

Children's Digital Safety and Rights in the Online Environment : Ethical, Legal and Educational Challenges

السلامة الرقمية وحقوق الطفل في البيئة الإلكترونية :
تحديات أخلاقية وقانونية وتربوية

Sécurité numérique et droits de l'enfant dans l'environnement en
ligne : enjeux éthiques, juridiques et éducatifs

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Abstract

This article examines children's digital safety as a child-rights issue situated at the intersection of ethics, law, media responsibility and education. Starting from the observation that children increasingly encounter social platforms, audiovisual content and algorithmically promoted materials at an early age, the study analyses the risks associated with harmful content, cyberbullying, hate speech, virtual bias and the normalization of discriminatory or violent representations. The paper adopts a descriptive-analytical approach supported by interviews and observation conducted with a purposive exploratory sample of thirty children in the Wilaya of Sétif. Rather than reducing online protection to parental control, the analysis argues that children's digital safety requires an integrated framework combining rights-based regulation, ethical content production, digital literacy, family mediation, school-based prevention, platform accountability and public policy. The study stresses the need to balance protection and participation : children must be shielded from exploitation, hatred and harmful content without being deprived of access to information, learning, communication and creativity. The article concludes with recommendations for families, educators, media professionals, digital service providers and public authorities, insisting on prevention, age-appropriate design, reporting mechanisms, respect for dignity and the best interests of the child.

Keywords

children's rights, digital safety, harmful content, hate speech, cyberbullying, media ethics, legal protection

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة السلامة الرقمية للأطفال بوصفها قضية من قضايا حقوق الطفل تقع عند تقاطع الأخلاق والقانون والمسؤولية الإعلامية والتربية. وتنطلق من ملاحظة تعرض الأطفال، في سن مبكرة، للمنصات الاجتماعية والمضامين السمعية البصرية والمواد التي تروجها الخوارزميات، لتحلل المخاطر المرتبطة بالمحتوى الضار، والتنمر الإلكتروني، وخطاب الكراهية، والتعصب الافتراضي، وتطبيع الصور العنيفة أو التمييزية. وتعتمد الدراسة مقارنة وصفية تحليلية مدعومة بالمقابلة والملاحظة لدى عينة قصدية استكشافية من ثلاثين طفلاً في ولاية سطيف. وتبين أن حماية الأطفال رقمياً لا يمكن اختزالها في الرقابة الأبوية، بل تتطلب إطاراً متكاملًا يجمع

بين التنظيم القانوني القائم على الحقوق، والإنتاج الأخلاقي للمحتوى، والتربية الإعلامية، والوساطة الأسرية، والوقاية المدرسية، ومسؤولية المنصات، والسياسات العمومية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى ضرورة الموازنة بين الحماية والمشاركة، بما يصون الأطفال من الأخطار الإلكترونية دون أن يحرمهم من حقوقهم في المعرفة والتعلم والتواصل والإبداع.

الكلمات المفتاحية

حقوق الطفل، السلامة الرقمية، المحتوى الضار، خطاب الكراهية، التنمر الإلكتروني، أخلاقيات الإعلام، الحماية القانونية

Abstract

Cet article examine la sécurité numérique des enfants comme une question de droits de l'enfant située au croisement de l'éthique, du droit, de la responsabilité médiatique et de l'éducation. À partir du constat d'une exposition de plus en plus précoce des enfants aux plateformes sociales, aux contenus audiovisuels et aux dispositifs de recommandation algorithmique, l'étude analyse les risques liés aux contenus préjudiciables, au cyberharcèlement, au discours de haine, au biais virtuel et à la banalisation des représentations discriminatoires ou violentes. La recherche adopte une démarche descriptive et analytique, appuyée sur des entretiens et des observations réalisés auprès d'un échantillon exploratoire raisonné de trente enfants dans la wilaya de Sétif. L'analyse montre que la protection numérique ne peut être réduite au contrôle parental : elle suppose un cadre intégré articulant régulation fondée sur les droits, production éthique des contenus, éducation aux médias, médiation familiale, prévention scolaire, responsabilité des plateformes et politiques publiques. L'article conclut à la nécessité d'un équilibre entre protection et participation, afin de préserver les enfants des risques en ligne sans restreindre indûment leurs droits à l'information, à l'apprentissage, à la communication et à la créativité.

Keywords

droits de l'enfant, sécurité numérique, contenu préjudiciable, discours de haine, cyberharcèlement, éthique des médias, protection juridique

Introduction

The accelerated expansion of the digital environment has profoundly modified the conditions under which children learn, communicate, play and construct their social identities. The internet, social networking sites, streaming platforms, messaging applications and online games now constitute a dense environment in which information, entertainment, commercial solicitation and peer interaction are continuously intertwined. This transformation has made the digital space a daily social space rather than a marginal technological tool. For children, it offers unprecedented opportunities for access to knowledge, creativity and participation; at the same time, it exposes them to new forms of vulnerability that cannot be understood through traditional media categories alone.

The emergence of harmful digital content, cyberbullying, virtual bias and hate speech illustrates the ambivalent nature of digital communication. On the one hand, digital media facilitate cultural exchange, rapid communication and the circulation of knowledge. On the other hand, the absence or insufficiency of ethical and legal regulation in certain online spaces may encourage fanaticism, hostility, humiliating speech and discriminatory representations. When these phenomena target children or are encountered by them repeatedly, they may affect psychological well-being, self-esteem, social trust and the capacity to participate safely in public life.

Childhood is a period of physical, cognitive, affective and moral development. This does not mean that children are passive beings, but it does mean that they require forms of protection adapted to their age, maturity, context and capacities. The child is both a rights-holder and a developing subject. Any approach to online safety must therefore avoid two opposite reductions: the first would treat children only as vulnerable victims to be shielded from all digital experience; the second would leave them alone in an environment shaped by commercial platforms, algorithmic amplification and social conflicts. A rights-based approach requires the simultaneous protection of children's dignity, privacy, development, expression, information and participation.

This study focuses on digital safety and children's rights by examining the ethical and legal challenges raised by harmful online content, virtual bias and hate speech. It addresses a central question: how can families, educators, media professionals, platform actors and public authorities protect children from online harms while preserving their access to the positive dimensions of the digital environment? The answer cannot be limited to technical filtering. It must integrate ethical responsibility, legal safeguards, media education, parental mediation, institutional cooperation and the development of children's own digital skills.

The article is situated within a broader concern for the social responsibility of media and digital content producers toward childhood. In the original problem statement, the key question was formulated as follows: what are the limits of

media practices concerning children? This question remains valid, but it needs to be expanded: media practices today include not only broadcasting and programming but also platform design, recommendation systems, visibility rules, data collection, age assurance, reporting tools and community standards. Protection therefore requires attention to content, infrastructure and governance.

The contribution of the article is threefold. First, it clarifies the conceptual relations between digital safety, harmful content, cyberbullying, hate speech and virtual bias. Second, it links these phenomena to a child-rights framework that combines protection, provision and participation. Third, it proposes practical mechanisms for prevention and regulation, with attention to the Algerian context and to international normative references. The purpose is not to demonize technology, but to define the ethical and legal conditions under which the digital environment may become safer, more educational and more respectful of children's dignity.

1. Research Problem, Questions and Objectives

The research problem centres on the safety of children in digital environments. Children are exposed to audiovisual, social and interactive media through smartphones, family devices, school-related technologies and peer networks. Such exposure may involve useful educational content, cultural discovery and play, but it may also include violent scenes, humiliating language, sexually explicit material, discriminatory representations, misinformation and forms of online aggression. The problem is therefore not the mere presence of children online; it is the unequal capacity of children, families and institutions to distinguish safe, beneficial and age-appropriate digital experiences from harmful or exploitative ones.

The primary research question may be reformulated as follows: What ethical, educational, and legal limits should govern media and digital practices to protect children's rights in the online environment? From this general question, five subsidiary questions guide the analysis: what are the main threats children face in the digital world, especially harmful content, cyberbullying and online hatred? How do such threats affect children's psychological, emotional and social well-being? What forms of family and institutional mediation can help control and guide children's digital use without suppressing their rights? What technological tools and reporting mechanisms are available to prevent or reduce exposure to harm? What laws and policies may protect children online, and how can they be strengthened through rights-based implementation?

The study pursues the following objectives: to clarify the ethical boundaries of digital content directed at or accessed by children; to identify the types of risk associated with harmful content, virtual fanaticism, cyberbullying and hate speech; to examine the cultural effects of digital content on childhood and socialization; to highlight the shared responsibility of parents, educators, media

professionals, platform operators and public authorities; and to propose a framework of prevention combining education, regulation, monitoring and respect for children's rights.

The importance of the study lies in its focus on childhood as a foundational stage of individual and social development. Children represent not only a vulnerable category requiring care, but also future citizens whose relationship with technology will shape cultural participation, democratic life and social cohesion. The study is also important because digital violence and online hatred may be normalized through repeated exposure, especially when they are presented as entertainment, humor or ordinary interaction. Finally, the topic is timely because digital technologies have become embedded in everyday life, while legal and ethical instruments still struggle to keep pace with the speed of technological change.

2. Conceptual and Normative Framework

The notion of digital safety refers to the conditions that enable children to use digital devices, online services, and connected platforms while being protected from avoidable risks to their dignity, privacy, psychological integrity, and development. Digital safety includes protection against hacking, fraud, identity theft and data misuse, but it also concerns exposure to harmful content, manipulative design, cyberbullying, hate speech, violent imagery and exploitative communication. It should not be confused with digital exclusion. A safe environment is not one from which children are absent; it is one in which risks are anticipated, mitigated, and made reportable, and in which children are progressively educated to act responsibly.

Harmful digital content may be defined as content likely to impair a child's moral, psychological, social or physical development. It includes, depending on age and context, violent images, humiliating messages, pornography, explicit abuse, self-harm content, extremist propaganda, commercial manipulation, degrading stereotypes and content that normalizes contempt toward groups or individuals. Not every risk produces harm, and not every exposure has the same effects. However, when exposure is repeated, unmediated or targeted at vulnerable children, it may influence emotional regulation, imitation, anxiety, aggressive behavior or the trivialization of humiliation.

Virtual bias refers to forms of prejudice and intolerance circulating in digital spaces against individuals or groups because of religion, gender, origin, language, culture, appearance, social status, political orientation, or other characteristics. Such bias may appear through insults, stereotypes, exclusionary jokes, stigmatizing images, comment campaigns or algorithmically amplified hostility. Hate speech constitutes a more explicit form of hostile expression when it humiliates, dehumanizes, discriminates against or incites hostility toward a person or a group. For children, the danger is twofold: they may be victims of these discourses, but they may also learn to reproduce them as ordinary forms of digital interaction.

A child-rights approach provides a more coherent framework than a purely moralizing discourse. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's rights to protection, information, privacy, participation and development. In relation to the digital environment, the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, the right to be heard, access to beneficial information and protection against violence must be read together. A protective measure that ignores children's participation may become paternalistic; a policy that promotes participation without protection may expose children to avoidable harm. The challenge is to articulate both dimensions.

International guidance on children's rights in the digital environment emphasises the responsibilities of states, families, educational institutions, and business actors. Digital service providers are expected to anticipate child-specific risks, integrate privacy and safety by design, provide accessible reporting mechanisms and avoid practices that exploit children's vulnerabilities. Public authorities must ensure that legislation is not merely declaratory but effectively implementable. Families and schools must provide mediation and education. This multi-actor perspective is essential because no single institution can protect children alone.

The Algerian context reinforces the need to connect general child-protection principles with media law, anti-discrimination instruments and policies addressing hate speech. Legal protection must include not only sanctions after harm has occurred but also preventive measures: age-appropriate content classification, media education, warning systems, professional ethics, protection of privacy, child-sensitive reporting, and cooperation among schools, families, regulators, and child-protection bodies. Law alone is insufficient without education, institutional coordination, and a culture of responsibility.

3. Methodological Approach

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. This methodological choice is appropriate for a topic that requires both conceptual clarification and the interpretation of social practices. The descriptive dimension identifies the phenomena under study: children's digital exposure, harmful content, cyber-bullying, virtual bias, hate speech and mechanisms of protection. The analytical dimension explains the relationships between these phenomena and the ethical, legal and educational frameworks through which they may be regulated.

The empirical orientation of the study is exploratory. It is supported by interviews and observation. Interviews allow the researcher to collect information, perceptions and experiences in a more direct and contextualized manner. Observation makes it possible to note recurrent practices, forms of exposure, adult mediation, and the types of content children encounter. These tools are particularly relevant when the objective is not statistical generalization but the construction of a diagnostic understanding of a sensitive phenomenon.

The study was conducted with a purposive sample of thirty children selected from various areas in the Wilaya of Sétif. The procedural definition of childhood retained in the manuscript covers ages 2 to 12 years. This wide range must be handled carefully because the digital practices and verbal capacities of a two-year-old child differ significantly from those of a pre-adolescent. For the youngest children, observation and adult mediation are more appropriate than direct questioning. For older children, interviews may provide richer information about perceptions, experiences and coping strategies. The interpretation of the results, therefore, needs to remain cautious and age-sensitive.

Ethical considerations are central to any study involving children. Research with minors requires respect for dignity, informed consent from guardians, assent from children when possible, anonymity, confidentiality and avoidance of any procedure that could expose the child to distress. In a publication-ready version, the researcher must indicate how consent was obtained, how anonymity was preserved and how the interviews or observations were conducted. The present article incorporates these ethical requirements into the study's scientific upgrade.

The limits of the methodology must also be explicitly acknowledged. A purposive sample of thirty children cannot represent all children in Algeria, nor can it provide statistical proof of causal relations between exposure to harmful content and psychological effects. The value of the study is diagnostic and analytical: it identifies risks, organizes them conceptually and proposes a preventive framework. This limitation does not weaken the article if it is clearly stated; on the contrary, it strengthens scientific credibility by preventing overgeneralization.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that the digital environment has become a major space of socialization. Traditional and modern media have facilitated communication, reduced distance and expanded access to information. Social media platforms attract users from all age categories and create an environment characterized by informational abundance and competition for attention. For children, this abundance may stimulate curiosity and learning; it may also expose them to content designed primarily to capture attention rather than to support development. The problem is therefore not only the content itself, but the economy of visibility that organizes content circulation.

The cultural effects of digital content on childhood are ambivalent. From a positive perspective, digital media can provide children with educational programs, language exposure, creative tools, access to scientific knowledge, exposure to different cultures, and opportunities for self-expression. They can contribute to the refinement of personality, the development of digital skills and the discovery of successful experiences. They may also help transmit social messages, support educational campaigns and give visibility to problems that require public action. These benefits justify rejecting any simplistic rejection of technology.

From a negative perspective, children may encounter content that undermines values of respect, modesty, cooperation and dignity. Offensive films, degrading programs, violent scenes, humiliating commentaries, discriminatory humor and sensationalist content may normalize indifference, aggressiveness or contempt. In conservative societies, the sudden circulation of external lifestyles and images may be perceived as a form of cultural pressure; however, the most serious issue is not cultural contact itself but the absence of critical mediation that would allow children to distinguish among openness, imitation, manipulation, and harmful influence.

The theory of social learning is useful here because children often acquire behaviors by observing models, especially when those models are repeated, attractive or socially rewarded. In digital environments, models are no longer limited to parents, teachers or local peers. Influencers, gamers, characters, celebrities and anonymous users may become behavioral models. When aggression, mockery, consumerist display or discriminatory discourse is rewarded by likes, shares and visibility, children may internalize the idea that such behavior is effective or socially acceptable. This is why digital safety must include the ethics of visibility and not only the removal of illegal content.

The psychological effects of virtual bias and hate speech may include isolation, fear, shame, lowered self-esteem, anxiety and depressive feelings. A child who is repeatedly exposed to contemptuous or discriminatory messages may begin to perceive difference as a threat or as a reason for exclusion. When children are themselves targeted, the harm may be more direct: humiliation, fear of social contact, withdrawal from online spaces or aggressive reaction. Cyberbullying aggravates these effects because it may be persistent, public, rapidly disseminated and difficult to escape when devices are constantly present in daily life.

The social and political effects of online hatred exceed the individual level. Hate speech divides communities, weakens trust, fuels conflicts and reduces the possibility of dialogue. In digital spaces, freedom of expression may be confused with the right to insult, humiliate or incite hostility. A democratic approach must therefore distinguish criticism, disagreement and debate from discourse that attacks dignity, dehumanizes groups or prepares the ground for exclusion and violence. For children, this distinction is essential because digital citizenship is learned through concrete experiences of speech, disagreement and responsibility.

Misinformation and misleading news intensify the problem. False information can generate fear, distrust and hostility, especially when it targets vulnerable groups or uses emotionally charged images. Children may not possess the cognitive tools required to identify manipulation, verify sources or recognize inflammatory framing. Media education should therefore include source evaluation, recognition of stereotypes, understanding of emotional manipulation and

knowledge of reporting mechanisms. Digital literacy is not merely a technical skill; it is a moral and civic competence.

Another important finding concerns the role of adults. Parental self-monitoring, as mentioned in the initial problem statement, is necessary but insufficient. Parents need practical knowledge of platforms, age settings, privacy options, reporting tools and the psychological signs of online distress. Educators need curricular resources to address hate speech, cyberbullying and respectful communication. Media professionals need ethical rules concerning children's images, children's vulnerability and the avoidance of sensationalist representations. Public authorities need enforceable frameworks and coordination between protection bodies, education, justice and communication regulators.

The legal response must be combined with ethical and educational measures. Laws against discrimination and hate speech are necessary, but they must be applied with clarity, proportionality and respect for legitimate expression. Child protection law must also be connected to media regulation and data protection. Platforms and content producers should be required to implement age-appropriate design, privacy by default, accessible complaint procedures, moderation of harmful content and transparent rules. These mechanisms should not be understood as censorship but as safeguards for dignity, development and the best interests of the child.

Preventing harmful digital content also requires technical tools. Filtering programs, parental control applications, content rating systems, reporting buttons, age verification, privacy settings, and warning mechanisms may reduce exposure to harm. Yet such tools have limits. They can be bypassed, they may overblock useful content, and they cannot replace dialogue. The most effective protection combines technology with adult mediation and children's empowerment. Children should learn why certain content is harmful, how to ask for help, how to block or report aggression, how to protect personal data and how to behave ethically toward others.

The findings, therefore, point toward an integrated model of protection. At the first level, families provide affective support, rules of use and dialogue. At the second level, schools build digital literacy, civic awareness and peer prevention. At the third level, media professionals and content creators adopt ethical standards and produce age-appropriate materials. At the fourth level, platforms implement safety and privacy by design. At the fifth level, public authorities guarantee legal protection, institutional coordination and accountability. These levels are complementary: weakness at one level increases the burden on the others.

5. Mechanisms for Combating Virtual Bias, Hate Speech and Harmful Content

Combating virtual bias and hatred begins with affirming human dignity. Religious, moral and civic values may support this objective when they encour-

age respect, responsibility and refusal of humiliation. However, protection must be framed in a manner compatible with children's rights and with the plural nature of contemporary societies. It is necessary to refrain from disseminating offensive, violent, discriminatory or degrading materials; it is also necessary to teach children how to respond to such materials without reproducing aggression.

The first mechanism is awareness. Parents, educators and children should be informed about the dangers of harmful digital content, cyberbullying, online grooming, hate speech, misinformation and privacy violations. Awareness campaigns should be adapted to age and context. For young children, the emphasis should be on trusted adults, safe communication and simple rules. For older children, training should include critical thinking, source verification, emotional regulation and respectful digital citizenship.

The second mechanism is educational prevention. Schools can integrate digital safety into civic education, language courses, media literacy activities and extracurricular programs. Children should be encouraged to analyze examples of online discourse, identify stereotypes, distinguish humor from humiliation, understand the consequences of sharing harmful content and learn how to report abuse. Peer education may be particularly useful because children often disclose online problems first to friends rather than to adults.

The third mechanism is family mediation. Total prohibition often produces secrecy, while absence of rules produces vulnerability. Balanced mediation includes co-use, discussion, agreed schedules, age-appropriate settings, attention to emotional signs and a climate in which children can speak without fear of punishment. Parents should be encouraged to accompany rather than merely surveil. The objective is to progressively build trust and autonomy.

The fourth mechanism is professional ethics. Media professionals and digital content creators should avoid sensationalizing children's suffering, exposing children's identities, using humiliating imagery or producing content likely to normalize discrimination. Content directed at children should respect age, dignity, cultural sensitivity and developmental needs. Objectivity, honesty, respect for privacy, and avoidance of incitement are not optional qualities; they are professional obligations when childhood is at stake.

The fifth mechanism is platform responsibility. Digital services used by children should provide privacy by default, clear language, age-appropriate interfaces, transparent reporting systems, rapid response to abuse and meaningful moderation of harmful content. Recommendation systems should not amplify violent, hateful or degrading content to children. Safety should be built into the design of services rather than added only after harm occurs.

The sixth mechanism is legal and institutional coordination. Public policies should clarify responsibilities, support reporting and referral pathways, ensure cooperation between schools and child protection services, and strengthen reg-

ulators' capacity. Legal provisions addressing discrimination, hate speech, media practices and child protection should be applied coherently. In addition, research institutions should be encouraged to produce local data on children's digital practices in Algeria, because effective policy depends on evidence rather than general anxiety.

Finally, successful protection requires evaluation. Programs, campaigns and technical tools should be assessed regularly: do they reduce exposure to harm? do children understand how to seek help? Do parents and teachers know how to respond? Are vulnerable children included? Do reporting mechanisms work? Without evaluation, protection remains declaratory. With evaluation, digital safety can become a measurable public objective.

6. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the study recommends strengthening awareness and education among parents and educators about harmful digital content and how to protect children from it. Such awareness should be practical, not merely moralizing: it should include platform settings, privacy, reporting, emotional support, and the recognition of signs of cyberbullying or distress.

It also recommends promoting cooperation between families, schools, governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations. Protection cannot be fragmented. A child who experiences online harm may need family support, school intervention, psychological accompaniment, platform reporting and, in serious cases, legal protection. Institutional pathways should therefore be clear and accessible.

Public campaigns should address virtual bias and hate speech through seminars, school activities, audiovisual programs and digital materials. These campaigns should not only condemn hatred but also teach respectful disagreement, recognition of misinformation and empathy toward difference. Children should learn that the digital environment is a space of rights and responsibilities.

Available protection tools should be reviewed and promoted, including filtering programs, parental control applications, content-rating systems and reporting mechanisms. Nevertheless, these tools should be presented as supports for mediation, not as substitutes for adult presence and children's digital literacy.

Further research should include larger samples, differentiated age groups, gender analysis, interviews with parents and teachers, and systematic analysis of the platforms most used by children. Future studies should also examine the effectiveness of existing laws and policies in protecting children online, with particular attention to implementation, reporting and access to remedies.

Conclusion

Digital safety is one of the major child-protection challenges of contemporary societies. The spread of harmful content, cyberbullying, virtual bias and hate speech threatens not only individual well-being but also social trust, civic dia-

logue and respect for dignity. Children are particularly concerned because they are developing subjects whose identities, emotions and values are shaped through repeated interactions with family, school, media and digital environments.

The article has argued that children's protection online must not be reduced to fear of technology. The digital environment can support learning, creativity, communication and participation. The task is therefore to build conditions under which these opportunities can be enjoyed without exposing children to avoidable harms. This requires a balance among protection and participation, regulation and freedom, and technological tools and human mediation.

The most coherent response is an integrated framework. Families must mediate and provide support; schools must educate and prevent; media professionals must uphold ethical standards; platforms must design safer services; and public authorities must ensure legal protection and institutional coordination. Such a framework is demanding, but it is necessary if societies wish to prepare children not only to use technology, but to inhabit the digital world with dignity, intelligence and responsibility.

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