

Background Paper for EPRA

Evidence Based Regulation - Youth Engagement in the Digital Environment

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1. Introduction

Communication and participation have become increasingly digitized, with use of digital services such as social networking sites, messenger services, and video streaming platforms at an all-time high. Given the prevalence of digital services in our societies, their role in spreading harmful content (mis/disinformation, misogyny, racist and other discriminatory content, etc), and because youth are generally a more vulnerable group than adults, the potential for harm is substantial.

There are a number of big questions surrounding youth digital participation, the overarching one being, how can youth safely navigate digital spaces? Other questions whose answers hold significance for digital governance, and regulation specifically: Do these services pose severe risks to mental health, or are these concerns overblown? Do platform-imposed limits (280-character tweets), polarized rhetoric and misinformation stifle democratic participation, or does political deliberation happen elsewhere nowadays? Should use of these platforms, and the internet more broadly be restricted, or regulated to negate potential harm – or are the opportunity costs of overregulation more detrimental?

Academic research cannot answer these questions definitively. However, there is data to suggest that specific positions are more plausible than others. At a [workshop](#), hosted as a partnership initiative between EPRA and the Comms Policy Collaborative at the University of Vienna on 24 November 2021, these questions and others framed crucial discussions on supporting youth online safety through regulation. This working paper summarizes the data presented during the workshop, and offers

additional resources for more holistic and informed regulation for safe and responsible youth digital participation.

EPRA and Youth Engagement in the Digital Environment

The protection of minors has been a recurring subject in EPRA meetings from the start, reflecting the importance of the topic as a key regulatory concern across all jurisdictions. Early discussions focused on the linear environment with the presentation of systems put in place in Europe to regulate the access of minors to potentially harmful content. Following the adoption of the successive Audiovisual Media Services Directives, the focus shifted to the protection of minors across new media platforms and the specific challenges experienced by media regulators to implement and monitor the provisions applicable to non-linear media service providers and video-sharing platforms. Recent EPRA discussions focused on the notions of [online harms and risks](#) (research and evidence to assess levels of online harm, developing remedies that are proportional to the level of harm) as well as on the [interplay between protection of minors and data protection](#) (Sarajevo and Athens 2019).

In parallel, the promotion of media literacy has crystallised as a particular area of interest for media regulators and has been featuring as a standing item on EPRA's agenda since 2017. In 2021, EPRA launched [EMIL](#), the media and information literacy taskforce, to facilitate coordination and learning, networking and partnerships and give media literacy networks a voice. For a growing number of broadcasting regulators, media literacy is considered as a necessary complement to or part of regulatory functions, not least because it may increase the effectiveness, acceptance and understanding of regulation by citizens. There is a common understanding that media literacy empowers citizens to make informed decisions about the media content they access, create and consume. Media literacy thus constitutes a route open to broadcasting regulators to try to deal with online harms as they understand them.

A word from Ľuboš Kukliš, EPRA Chairperson:

Evidence-based and future-proof regulation require robust research as well as good knowledge on children online experience.

Against that background, the EPRA Executive Board warmly welcomes the very valuable contributions from the panellists of the University of Vienna on the topic of Youth Engagement in the Digital Environment. One key theme underpinning EPRA's Work Programme in 2022 is "Empowering and Protecting minors" and we look very much forward to the continuation of the fruitful partnership with the Comms Policy Collaborative at the University of Vienna.

2. Summary of panellists' presentations

2.1. *The role of social media for youth political engagement*

[Jörg Matthes](#), Professor of Communication, Department Chair

We know that young adults are less interested in traditional politics when compared to older generations (Delli Carpini, 2000; see for the following, Matthes, in press), less likely to vote, and generally less politically sophisticated (Binder et al., 2021). Yet with social media, scholars have expressed great hopes regarding young adults' democratic engagement (see Binder et al., 2021). It has been suggested that social media, in particular, has the potential to better connect political actors and young adults, enable social political interaction through enhanced communication, expressions of political opinion, engagement equity, and generally foster participation, as well as boost voter turnout. In terms of digital media, there is certainly reason to hope that it can help to narrow the generational engagement gap.

In fact, scholars working on digital media and political engagement initiatives have been fascinated by this idea, pointing to a number of outcomes of social media use that seem to bolster democratic processes, including enhanced learning and participation. Recent meta-analyses on the topic have surfaced overwhelming evidence of positive outcomes of social media for democratic processes (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). On the other hand, scholarship on the democratic outcomes of social media frequently seem to overlook the fact that social media is used primarily for entertainment and community engagement purposes, especially when it comes to young adults (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). This type of usage increases access to non-political information, and, ultimately, can impede the processing and salience of political information, dampening the activation and execution of participatory goals. In order to evaluate these lines of inquiry, future research must distinguish types of content on social media, as well as other platforms and channels, to evaluate motivation, and gratification behaviour related to specific usage and content. This may lead to a more nuanced understanding of social media-based youth political engagement - of particular importance as a potential indicator of and contributor to participation in democratic processes.



[Link to presentation during EPRA Workshop](#)

Literature for further reading

- Binder, A., Heiss, R., Matthes, J., & Sander, D. (2021). Dealigned but mobilized? Insights from a citizen science study on youth political engagement. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(2), 232-249. <https://doi:10.1080/13676261.2020.1714567>
- Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young People, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(2), 111-127. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0894439318814190>
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- Dimitrova, D. V., & Matthes, J. (2018). Social media in political campaigning around the world: Theoretical and methodological challenges. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(2), 333-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077699018770437>
- Matthes, J. (accepted). Social media and the political engagement of young adults: Between mobilization and distraction. *Online Media and Global Communication*.

2.2. The effects of social media use on youth well-being

Tobias Dienlin, Assistant Professor, Department of Communication

When analysing the effects of media use on well-being, it is important to note that there are manifold types of use and well-being. In terms of use, we can differentiate the device (e.g., smartphone), the application (e.g., social networking sites), the branded application (e.g., Instagram), the feature (e.g., like button), the interaction (one-to-one), and the content (positive, negative, political, ...) (Meier & Reinecke, 2020). In terms of mental health, it makes sense first to differentiate psychopathology from well-being (Meier & Reinecke, 2020). Psychopathology includes mental diseases that can be diagnosed using, for example, ICD-11 (schizophrenia, depression, ...). Well-being encompasses subjective/hedonic well-being (positive or negative affect) and psychological/eudaimonic well-being (e.g., meaning, fulfilment). Levels of happiness have been very stable in Europe during the last twenty years, and may have even improved slightly (Dienlin, 2018).

Empirical research shows that potential effects of media use on mental health depend on the type of use as well as the type of mental health indicator. For example, using social media is related to slightly increased social support and social capital (eudaimonic measures of well-being) (Domahidi, 2018), but also to slightly decreased levels of life satisfaction (Huang, 2017). Notably, however, most effects lie somewhere on the scale between small and trivial (Meier & Reinecke, 2020). Although average effects

are often negligible, some users of digital technology do see substantial detriment to mental health (Beyens et al., 2020). The highest levels of well-being have been reported by moderate users of digital technology (both abstinence and excessive use are related to decreased levels of well-being) (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Notably, these results are still in the preliminary stages of analysis. Also important to note is that most studies measure media use based on user self-reporting, which is not particularly reliable (e.g., Scharnow, 2019). Future research should therefore adopt standardized methods for measuring technology use, along with experience sampling of well-being. The very first studies that use this type of measurement for data capture report even more minimal effects (Burnell et al., 2021). Taken together, the data indicates that the effects of media use on mental health are moderate, and does not necessitate urgent global alarm.



Implications for regulation

- **To prevent harm, custom approaches specifically tailored for at-risk groups seem very promising.**
- **Although effects on some users have been shown to be negligible, for most users increasing media literacy seems to result in positive outcomes.**
- **Usage recommendations, such as periods of abstinence or more mindful use are not yet well-researched, and do not have a strong evidence base. However, the potential merits still outweigh actual costs.**



[Link to presentation during EPRA Workshop: https://www.epra.org/attachments/epra-workshop-with-university-of-vienna-presentation-by-dr-tobias-dienlin](https://www.epra.org/attachments/epra-workshop-with-university-of-vienna-presentation-by-dr-tobias-dienlin)

Literature for further reading

- Dienlin, T., & Johannes, N. (2020). The impact of digital technology use on adolescent well-being. *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, 22(2), 135–142. <https://doi.org/doi:10.31887/DCNS.2020.22.2/tdienlin>
- Livingstone, S. (2019). Are the kids alright? *Intermedia*, 47(3), 10–14. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102336/>
- Orben, A. (2020). The Sisyphean Cycle of Technology Panics. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(5), 1143–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620919372>

2.3. Harmful outcomes of social media & smartphone use for children and youth

[Anja Stevic](#), Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Communication

With a particular focus placed on parental and peer perspectives, this presentation focused on recent studies on smartphone engagement, and addressed relevant implications for digital literacy in the online environment, within the framework of youth empowerment and responsible digital engagement.

Family and peers play an important role in the lives of children and adolescents generally, and also when it comes to digital engagement via smartphone. In the family context, parents enable children's online engagement by acquiring smartphone devices, and creating a framework for usage (rules and other guidelines that influence/dictate use). The utilization of parental controls, including active and restrictive mediation techniques in the long-term context have been shown to have no influence on child well-being as relates to independent smartphone and social media use (Stevic & Matthes, 2021). However, parents' perceived lack of control over children's smartphone use might actually result in increased exposure of children to online harassment (Schmuck et al., 2021), although the same study indicates that online harassment does not seem to influence children's self-esteem - when evaluating effects four months after an instance of harassment (ibid).

Smartphone use in certain contexts - including at bedtime or during face-to-face social interactions - may not be desirable or beneficial for young people. In light of research indicating that teens spend more screen time than children and early adolescents, and utilize smartphones at bedtime (Common Sense Media, 2019a, 2019b), investigation of digital disengagement techniques to explore how and when adolescents limit smartphone usage, seems particularly valuable. Early empirical evidence shows that late adolescents tend to consistently disengage from smartphone use in particular situations, such as having dinner, with levels of disengagement higher for adolescent users with lower levels of device separation anxiety (Matthes et al., 2021). With such intentions, late adolescents can have their smartphone under control.



Implications for regulation

- **Because mobile devices are highly individualized and private, parents rarely have full control over their children's usage, and therefore the content they are exposed to or engage with.**

- Accessible intervention programmes that increase parental agency and knowledge when it comes to monitoring and regulating smartphone usage could be beneficial.



[Link to presentation during EPRA Workshop](#)

Literature for further reading

- Common Sense Media (2019a). *Parents, Teens, Screens, and Sleep in the United States*. Retrieved from <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/the-new-normal-infographic>
- Common Sense Media (2019b). *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*. Retrieved from <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2019>
- Matthes, J., Karsay, K., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., & Schmuck, D. (2021). Reflective smartphone disengagement: Conceptualization, measurement, and validation. *Computers in Human Behaviour*. <https://doi:10.1016/j.chb.2021.107078>
- Schmuck, D., Stevic, A., Matthes, J., & Karsay, K. (2021). Out of control? How parents' perceived lack of control over children's smartphone use affects children's self-esteem over time. *New Media and Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211011452>
- Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (2021). A vicious circle between children's non-communicative smartphone use and loneliness: Parents cannot do much about it. *Telematics and Informatics*, 64, 101677. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101677>.

Annex - Literature for further reading

- Beyens, I., Pouwels, J. L., van Driel, I. I., Keijsers, L., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2020). The effect of social media on well-being differs from adolescent to adolescent. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 10763. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-67727-7>
- Burnell, K., George, M. J., Kurup, A. R., Underwood, M. K., & Ackerman, R. A. (2021). Associations between Self-Reports and Device-Reports of Social Networking Site Use: An Application of the Truth and Bias Model. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 15(2), 156–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2021.1918654>
- Dienlin, T. (2018, Juli 5). Have Europeans become more or less happy since the advent of smartphones and social media? <https://tobiasdienlin.com/2018/07/05/since-the-advent-of-smartphones-have-we-become-more-or-less-happy/>
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- Huang, C. (2017). Time spent on social network sites and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis. *Cyberpsychology, behaviour and social networking*, 20(6), 346–354. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0758>
- Meier, A., & Reinecke, L. (2020). Computer-mediated communication, social media, and mental health: A conceptual and empirical meta-review. *Communication Research*, 009365022095822. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650220958224>
- Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2017). A large-scale test of the Goldilocks hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 28(2), 204–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616678438>
- Scharnow, M. (2019). The Reliability and Temporal Stability of Self-reported Media Exposure: A Meta-analysis. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2019.1594742>