(English version)

Question for written answer E-000563/25
to the Commission
Liesbet Sommen (PPE)
(7 February 2025)

Subject: Children's series like CoComelon and PAW Patrol are harmful for children's development

Over the past decade, children's screen time has doubled. Children aged 0 to 6 spend an average of 99 minutes behind a screen every single day. Series such as CoComelon and PAW Patrol are addictive and have a negative impact on toddlers' linguistic and social development. The videos are designed with bright colours, sounds and rapidly changing images, and are tested by placing children in front of two screens: one with the series and one with regular images. As the children look away, the videos are adjusted to make them more addictive.

These stimuli can lead to overstimulation and the release of stress hormones such as cortisol. Dopamine triggers the reward system, which can in turn lead to addiction. Children become accustomed to constant rewards. This can also affect brain development. Research shows that more screen time at age 1 is associated with delays in communication and problem-solving skills.

1. Is the European Commission aware of these issues?

2. Does the Digital Services Act (DSA) allow the design of programmes that exploit minors' weaknesses or lead to addictive behaviour and will the Commission investigate this?

3. Can research be carried out on this issue as part of the health or culture clusters under Horizon Europe?

Submitted: 7.2.2025

Answer given by Executive Vice-President Virkkunen on behalf of the European Commission
(16 April 2025)

The protection of minors online is a priority area for the Commission.

The communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health ([1]) supports young people's mental health including in the digital sphere ([2]).

The Commission plans to carry out an EU-wide inquiry on the broader impacts of social media on mental health and wellbeing, focusing on young people ([3]).

Under the Digital Services Act (DSA) ([4]), the Commission does not regulate content, but providers of intermediary services are required to conduct risk assessments, considering actual or foreseeable risks stemming from the functioning and design of their services; and are required to put in place effective mitigation measures. In particular, platforms accessible to minors must ensure a high level of privacy and safety.

The Better Internet for Kids Strategy (BIK+) will also monitor platforms' unethical techniques, such as addictive design, and support carers and educators ([5]).

Member States are required by the Audiovisual Media Services Directive ([6]) (AVMSD) to ensure that audiovisual services providers put in place defined measures to protect minors from programmes and content which may impair their physical, mental or moral development.

The Commission is supporting EU citizens, including children, to stay mentally healthy as a priority within Horizon Europe ([7]) with several research actions ([8]).

For the development of the next Horizon Europe work programme ([9]), the Commission is also reflecting on the negative impact of digital technologies on children's mental health.

([1]) https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/european-health-union/comprehensive-approach-mental-health_en
([2]) https://health.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6317c605-5f5d-4d4f-9c8a-d5c93e869814_en?
([3]) https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029_en
([4]) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng
([5]) https://better-Internet-for-kids.europa.eu/en/news/better-Internet-kids-annual-report-2024-out
([6]) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:am0005
([7]) Horizon Europe, the funding programme for research and innovation; https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en
([8]) https://cordis.europa.eu/search?q=frameworkProgramme%3D%27HORIZON%27%2C%27H2020%27%20AND%20(%27mental%27%20AND%20%27health%27%20AND%20%27children%27)&p=1&num=10&srt=Relevance:decreasing
([9]) Clusters 1 and 2.

Finally, the Commission is working with Member States for the preparation of a European partnership on brain health whose scope will also include research and innovation actions to understand and promote children’s mental health.