SOCIAL MEDIA & TEENS

PROJECT REPORT

QUARTER ONE'23

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SOCIAL MEDIA & TEENS

MESSAGE FROM THE LEAD TEAM

Dear Readers,

We are thrilled to present the first report from the Social Media & Teens project. Our mission is to empower teenagers to use social media responsibly and co-create the next generation of digital public spaces. Our goal is to create a set of guidelines that clearly define technology from the perspective of young people. We believe that this can only be achieved by involving young people directly in the co-creation of the next generation of digital public spaces.

We are excited to share with you the insights and lessons learned from these activities in this report. We hope that the information and recommendations contained within will assist different groups in further researching, implementing, planning, or conceptualising their own projects in the field of social media.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the individuals and organisations that have supported us in this project. We also want to thank the teenagers and young people, who participated in our activities and shared their experiences and insights with us.

Sincerely,
Responsible Technology Hub e.V.

INTRODUCTION

The Social Media & Teens project is focused on the issues that teenagers & young people encounter in their use of social media. Our mission is to empower them to use social media responsibly and to engage them in co-creating the next generation of digital public spaces. We have several activities coming up in the new year, starting off with a World Café where we will discuss whether social media is a responsible technology with some amazing panelists as well as the RTH community!

Further down the road, we want to engage with teenagers more directly by working with them in their classrooms. Finally, we want to put all our learnings into a set of guidelines to help young people use social media in a healthier way and we might even hack our way into the social media game as well. In this report we will discuss the different lessons learned from the past months of implementing the project during Q1 in 2023.

We hope this report can assist different groups in further researching, implementing, plan or conceptualize own projects in the field of social media. This report can also be of guidance for social media platform developers and stakeholders, who are actively working in social media or around change development within the field.

The Social Media and Teens project is conceptualized in three parts. Within each quarter of the year we implement one Workshop at a local High School, one World Café and publish one lessons learned report. In total we therefore plan to host four workshops, four World Cafés and four lessons learned.

We are excited to share our insights with the public and we are looking forward to see what is to come for the next months.

LEARNINGS
SO FAR
WORKSHOP IN BERLIN
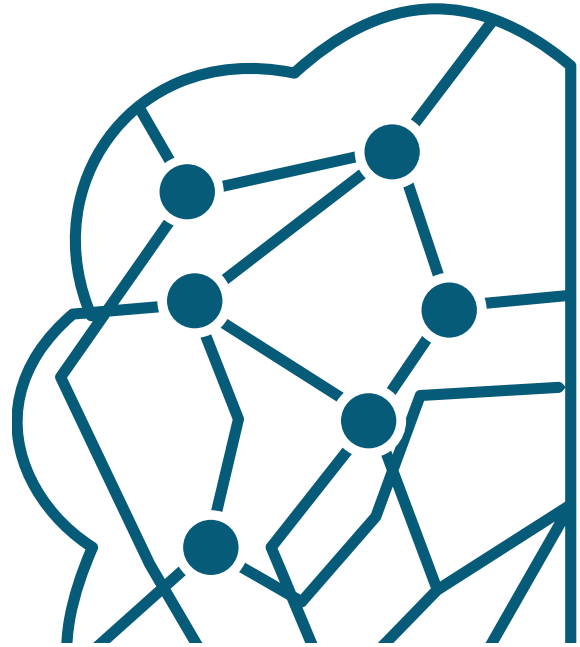
RTH hosted its first Social Media & Teens Workshop in January at a Berlin High School. A total of 10 participants from grade 6 to 12 were present on the day and went through a rigorous process of debating social media platforms and building their own ideal paper prototype of a platform they would use or change. During the Workshop we noticed and learned three specific things we want to share with you:

1. SOME THINGS DON'T WORK WITH TEENS!

2. TEENS ARE VERY MUCH AWARE!

3. LET YOUTH JUST DO!

LEARNINGS
Q1 2023

1

Some things don't work with teens!

Lecture style workshops don't work with teenagers. Instead it is important to start the session with questions and thereby find out what the current status of knowledge is of the teenagers. Knowledge and use of social media varied very much during the workshop: We had one student, who knew how to code and build hardware and spend up to 6 hours a day on social media platforms, while on the other side we had a very young student, who doesn't use a smartphone at all. It is important to find out what the status of knowledge and the use of technology is within the teenager group before starting any information session.

2

Teens are very much aware!

Most teenagers are aware about how the Social Media platform operate. All teenagers knew that Social Media platforms actively influence the content that is being shown to the user. The term algorithm was used multiple times, while only a few were able to explain what exactly is behind an algorithm, all participants knew that content can be shadow banned or pushed more depending on how polarizing the content is. Explaining technical concepts such as AI systems only work if students are actively involved, e.g. through small coding lessons.

3

Let youth just do!

The best way to showcase and explain how teenagers view Social Media is to let them design their own ideal platform: Teenagers don't need to be told what issues and upsides Social Media platforms have. Most teenagers have their own experiences, ideas and norms around social media consumption. Paper prototyping really helped us understand what exactly the teenagers found problematic with Social Media and what aspects they cherished, without us intervening or influencing their opinions. Below we have highlighted which issues were raised and how students wanted to tackle the problems. Although some solutions raise additional questions related to ethics, the solutions presented made very clear what problems teenagers want to see solved.

WORKSHOP IN BERLIN

REFLECTING
WORKSHOP RESULTS

During the workshop the teenagers shared their views on what they find problematic within Social Media platforms. The following three points were named as the main issues

Minimize the potential to get addicted: A second group showcased their concerns of social media being addictive, especially for young students and teenagers. Their solution is based on developing a new Social Media Platform, that allows its users to use the platform for a maximum duration of 30 min. Pictures and Videos can only be posted if taken through the App, thereby ensuring that no filters are used, highlighting the concern of the first group. Instead of a "Like" button users can decide to distribute a limited amount of "Coins", which can be used to get vouchers from the App partners. The idea is to limit the user to only "like" specific content they really do appreciate. Coins, followers and comments cannot be seen by users, thereby taking away the motivation to become an "influencer". Coins can also be earned by users, by users actively moderating the platform.

Make Social Media Real again: One group of participants highlighted that Social Media does not seem real to them but instead the content shown portrays a fake reality that continuously pushes young people to develop unrealistic life goals. Although all participants acknowledged this issue, most admitted that although they were aware of the "fake portrayal" within the platforms, the content regularly influenced them in comparing themselves with other users. The paper prototype solution described is a platform that should be developed to be more personal and authentic.

Decrease Populism and polarizing content: The third group underlined the issue of populist and polarizing content gaining tractions within existing Social Media platforms. Their solution focused on developing an extension in current apps. The extension in the app should include more information on posts through a simple right swipe. An additional information box, which can include explanatory videos, can thereby pop up and inform the user of the origin and sources of the content. Users are thereby incentivized to actively deal with the content and not only passively consume.

Lastly the group also decided that the extension should also introduce an App limit and thereby limit the use of the social media applications.

THE WORLD CAFÉ

During our World Café format in January, we hosted around 40 participants, who discussed the topic "Is Social Media a Responsible Technology?". Participants ages and professional background varied immensely. From students to retired workers, the event was joined by a very diverse group of people. We let the participants discuss three major questions in groups, write statements/answers to these questions and let them vote on the statements they most agreed or disagreed on.

40
Participants

3
Questions

53
Statements

We summarized all the statements made during the world cafe and will share with you the results of the vote in the following pages.

THE STATEMENTS

How can people make responsible and informed choices about their social media usage?

Statement	% Agreed	% Disagreed	% Passed
Support digital literacy on online behavior.	100	0	0
Start talking about social media with kids starting in elementary school - get awareness about it, smoking has been super cool once too	94	0	5
Digital literacy is useful, but is only a partial solution (if, at all). Laws, regulations, social pressure, incentives, etc. are also needed as well.	94	5	0
Have algorithmic transparency to facilitate informed decisions	94	0	5
Track your habits.	88	5	5
Make sure that social platforms do not use nudging techniques/dark patterns to influence your usage.	88	5	5
Critically question own digital self-awareness.	82	5	11
Be able to change and adapt algorithmic sorting and suggestions.	82	11	5
Assess how your habits affect you.	82	5	11
Two perspectives - both consumption and contribution should be responsible. Informed decisions- time of usage, escaping trauma through social media.	76	0	23
Find things for yourself that are more interesting than social media.	70	17	11
Check the World health organization website for advice.	64	11	23
Allow yourself to be bored.	58	29	11
To be able to understand and consent to the terms and conditions of the personal data that's used for market research.	58	11	29
To contribute- sensitive content- it has to go through two filters- fact and opinion. Its important to contain misinfo but opinion cannot be brought down. It's important to keep people's opinion intact	47	11	41

THE STATEMENTS

How does social media affect your everyday life?

| Statement	% Agreed	% Disagreed	% Passed
get drawn in & waste a lot of time	100	0	0
Social media can lead to burnout and when consumed on a daily basis, it can be very time consuming and is almost akin to an addiction	100	0	0
Steal away time	100	0	0
Constant consumption of unnecessary information overloads our brains. This leads to unhealthy conditions, such as "zoning out" to avoid more information (which might actually be useful), apathy, fatigue and so on.	100	0	0
Social media simplifies communication, hence provides opportunities for business development, dissemination of ideas etc.	92	0	7
Interferences with what you really want to focus on/distraction.	92	0	7
I feel like social media is impeding my mental well-being / mental health.	92	0	7
getting a lot of information	92	0	7
Social media grants easy access to instant dopamine, which makes us less sensitive to it. Simply put, it's harder for us to feel happy.	92	0	7
Connect with people you otherwise wouldn't have connected with.	92	0	7
Social Media is undeniably a part of most people's daily lives one way or another.	92	0	7
Social media affects the mental-health and will-being when consumed on an everyday basis, it can lead to comparison and severely impact you. Eg. Body Dysmorphia.	92	0	7
Social Media could also be really positive - for us everyday immediate access to information of all kinds is extremely convenient and it also opened up a platform for representation that isn't normally found in mainstream media.	92	7	0
Social media can be a comforting tool in the beginning offering a medium or safe space for social connection, however it has replaced real interactions in some cases and made conversations more extreme. It can function as a drug for seeking comfort and getting dopamine. Don't get drunk on Twitter.	85	7	7
Cognitive dissonance (fomo).	84	7	7
Where social media was first a reflection on our offline lives, offline lives has become a reflection of social media.	78	15	7
Focus, time span.	76	15	7
Community phenomenon and culture influence that needs to be consciously separated from the virtual world.	76	7	15
Need to address its usage through different mechanisms like school.	64	7	28
Redundancy of information is more across platforms.	61	7	30
Information posted must be automatically by platform reviewed if from authorized source.	46	15	38

THE STATEMENTS

Statement	% Agreed	% Disagreed	% Passed
Establish communication channels between the public and the entities that run social media to ensure that people's voices are heard. "The world I want to live in" is different for different groups of people.	94	5	0
Develop alternative business model for social media companies: get rid of the system the sole purpose of which is to make you spend more time in it through creating one with monthly payments. Not the user bringing value to the company, but company brings value to the user.	94	5	0
People should be less flammable and reflect more. This could be build in into the platform and hint people to be less flamatory or to read up on a topic.	88	5	5
Have more ethical UI that can help people to get off the platform and connect in person.	88	5	5
Use social media as a medium of free speech in countries that do not have that.	88	0	11
Go back to connect more people outside our bubble with different or controversial ideas and bring society closer together.	88	5	5
Social media could motivate us to educate ourselves on creating different social media options.	82	11	5
Before people post, suggest to them 1) doing more research on the topic 2) they should use less aggressive/inflammatory language.	82	11	5
Quality control for ethical UI design (restrict endless feed).	82	5	11
Media literacy. Knowing who to follow will determine what you see.	82	11	5
Increased connectivity.	70	11	17
Show more about the reality - like for example BeReal.	70	17	11
Restructuring incentives to not be based on primal human psychology.	58	17	23
Stricter regulations from the social media companies over directors' duties of care.	58	17	23
Consumers taking more responsible actions in self-policing the community.	52	23	23
Less performative transparency. Make it impossible for users to miss out on how they eg use an app; are faced with algorithmic curation.	52	17	29
Faster policy making.	35	29	35

CONCLUSION

What we could observe throughout all the participation within the World Café as well as the Social Media & Teens Workshop, is the general perception of increasing consumption of Social Media. The platform's design and methods to increase platform usage has been criticized in all instances and has been highlighted as a significant issue for most participants. The major discussions we therefore want to further focus on in future World Cafés is the aspect of reforming Social Media design and planning how to involve more young people in the design conceptualization and design development of such platforms.
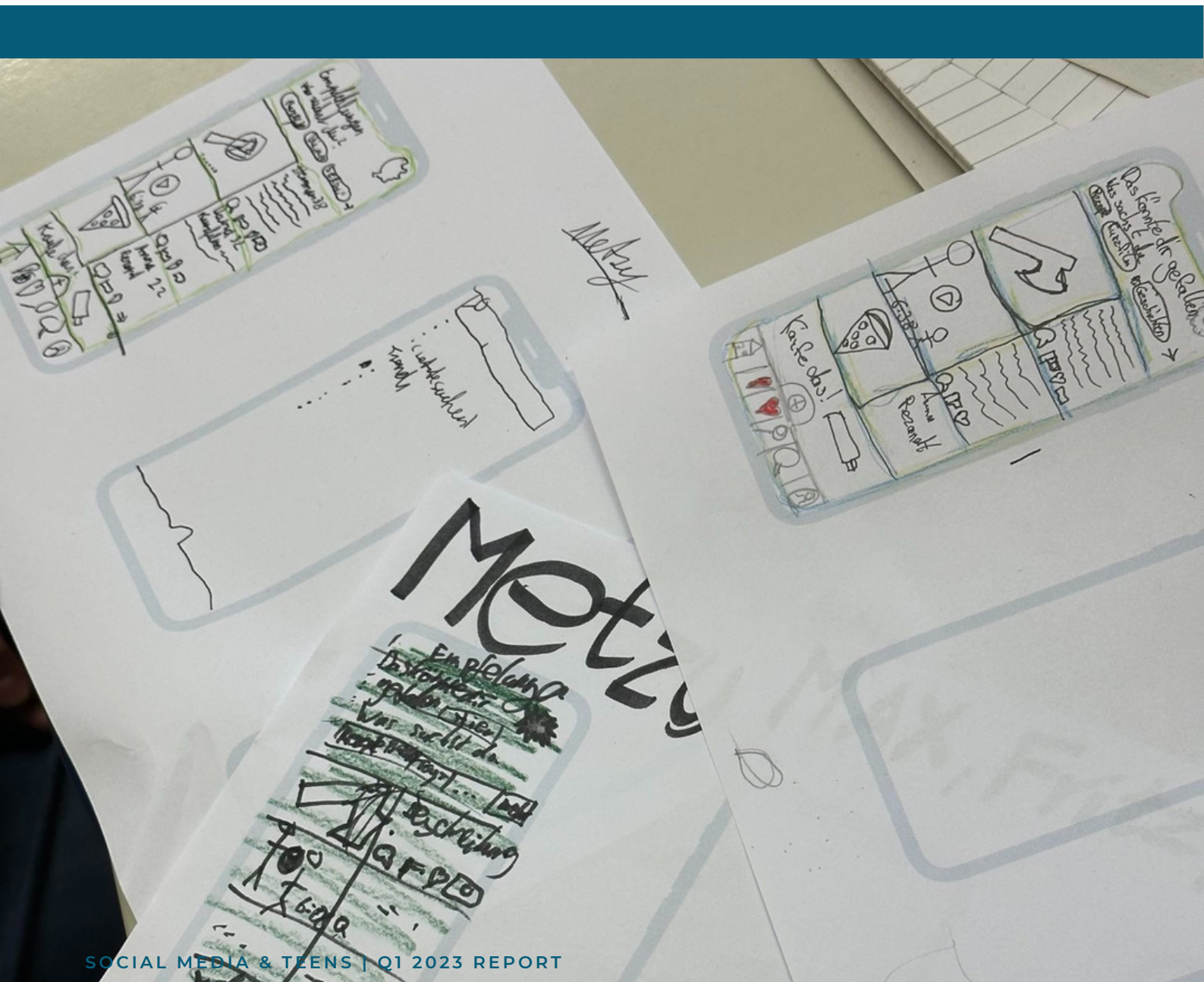
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Social Media and Teens project is a collective effort of RTH project members, who have conceptualised the Workshop and World Café format. Special thanks goes out to **Philipp Heideker** and **Paul Ritt**, RTH Project Managers, who both led the project since the very beginning.

We also want to thank the **TUM Think Tank** for hosting our Social Media & Teens events within the Think Tank's premises.

Additional thanks go out to the **Alfred Landecker Foundation** and the **Humanity in Action**, who are supporting the general work of RTH.

WE THANK YOU
FOR YOUR SUPPORT IN
OUR PROJECT