# Are European children protected well online?

The European Parliament and other stakeholders have put a lot of effort to protect the rights of children in the digital environment. But are minors effectively protected in practice? There is growing evidence of harm to children online – both to their safety and security, as well as to their rights and wellbeing in general. Properly addressing the risks is a challenging task: they are often highly sensitive, while their causes vary and evolve. This makes the long-term effects of the potential actions hard to anticipate.

Sonia Livingstone, Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, and Emma Goodman, Research Officer for the LSE Media Policy Project, argue that the existing European legislative framework for child protection is both insufficient and inefficient, and that more should be done in that regard.

Recent developments in the field of regulation seem encouraging and may have positive impact on the process. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) includes several provisions aimed at enhancing the protection of children's personal data online. One such measure is obliging service providers to use clear and plain language that children can easily understand, in all information society services that require personal data processing. The (recently) revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) has created a single unified standard for the obligations of audiovisual media services providers regarding content that might harm minors. In that sense, video-sharing platforms (such as YouTube) and audiovisual content shared on social media services (such as Facebook) fall under the scope of the revised directive. In addition, the Better Internet for Kids (BIK), whose goal is to establish efficient policies for child safety online documented wide support for its strategy in the BIK Policy Map. However, many gaps still remain, especially in the realm of policy governance and stakeholder participation. The challenges to these positive endeavors still persist, since parents and children struggle to understand the best options and tools, as well as the risks they face and their responsibilities in the complex digital environment. In addition, new tools and services are being continuously introduced. The EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression online and offline, which includes "media and internet literacy" and the "Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online" (which are considered to offer a successful model for co-regulation) can be effective tools for children protection despite of the fact that their focus is broader and not specifically on children.

Livingstone and Goodman suggest that the European Parliament should establish and promote clear common standards and assist the coordination among stakeholders. More specifically, they recommend a comprehensive Code of Conduct to be created for the converged digital

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environment that would set minimum standards for providers of the services used by children. These standards would ideally be embedded into the mere design of the devices and services, and would have the child's best interests as paramount. In addition, a new Recommendation needs to be adopted that promotes an integrated approach to media literacy. On the one hand, it would be defined broadly to support critical understanding, creative production and participation; on the other, it would require and define protective actions and technical skills.

Clearly, the scope of any effort should be updated following the evolution of the digital environment. Effective coordination of all actions can be accomplished if the European Commission sets up a permanent High Level Expert Group to integrate the Code of Conduct, the Recommendation on media literacy, and if it encourages beneficial actions by the Member States. All measures should be backed by a dedicated European funding to ensure pan-EU data collection on a regular basis, thus providing reliable and up to date evidence to guide the development of EU policy on the protection of minors in the digital age.

Meaningful participation of children themselves and of the relevant experts representing children's best interests is central to the successful implementation of these measures.

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