

Annual Written Contribution of the [COMECE Youth Net](#) on Balancing Faith, Connectivity, and Family Values in the Age of Digital Transformation



DIGITAL CHALLENGES FOR FAMILIES IN EUROPE

Published in June 2024



PREFACE

In today's Europe, the digital revolution has emerged as a double-edged sword, carving pathways to unprecedented connectivity while weaving complex challenges into the very fabric of society. Families are navigating the delicate balance of embracing digital modes of connection, while simultaneously ensuring these technological advances reinforce their family values and harmonise with the Christian ethos. This contribution seeks **to explore the nuanced dynamics** at play and **formulates some tangible suggestions** for EU policymakers. In this way, the *COMECE Youth Net* aims to give a voice to young people engaged in the Catholic Church and willing to contribute to the betterment of the European project.

“The inherent dignity of each human being and the fraternity that binds us together as members of the one human family must undergird the development of new technologies” (Pope Francis) [1]

Recent remarks by Pope Francis, alongside the doctrinal insights from ["Towards Full Presence"](#) issued by the Dicastery for Communication, call upon individuals worldwide to reflect on the trajectory of technological advancements and engage in crafting new ethical frameworks for families. This subject is further reinforced by feedback from youth representatives across EU member states, who highlight that *“the European Union must underscore the significance of the family in the evolution of our society,”* as gleaned from the Youth Net survey [2]. Additionally, findings from official EU barometers (cf. p. 2) emphasise this common concern among families, facing the **dual challenge of adapting to technological advances while seeking to participate in the democratic processes that foster societal cohesion.**

A youth response to a positive change

In response to the digital challenges of disconnection and loneliness, Catholic Social Teaching offers valuable principles that could enrich future strategies to address these issues. These core principles encompass human decency, care for the world, and promoting genuine interactions within safe communities. Highlighting the importance of three pivotal actions, namely 1) education as a preventive and empowering measure, 2) adopting a new approach to digital consumption, and 3) fostering real encounters and dialogue to enhance understanding and collaboration, this contribution will further explore in more detail these challenges and aims **to illuminate how the Christian perspective contributes to the development of a more connected, respectful, and human-centred digital environment.** In the conclusion of this contribution, these insights will be formulated into concrete initiatives that EU policymakers can implement to effect positive change for all current and future EU members.

=> We invite you to share this message with your network, local policymakers, Church leaders and anyone who might find it valuable. Your help in spreading the voice of Europe's young people is crucial for driving positive change and ensuring our collective voice is heard.

Together, we can make a difference.

NAVIGATING DIGITAL CHALLENGES: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON FAMILY DYNAMICS AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

Families across Europe are confronting the complexities introduced by the rapid advancement of technology. This segment aims **to highlight some effects digitalisation has on family life and its wider implications for society and culture.** We will examine how digital trends are challenging the way Christian families maintain their relationships and uphold their values amidst changing societal norms [3].

I. Digital Influence on Family Dynamics

The expansion of digital technology has fundamentally **transformed family interactions** and daily life structures. In Europe, families are increasingly feeling the digital age's impact on their relational dynamics. The rapid pace of life, fueled by smartphones and social media, has ushered in an era of unprecedented connectivity. However, this interconnectivity brings potential challenges to family bonds. Digital devices, while enabling swift communication, also increase the risk of reducing face-to-face interactions. The growing trend of teleworking suggests more family time but doesn't necessarily improve the quality of interactions. Merging work and family time adds further complexity to achieving meaningful connections [4].

Moreover, technology, while facilitating communication, can paradoxically lead to **social isolation** if family members spend more time engaging with devices than with each other. This shift may result in **mental health issues such as digital or substance addiction, distorted intimacy expectations, and disconnection from daily life.** The intersection of digital distractions, pornographic material [5], and screen time management, and their impact on Christian practices of presence, patience, and genuine connection requires careful consideration [6].

The international [report](#) on European children's digital literacy by the London School of Economics and the EU Kids Online network underscores the risks for children in the digital age. Their extensive surveys reveal a critical demand for enhanced digital literacy programs. There's a clear **need to equip children and parents with the knowledge to maintain a balanced lifestyle and protect against online risks.** Survey participants expressed a desire for tools that facilitate quality family interactions while safeguarding against the internet's harmful aspects [7].

II. Cultural and Societal Impact of Digitalization

As digitalization starts to influence every facet of society, the cultural and societal landscape of Europe is undergoing transformative shifts. Families find themselves searching for new ways to deal with the implications of these changes, as the virtual realm increasingly intersects with traditional cultural norms and values [8].

Findings from the [Eurobarometer Survey on Digital Transformation](#) [9], conducted by the European Commission, indicate a public desire for greater focus on the ways technology affects family information and entertainment consumption, as well as its role in shaping societal expectations and norms. The constant flow of diverse perspectives, ideas and lifestyles accessible through digital platforms can challenge traditional Christian values, **raising questions about identity, morality, and the preservation of cultural heritage**. Moreover, the ever-evolving nature of digital culture can inadvertently contribute to a sense of displacement for Christian families seeking to navigate the tension between technological advancements and the preservation of their cultural and religious identity.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS ON DIGITALISATION

In the following sections, we will highlight some Christian insights on **the ethical interpretation of digitalization** and propose three potential strategies for policymakers in the EU, focusing on intergenerational education in order to harness the positive aspects of digitalization, while safeguarding Christian values and family connections.

I. The Catholic view of the media

The Catholic Church has been watching the evolution of media since its appearance in the world, showing the possibility of an ethical and Christian use of the internet. In 2002, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications [10] called for a responsible use of media by accepting the internet, and learning how to use it in a proper Catholic way [11]. The internet should be used as a medium of communication where fear has no place, encouraging it to rather foster a virtuous and cultivated approach to relationships. **The internet has to be a mastered medium, not a goal in itself.** “The network we want, [is] a network created not to entrap, but to liberate, to protect a communion of people who are free” [12].

Governments should seek legal ways to regulate the web and protect the original vision of a free, open and secure network, while **families have the responsibility to invest in relationships**, in humanity and the proper use of certain kinds of communication tools.

II. Family as a long-term solution

As young Catholics, we would like to suggest **the family approach as a possible long-term investment** to reduce the negative effects of the media on younger generations. The following examples can already be found in different Dioceses in Europe.

Because of the media, young people are risking becoming social hermits, putting in danger the values of real relationships. Young people are those most exposed to the illusion that the web can completely satisfy them on a rational level, leading them to loneliness, pornographic addictions and issues regarding their self-esteem (cf. [EU Loneliness Survey 2022](#)).

Families are the centre of affection, real relationships and happiness and fulfilment [13]. On top of that, they are the source of social order, because healthy families enable healthy societies. Being the bedrock of every society, there is an important need to invest in them by consulting countries with higher birth rates and encouraging governments to implement more family-friendly policies, especially considering the current demographic crisis affecting Europe. It is important **to rediscover the beauty of families and invest in their growth by strengthening family values**, educating them on virtues, offering a helping hand to people struggling with sexuality or relationships, and testifying about personal family experiences.

Families should provide enough security, well-being and the feeling of love to the young, in order to avoid them pursuing these values and needs in the digital world. They should be the first instance for young people to turn to in cases of doubts and insecurities and set a positive example of peace and harmony, for young people to strive for peace in their own lives. A place of company, in contrast to loneliness, they should show young people to look out for real, strong and founded relationships. **Strong families**, being the foundation of every child's development, will help them to look out for the truth in their surroundings, including the media world.

It is in the responsibility of parents and older generations, therefore, **to educate young people on how to ethically use the internet**, as society and institutions, in turn, must encourage parents to use the internet ethically themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is based on the main ideas elaborated above. It includes three suggestions for facing digital challenges for families:

1

● Media and information literacy (MIL) education based on ethical principles

Media and information literacy (MIL) skills are crucial for every citizen and becoming of the same importance as traditional literacy because of the increasing time spent by people on media. According to UNESCO, MIL covers: competencies that enable critical and effective engagement with communications content; the institutions that facilitate the content; and the use of digital technologies [14]. MIL has different definitions. However, a keystone in all possible definitions is the development of critical thinking by the user. The competence of critical thinking is crucial while facing the above-mentioned digital challenges for families. Therefore, **the EU institutions and Member States should ensure that all citizens are well-equipped with MIL skills, regardless of age.** Nevertheless, the digital world “raises several ethical questions about matters like privacy, the security and confidentiality of data, copyright and intellectual property law, pornography, hate sites, the dissemination of rumour and character assassination under the guise of news, and much else [15].” **Thus, MIL education cannot be only about techniques and critical thinking, but it needs to be based on ethical principles to help people “form standards of good taste and truthful moral judgement, an aspect of conscience formation” [16].** There are many different stakeholders at the level of Churches, faith-based institutions and organisations (from academia to NGOs) who have expertise, and a rich background of ethical knowledge. Therefore, we recommend EU institutions and national States to partner with them in the field of MIL.

“A central idea could be supporting Media literacy for parents.”

(COMECE Youth Net Survey, Germany)

“Support the development of values and virtues at home [...] Materials include online discussions, links to interesting TED talks, 12 character education lectures, etc.”

(COMECE Youth Net Survey, Latvia)

=> We recommend putting more efforts into equipping the EU citizens with media and information literacy based on ethical principles, with initiatives involving Churches and faith-based organisations in the creation of projects for families and communities

RECOMMENDATIONS

2

● Regulation of pornography and education about the harm caused by pornography

Digitalisation has made pornography easily accessible to a very broad audience, including young people and children [17]. Even though parental supervision and education on healthy human relations and sexuality are prominent, joint efforts tackling this challenge to protect children and youth as much as possible are needed. We welcome the decision made by the European Commission to include three pornography websites on the Digital Services Act's very large online platforms list, which seeks to create a safer online environment for children by obliging these platforms to create "measures to protect minors from harmful content and to address the dissemination of illegal content" [18]. Other initiatives from the EU institutions, such as the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#) and the Strategy for a [Better Internet for Children \(BIK+\)](#), are commendable and should be strengthened, pushing Member States to consolidate their national plans in line with such guidelines. In particular, **we encourage further steps towards effective regulation of pornography, including the collection and sharing of good practices from other countries** (e.g. United Kingdom [19]). Moreover, education on the harm caused by pornography should go together with regulation. The collaboration with the Church and other faith-based institutions on this process of education is meaningful and valuable, and makes action closer to communities and families.

"However, what many perceive that it certainly could do is the regulation of online content, especially social networks, access to pornographic content - this is something that should have been regulated a long time ago, on which the EU as a "big player" can have an impact."

(COMECE Youth Net Survey, Slovakia)

=> We encourage further steps towards effective regulation of pornography, with more efforts aimed at EU-wide binding provisions, including the collection and sharing of good practices from other countries

RECOMMENDATIONS

3

● International social campaign „Media for Encounter“

Although digital tools have made us more accessible and interconnected to each other, digital space affects young people both positively and negatively. Tablets and smartphones, along with social media platforms and messaging apps, have become integral to young people's lives, sometimes to the detriment of physical and mental health [20]. **Therefore, we encourage EU institutions and NGOs to take an active part in a social campaign that seeks to promote on the internet a “culture of encounter”** and create space to talk on issues such as loneliness, alienation, self-representing in media, human dignity and the problem of inferiority which comes from comparing oneself to others. Different role models, high-level politicians, artists, and ordinary citizens from all over Europe would be invited to share their insights on the above-mentioned issues sharing their short testimonies, inviting people to use technologies that enhance genuine human connections, fostering community-building and social connectivity online and offline. We invite EU institutions, and NGOs to ponder the concept of this social campaign so our digital space would be a place of encounter and not of alienation. We see this campaign in the framework of other EU efforts to counter mental health issues, especially among youth.

“More intergenerational projects [...] are highly needed. Such projects need a bottom-up approach supported by suggestions and ideas from the EU.”

(COMECE Youth Net Survey, Germany)

“Create projects that would like young people with centres who care for those suffering and struggling and lonely members of our community.”

(COMECE Youth Net Survey, Malta)

=> We encourage EU institutions, and NGOs to take an active part in a social campaign that seeks to promote on the internet a culture of encounter

CONCLUSION

The digital era in Europe poses unique challenges and opportunities, especially for Christian families striving to navigate technological engagement within their value-based approach. This contribution highlights the critical role of education, regulation, and community engagement in navigating the complexities of digitalization while upholding human dignity and family bonds.

Education, centred on media and information literacy with a foundation in ethical principles, is essential for critical engagement with digital content. Families and educators must work together to equip individuals with the skills to thoughtfully navigate the online world.

Regulation, particularly concerning content like pornography, is crucial for protecting vulnerable people. Collaborative efforts, including ethical input from Churches and faith-based organisations, can help mitigate the risks associated with digital content, ensuring a safer online environment.

The "**Media for Encounter**" campaign proposes using digital tools to foster genuine human connections, addressing issues like loneliness and promoting a culture of positive social interaction. This initiative underscores the potential for digital platforms to enhance rather than detract from meaningful community connections.

In sum, the path forward involves a concerted effort across sectors to ensure that the digital landscape can foster Christian values and contribute to societal well-being. By focusing on education, regulation, and positive digital engagement, we can create an environment that supports both technological advancement and the preservation of core family and societal values.

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Drafted by the four members of the COMECE Youth Net Presidency:
Ruben Cuyvers, Clotilde Lacoste, David Ogorevc and Miglè Viselgaité
with the help and contributions of the COMECE Youth Net Members
Edited by Emilio Dogliani and Nina Danišová

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