

Harmful internet use

Part II: Impact on culture and society

The purpose of this Options Brief is to provide the Members of the European Parliament with policy options for the prevention and mitigation of the negative effects of internet use on society. This brief is associated with the STOA study on 'Harmful internet use – Part 2: 'Impact on culture and society'. The study focuses on eight specific harmful effects associated with internet use: internet addiction, information overload, harm to social relationships, harm to cognitive development, harm to public/private boundaries, harmful effects on knowledge and belief, harm to communities, and harm to democracy and democratic citizenships. These effects can be categorised as harmful to individuals, to social structures and institutions, and to equality and social inclusion.

Policy option 1: No action

The first option open to policy-makers is not to intervene. This option bets on self-regulation by internet users, tech companies and other stakeholders. The option has the advantage of giving full freedom and control to private parties who are involved in making and using the internet. It moreover gives these parties the freedom to self-regulate and find regulatory solutions of their own as they see fit. The disadvantages of this option are, however, that these private parties may not be in a position to know the harmful impacts of certain designs and uses of internet technology, may not have the knowledge or resources to take action against this harm, and may not feel that taking such action is in their interest or part of their responsibilities.

Policy option 2: Promoting technology that better protects against self harm

This policy option is to stimulate or require technology companies to introduce design features, products and services, and corresponding user policies that support internet users in avoiding usage patterns that cause harm to their health, well-being and normal functioning. Sometimes, this means modifying products and services so that harmful effects to users are reduced or eliminated, and sometimes it means introducing new products and services that help users protect themselves against harm to their health, well-being and functioning.

Examples of actions to this effect are:

- **Internet addiction:** requiring or stimulating tech companies to provide technologies and services that help users measure and limit their own internet use, and regulating technologies and services that include reward systems that encourage addictive behaviour.
- **Information overload:** requiring or stimulating tech companies to develop solutions that address information overload, for example tools that help people process information, or that limit exposure to information.

Policy option 3: Promoting technology that better protects social institutions, equality and social inclusion

This policy option involves stimulating or requiring tech companies to introduce design features, products and services that better protect social institutions, equality and social inclusion. Many tech companies have already started to realise that technology and services have major societal impact and have started to acknowledge that addressing societal harms is part of their corporate social responsibility. For example, some tech companies have started combating fake news, online harassment, filter bubbles, and political manipulation of social media.

Examples of actions to this effect are:

- Harmful effects on knowledge and belief: requiring policies and actions by tech companies to discourage the functioning of communication through echo chambers, especially when these could lead to radicalisation.
- Harm to democracy and democratic citizenship: prohibiting social media platforms from transferring social media data for targeted political messaging and encouraging them to develop technological solutions, services and user policies to promote civil political discourse and democratic institutions.

Policy option 4: Education about the internet and the consequences of its use

Given the importance of the internet in young people's lives, from education to leisure to socialising, and given its importance in society at large, schools devote relatively little time to educating children and adolescents about internet technology, its uses and its effects on individuals and society. An option is therefore to strengthen education about the internet, which could start as early as elementary school. Such education could include:

- instruction on the technical and economic aspects of the internet and the way it is used in society;
- instruction on and discussion of social consequences, benefits of and harms caused by the internet;
- critical internet skills: digital literacy skills that include information literacy, media literacy and information and communication technology literacy;
- discussing and developing skills and practices for responsible, self-aware internet use.

While most education about the internet has its proper place in primary and secondary education, the first three of these topics can also be taught at university level and in continuing education.

Policy option 5: Information campaigns that target internet users

Surveys show an impressive lack of awareness among internet users regarding the possibilities offered by the technology they use, the risks that are involved, and the potentially harmful impacts on themselves and others. Information campaigns can help create awareness and help users develop skills to prevent such harm from taking place. Such campaigns have already been run in several Member States and non-EU countries, including campaigns against cyberbullying, sexting and internet addiction, and in favour of better internet security practices; recognising and dealing with online sexual predators; safe internet use by children; and recognising fake news.

Major internet use risks to health and wellbeing, including internet addiction and information overload, could be the subject of public health educational campaigns. Public recognition of internet addiction and information-related stress as disorders could encourage citizens to seek help. Health institutions could distribute further information. One option is to develop and promote guidelines for healthy, safe

and ethical internet use that have strong support from different stakeholders in society and that are widely promoted.

Policy option 6: Strengthening social services support for internet users that engage in unhealthy and harmful use

Some internet users need professional help to prevent or mitigate harm to themselves or others, and such help is not always available. This policy option involves strengthening social services that are dedicated to preventing or mitigating such harmful effects, including internet addiction, antisocial online behaviour, information overload and others. It could also involve the development of better systems for early recognition of harmful uses, including internet addiction and cyberbullying in children and adolescents.

Policy option 7: Stimulating or requiring employers to develop policies and initiatives that protect workers against harmful work-related internet use

Work-related internet use is a large part of overall internet use. Employers are in a position to help employees develop healthy internet habits and prevent harm to themselves and others. This policy option is to stimulate or require employers to take measures to protect users against the harmful effects of work-related internet use. Particular effects that employees can address are information overload and the blurring of lines between public and private (for example by protecting workers against work emails invading their private time), and protection of workers against online harassment. Special consideration may be given to schools and universities, which are in a position to protect not only their employees, but also vulnerable children and young adults who are their pupils and students.

Policy option 8: Establishing or transforming government units, government programmes, multi-stakeholder platforms, think tanks, or advisory bodies to address social and cultural problems caused by internet use

European institutions have a major role to play given the international nature of matters linked to the internet. The European Commission Directorate-General for Communications Networks (DG CONNECT) clearly has a role here, given that part of its mission is to foster a modern, secure, open, and pluralistic society by means of ICTs, and consideration could be given to how DG CONNECT could mobilise units/directorates, programmes and initiatives that explicitly focus on social and cultural problems caused by internet use. The same initiative could be carried out in other Directorate-Generals, including DG Research and Innovation, DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG Justice and Consumers.

The EU could also stimulate the development of global forums, platforms and initiatives to discuss the harmful effects of the internet for society and potential solutions. Promoting international dialogue could lead to global solutions and motivate/encourage information and service providers to adopt codes of conduct for a less harmful internet. An option is to expand current units, forums and initiatives that focus on internet privacy and security issues to include social and cultural harms associated with internet use.

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STOA@ep.europa.eu (contact)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/stoa/> (STOA website)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

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