

# “The influence of social media on the development of children and the young people: Implications for policy and pedagogy”

Invited talk for “*Blue Light and Blue Skies - The Challenges of Education in the Digital Age*”

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## **Abstract**

It is widely acknowledged that children are immersed in the digital environment and gain many valuable opportunities and benefits from doing so, whilst also encountering risky experiences and much that may be problematic for their healthy development. This presentation focuses on the wider relationship between digital technologies, pervasive use by children and young people and the various developmental stages they experience through childhood and adolescence. Set against the background of international efforts to create a *better* as well as a *safer* internet for children, the presentation will consider implications for good policy and pedagogy. In addressing the theme of the “Blue Light and Blue Skies” conference, celebrating the 30th anniversary of the reestablishment of St. Stanislav’s Institution, the presentation will discuss challenges and opportunities for educators, particularly in the Catholic tradition, framed against three main themes: a) the high-level vision for children’s participation in the digital environment, b) drawing on what we know about children’s and adolescents’ developmental experiences when mediated through digital technologies and services, and c) lessons from educational practice and pedagogy in fostering positive outcomes for young people, including effective digital citizenship.

## **Outline**

### **1. Setting the scene: envisioning a safer and a better internet - policy contexts and landscape**

- A brief overview of children in the digital environment as envisioned in EU (and other international) policy declarations. For instance, elaborating on the vision of the Digital Decade in an EU context and its manifestation in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Strategy for Better Internet for Kids (the BIK+ Strategy) as well as the combined approaches to support children (defined as under 18 years) in signature policy initiatives such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) whilst promoting

the digital transformation under the Digital Education Action Plan.

- Additionally, this comes at a pivotal time internationally, when a) there is greater awareness and focus regarding children's rights in the digital environment and b) there is a shift to more robust policies to protect young people in the online world. In this context, it would be good to refer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.25, and the current UN Global Digital Compact, which is in preparation.
- I will also reference Slovenia's digital transformation agenda, including the Slovenian Digital Education Action Plan 2027 and cooperation with the Council of Europe's Digital Citizenship Education initiative.
- The aim is not to go into detail about any of these policies or initiatives but rather to set out the general vision and underlying philosophy underpinning digitalisation, acknowledging the widely concerns among educators, and highlighting some of the possibilities as well as tensions for human development (ethics, human rights, education, social development)

## **2. Child and youth development in the digital age - developmental needs, experiences and consequences**

- This will be a deeper dive into the research landscape of children and young people in the digital age, with a particular focus on development stages and life cycles mapped against typical digital affordances, technologies, and uses.
- I will draw on themes and concepts similar to those in the presentation I gave to the CULT Committee and to COMECE, which was organised around the experiences of risks and opportunities for different age groups. This will include relevant findings from the last EU Kids Online study (plus any statistics I can find on Slovenia).
- The primary interest is understanding child and youth perspectives and experiences as a response to developmental needs, including for healthy physical, social and moral development, socialisation, agency, growing independence etc. thereby pointing to potential areas for educational interventions on digital literacy and pedagogy.

## **3. The role of education - how teachers, schools, parents and others who work with children can foster better digital experiences for young people**

- Here, the focus turns to educators and parents on how they can support young people in managing their participation in all things digital. The challenges of mentoring and

parenting in the digital age are acknowledged and characterised as a careful balance of providing support and protection and promoting autonomy and resilience.

- From the education perspective, I refer to the Council of Europe's competence framework (competences for democratic culture) of *values, attitudes, skills* and *critical understanding* as a helpful way of organising approaches to learning activities and outcomes.
- Selected learning examples and case studies will illustrate the approach, including different educational levels (primary, pre-primary, secondary, etc.) and age-appropriate styles of communication and joint participation in digital environments.

#### **4. Conclusion**

- The conclusion will present some takeaways for meeting the challenges of educating in the digital age.
- I will use the opportunity to reflect on the implications of Catholic social teaching for educational practice in this context, including drawing on the Catholic tradition of media literacy, pedagogy and civics, which has much to say about engaging with communications technologies and placing the dignity of the human person at its centre.
- The aim is to inspire confidence in the possibilities for collective action to promote positive digital experiences and outline some of the likely steps ahead in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.