Teens for Democracy - Policy recommendations
2024 Athens Democracy Forum

Working on our topic

Throughout these three days, we have worked on the topic of social media and AI systems, discussing about their positive role in our democracies, but also identifying areas of possible violations of children and human rights. To this end, we've gone through several important aspects such as their utility in building networks of communication, enhancing and boosting creativity, receiving important information, highlighting young people's voice, promoting one's work.

On the negative side we have discussed about:

- Fake news and deep fake videos and the risk they pose for our democracies.
- The deception of perfection in social media and how the expectation of perfection affects our self reflection and image. We specifically focused on influencers and the disguised promotion of products through the promotion of lifestyles and a false body image.
- The aspect of misleading voters and consumers.
- The ethical problem and concern regarding algorithms and the collection of users' private information.
- And of course the challenges of hate speech, cyber bullying and harassment that many young people face every day.
- Finally, we've asked ourselves whether tech companies - operating some of the world's biggest online platforms , including Meta, Microsoft, Google, Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok- have too much power on how our democracies work
- And we've contemplated on whether our states and international organisations have demonstrated enough willingness to properly regulate this field.

The 2022 EU Code of Practice on Disinformation for example was an attempt of that nature, but is it sufficient?

Our concerns
In the process of discussion many concerns were raised about the context of risks and factors, such as:

- The fact that our legal systems are not adequate and fast in their response. In other words, we seem unable to keep up with the developments.
- The major factor of our education systems, that are not properly built and equipped to help us develop the critical and emotional thinking required to address all the risks. Not learning how to think on your feet from school can lead to easily consuming fake news, propaganda, hate speech and inappropriate content.
- We've also underlined many times the aspect of dopamine addiction to bubbly, pleasant to the eyes everyday content, which could eventually affect young people , making them indifferent to reality and news or real information.

An important risk stems from the fact that vulnerable people that are already marginalized are more likely to be manipulated and therefore we 've underlined the importance of inclusive policies.

- We've expressed our concern about the world of employment and how the development of AI systems will completely change our societies and possibly lead to an increase of unemployment and poverty rates worldwide.
- Finally, we've discussed the challenge of setting boundaries within the family. Parents seem to need more knowledge and support to protect their children and cope with these risks.

Our recommendations
We all highlighted the need for adjustment of our educational systems to our modern needs, which would include:

- Interactive, participatory AI and new technologies education
- Human and children's rights programmes introduced in an interactive appealing way for young people
- The introduction of mandatory and coherent education from an early age, about emotional and critical thinking. This will help us better understand ourselves and others and build empathy and a critical approach to deceiving practices, hate speech and fake news.
- Encouraging more democratic participation and empowering children in our schools through pupils' councils, frequent discussions about "difficult" topics and taboos.

- Increasing the visibility of discriminated and vulnerable populations in school but also in curricula to build resistance to online discrimination.
- For these purposes the training of teachers on new technologies and AI systems and school staff is imperative. Schools should be able to inspire respect for human rights and promote a zero-tolerance approach to violence not just through teaching but through everyday practice and active commitment. To this end it is important to listen to children and allow them to participate in decision making which will gradually lead them to a healthier perception of citizenship.
- Ensure that professionals in schools monitor the wellbeing of children and teachers and apply practices to address possible risks.
- Introducing more activities and Erasmus projects to help children see and understand the world focusing on new technologies and AI systems.

We all stressed the need for improvement of our systems to make them effective in supporting families and parents in their role by:
- Introducing AI and new technologies education for parents. This education should include understanding platform functionalities, recognizing potential risks and learning how to report issues effectively. Parents should be equipped to support their children in navigating social media without excluding them from these networks, provided they are over 13.
- Applying content monitoring systems that are free and accessible: Establish a system that allows parents to monitor and identify possible risks within the social media content of their children including. This system should respect privacy while ensuring that parents can guide their children towards safe and constructive online experiences.
- Establishing AI online services to offer parents and children reliable legal and other information and guidance regarding violations of their rights (Where to go and what to do when a violation occurs.). Online networks of parents would also play a key role in this direction.
- Introducing effective content filtering options-Educational Content preferences: Implement features on social media platforms that allow children and adults to choose the content they want to, ensuring that only educational and creative materials are accessible if wanted.
- Supporting social and mental health services to help them establish boundaries in families with respect for children.

We also underlined the paramount importance of regulating and monitoring the implementation of provisions and codes of practice. In this light our recommendations are the following:

- Establish an International Data-Based Systems Agency to promote safe, secure, and peaceful uses of artificial intelligence and to ensure that these systems respect human rights. Such an institution would also have regulatory authority.
- Introduce national and supranational online safety codes which will require social media and video-sharing platforms to protect children from harmful content or face the prospect of significant fines that will be calculated according to the net worth of these companies.
- It is important to introduce effective complaint submission platforms and improve the existing ones through AI. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure access to children from a young age without the requirement of parental consent.
- Companies should be obliged to include disclaimers on posts that claim to provide information but do this without verification and confirmation of the source. This policy aims to enhance critical thinking among users, encouraging them to question the validity of the information they encounter online.

Advertises and commercial practices online should be monitored properly regarding their credibility.

- Introduce an accreditation system that will reward service and news providers that follow proper verification procedures.
- Oblige companies to create separate sections for news to safeguard the distinction between what appears to be informative and what actually is. Apply AI filters for that purpose.
- Obligate companies to create child-friendly appropriate sections with information that is adjusted to children's needs.
- Consult with children and encourage them to participate regarding all matters affecting them, including digital technologies and AI!