate online but whether the digital environment has been designed with accessibility in mind. If accessibility is built in, social media can expand social opportunities; if it is not, the same technologies can simply reproduce offline exclusion in a new form.

Why this distinction matters for European digital policy

Taken together, these differences help explain why European institutions increasingly stress that children with disabilities should not be treated as a uniform group in digital governance. The Council of Europe concludes that while digital environments can empower disabled children, they can also disproportionately expose them to risks if accessibility, safety, and support systems are not carefully designed (Council of Europe, 2019).

For policymakers, this creates a three-part challenge:

autistic youth may need stronger protection from online harassment while preserving online communities that support them;

young people with learning disabilities may need structured digital-skills education and supported access;

children with physical disabilities may depend heavily on accessible design to participate at all.

Because these needs differ, effective social-media policy in Europe increasingly focuses not just on access, but on inclusive digital participation tailored to different disabilities. While significant progress has been made, ensuring accessible and safe social media for disabled children is not optional policy reform, but a core requirement of meaningful equality in the digital age.

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Dear ChatGPT... *On AI ChatBots and Children's Mental Health*

By Mathilde Colarte

In 2021, 89 million adolescents aged 10 to 19, including 77 million girls within this age group, were living with a mental disorder. Yet, despite the scale of this need, the vast majority of these young people will never have access to professional psychological support or therapeutic care. In the absence of accessible support systems, adolescents are often left to turn to what is readily available to them: their phones, social media platforms, and, increasingly, AI-based chatbots.

Confiding in artificial intelligence is not a marginal phenomenon. It is already a reality, gaining momentum. The question raised in this contribution is not whether young people should use AI for mental health support, as they already do. The question is rather whether the tools they use are truly designed with their rights, safety, and voices in mind. PACE Resolution 2521 (2023) clearly states that mental health is a rights issue for children and young people. The position of this contribution is that AI, as currently deployed, does not meet this standard, but that it could do so and that we should think about it.

Sit down and write your prompt: AI as your therapist

AI can be broadly defined as “the ability of a machine to display capabilities similar to those of a human being, such as reasoning, learning, planning, and creativity”. It is now being applied to mental health in four main areas that affect young people: diagnostic assistance, chatbot therapy sessions, mobile health monitoring apps such as mood trackers and medication reminders, and virtual reality treatments for disorders such as anxiety or phobias. For a teenager who cannot afford to see a psychologist, who lives far from the local clinic, or who fears the judgment of their family, a chatbot available at any time is appealing. This accessibility is important and should not be overlooked.

However, the impact on young people must be approached with particular care. Childhood and early adolescence is a formative period in which individuals are still learning how to process and sit with difficult emotions. At the same time, they may be more susceptible to social withdrawal and isolation, the idealisation of relationships, and a heightened risk that signs of distress go unnoticed by those around them. This can be seen in the case of Eliza, a chatbot with whom a Belgian man chatted daily for six weeks before his suicide, showing the potentially devastating outcomes when an emotionally dependent relationship with AI develops. Another example is the WHO's AI health assistant, S.A.R.A.H., which has been criticized for providing broken links and inappropriate responses to people who are actively seeking health advice.

Three rights concerns emerge. First, privacy: young people who disclose their mental health struggles are doing so to AI integrated into business-driven platforms. This effectively feeds a system optimized for engagement and profit, not their well-being. Second, bias: AI systems are trained on datasets that do not reflect the diversity of young people's experiences. As a result, groups that already face the greatest barriers to mental health support (such as LGBTQ+ youth, youth from ethnic minorities, migrant youth, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, etc.) risk being left behind and rendered invisible. Third, and most fundamentally, AI responses are ‘flat’. They do not take into account tone, context, cultural

nuances, elements that are central to human understanding and care. For a young person in need, this flatness can be not only insufficient, but potentially harmful.

“I can’t help with that”: The missing elements

The legal framework is already moving in the right direction. General Comment No. 25 of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child stipulates that digital technologies must not harm children's mental health and that young people have the right to participate meaningfully in digital governance, not as a courtesy, but as a legal obligation. Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)7 of the Council of Europe says the same thing for member states. But the application of these standards to AI tools for mental health is slow.

The EU AI Act offers a real opportunity here. AI tools that support young people's mental health should be classified as high risk. This implies a variety of measures: clinical validation, bias assessment, clear referral to human professionals for critical situations, and mandatory disclosure that users are interacting with a machine. The current workaround of classifying chatbots as ‘wellness’ apps rather than medical tools is a loophole that puts vulnerable young people at risk.

But the biggest gap is not in regulation. It lies in the fact that young people and children have virtually no say in the tools that are developed for them. The revised European Charter on Youth Participation is clear: young people have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. AI tools related to mental health have a direct impact on their lives. Yet almost all of them are designed by adults, based on adults' assumptions about young people's needs. Meaningful participation requires young people who have experienced mental health issues to participate in design reviews, policy consultations, and monitoring assessments. It also means investing in young people's digital literacy, particularly in relation to mental health so they can use these tools critically rather than passively consuming them.

The contrast between SuperBetter, a playful app focused on resilience and personal goals that is accessible and youth-centred, and chatbots that offer no pathway to professional support, is insightful. The difference is not just in the design. Indeed, it reflects a fundamentally different response to the question of whether young people are rights holders capable of shaping their own mental health journey or passive users who need to be taken care of.

Closing the tab: Concluding remark

Young people are already talking to AI about how they feel. That's not going to change. What can change is the context in which these interactions occur. Such conversations should take place within spaces that truly respect their rights: their right to safe, fair and transparent tools; their right to privacy; and their right to have a say in the systems that shape their lives.

The Council of Europe can play a leading role in this area. What is needed is the willingness to treat young as individuals whose participation – in design, governance, and evaluation – is key to achieving meaningful results.

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Social Media and Radicalisation of Children

By Flavie Curinier

There has been a steep increase in radicalisation of children on social media and online in recent years. A 2025 report by the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network raised significant concerns about an alarming trend: in recent years, increasingly younger individuals are being exposed to, and drawn into, processes of online radicalisation.⁵¹ The data shows that in 2024, children made up nearly one third of those arrested for terrorism-related offences in the EU, and in many of these cases, had been radicalised online. In France, there has been a tenfold increase between 2022 and 2025 of minors indicted for terrorism-related offences. In Belgium, between 2022 and 2024, one third of the persons who were planning terrorist attacks were younger than 18, with the youngest suspect being only 13 years-old at the time of his arrest. Finally, in the UK in 2024, one fifth of the people having been arrested for offences related to terrorism involved minors under the age of 17.

Extremist groups target children on popular platforms through tailored content and algorithms. Additionally, decentralised platforms and the dark web provide resilient infrastructures for circulating violent content. Each radicalised individual requires a tailored approach, and the online sphere adds an extra challenge to it. It is essential to have a holistic approach, which requires trust-based relationships with families, schools, community members, as well as practitioners. Concrete cases highlighted that, due to their age, those involved often lack the capacity or resources to carry out large-scale attacks themselves. However, they may still play a significant role by providing online logistical support to others, and, in some instances, even contributing to the radicalisation of individuals older than them.

At present, there is no coherent or harmonised approach to addressing terrorist and violent extremist cases involving young people, particularly children, in the online sphere. National authorities face significant challenges in striking a balance between safeguarding the best interests of the child and ensuring compliance with legal frameworks on terrorism and violent extremism. This tension is further complicated by the reliance on administrative and criminal procedures that are largely designed for adults, and which may be ill-suited to the specific rights, needs, and vulnerabilities of children.

The volatile nature of the online sphere and the increasingly young age at which youth are being radicalised is what makes this trend distinctive. A better understanding of the threat and how to best prevent and counter it is required at the European level. As director of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism Thomas Renard questions, "is every country confronted with the same trend, or are their regional differences? Is youth radicalising across all ideologies, or does that also vary across countries? Are boys and girls equally concerned by this phenomenon? Which online platforms are more conducive to violent radicalisation?".⁵² Moreover, the phenomenon is seemingly reaching unprecedented levels, reaching up to 20-30% of the counter-terrorism (CT) investigations in some countries.

Minors are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation for several reasons, and the online sphere adds an extra layer to the complexity. Minors can feel rebellious, frustrated, or angry – all regular emotions through adolescence, which are also risk factors for violent extremism.

⁵¹ Natalia Jarmużek-Troczyńska & Margarida Damas, *"Dealing with radicalised minors: The role of external influences and radicalised families"* (European Commission, 2025).

⁵² Thomas Renard, *"Adolescent Radicalisation: It's Not Just on Netflix"* (European Commission, 2025).

Minors can also be self-centred and lack empathy, which can facilitate binary worldviews and dehumanising extremist narratives. Moreover, minors can lack critical judgement in their decisions and behaviour, again yet another risk factor. Finally, youth can be impulsive and lack self-control, which can facilitate violent action.

Loneliness, mental health struggles, and heavy Internet use make young people more vulnerable to radicalising influences. Many join online radical communities seeking a sense of belonging. Europol's 2024 Terrorism Situation & Trend Report (TE-SAT) highlights that they "often underwent a process of self-radicalisation online and acted independently of any centralised organisation, often alone or within small cells of peers." It also mentions that "the combination of psychological vulnerabilities, social isolation, and digital dependency continued to be instrumental in the radicalisation of young people".⁵³

Some online networks actively groom vulnerable minors, encouraging self-harm or violent attacks. The overall online ecosystem and the way youth interact with it is crucial to understanding youth extremism, as radicalisation is always an interactive process between a demand and an offer, between push and pull factors. Young people, particularly "digital natives", spend a lot of time online, to the extent that important aspects of their lives and social interactions are rooted online. This includes belonging to a variety of digital communities, through different communication channels. In their online interactions, they can become exposed to certain elements of language or narratives (such as toxic masculinity or racist remarks, including in the guise of humour), which can progressively contribute to the normalisation of certain forms of extremism, or lead towards recruitment into more extreme communities. The radicalisation drift, whether triggered by social interactions, organic searches, or algorithmic suggestions is never too far away. There is no shortage of toxic ideologies and communities online, to which youth could adhere.

Youth radicalisation is a key new concern for counter-terrorism practitioners, and it has been identified as a research priority by the EU Knowledge Hub on the prevention of radicalisation. More research is certainly needed, to collect more data on the phenomenon, and to better understand youth risk factors and how they interact with the online conducive environment. The Knowledge Hub's Research Committee can support this work, by identifying specific research gaps and leading in-depth studies of this topic, as well as on others. One of the key tasks of the Research Committee is to support the European Commission and its member states in formulating research priorities in the field of (preventing) violent extremism.

The European Commission recognised the urgency of the need to deal with this issue and highlighted several key points that need to be addressed.⁵⁴ First is strengthening the role of trusted adults to provide early guidance and mentorship. Second is closing the knowledge gaps among youth practitioners who can spot early warning signs. Third is improving the cooperation between national and local actors. Fourth is supporting parents and caregivers, often the first to notice changes in behaviour and potential first signs of radicalisation, through awareness-building. Fifth is embedding prevention within education curricula, from primary school through secondary school. Sixth is establishing early detection protocols for

⁵³ Jarmużek-Troczyńska & Damas, "*Dealing with radicalised minors: The role of external influences and radicalised families*" (European Commission).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

professionals working with youth. Seventh is promoting counter/alternative narratives and digital resilience directly among young people.

Several online prevention initiatives exist, and they fall into two main categories: alternative/counter narratives on the one hand, and media and information literacy (MIL).

Despite the lack of consensus or evidence, some recent research suggests that alternative/counter narratives could be a promising strategy in prevention. There currently are no empirical studies on whether alternative/counter narrative measures could be efficient to prevent online violent radicalisation. Additionally, there is a need to study alternative/counter narratives from the private sector.

MIL has a “long tradition of dealing with harmful content and violent representations, including propaganda”.⁵⁵ MIL is a sensible and critical way to approach the radicalisation via the online sphere and social media. As such, “MIL can effectively contribute to enhancing intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding, peace, promote human rights, freedom of expression, and counter hate, radicalization and violent extremism”.⁵⁶

Finally, more attention on the specific topic of the online radicalisation of the youth on social media is needed for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to facilitate informed policy responses.

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⁵⁶ Ibid.

Teaching a child to scroll: How education can help bridge the gap between regulation and social agency in discussions of children and social media

The balance between protection and agency

By Sebastian Hirjoaba

Although much attention is given, and rightfully so, to the protection of children from the worst aspects of social media and AI, less attention is given to providing children age-appropriate education to develop their social agency, so that they may learn to protect themselves from risks whilst enjoying the benefits. This is an important perspective both within human rights frameworks and literature in education, for example, (Biesta, 2011; Hygum & Hygum, 2023; Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006; Veugelers, 2021). From the legal perspective, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) places forward important freedoms of the child that highlight this agentic vision, such as the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and expression of the child, as well as the right to freedom of association and assembly (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989). Other articles of the UNCRC emphasise that such freedoms need to be built on important institutional and socio-emotional safeguards, aimed at the 'social, spiritual and moral wellbeing and physical and mental health' (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989) of the child.

Hence, a rights and protection-based framework must be combined with an agentic view of children, which sees them as capable of forming their own thoughts, feelings and opinions. Further, this agentic view of children can lay the foundation for the development of rights-based and democratic societies because individual agency is based on universal entitlement in rights-oriented frameworks. Indeed, the preamble to the UNCRC states that the child should be 'fully prepared to live an individual life in society, and brought up on the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity' (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989).

The contradiction therefore between agentic and rights-based versions of children's development and contemporary versions of social media, digital technologies and AI, is that such technologies are often not built in mind with notions of enabling the virtuous development of the child, but rather the maximisation of profit through engagement with algorithms and maximisation of engagement time. This often means relying on and amplifying the base emotions of children in ways that are not actively helpful to their development and may come to their detriment. A recent example of this is the rise of manosphere online content, which promotes misogynistic and anti-democratic world views to vulnerable boys, indoctrinating them into extremist ideologies. Other such examples exist, promoting racist and ableist content, as well as harmful body images that affect the physical and mental health of young people. At the extremes, digital technologies can result in online child sexual exploitation and abuse, leading to severe physical and psychological wounds to vulnerable young people.

Many governments around the world, such as Australia, India, France and the UK, have either already banned or are having governmental discussions about the banning of social media for children under the ages of 15 or 16. Whilst it may prevent many young people from accessing harmful content, it would also block all the benefits that social media have brought to young

people, such as developing intercultural competences by developing friendships all over the world, allowing themselves to relax, develop, and express their creativity through online gaming platforms, to form communities of people that are alike, especially important, for example, for queer or neurodivergent people raised in restrictive environments, or the free access to relevant and educational information, a core element for the development of personal curiosities, personality development and enlightenment. Whilst regulation is important, a blanket ban might be a step too far. Perhaps an alternative to this would be stronger regulation of social media and its algorithms, coupled with a greater focus and investment into education to ensure children can fight against the risks and maximise the positives coming from such technologies.

What can (formal and non-formal) education do?

Besides the teaching of core competences such as numeracy, literacy and science, education also has the important responsibility to help shape citizens which are able to freely and responsibly participate in rights-based, democratic societies. Article 29 of the UNCRC claims that education of the child shall be directed at the development of their personality, talents, mental and physical abilities, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for parents, their own cultural identity and for other cultures and nationalities, and ‘the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin’ (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989). Hence, the role of education preparing young children for responsible and active participation in human rights and dignity driven societies is deeply entrenched in children’s rights legal frameworks.

This framework can be seen to have a close connection to what this contribution shall label citizenship education, for which multiple international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and the OECD, among others, have dedicated countless pages and activities of definition and work. Whilst definitions may differ, for example with UNESCO placing a greater emphasis on global citizenship education, the Council of Europe on education for democratic citizenship, and the OECD on civic and citizenship education, what remains relevant to all is a consideration that education should help children to participate as active and competent citizens of rights-based societies. This may include not only content and knowledge and understanding about, for example, politics, philosophy, economics, geography and environmental sciences, but also education regarding the values, attitudes, and skills children need to competently participate in democratic societies (Council of Europe, 2026).

Further, such approaches often propose frameworks going beyond traditional forms of learning, arguing for active pedagogies, democratic school cultures, and student participation structures, as is the case in the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC). Important advancements can also be made through non-formal education, for example through community service activities and extra-curriculars such as debate clubs. Moreover, the teaching of democratic and human rights competences is not about teaching children to adhere to any particular world order, other than one that is based on the intrinsic dignity and equal worth of every being. Instead, it should aim to teach children how to actively and consciously shape the world they would want to see together. Hence, education is a powerful tool for the shaping of future democracies both for children and adults, as teachers, school leaders, and other educational staff are also involved in the

teaching and learning of democratic competences, and citizenship education is a longstanding and important component of lifelong learning.

Citizenship education can also be shaped to address emerging digital challenges and opportunities. As democracy changes, so must education to facilitate it. This has led to recent developments into the field of digital citizenship education, which seeks to transpose the notions of citizenship education into the digital age. For example, the Council of Europe has worked to adapt the RFCDC into the digital area through their work on digital citizenship education (Huddleston, et al., 2024; Richardson & Milovidov, 2019).

Informal education

It is important to avoid the often-repeated maxim that places education found in schools, namely formal and non-formal education as the panacea to protecting children and enabling democracy. Such education alone cannot achieve this mission and may indeed crumble under the pressure at a time of heightened requirements for education systems and institutions and public underfunding in general, informal education must also be considered. The Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education defines informal education as 'the lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience (family, peer group, neighbours, encounters, library, mass media, work, play, etc)' (Council of Europe, 2010).

This highlights that, especially for children, every experience is a learning experience, whether it be learning empathy through connecting with a friend, intercultural competences by trying out a dish from another culture with family, or environmental responsibility through child-centred recycling infrastructure in our communities. Digitally, this may take the shape of learning important rules about communication and empathy through interaction and play, which far too often go awry because of limited regulation of social media infrastructures.

To achieve the development of safe and democratic societies, we must shape our families, homes, cultures, third spaces and communities, including online, to nurture safety, socio-emotional and economic stability, human rights, and civic responsibility for children by design. We must also fight for regulated and safe access to social media, transparent algorithms and regulation of hateful content. This message is especially prominent, as recent decades have resulted in decreases from public budgets in many contexts from cultural and recreational spaces and activities, now happening at a time where children are spending large amounts of time on largely unregulated online spaces.

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Conclusion

By Juliette Hudson

If there is one thread running through this compilation, it is that children's digital lives cannot be reduced to a single narrative of harm. Nor can they be solved through singular measures.

Blanket bans may appear protective, but they remain a simple solution to a much more complex problem. A rights-consistent approach requires structural responsibility. It requires regulating platforms rather than excluding children. It requires transparency in algorithmic systems, investment in digital literacy and democratic education, accessible reporting and redress mechanisms, and sustained research into differentiated risks. Above all, it requires meaningful participation of children and young people in shaping the policies that affect them.

Children are already active participants in the digital public sphere. Protecting them and empowering them within these spaces are not competing objectives, they are interdependent. Durable responses to social media's emerging risks must hold both together.

As young professionals, we hope these contributions spark continued conversation within the Council of Europe: in meetings, in corridors, around dinner tables, and beyond. The complexity of this issue cannot be resolved through isolated measures or single perspectives. It demands ongoing dialogue, exchange and collective reflection on its nuances, tensions and possibilities.

Annexe

By Ludivine Briain

Ideas for cultural projects

- A. Children's Rights, Wellbeing and Mental Health
 - UNESCO and Kids Code Jeunesse (KCJ)
 - Colori
 - Projet LINA
- B. Exposure to hateful content and discrimination
 - Play your role (2019-2021)
 - Artist
- C. Education, empowerment and democracy
 - MédiaLab
 - Le BAL
 - Stimultania
 - Labo148
 - Journalist's residence

A. Children's Rights, Wellbeing and Mental Health

In a very broad sense, culture is seen as a vector and tool for mental health. Voices of Culture,⁵⁷ in their report on [youth, mental health, and culture](#), explains that culture and art can foster critical thinking, inspire good practices, develop communication and understanding between different people/groups, and also improve physical health by reducing stress and encouraging movement.

More specifically related to the themes developed in this section, various organizations use art to raise awareness about the impact of algorithms, data, and other factors.

UNESCO and Kids Code Jeunesse (KCJ)

This partner is developing the "[Decode Algorithms and Data](#)" program, with the support of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

The project aims to raise awareness and educate children about the influence of algorithms in digital experiences.

⁵⁷ **Voices of Culture.** (2022). *Youth, mental health and culture: Brainstorming report*. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/culture/docs/voices-of-culture/voices-of-culture-brainstorming-report-youth-mental-health-culture-2022_en.pdf

The program has published several documents to facilitate and encourage discussions about data, AI, and algorithms, as well as others offering workshops for classroom use. It also develops various online and interactive activities.

This partnership has two main objectives:

- o Organizing an international competition to encourage young people to use artificial intelligence (AI) and data to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals;
- o Promoting data and algorithm education through awareness-raising activities and providing training resources accessible via digital platforms.

Colori

This French company aims to introduce children as young as 3 to technology, coding, and information logic without any screens. More than 60 activities have been created, grouped under the following themes:

- o Algorithms, languages, and programming
- o Technological literacy
- o Responsible digital practices

These activities can be done in the classroom or at home.

More recently, they also created the Screen Fresco, inspired by the Climate Fresco, which helps children understand how digital technology works in order to assess its dangers and opportunities.

Colori also offers workshops in schools, libraries, and community centers to train the educational community: teachers, activity leaders, and facilitators.

Projet LINA

The LINA project is designed for children over 10 years old. LINA is a serious game based on augmented reality for smartphones, depicting a day at school for an entire class and their teachers. This game aims to improve peer interaction, a sense of belonging, and the classroom atmosphere, while creating a safe space to reflect on mental health and external stressors related to family situations. In this game, players learn that a fictional classmate named Lina has suddenly left school. This involves solving the mystery of where Lina—whose behavior often marked her as unusual—went and why. Players discover personal artifacts that Lina left in the classroom (using augmented reality), exchange information with other players, and collaboratively solve puzzles. In this way, they piece together the story of a classmate dealing with an atypical and stressful family life, caring for a mother suffering from depression.

The game is written and directed by a professional playwright, theater director and creative practitioner from the UK, who worked closely together with Austrian psychologists, and computer scientists from Portugal and the UK, to implement storyline and psychoeducational content into the digital game. Additional AR programming and additional cooperation with industry partners such as a professional illustrator to create visuals (e.g. Lina's artwork and handwriting), and a professional composer for the soundtrack, ensured a polished audio-visual experience. Voiceover was performed by young people equivalent in age to the characters they were playing, plus adult actors to represent the teacher (see acknowledgments for further information). Exposure to hateful content and discrimination

B. Exposure to hateful content and discrimination

[Play your role \(2019-2021\)](#)

Play your role is a project supported by the [European Union](#) as part of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship program. It is coordinated by Zaffiria (Italy), in collaboration with COSPE (Italy), Vsl Edukaciniai Projektai (Lithuania), University of Algarve and CIAC (Portugal), JFF – Institute for Media Education (Germany), Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska (Poland) and Savoir Devenir (France).

The "Play Your Role" initiative uses video games to develop critical thinking skills in young people (especially those aged 11 to 19) and help them combat hate speech. To achieve this, it offers educational facilitators (teachers, educators, youth workers, etc.) learning paths that include tools, resources, and innovative activities.

Cinq serious games (en anglais), développés dans le cadre du Hackathon Play Your Role, accompagnés d'un kit pédagogique :

Five serious games (in English), developed as part of the Play Your Role Hackathon, accompanied by a learning kit:

- o [Divide and Conquer](#): You are a disreputable political leader. Your strategy: divide (your community) to rule. Your favorite weapon: hate speech and plenty of ideas for using it to turn people against each other...
- o [YouTube Stimulator](#): You are a YouTuber. Your missions: recruit as many followers as possible, manage the more or less civil exchanges within your community... while preserving your sanity.
- o [Social Threads](#): You are an internet user confronted with toxic behavior and must make decisions. Your mission: keep your resilience level above 0 to be able to develop your network of safe spaces.

- o [Deplatforming](#): A group of activists launches a flash racist campaign online. It's up to you to stop it and block the group's activities on social media.
- o [Among All of Us](#): You are a detective. Can you explain why this video game blog was suddenly shut down by its authors? Happy investigating!
- o And an [Educational Kit](#)

Less cultural but projects that can be linked:

- o [Youth Alternarration: Combating Radicalization of Young People in Online Spaces Erasmus Project – Erasmus Projects and Activities](#)
- o [UNESCO Youth Bootcamp contre les discours de haine](#)
- o [Empowering youth in Palestine to fight online violent extremism and](#)

Artist: [Mimi Onuoha](#)

In her work, The Library of Missing Datasets (series), the artist documents datasets that do not exist. The project maps the "empty spaces" where information should exist, but does not show absences that reveal cultural values and power structures more clearly than what we choose to collect.

The work is still in progress and evolves based on the publication of new data.

[Interview](#)

C. Education, empowerment and democracy

[MédiaLab](#)

The mediaLabs are places of learning and experimentation around digital data, creation and dissemination of media. These places focus on the development of media, their online supports and social networks, in a neighborhood, as a civic, social, economic tool. These places educate all people (ages, gender, profession etc) to media creation.

There is no typical Medialab, each one offers quite different activities, but all allow for media education encouraging the development of skills and critical minds.

[Le BAL](#)

The BAL is a Parisian place dedicated to document images. It offers a place for exhibition, publishing, reflection and pedagogy.

Their educational activity, entitled *La fabrique du regard*, works with young people aged 6 to 20 in the city's political districts; priority education networks, territories far from the cultural and artistic offer.

Through a pedagogy that combines "seeing" and "doing", young people learn to read images by questioning their process of making, broadcasting, and receiving. They thus confront different points of view, sharpen their gaze on the formal biases of images and what they tell us about the contemporary world.

This immersive and sensitive approach is deployed during collective analysis workshops in class, in front of works at the BAL, in cinema halls, on ERSILIA, an education platform based on the image of the BAL, or in a professional partner place. At the end of this reflexive phase, a creation phase is carried out by young people with artists to design and produce a singular object: film, photographic series, publication, performance, etc., in which their thought and taste for the image are embodied. Each program takes place over a duration of 15 to 60 hours.

Projects have thus been conducted on AI and disinformation, algorithms, the creation of new imaginaries, etc.

Stimultania

Stimultania is a photography Pole based in Strasbourg. Stimultania works in the field of education to and by the photographic image, notably developing an innovative educational tool, LES MOTS DU CLIC.

The words of the click is a card game allowing to question images and their constructions. What look on an image? Art, press or advertising photography. Printed, displayed, projected. How to talk about it? How to analyze its construction and purpose? The game LES MOTS DU CLIC was created by Stimultania to question the viewer. It is both a game of observation, interpretation, vocabulary acquisition and citizen reflection.

This game allows one to develop their vocabulary, their understanding of an image, their creation and is more widely integrated into a process of artistic and cultural education in addition to media education.

Labo148

The Labo148 in Roubaix (France) is an agency of journalistic and artistic productions created by and for young adults aged 15 to 30.

Each year, an exhibition/event is created by the young people according to a theme chosen at the beginning of the year. To create this, the young people, accompanied by two adults, learn

about media creation (video creation, photography, editing, retouching, interview, artistic creation).

Instagram

Journalist's residence

In the continuity of artist residencies, journalistic residences are created. In this context, a journalist settles for several months, in a specific city or place and proposes a set of activities related to his artistic practice.

In the context of residence in middle or high schools, the journalist can thus offer a set of activities related to media and journalist creation and raise awareness among everyone about the issues of journalistic freedom, information processing, editorial choices.

These measures are integrated into media and information literacy policies.