universität wien

MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Between Protection and Empowerment: Safeguarding Children's Digital Information Rights in Austria. Perceptions, Challenges, and Policy Recommendations from In-Depth Elite Interviews

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science (MSc)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet:	UA 066 550
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet:	Masterstudium Communication Science
Betreut von | Supervisor:	Univ.-Prof. Dr. Katharine Sarikakis

For my Steyr Opa, Lola and Leni

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my profound gratitude towards my supervisor, former boss, professor, and mentor, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Katharine Sarikakis who never stopped challenging me, and always supported my critical thinking – who taught me that research can be done to make a difference and leave a positive impact in the world. Thank you for your academic guidance, and all the opportunities, and meaningful experiences I could make during my studies, especially in the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence FREuDE, which led me to my master's thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank all the interviewees, who took the time to talk about the important issue of children's informational rights in the digital space and provided meaningful insights for this research.

To all my colleagues and close friends, I have met in this master's program, thank you for making this such an incredible and unforgettable experience, I am deeply grateful. To my partner in crime Oskar, thank you for always being there for me and pushing me to do better, thank you for your love and support.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, my mother Isabella, my father Gerold – who probably knows this thesis by heart – and my two sisters Leni and Lola. You have taught me that anything is possible. I am so happy to call you my family, thank you for your endless love, support, trust and belief in me.

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1. Introduction

Almost every European child between the ages of 9 and 16 spends time online every day (Smahel et al., 2020). The digital space has become a living environment for children all over the world, opening up new opportunities such as access to a variety of information (Stalker et al., 2019). However, children do not have the option to decide whether they want to be in this online world or not, it has become a space like any other, where children communicate with their friends, access education, their civic rights, and engage in various activities (Stalker et al., 2019; Kubow, et al., 2023). In Austria, 80% of young people between the ages of 11 and 17 use social media to receive information about daily topics, however only 8% of them rate social media platforms as credible (Saferinternet.at, 2023). Especially in the Austrian context, representing one of a few European countries that has lowered the standard legal voting age to 16 years (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2023; Mańko, 2023), it is important to support children's critical information seeking and digital media literacy skills, as well as to enable access to authentic, age-appropriate, relevant, and truthful sources and information in order to enable children to make informed decisions and participate in democratic systems (Chávez, 2014; Mateus, 2021; UNCRC, 2021, Art. 50-53).

This is where children's information rights in the digital space come to play. A legal framework that seeks to fulfill, empower, and protect children's rights to information is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Ratified in 1989 as the first international legal framework to guarantee rights specifically for children, the Convention promotes the notion that children are recognized as subjects rather than objects of rights (Liebel, 2009; UNCRC, 1990). Especially relevant regarding children's information access are article 13 – the right to freedom of expression and to seek, receive and impart information – as well as article 17 – the right to access information of a variety of sources and the right to access media (UNCRC, 1990).

Due to the increasing number of children using digital platforms such as social media for information-seeking activities (Eurostat, 2023; European Commission, 2022; Saferinternet.at, 2023), children are increasingly faced with new risks and democracy threatening developments online, such as the spread of exploitative information, false narratives, misinformation and disinformation (Howard et al., 2021; Stalker et al., 2019; UNCRC, 2021, Art. 54). Therefore, the protection and empowerment of children's information rights in the digital environment is becoming more urgent than ever, however the UNCRC (1990) was not created with digital developments in mind. Hence, in 2021, the "General Comment on Children's Rights in relation to the Digital Environment" (UNCRC, 2021) was released. It explains how states parties should implement the convention and provides guidance on legislative and policy measures to ensure that children's rights are promoted, respected, and protected in the digital environment, which potentially "provides a unique opportunity for children to realize the right to access to information" (UNCRC, 2021, Art. 50). States parties should ensure children's access to a wide diversity of information, entailing information of public bodies. As well as to "provide and support the creation of age-appropriate and empowering digital content for children in accordance with children's evolving capacities" (UNCRC, 2021, Art. 51). In this context, the European Union is also working on ways to ensure that children can safely navigate digital spaces. In 2022, under the main strategy on the Rights of the Child, the "Better Internet for Kids" (BIK+) strategy was updated and released, focusing on children's digital empowerment and participation. The strategy seeks to ensure, that young people are protected, respected, and empowered online by providing them with the necessary competences to navigate the online environment responsibly and safely through the provision of age-appropriate digital services and content. For the strategy to be successful, policy-making and coordination at both European and national levels to promote the protection and empowerment of children online is central (European Commission, 2022a, 2022b).

Hence, having children's information rights on digital platforms, especially their right to access relevant, accurate, truthful, and reliable information online in mind, this master's thesis investigates how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Europe, in the case of Austrian child, youth, and media policy efforts and their practical implementation. When talking about children's digital information rights, this thesis refers to a concept consisting of a legal dimension (actual rights) – related to articles 13 and 17 UNCRC (1990), and the UN General Comment No. 25, Art. 50-51 (2021) – as well as to a practice. Considering children's digital information rights as a practice allows to ask questions of how and in which spaces children enact their information rights and how their rights can be supported through policy efforts, in order to address opportunities and challenges of the digital environment for children's information access and evaluation skills, impacting their abilities to make informed decisions as part of their civic engagement (Mateus, 2021; Tobin, 2021). Here, it is important to operationalize that when the term "children" is used, this paper predominantly refers to the age group between 6 and 16 years, since it comprises the official schooling age of Austrian children as well as the official legal voting age in Austria (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2023).

The guiding research question of this thesis is addressed through the lens of children's citizenship theory, that acknowledges children as participating subjects and active citizens with their own rights, responsibilities, needs, and agency (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Lister, 2007a; Lister, 2007b). To find out how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria and what needs to be done beyond existing policy efforts, the following sub-questions are posed: What are children's information rights stakeholders' perceptions of Austrian children's media policy efforts in catering for children's information rights on digital platforms? (RQ1). How are children's digital information rights addressed by Austrian policy makers? (RQ 1.1.). Which aspects of children's digital information rights are part of the Austrian public awareness, and which are undeserved? (RQ 1.2.). What are key policy fields, actors, and

regulatory instruments in supporting children's digital information rights? (RQ2), as well as to what extent and which policy measures are needed beyond existing Austrian children's media policy efforts to cater for children's digital information rights? (RQ3).

In order to explore the concept of children's digital information rights in the Austrian context and to answer the stated research questions, a qualitative research approach was chosen. 17 semi-structured in-depth elite interviews were conducted with different Austrian experts having a stake or special expertise (stakeholders) in issues related to children's digital information rights – such as media education, social media and disinformation, children's rights, or policy making for children – accompanied by desk research in the form of policy reviews of relevant Austrian and EU legal, regulatory, and policy documents. Finally, through a systematic thematic analysis four main themes were identified – *limited political awareness (1)*, *digital media literacy (2)*, *child-friendly verified digital information offers (3)* and *platform regulation in form of transparent algorithms (4)* – from which challenges and recommendations for policy actions to support children's digital information rights in Austria were derived.

2. Citizenship Theory: Conceptualizing Children's Citizenship

To understand the ways children's digital information rights are (not) catered for in Austrian public policies and the ways children may act upon their information rights on digital platforms, children's role in today's democracies and their relationship to information on social media platforms is being addressed and conceptualized by drawing on inclusive, difference-centered, and feminist citizenship theories (Devine & Cockburn, 2018; Kubow et al., 2023; Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2019; Lister, 2007a; Lister, 2007b, Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

2.1. Children's Role in Democracy

Often, when referred to children's rights in social and communication science, citizenship theories and concepts of democracy are used to explore to what extent children develop a sense of belonging and can play an active and effective role in enforcing certain rights and responsibilities (Butler & Benoit, 2015; Liebel, 2007; Lister, 2007a; Lister, 2008; Wall, 2011). Democracies represent 'the people'- the demos - in the exercise of political power (Wall, 2011). Here, truthful information represents an important pillar, which can be understood as "a right and a basic principle of democracy" and is fundamental for democratic participation (Chávez, 2014, p. 123). The better a citizen is informed, the better he or she will be able to participate in public policy creation processes (Chávez, 2014). Public policy is understood as the output of a political system, like measures, strategies, and courses of action adopted by the government. Public actors (especially government) and societal actors (NGOs etc.) that may to some extent play a role in public policy making regarding children's digital information rights are of interest for this paper (Knill & Tosun, 2022). Chávez (2014) highlights, that "as basic principle, access to information can be understood as a fundamental instrument for increasing and improving the capacity for action" (p. 123). However, marginalized and "vulnerable" groups – as which children are frequently described – often do not have access to important, and timely information, which leads them to be unaware of their rights, opportunities, and

public policy in general (Chávez, 2014). Young people only seldomly enjoy the democratic right to shape policies, laws, or vote representatives. For a long time, democracy only represented a sphere for adults, children were considered as too incompetent to participate (Wall, 2011). Although children up to the age of 14 years old make up a quarter of the world's population (World Population Review, 2023), they are still often not taken into account in decisions that affect them or eventually will affect them. On the one side they are marginalized in the policy-making process, and on the other side they are the most governed group by the state. Thus, they play a central role in state interventions (Lister, 2007b). Recognizing children's evolving capacities to exercise their rights, just as recognizing the capacities expected of adult citizens remains a challenge to existing understandings of children's role in democratic societies (Lansdown, 2005; Lister, 2007b; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Tobin, 2015).

2.2. Children's Citizenship – From Liberalism to a Difference-Centered Approach

For a long time, children felt excluded and powerless (Roche, 1999), which led young people to increasingly call for recognition. The status as democratic citizen for children is not straightforward and varies, being able to act on some rights, responsibilities, duties, and opportunities, and having to face restrictions with others (Larkins, 2014; Lister, 2007a). Roche (1999) argues: "the demand that children be included in citizenship is simply a request that children be seen as members of society too, with a legitimate and valuable voice and perspective (p. 479). But what is citizenship? At a formal level "citizenship simply denotes the legal status of membership of a nation-state, as symbolized by the right to a passport" (Lister, 2008, p. 9). It is characterized through an interplay of rights - such as the right to participation - responsibilities, and duties, as well as through notions of inclusion and exclusion (Butler & Benoit, 2015; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Children have the legal status of citizens of their country of birth but are for example not allowed to act on the citizen's right to vote (Lister, 2007a). Although, children's right to vote differs per country and Austria is an exception in Europe with

the right to vote from the age of 16 years old (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2023), it represents in all cases a temporal restriction on children's citizenship (Lister, 2007a).

Citizenship is a concept, that has been coined by elements of liberal democracy and nation-state, it changes in meaning depending on the social, political, and cultural context, and implies belonging to a community (Lister, 2007a; Lister, 2008; Treviño et al., 2022; Villalobos, 2021). In early citizenship models, especially in the classical liberal tradition, the citizen is the holder of civil and political rights, questions of citizenship were predominantly linked to who could own property and conclude contracts – embodied in white men who had the right to vote (Hobson & Lister, 2001). Social liberalism further extended the scope of rights, which is strongly linked to the thoughts of Marshall T.H. (1950), remaining a foundation for studying citizenship and policy today (Revi, 2014). Marshallian citizenship differentiates between three elements: civil, political, and social rights. The civil element of citizenship comprises the rights "necessary for individual freedom" like the liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to justice, to own property and to conclude valid contracts (Marshall, 1950, p. 10). The political element refers to "the right to participate in the exercise of political power", this can be as a member of a political authority or as voter of the members of such political authority (Marshall, 1950, p. 11). The social element refers to institutions such as the education system and social services and entails the right to economic welfare and to "live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall, 1950, p. 11). However, when it comes to different categories in his understanding of what makes a citizen Marshall's work has been challenged by many authors over the last decades (Cockburn, 2018; Hobson & Lister, 2001; Liebel, 2007; Lister, 2008; Lister, 2007a; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Scholarly criticism refers to the exclusion of different perspectives and life realities, explicitly concerning the disregard of gender and ethnicity in his definition of social citizenship (Hobson & Lister, 2001; Revi, 2014). When it comes to children, classic liberal and social liberal citizenship theories either tend to ignore children, "implicitly equating citizenship with

adulthood" or represent children as "citizens of the future" (Lister, 2007a, p. 696). Marshall (1950) refers to children as "citizens in the making" (p. 25). Through this future-oriented approach to children's citizenship, young people are constructed as "citizen-workers of the future", that are worth to invest in (Lister, 2007a, p. 697; Lister, 2003, p. 433). However, it paradoxically encourages the "partial disappearance of childhood", including the child as a rights-bearer (Lister, 2003, p. 433), and leads children's citizenship being understood as a status that can be achieved eventually, but is not yet reached (Lister, 2007a).

Much of the citizenship literature concentrates on children as recipients of care and resources, and ignores children's own agency (Cockburn & Devine, 2020). Lansdown (2005) and Tobin (2015) argue that the concept of evolving capacities is crucial in recognizing children as active agents in their own lives, who are listened to, respected, can exercise their rights, and at the same time enjoy protection, that considers their relative immaturity. The concept provides the basis for respecting children's agency without exposing them to all responsibilities associated with adulthood. To address children's agency in their citizenship practices, the social liberal idea of citizenship has been expanded by alternative citizenship models that underline the possible varieties of social membership, and adopt among others a difference-centered perspective, that acknowledges different "social identities", such as gender, race, or sexuality (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 369). Scholars argue that new approaches are needed, that value children's practices and differences (Cockburn, 1998; Devine & Cockburn, 2018; Larkins, 2013; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Moosa-Mitha (2005) underlines that alternative citizenship models offer possibilities to understand citizenship of children in a way that takes their rights, as well as their status as citizen serious, instead of excluding them due to their "identity as children" (p. 370). It is necessary to take into consideration the specific needs, standpoints, interests, rights, and forms of participation of marginalized groups – such as children in the policy making process – since they are not considered in the general idea of citizenry. Through that "the conversation now includes many other factors that affect the forms and practice through which

the idea of the citizen is posited" than only possessing rights and having the right to exercise them (Chávez, 2014, p. 120). The understanding of citizenship goes beyond rights and incorporates perspectives that emphasize identity and difference (Hobson & Lister, 2001). Lister (2007a) argues that a "dynamic construction of rights" caters for a conversation between the understanding of "citizenship as a legal status and citizenship as a socio-political practice" (Lister, 2007a, p. 695). She further highlights the importance of human agency "which provides the link between conceptions of citizenship as an active, participatory practice and as a set of rights, which are the object of struggle" (Lister, 2007a, p. 695).

Children's citizenship should be therefore recognized as part of a "dialectical conceptualization", which acknowledges the important underpinning of rights, and their active practice of citizenship (Lister, 2007a, p. 718). Devine and Cockburn (2018) argue that, through taking on an "inter-generational lens", it is possible to address the existence of a children's "citizenship habitus", that is "both product and outcome of wider processes of power, control and social practice in their lives" (p. 147). Lister (2007a) further underlines that children's citizenship should be understood as "lived citizenship" - involving how children "live 'membership, rights, responsibilities and equality of status'" - which can be seen as element of children's "developing identity" (pp. 699-718). It is not necessarily claimed that children should enjoy all adult citizenship rights and duties, but that children's citizenship practices should get recognized in terms of them as "de facto, even if not complete de jure citizens" (Lister, 2007a, pp. 717-718). In a similar manner Moosa-Mitha (2005) re-articulates children as "'differently equal' members of the public culture in which they are full participants" (p. 369).

Therefore, the elements and scholarly considerations in rethinking the concept of children's citizenship allow to go beyond the right to enjoy rights. Citizenship of children embodies a relation between rights, duties, and identity, and can be seen as a status of bearing rights, as well as a practice, that is essential for the positive development of societies (Chávez,

2014; Hobson & Lister, 2001; Lister, 2008). Citizenship as a practice therefore embodies an "expression of human agency", whereas citizenship as rights allows to act in many cases as agents (Lister, 2007a, p. 695). Children engage in different areas related to politics, policies, and social rights, that can be in a global, national, local, and familial scope (Devine & Cockburn, 2018). Children should be acknowledged in their present role as children and not their future adultness – Devine and Cockburn (2018) consider young people as "contributing citizens in the present" (p. 154) – additionally children's needs should be referred to regarding their diverse characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, class, or disability. Just like adults, also children experience citizenship in different ways due to their social background (Kubow et al., 2023; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Yet, at this point it is important to note that this thesis intentionally addresses children's difference only from the perspective of age, in the specific case of digital information rights, to explore estimations concerning Austrian public policies – especially children, youth, and media policies. To do this, a closer look into children's digital media citizenship is necessary.

2.3. Children's Digital Media Citizenship and their Use of Digital Platforms

Media, including social media platforms, have developed into "a key contributor to the procedures and experiences of public sphere, citizenship and social identity construction" (Iosfidis & Nicoli, 2020, p. 18). The use of the Internet and digital technologies has become an integral part of young European citizens' lives over the last three decades (Smahel et al., 2020). In Austria 79% of young people between the age of 16 to 17 years old are using social media regularly in their free time (ORF Public Value & Hitradio Ö3, 2023). The age group of 11- to 17-year-olds most frequently use the digital platforms WhatsApp (76%), Instagram (71%), YouTube (70%), TikTok (65%), Snapchat (61%), and Pinterest (42%) (Saferinternet.at, 2024). Young people predominantly rely on social media platforms to inform themselves about the world and get weekly or daily information about current topics. However, only 8% of

Saferinternet.at study's respondents (11- to 17-year-old Austrians) consider social networks as reliable (Saferinternet.at, 2023). Although the internet and social media sites provide various opportunities for young people to access information and share their views, safety concerns must be addressed. Young people should be supported to critically evaluate the credibility and reliability of (digital) sources concerning their information and content (Eurostat, 2023; Saferinternet.at, 2023). In a study about the current concerns of Austrian Gen Z, 64% of young Austrians (aged 16 to 17 years old) stated, that they do not learn enough about how to evaluate information. When it comes to media education, also 63% of the respondents answered that they are not learning enough about media in schools (ORF Public Value & Hitradio Ö3, 2023). Furthermore, 53% of young Austrians stated that they have only little trust in the information they encounter on social media (ORF Public Value & Hitradio Ö3, 2024). 36% of young Europeans engaged in activities related to fact-checking online information (Eurostat, 2023). In the case of Austria only 22% of the 11- to 17-year-old respondents stated that they are familiar with fact-checking websites, even though the majority would be interested in verifying the information they encounter online (Saferinternet.at, 2023).

Digital tools and the capability of using (digital) media in a reflective and critical way play central roles in contemporary citizenship and young people's own practice and understanding of citizenship (Harris et al., 2023; Heggart & Flowers, 2023; Mateus, 2021). Through digital technologies children can get involved in global movements and engage as active citizens (European Commission, 2021). Children enact their citizenship - through globalization and digitalization - in many different spaces and challenge traditional understandings of what is being understood under citizenship. The concept is continuously shaped and reframed, since young people's citizen action is to some extent undertaken in the private space where "technology is allowing youth to enter the public through the private" by using their laptop or smartphone (Kubow, et al., 2023, p. 246). The binary division of what is seen as public and private, as well as online and offline becomes obsolete in children's

citizenship (Kubow, et al., 2023). A pillar of growing importance in children's contemporary citizenship is the role of digital content and information, and how children can access it, since plural and independent media enable to make informed decisions in democracies (Mateus, 2021). However, since an increasing number of children and young people predominantly rely on social media platforms to inform themselves (Saferinternet.at, 2023; Smahel et al, 2020), concerns about its risks on children's information consumption are rising, especially due to information manipulation in form of the spread of dis- and misinformation, as well as technical prerequisites like social media algorithms recommending and pushing such information (Fallis, 2015; Stalker et al., 2019; Safer Internet, 2023).

3. Children's Digital Information Environment: Manipulation of Information and Recommendation Algorithms

Digital platforms, including social media networks, make up a large part of children's living environment and are prevalent in their information-seeking activities (Smahel et al., 2020). Young people in Austria predominantly rely on social media platforms to consume daily information about current topics and to inform themselves about the world (Saferinternet.at, 2023). However, these social media platforms aim to engage and occupy their users through specialized algorithms that generate personalized content, and at the same time boost already existing beliefs, which may be based on accurate but also inaccurate information (Howard et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2022). The design of social media platforms puts children at risk of being exposed to and misled by growing threads of false narratives in the form of misinformation and disinformation (Howard et al., 2021; Saferinternet.at, 2023). Here, it is important to emphasize that misinformation refers to the unintentional transmission of inaccurate information, whereas disinformation describes the intentional spread of inaccurate information (Fallis, 2015; Howard et al., 2021). The reason behind the spread of false narratives can have different origins, being of political nature to gain power or to harm opponents, to benefit financially, or to win popularity for one's own sake (Howard et al., 2021).

Especially, on these social media platforms disinformation and misinformation spread at a very fast pace, social media platforms have been found to be a major source of exposing their users to "fake news" (a form of disinformation) (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Kaiser & Mayer, 2023; Rhodes, 2022). Vosoughi et al. (2018) discovered that dis- and misinformation are shared faster than real news and true information, putting our democracies at thread. One of the reasons for this increasing spread of dis- and misinformation are the mentioned technical prerequisites of social media platforms – among other things the social media algorithms and its recommender systems (European Commission, 2022; Howard et al., 2021). These recommender algorithms are responsible for the information display in the news feeds of social

media platforms, they track the behavior of users, give content recommendations and create news feeds customized to users' personal preferences. Furthermore, these recommender algorithms bear in some cases the responsibility for amplifying the spread of misleading and false content (Eurostat, 2023; European Commission, 2022; Howard et al., 2021; Stalker et al., 2019; Kaiser & Mayer, 2023; Safer Internet, 2023). Again, the problem lies in the design of recommender algorithms, which suggest similar content to users that they have already interacted with and liked, enabling the emergence of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers", both of which create a "tailored user experience" (Fernandez & Bellogín, 2020; Rhodes, 2022, p. 5).

As children and young people spend a lot of time on these platforms for different types of activities, they are particularly at thread of being exposed to dis- and misinformation (Howard et al., 2021; Saferinternet.at, 2023; Stalker et al., 2019). Here, children and youth can be targets of dis- and misinformation, but they may also be intentional or unintentional spreaders of such false information content (Howard et al., 2021). In light of these developments, studies have shown that young people are aware of potentially false or misleading information on social media, and regularly report feeling concerned about the influence of these false narratives and false information (De Leyn, 2022; Vissenberg et al., 2022; Saferinternet.at, 2023). Thus, children's access to truthful and factual information and their ability to evaluate digital information is becoming increasingly urgent (Mateus, 2021).

4. Balancing Protection and Empowerment: From Prohibition to Digital Media Literacy

When it comes to young people's use of digital technologies, like social media platforms, the public discourse, policies, educational institutions, and industries often predominantly focus on perceptions of fear and harm (Tobin, 2021). Yet, social media platforms and other digital technologies are considered to offer both opportunities, and risks in young people's lives, leading to much attention, concern, and anxiety among adults (Vickery, 2017). This chapter treats different approaches of dealing with children's use of digital platforms and their access to information from a theoretical perspective.

4.1. Children's Protection through Approaches of Prohibition

By focusing on the negative ways digital platforms may impact young people, a "moral panic about technology" has developed (Vickery, 2017, p. 6) and questions arise on how this fear regarding children's use of technology and social media platforms impacts policies. Tobin (2021) underlines that protective concerns dominate policymakers, research, and regulatory responses to children's relationship with social media. Through the centrality of potential risks, harms and protectionist efforts, children's vulnerability is being focused on – a main aspect of the "welfare approach" – in which children are mostly seen as "passive objects in need of protection rather than as active subjects with rights" (Tobin, 2021, p. 30). Children are perceived to lack competency and to rely on adults to protect and provide for them, with little acknowledgement of their potential to express themselves (Tobin, 2021). Adults with a duty of care to children, like parents or caretakers, but also teachers tend to restrict children's online activities, with the priority of protection in mind. Thus, it is discussed by experts and policy makers which form of protection is appropriate (Stalker et al., 2019; Mateus, 2021; Tobin, 2021; Tobin, 2015) and questions arise on how to cater for children's information rights in the digital environment and on social media platforms. Different scholars argue that safety efforts in form

of prohibitions are counterproductive and may hinder the access of children to the positive sides of the internet such as accessing information and developing digital skills. The focus should rather lie on teaching children the right skills to become more critical to cope with online threads (Stalker et al., 2019; Tobin, 2021). Therefore, public, and parental responses to kid's navigating the online environment should consider that protection only is not sufficient.

Here, a rights-based and empowerment approach comes to play, that does not define children by their vulnerabilities but recognizes their evolving capacities, through which children are not only seen as "potential victims who must be saved or protected from the dangers and perils associated with social media" (Tobin, 2021, p. 31). The empowerment of children caters for their formation of citizenship and critical skills (Mateus, 2021). Way and Malvini-Redden (2017) highlight in their review of research focusing on youth online activities, that there is the need to understand young people as agentic users of social media, in line with the thoughts of Lister (2007a). Young people should be understood as "fully human actors who are actively engaged in a spectrum of communicative processes" (Way & Malvini-Redden, 2017, p. 131). There is the need of scholarly work, that considers the opportunities the online world can offer for young people, and in which ways children's rights, in the case of this thesis especially the children's right to information, can be promoted, fostered, and safeguarded on social media (Tobin, 2021).

4.2. Empowering Children through Digital Media Literacy

Due to an endless number of different forms of information available online, including the spread of mis- and disinformation on social media platforms potentially misleading young people around the world accessing and sharing this information (Howard et al., 2021), as well as articulating their ideas through self-generated media content, it is essential that children possess the right skills to find the content they are looking for and verify whether the information they found tells the truth or not (Stalker et al., 2019). Critical thinking skills in

mediatized scenarios, as well as the ability to interact with media are becoming more important than ever (Kubow, et al., 2023; Stalker et al., 2019). Mateus (2021) argues that young people need critical, digital and social media literacy skills to access information, participate, share their views, and connect in the digital world. In their survey about the online activities of children from ten different countries Stalker et al. (2019) highlight that compared with the proportion of children who stated to possess strong information-seeking skills, less children reported to be good at critically evaluating the information they encountered. Older children (15-17 years old) tended to have higher critical evaluation skills, nevertheless Stalker et al. (2019) emphasize that children generally could take more advantage of the opportunities available for finding and checking information online. Similarly, Enesco et al. (2022) found through semi-structured interviews with children of the ages five to nine that misconceptions about the Internet and its content existed in all age groups, contrary to previous assumptions that older children participating in the study would be rather aware of false information on the internet and would rather use other sources to check questionable information they encounter online than younger children. Thus, as Stalker et al. (2019) and Smahel et al. (2020) highlight, the support of parents, schools, digital providers, and policy makers is needed, so that children are empowered in their skills and can make use of their information rights in the digital world. Also, Tobin (2021) highlights that, for young people to navigate the online world in a constructive way adult provision of access and support is needed. It is not enough that children have access to the Internet, they must develop critical media literacy skills, which "aim to equip people with skills for responsible and free speech in a mediatized world" (Howard, et al., 2021; Mateus, 2021, p. 374).

Livingstone (2003) emphasizes the importance of children's information literacy, in which information is seen as a "tool" to act upon the world, while she describes that media literacy perceives media as a lens to view the world. In times where children are increasingly using digital platforms for accessing information it is important that information literacy, as

well as media literacy are part of broader digital literacy efforts (Howard, et al., 2021). Yet, it is important to differentiate digital skills and digital literacy, since digital skills only comprise one part of digital literacy and describe the child's technical abilities, whereas digital literacy also entails the ability to critically examine digital content (Vissenberg et al., 2023). Thus Vissenberg et al. (2023) found out that digital skills and digital knowledge alone are not enough to prevent young people from the negative consequences of mis- and disinformation. Therefore, the EU Digital Competence Framework emphasizes digital competence and defines information and data literacy as the skill of judging digital information, as well as the relevance of the source and its content (European Commission et al., 2022). Also, the EU Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation which seeks to foster education and media literacy in the fight against "fake news", states that "the life-long development of critical and digital competences, in particular for young people, is crucial to reinforce the resilience of our societies to disinformation" (European Commission, 2018, Art. 3.3).

Stalker et al. (2019) argue that the digital world represents a useful source for information, especially for older children, that gained online experience by using the Internet for different kinds of information seeking activities and received the right form of parental support with enabling attitudes, rather than restrictions. Therefore, there is the need to find a balance between protecting children as "vulnerable part of our society" and empowering them to become active citizens in the digital environment, that possess the ability to critically evaluate digital information. Vickery (2017) argues that a safer digital future can be created through an approach in which "policy makers, educators, technology companies, researchers, and commercial institutions work together with young people to meet their needs and to understand their practices […]" (p. 11).

5. Policy Overview and Research Questions

In view of the increase of dis- and misinformation on digital platforms, spreading faster than real news and true information (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and social media algorithms amplifying this spread (Kaiser & Mayer, 2023), concerns are growing for children navigating the digital environment as part of their living environment. Since children's social media usage has become part of their daily lives and a prime source of accessing information (Saferinternet.at, 2023), questions are emerging of how to cater for children's information rights on digital platforms in a way that children can act on their information rights by being able to recognize truth- and factful content, as well as to subsequently make informed decisions. As Tobin (2021) highlights there is a need for scholarly work, that considers the opportunities the online world and social media platforms can offer for young people, and at the same time investigates in which ways children's rights – in the case of this thesis children's right to information – can be promoted, fostered, protected and safeguarded.

Thus, scholarly attention to map out policy and awareness gaps towards children's digital information rights is needed. Here, public policies are understood as the output of a political system, like measures, strategies, and courses of action adopted by the government (Knill & Tosun, 2022). Public actors (especially government) and societal actors (NGOs etc.) that may to some extent play a role in public policy making regarding children's digital information rights are of special interest for this paper (Knill & Tosun, 2022). Furthermore, particularly youth and children's media policies, that cater somehow for children's digital information rights are of high relevance for this paper.

Significant aspects can be found in EU policy documents such as the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which aims to ensure that children can navigate safely in the online world and benefit from the opportunities it offers (European Commission, 2021), as well as the "Better Internet for Kids" strategy (BIK+) – updated and released in 2022 – focusing on young people's protection, participation, and empowerment of necessary competences to navigate the digital

environment responsibly, by providing age-appropriate digital services and content. In that sense, the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive seeks to protect minors from harmful content and inappropriate commercial communications by establishing measures for video-sharing platform providers (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2018, Art. 28b). Similarly, the revised Digital Services Act (DSA), works towards creating fair and open online platforms, and mentions the need for stronger protection of children by preventing the spread of disinformation (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022). Moreover, the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) addresses aspects of children's digital information rights by tackling the issue of disinformation through the promotion of digital literacy, (digital) education and education training (European Commission, 2020).

Regarding the case of Austria, every Austrian child is the bearer of independent human and special children's rights, in 1992, the UNCRC was ratified through which Austria agreed to cater for the fundamental rights of the child. However, only some children's rights of the UNCRC (1990) reached constitutional rank in the Austrian "Bundesverfassungsgesetz über die Rechte von Kindern". Art. 13 UNCRC (1990) "Freedom to seek, receive and impart information", and Art. 17 UNCRC (1990) "The right to access information of a variety of sources and the right to access media", which play an important role for children's information rights, were not included in the Austrian "Bundesverfassungsgesetz über die Rechte von Kindern" (RIS, 2011). Anyhow, most of the above-mentioned European policy strategies have been adopted and translated into Austrian national law – there are Austrian Safer Internet Centres, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AMD-G), and with the strategy "Digital School" (Digitale Schule) Austria seeks to combine digital infrastructure with "future-oriented" teaching, for children to acquire digital skills and to learn with digital media about digital media, to develop a basic understanding of how the digital world works (Federal Ministry of Austria, n.d. b). Thus, policy making and coordination at European, as well as on national level is relevant in catering for children's information rights on digital platforms. However, there is a

research gap concerning the investigation of the specific concept of children's information rights on digital platforms – based on the UNCRC (1990) and the General Comment on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment (UNCRC, 2021) in connection with the national context of Austrian children, youth, and media policy efforts and its practical implementation. Therefore, this thesis seeks to analyze the role of children's digital information rights in Austrian public policy efforts from a children's citizenship, rights-based and empowerment perspective, that acknowledges children's citizenship practices (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Lister, 2007a).

The question of how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria and what needs to be done beyond existing policy efforts, guides this research and is being conceptualized by the following sub-questions: What are children's information rights stakeholders' perceptions of Austrian children's media policy efforts in catering for children's information rights on digital platforms? (RQ 1). How are children's digital information rights addressed by Austrian policy makers? (RQ 1.1.). Which aspects of children's digital information rights are part of the Austrian public awareness, and which are undeserved? (RQ 1.2.). What are key policy fields, actors, and regulatory instruments in supporting and implementing children's digital information rights? (RQ2), as well as to what extent and which policy measures are needed beyond existing Austrian children's media policy efforts to cater for children's digital information rights? (RQ 3).

6. Method

To answer the stated research questions a qualitative research approach was chosen to explore the perceptions, estimations, and opinions of Austrian professionals that demonstrate a certain expertise concerning aspects of children's digital information rights, and/or dispose of a relevant (elite) role concerning Austrian public policy efforts in that regard. To do so, in-depth semi-structured interviews based on elements of elite and expert interviewing were conducted, accompanied by secondary research in form of public policy reviews of different legal and regulatory documents – mainly national and EU media, children's, and youth policies – that cater to some extent for children's digital information rights. Through this triangulation, an attempt of ensuring an in-depth understanding of children's digital information rights was undertaken (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Here, it is important to note that children's digital information rights refer, in terms of this paper, to a complex concept that is based as much on legal foundations like the UNCRC (1990) and the UN General comment No. 25, Art. 50-51 (2021), as well as on understandings, expectations, and claims deriving from respondents. Interviewing elite opened the possibility of identifying dynamics to analyze societal processes regarding the specific topic, such as policy making gaps (Blöbaum et al. 2016; Herzog & Ali, 2015). The focus of the interviews was on processes at meso and macro levels and the special knowledge and expertise of the interviewees regarding the research topic (Blöbaum et al. 2016; Flick, 2018; Mey & Mruck, 2010). The interviewees were integrated into the study as representers of a specific group, and not as single cases, therefore especially "interpretive knowledge" was of interest, meaning the subjective points of views and interpretations of interviewees (Bogner & Menz, 2009; Flick, 2018).

6.1. Sample

The sample of this study was conducted purposively by sampling participants due to their expertise followed by theoretical and snowball sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through theoretical sampling gained insights from already analyzed data could be taken into consideration when new interviewees were chosen (Anderson, 2010), and strategic decisions about which resource individual would provide the most valuable data source for answering the research questions were made (Littig, 2008), as well as recommendations for further experts from already interviewed respondents were considered (snowball sampling). Therefore, professionals – public or societal actors – with distinct knowledge or expertise related to children's digital information rights in Austria were selected. To obtain diverse perspectives, experts from different societal and professional sectors (see Figure 1) were chosen and asked about their experiences and estimations regarding Austrian public policy efforts in catering for children's digital information rights.

To determine the sample size, data saturation was considered. The sampling procedure for new interviewees was stopped after new information and codes did not emerge anymore. The final sample of interviewees consisted of 17 resource individuals with backgrounds in social welfare, non-profit and non-governmental organizations with a focus on children's rights, children, and media or (digital) media literacy. Other interviewees were also linked to politics (federal chancellery and opposition), journalism, youth work and teaching. Predominantly people from non-political and non-governmental positions were chosen in order to receive their estimations, opinions, and perceptions towards Austrian policy efforts and developments regarding children's access to truthful and child-friendly information on digital platforms, children's use of social media and their ability to evaluate information, as well as potential gaps and what needs to be done to support children's information rights on digital platforms in the best possible way. Looking into the demographics of the interviewees (see Table 1) it can be observed that 9 female and 8 male experts were interviewed with an average age of 47 years.

Figure 1

Different Working Sectors of Respondents (N = 17)

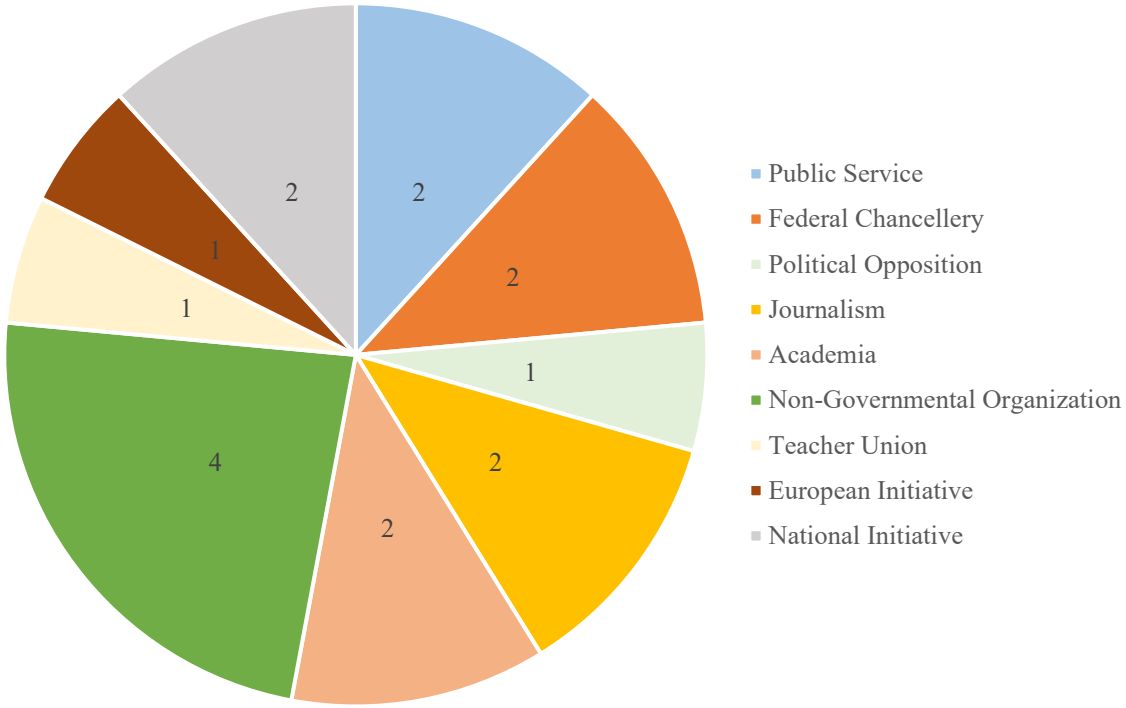


Table 1

Interview Sample, Demographics and Roles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Organisation	Sector
R1	female	57	Saferinternet.at	European initiative
R2	female	37	Unicef Austria	Social welfare non-profit and non-governmental organization
R3	female	38	Volkshilfe Austria	Social welfare non-profit and non-governmental organization
R4	male	58	Union of Compulsory School Teachers	Teacher Union
R5	male	33	Digitaler Kompass	Non-profit and non-governmental organization
R6	male	34	University of Vienna	Academia
R7	female	53	Children's and Youth Ombuds-Office	Civil service

R8	male	28	NEOS	Political opposition
R9	female	49	Austrian Children's National Coalition	National initative
R10	male	56	Competence Center Youth and Youth Policy Department	Federal chancellery
R11	male	56	Youth Policy Department	Federal chancellery
R12	female	55	WienXtra Media Centre	Civil service
R13	male	54	Ludwig-Boltzmann-Institute	Academia
R14	male	67	Kinderkurier/Kijuku	Journalism
R15	female	27	Kleine Kinderzeitung	Journalism
R16	female	51	Beteiligung.st	Non-profit organization
R17	female	50	Austrian National Youth Council (BJV)	National initiative

6.2. Research Design and Data Collection

The first step towards data collection was the development of an interview guide, which is central to cover relevant topics to answer the research questions (Flick, 2018; Meuser & Nagel, 2002). The interview guide consists of 14 open-ended questions that are separated into four different sections of key questions for the discussion on the following topics: Organizational aims and challenges regarding children and their right to information in form of media use and access to information (1), children's information rights in the digital environment (2), Austrian public policies concerning children's digital information rights and their practical implementation (3), challenges regarding children's digital information behavior and possible solutions (4). The guide starts with an introductory part, followed by four sections of key questions, and ends with an outlook and questions of "what needs to be done beyond existing efforts" to address, protect and empower children's digital rights to information.

The semi-structured interview setting allowed to ask questions in a different order, to further elaborate, ask follow-up questions, and add depth to what was said. Through that unexpected topics and aspects that came up during the interview could be discussed, yet in each

interview all relevant topics for answering the research questions were covered (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Since mostly representatives of hierarchical high positions were interviewed principles and approaches of elite-interviewing (Flick, 2018; Mikecz, 2012) were followed, to prepare for the interview situation, in which an imbalance of power – a power shift towards the interviewee – often occurs (Glas, 2021).

Within the time span of February to September 2023, 17 in-depth elite interviews with different resource individuals were conducted. Potential interviewees were recruited via email by sending official interview request letters, with a precise description about the study, followed by a confirmation e-mail that included the declaration of consent for the study, as well as date, time and either a link to an online meeting or the meeting location, depending on the interview setting (online or in person). The interviews were held in German, to the convenience of the interviewees, most of them online via Zoom, and some in person, accordingly to the wish of the interviewees. All respondents were asked about their sociodemographic data (name, occupation, age), however for reasons of anonymization these parts were taken out of the transcripts and only used for a descriptive representation of the data. The average interview length comprised of 37 minutes, with the shortest taking 20 minutes and the longest 1 hour and 26 minutes, altogether over 10 hours of interview material and 123 transcript pages were produced (see Appendix Table 2).

Throughout the process of conducting interviews the interview transcription was started. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed – with the help of the audio transcript and artificial intelligence-based tool "trint" – to enable an accurate analysis of the interviews (Kuckartz, et al., 2008). The transcription was done based on Kuckartz et al. (2008), as well as on Dresing and Pehl's (2018) content-semantic trancrisption system (non-verbatim). Since expert as well as elite interviews are looking for "objectifiable background knowledge, observations, interpretations and actions" (Blöbaum et al., 2016, p. 188) unconscious meaning structures, body language and other non-verbal features were not transcribed. Word repetitions,

stuttering, dialect, and colloquial phrases were either not transcribed or smoothed out (Dresing & Pehl, 2018; Kuckartz et al., 2008). However, pauses as well as emotional non-verbal expressions like laughter were noted in the transcript (Dresing & Pehl, 2018; Kuckartz et al., 2008). After the transcription each interview was translated to English, and respondents' names were pseudonymized by assigning codes in a numbered order to keep their identities anonymous. There are 17 respondents, thus also 17 codes "R1 - R17" – R standing for respondent.

6.3. Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

To analyze the obtained qualitative elite-interview data, a six-phase thematic analysis (TA) approach combined with constant comparison (simultaneous data collection and comparison of data) was performed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thematic analysis is appropriate for explorative research designs and represents a flexible and useful research tool to answer research questions of meaning rather than ones asking about quantity (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). It provides the possibility for a rich and detailed account of data. An inductive approach was chosen to identify and explore reoccurring themes - "repeated patterns of meaning" - within the data "without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

The first two steps of the analysis consisted of data familiarization (1), meaning that the interview transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read, as well as initial ideas (memos) were noted, and initial codes were generated (2) through practices of open coding, data was broken down into smaller units (the codes) to systematically compare and categorize them. Next, worked out codes were further compared and condensed into possible themes and sub-themes (3), through axial coding connections between the data were identified, as well as an inductive category system was developed. Now, identified themes were reviewed and checked (4) regarding their suitability for the coded extracts and the entire dataset. In the last step of

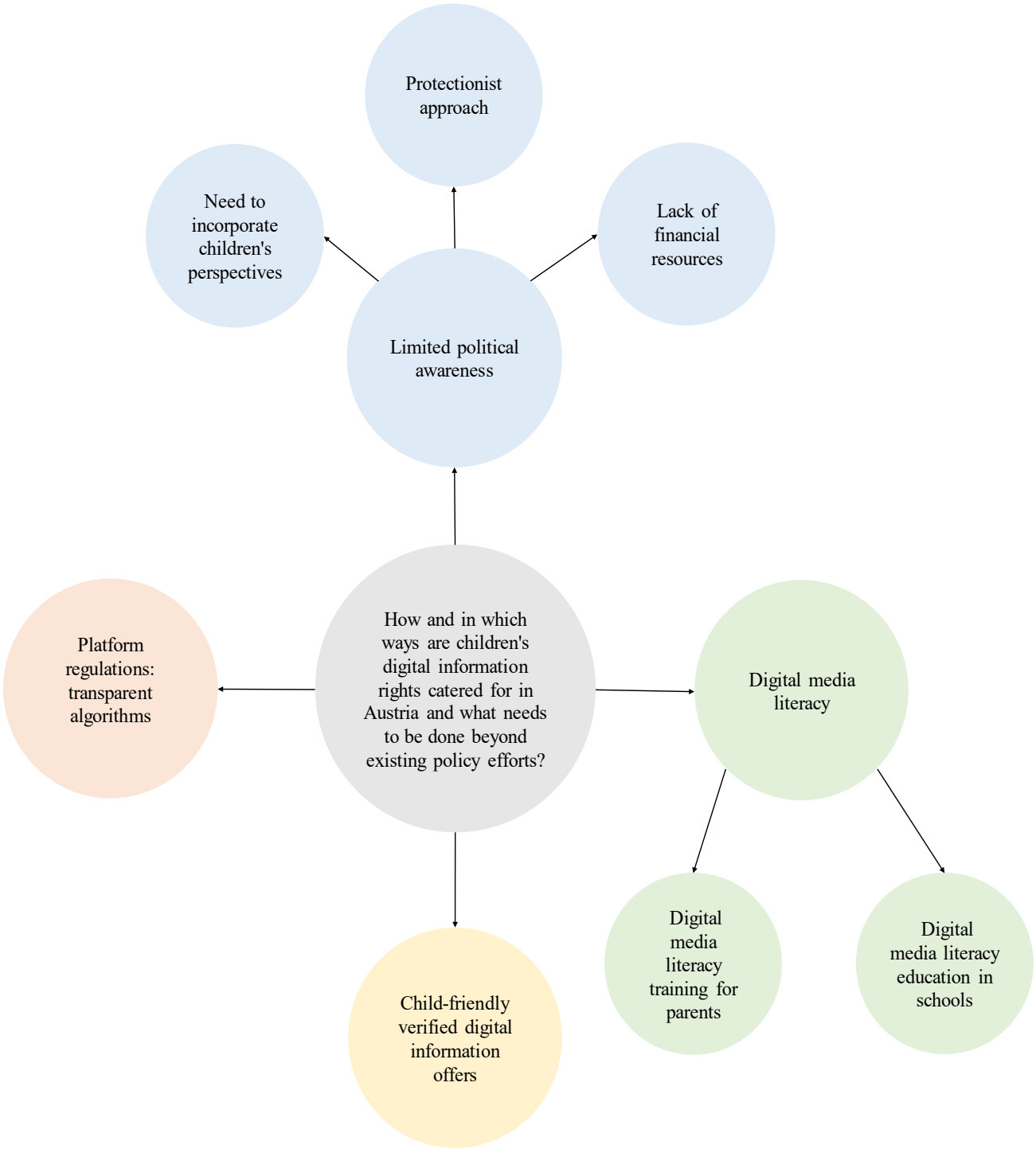
analysis, the final definition of themes (5) was made through selective coding – core themes were developed and defined. The last phase of thematic analysis comprised of writing the final report (6). Themes were identified regarding two rules: It should capture important aspects regarding the research questions and represent patterned meaning within the data and identified codes, by being mentioned by different respondents (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

It is important to note, since elements of constant comparison were considered, codes and themes were constantly compared across the dataset to identify similarities or differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Generally, coding was understood as an "ongoing organic process", "that allowed the researcher to simplify and focus on some specific characteristics of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2008, p. 91; Morse & Richards). For all steps of the analysis Excel datasheets were used to work in an organized, systematized, and transparent way. The analysis of interview data through thematic analysis represented an effective way of reducing extensive data material (Müller, 2018). In the case of this paper 123 pages of interview transcripts could be summarized, condensed, and classified into 4 themes and 5 sub-themes, describing how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria and what public policy efforts are needed beyond. The first theme *limited political awareness (1)*, is divided in three further sub-themes: *Lack of financial resources (1.1.)*, *protectionist approaches (1.2.)*, and the *need to incorporate children's perspectives (1.3)*. The second theme detected is *digital media literacy (2)* and disposes of two sub-themes: *Digital media literacy education in Austrian schools (2.1.)*, and *digital media literacy training for parents (2.2.)*. The last two themes identified refer to the need for *child-friendly verified digital information offers (3)*, and *platform regulations in form of transparent algorithms (4)* (see Figure 2 and Appendix Table 3).

All steps of further analysis, as well as the interview guide, transcripts, and declarations of consent are accessible for the supervisor and researcher and can be made available upon request.

Figure 2

Visualization of Identified Themes and Sub-Themes



6.4. Research Ethics, Reflexivity, and Transparency

Prior to each interview, all interviewees were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, giving them the opportunity to ask any questions they might have towards the interview itself as well as how their answers and data will be stored and used. Respondents were informed that participation in the study was completely voluntary, and that their withdrawal would be possible at any given time without any disadvantage. All participants received an informed consent document, that clarified how their data would be used. To assure the anonymity and privacy of the participants, their data was pseudonymized (De Leyn et al., 2022). Identification keys instead of their real names were used, making it only possible with the help of additional information (only accessible by the researcher and supervisor) to associate personal data with the actual person. To further make sure that all data were handled in a secure way, all audio-recordings were stored safely and only accessible to the researcher. The data was deleted after the research process was completed.

To ensure and control for transparency, quality, and credibility of the paper the concept of reflexivity was considered throughout the research process. In qualitative research, it is assumed that the person conducting the research is making a difference in the creation and the findings of the study – the researcher represents the "research instrument" (Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity in a research process means to "recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2015, p. 220). In this case, the researchers own background, beliefs, and experiences were acknowledged and accounted for – being a 23-year-old female Master student, that grew up in Western Europe, Austria, emphasizing theoretical feminist approaches in her work. Through the perspective of being a young woman, the thesis is grounded in feminist, inclusive and difference-centered citizenship theories, that allows to recognize children's own citizenship agency and empowerment and does not exclude them. During the process of conducting interviews the own

role as a researcher was reflected on regarding a power imbalance in interviewing elite (Herzog & Ali, 2015). To ensure trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017) and comprehensibility during the whole analysis process, a clear description of the analysis method was provided, as well as an explanation of what methods were used and why. Additionally, all stages during the analysis were described and memos (notes about emerging thoughts of the researcher) during the research process were taken. Regarding the replicability of elite-based research, it must be noted, that, often, it is not possible to repeat the research, because elite may not agree to answer questions twice about the same topic. Yet the research instrument – interview guide and methods used for data analysis – could be replicated. Here, clear outlines, and critical reflections on the methods used, were carried out to assure reliability of the study (Herzog & Ali, 2015). Through the triangulation of interview data and policy reviews an in-depth understanding of Austria's role in catering for children's digital information rights and its practical implementation could be realized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

7. Children's Digital Information Rights: Respondents' Perceptions, Policy Challenges and Recommendations

Policy makers are faced with the challenge of providing children with a digital environment in which they can safely share and consume information. In the following chapters the results of this paper are presented and discussed – four detected themes and five sub-themes representing different areas, that cater to some extent for children's digital information rights and/or require policy action. A balance must be found between the available information access for children on digital platforms, their empowerment through digital and media literacy skills, and the necessity to regulate it. Throughout all 17 interviews and its systematical thematic analysis (see Figure 2 and Appendix Table 3) the need of two different levels of catering for children's digital information rights emerged, which are to some extent supported and addressed by Austrian public policies. On the one hand there is the political-technical level, where attempts to regulate digital platforms to protect children, and their information rights, can be allocated. On the other hand, there is the individual dimension which entails the question of how to strengthen and equip children with the right skills to assess information they encounter online to act on their information and civic rights. Aspects, challenges, and policy recommendations on both levels could be identified, to answer the research questions.

7.1. Limited Political Awareness

Even though all interviewees have different backgrounds, understandings and approaches regarding children's information rights, a rather critical notion towards Austrian public policy efforts in protecting and supporting children's rights to information could be perceived. Generally, a lack of considering children's rights in policy making has been underlined many times, as stated by the respondent associated with Volkshilfe Österreich (R3):

> I think that we as an organization take children's rights very seriously, in the sense that we see children as independent subjects and not just as appendages, to put it boldly. I

> think it's about the implementation of children's rights as a whole, and we see a lot of deficiencies there. (R3, 2023, L. 125-128)

Austrian laws and public policies concerned with children's rights, usually do not address their information rights, as highlighted by different study participants, there is a lack of policy initiatives on this matter due to missing political awareness towards the legal component of children's information access, especially in the digital space. Therefore, the need for a nationwide policy strategy that seeks to support and protect children and their digital access to information, as well as more political awareness and commitment was highlighted. Even though some Austrian policy strategies that address aspects of children's digital information rights have been mentioned by interviewees, especially the Austrian Youth strategy (see chapter 7.2. Empowerment through Digital Media Literacy) and Digital Basic Education (see chapter 7.2.1. Digital Media Literacy Education in Austrian Schools), respondents generally agreed that Austrian policy makers are not giving the topic of children's digital information rights, especially on digital platforms, enough attention. The respondent associated with UNICEF Austria (R2), and the respondent answering on behalf of the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Fundamental and Human Rights (R13) underlined the missing awareness regarding the existence of a children's right to information.

> With regard to information rights, I think that with some topics, the challenge is that it is not automatically connected to children's rights. So, when it comes to media or digital things, it may simply be perceived as entertainment. The entire media and information sector are somehow seen as part of everyday life, often it is not thought about which children's rights issues might be at stake here. (R2, 2023, L. 169-173)

> In general, there is the challenge of actually perceiving children as legal entities, who have the right to complain, who have the right to obtain information. (R13, 2023, L. 582-583)

In a similar vein respondents affiliated with the youth policy department of the federal chancellery (R11) and WienXtra (R12) – a youth work organization collaborating with the city

of Vienna – highlighted the need for more political awareness and sensitivity towards the topic of digital information rights:

> There is probably a need for sensitization in the development and implementation of a number of strategies regarding this possibility, this access to information (R11, 2023, L. 156-159).

> I think there is a need for much more political awareness of children's rights in the digital space, an awareness of the fact that adolescents today must also be able to navigate the digital space, as well as the physical space. (R12, 2023, L. 110-112)

When interviewees were asked about the ways public policies address children's digital information rights, respondents associated with the national coalition of children's rights (R9), as well as the ones related to journalism, answering on behalf of the "Kleine Kinderzeitung" (R15), and the children's news website "Kijuku" (R14) criticized lacking political efforts regarding the topic of children's digital information rights and their use of (digital) media for obtaining information about the world.

> I don't see any political, I'm not even saying priority, I don't think it's even on the radar. (R9, 2023, L. 144-145)

> I think it's easier to state what isn't being done. I think what's needed is this political commitment, that value is seen in it and that it is recognized as something important for democracy, this is not happening right now. (R15, 2023, L. 239-242)

> The ministry, which is responsible for media, could be one of the most important partners when it comes to children and media. And I find it even bizarre that, so little is happening there. (R14, 2023, L. 122-124)

Despite calls from the UN in its General Comment No. 25 on Children's Rights in relation to the Digital Environment to better address children's rights in the digital space – like the child's right to access a variety of information online (UNCRC, 2021, Art. 50) – Austria has been rather slow in considering children's rights in this regard, as highlighted by different interviewees. States parties should play a significant role in ensuring children's access to information online (UNCRC, 2021, Art. 50), yet the respondent associated with WienXtra

(R12) criticized that the UN General Comment has not been mentioned in any Austrian governmental communication or policy. The need for an official authority that is assigned to monitor the implementation of the UNCRC in the digital environment has been highlighted during the interview.

> There is this excellent addition to the Convention on the Rights of the Child about children's rights in the digital environment and in Austria it should start with someone, any authority, being commissioned to look after the children's rights convention and it should also be provided with resources to monitor the implementation. And that is not happening in Austria at the moment. It began when this General Comment that was passed, and there was not a single statement from Austria […] (R12, 2023, L. 97-103).

In fact, no official Austrian statement regarding the UN Comment No. 25 could be found. Neither on websites of Austrian ministries, nor on the website of the Austrian Federal Chancellery. The comment is not being mentioned under the sections “Children’s Rights”, “Children’s Rights Policies”, nor in its published documents (Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.). Throughout the analysis it could be seen that interviewees rated the Austrian awareness for children’s digital information rights and the willingness to act on this matter dependent on distinct initiatives or the individual in charge. A respondent associated with the Austrian National Youth Council (R17) stated, that awareness for children and their digital information rights, can be compared to the awareness for children’s rights in general:

> Awareness is high among actors who work more intensively on the topic, or among committed multipliers; in broad sections of the population, and among some decision-makers, there is certainly a need to catch up. (R17, 2023, L. 80-82)

Here, respondents predominantly mentioned non-governmental initiatives as positive examples of catering for aspects of children’s digital information rights and agreed that quite a few Austrian projects can be rated as successful. However, these initiatives would need more public support and financial resources, as R12 (WienXtra) highlights in her answer concerning the practical implementation of children’s digital information rights:

> I think Austria has very, very good initiatives and they are hopelessly under supported, so I am giving a very, very high rating for the work of individuals. For the political perception of this important work and the corresponding provision of resources, I am giving an extremely low rating also because Austria did not even consider itself worth the effort to discuss children's rights in digital environments. (R12, 2023, L. 322-326)

7.1.1. Lack of Financial Resources

The lack of provided resources and financial support by Austrian ministries and political authorities for initiatives catering for aspects of children's digital information rights, like media literacy initiatives, could be identified as aspect of missing political awareness throughout the interviews. Respondents associated with Digitaler Kompass (R5) – an Austrian non-profit and non-governmental organization for media literacy and digital education – UNICEF Austria (R2), and WienXtra (R12) underlined this lack of financial support and challenges in implementing projects.

> Sometimes the challenge is that we are unable to implement some things because we do not have the funding for them […] which is certainly one of the major challenges in practice, which certainly also exists in other organizations. (R2, 2023, L. 139-143)

> I think, as with many other non-profit organizations, it's always a question of how to finance what we do in a sustainable way so that we can achieve our goals and achieve our purposes, and I think that's an area in Austria that could work better, because that's something where we spend a lot of energy […] What always concerns us is that we have many goals and ideas and we want to make a lot of things happen, but on the other hand we have limited time to achieve all of that and time also flows into financial things and more financial possibilities would of course provide more resources and more resources could benefit more children. (R5, 2023, L. 78-101)

> Overall, media education in Austria requires much more resources. So, it's really amazing how much progress can be made with so little resources. (R12, 2023, L. 220-221)

Also, the digital media literacy initiative "Saferinternet.at" (R1), which supports children's, parent's, and educator's safe use of digital media, being part of the Europewide initiative of "Safer Internet Centres", as well as of the European "Insafe Network" (European Commission, n.d.), stated raising money for projects and workshops as main challenge. Even

though Saferinternet.at is being funded by Austrian ministries like the Federal Chancellery, or the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research, being comparatively well supported, the respondent associated with the Europewide media literacy initiative (R1) stated the following:

> We need money, resources. That's the public sector. And that's primarily ministries in Austria, where we have to request again and again, in the area of education and youth and digitalization. (R1, 2023, L. 49-51)
>
> The biggest difficulty is to raise money. Because every training, that a school orders, must be paid for and that's not easy at all for many schools. (R1, 2023, L. 74-75)

Moreover, critique from many interviewees is expressed regarding the situation of the Austrian children's national coalition receiving not enough public funding, which leads to a lack of resources in catering for children's information rights, as R12 (WienXtra), R16 – the interviewee associated with the non-profit-organization "Beteiligung.st", a center for child, youth and citizen participation - and R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) stated:

> There is the Children's National Coalition, which primarily works with a great deal of volunteer work, and they are also overwhelmed by this issue and are currently concerned with, you can say, even more essential needs, such as child poverty. (R12, 2023, L. 106-108)
>
> The Children's National Coalition Austria receives no funding. How is that supposed to work. (R16, 2023, L. 288-289)
>
> In the Children's National Coalition, we have a coordinator who currently works 20 hours a week, i.e. is employed on a half-day basis, and does coordination work herself and cannot prepare reports and legal analyses and everything else only by herself. (R13, 2023, L. 364-369)

The national coalition represents an independent network of 53 member organizations and institutions, promoting the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in Austria, and delivering the "Supplementary Report" alongside to the Federal Government's State Report for the review process of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Netzwerk

Kinderrechte, 2021). The respondent associated with the children's national coalition (R9) mentioned herself:

> We would definitely need resources; we have no basic funding. The mentioned Ministry of Family Affairs does not finance us. So we are always at the financial abyss, so to speak […] We definitely need these resources and I think that we could then also work extremely well with additional employees on this networking part (R9, 2023, L. 124-131).

Interviewees associated with "Beteiligung.st" (R16), as well as with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (R13) summarized the situation of children's information rights in Austria and above-mentioned points and highlighted the need for a nationwide policy initiative.

> I think in sum, some things are there, many good initiatives and many efforts, and certainly funding here and there too. But the big thing and that it is intended nationwide, is not there. (R16, 2023, L. 295-297)

> Maybe it's a patchwork, so there's a lot. You hardly must start from the beginning anywhere, I think. We have hotlines such as "Rat auf Draht", we have child and youth attorneys. We have newspapers, media, television, we have all the social media channels, none of which are prohibited in Austria. No one can say that there isn't a huge amount of information available. (R13, 2023, L. 447-450)

7.1.2. Protectionist Approach and the Need to Incorporate Children's Perspectives

Intertwined with a lack of political awareness for children's digital information rights, a tendency within the interviewees of rating Austrian public and policy approaches regarding topics related to children's use of digital platforms as protectionist, could be noticed. The public way of perceiving children and talking about them and their access to media and information was mostly referred to as being patronizing and rather commanding, in a prohibition- and protection-driven manner – framing children as "victims" regarding possible risks and dangers they may encounter online – instead of empowering them to engage and participate in processes related to policy creation, as it would be in-line with children's active citizenship practices (Lister, 2007a). The respondents associated with the children's national coalition (R9), the children's news website Kijuku, and Kleine Kinderzeitung (R15) stated:

> You only have to look at how children are talked about. ‘They are the weakest members of society’, ‘helpless’, ‘victims of violence’. I don't want to downplay those things, but that already puts them in the position of our protectees (R9, 2023, L. 215-217).
>
> Children are still more likely to be patronized; too little is expected of them. It is simply not well enough established that children are independent people and that they simply have rights. (R14, 2023, L. 365-367)
>
> Children are addressed in the sense of 'you you you' and pedagogically I will tell you as an adult what you have to do. (R15, 2023, L. 461-464)

In a similar manner the respondent related to the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (R13) argued:

> We adults must take care of these challenges of the information age and digitization, instead of continuing to ban children from using cell phones or prohibit everything that can be evil, with these discussions we are getting nowhere. (R13, 2023, L. 558-560)

Respondents highlighted that children must be equal stakeholders in discussions concerning information access issues and information rights in the digital space. Protection only was rated as not enough, participants agreed that to cater for children’s information rights, their perspectives need to be considered in policymaking processes, children should be listened to and asked how they define information rights and how they would like them to be regulated, with the ultimate responsibility within adults and parents.

> I would find it exciting if we could ask children and young people on a large scale how they define information rights for themselves and what they exactly imagine under it […] because they know that much better than we do. (R7, 2023, L. 301-310)

Throughout the interviews the importance of incorporating children’s perspectives when creating policies emerged, and the problem of carrying adult perspectives on children’s spaces was underlined by interviewees associated with media literacy NGOs and NPOs, independent national initiatives, Academia, public services, as well as associates of the youth policy department of the federal chancellery, that stated:

> What we in our department, in various committees always bring in, is that you should also ask the young people. A kind of reality check to see if a measure is really suitable

> for the target group of young people […] You can, when legislative projects are initiated or elaborated, already in this process stage, invite young people to a workshop and say, 'How do you see that, what would you change? (R11, 2023, L. 122-130).
>
> A discussion about the digital communication and information rights of young people cannot happen without young people. (R13, 2023, L. 628-629)
>
> We need a bit of intergenerational permeability in order to learn from the younger generation […] that applies in the case of children's information rights as well. We need to listen to young people a lot more in this regard. That would be my plea. (R7, 2023, L. 301-310)

The respondent affiliated with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (R13) further highlighted:

> Children must be equal stakeholders in the discussion when it comes to access issues and informational rights in the digital space, and this also requires appropriate structures and when it comes to any discussions of EU regulations, I haven't seen yet that the Federal Government is planning a discussion process with young people in any way, I think that would be a minimum. (R13, 2023, L. 609-613)

Another aspect, that came up during the interviews, is the Austrian focus on preservation policy and preservation education, when asked about the assessment of the practical implementation of children's digital information rights in Austria, R12 (WienXtra) therefore referred to the need of catering for digital environments suitable for children:

> There is so much to do, and it often stops at this level of preservation education, where you say that children shouldn't go there, we should protect them from this and that, also important, but above all, it should be about where the positive, the inspiring, the profitable environments are and who creates them. (R12, 2023, L. 234-237)

7.2. Digital Media Literacy

Related to a critique on protectionist and preservatory approaches by Austrian policy makers, various respondents referred to the need of catering for children's digital information rights by empowering them to evaluate information they encounter online. In line with the thoughts of Stalker et al. (2019) and Tobin (2021), that highlight the importance of teaching children the right skills to become more critical in their information evaluation and being able to cope with online threads, R1 (Saferinternet.at) highlighted:

> In the past, we would have said that they [children] should be protected as much as possible, but I think everyone has figured out by now, that protection isn't really possible here, it's more about empowering and strengthening children so that they can deal with the challenges of the digital world (R1, 2023, L. 5-8).

It is important that public and parental responses to kid's navigating online spaces consider that protection only is not sufficient (Tobin, 2021). For children to act on their digital information rights, digital information assessment and media literacy skills, as well as the ability for source criticism are needed, in order for children to make informed decisions in democratic societies (Mateus, 2021). Both respondents working in Academia; R6 (University of Vienna) and R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) stated in this regard:

> You must start with individuals – the buzzwords are media literacy and media criticism, which is an immunization against these mechanisms that contribute to flooding the Internet with bullshit like with unreliable information, fake news, disinformation. Children should learn very carefully or acquire skills to evaluate information from the Internet. (R6, 2023, L. 191-195).

> There is a lot of nonsense available on social media in terms of information or 'pretend-information' where this question of assessment, if content is true, whatever truth means, but which is obviously not contrary to facts and children should learn to recognize that, how to distinguish one from the other (R13, 2023, L. 242-245).

The interviewees associated with media literacy initiatives - R1 (Saferinternet.at) and R5 (Digitaler Kompass) - further highlighted the importance of information assessment skills.

> We are convinced that in these times everyone needs to learn basic information assessment techniques to help them navigate the online environment. (R5, 2023, L. 5-6)

> If children don't have the skills to understand the information at all, then it doesn't help if there is some. And that's what I see unfortunately. (R1, 2023, L. 232-235)

When interviewees were asked about positive Austrian examples of initiatives catering for children's digital information rights, most frequently mentioned was Saferinternet.at, that empowers children to deal with new digital developments. Here, empowerment was

predominantly understood by interviewees as teaching children how to deal with possible risks, how to recognize if content is trustworthy or not, as well as how to make use of opportunities on digital platforms in terms of consuming relevant and fact-based information, away from a prohibition only approach. R1 (Saferinternet.at) argued:

> We have to give children and young people the tools they need. We have to inform parents and make recommendations. So, recommending instead of banning (laughs) and that's also certainly a way that's helpful and just the more sensible thing for children and young people in the long term (R1, 2023, L. 186-190).

Also, R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) put emphasis on the necessity to focus more on digital literacy, even though he underlined the importance of online child protection, he argued that the primary focus on possible risks, that lead to bans must shift.

> It's not just the discussion about the risks, there are already all the concerns about child protection online, all of which are justified, but I think it would be much more necessary to focus on what is called 'digital literacy', that you have the skills to use all these technical options in a meaningful way, without the discussion about banning cell phones or banning artificial intelligence. Every time there is a technical innovation somewhere, I have the feeling that the school reacts with bans, instead of thinking about how to integrate it in a meaningful way (R13, 2023, L. 152-157).

A policy strategy mentioned by respondents of the Austrian federal chancellery (R10 and R11), and WienXtra (R12), is the Austrian Youth Strategy, that was decided to be continued in 2020 by the Austrian Federal Government. The strategy seeks to strengthen and coordinate a joint youth policy implementation for all Austrian Ministries, with one focus point on “Media and Information” (Federal Chancellery Republic of Austria, n.d.). Here the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research plays an important role, since one of the established youth goals lies within enhancing digital and media literacy among young people, their families, youth workers and educators. Additionally, the strategy seeks to cater for reliable youth-oriented and youth-relevant information (Federal Chancellery Republic of Austria, n.d.; Federal Ministry Republic of Austria Education, Science and Research, n.d. c). However, it must be noted that

the youth strategy only addresses children above the age of 13 years old, and information offers for younger children are limited. R10 (Federal Chancellery – Competence Center Youth) stated:

> Young people have the right to good information and appropriate activities are needed to bring this information to young people. One of four cornerstones of the youth strategy is this issue of dealing with media, media literacy and the transfer of information. So, in this strategy we have it at least strongly established, and there are already individual measures by some ministries. But of course, this also needs to be expanded because we regularly come across new topics and questions. (R10, 2023, L. 234-239)
>
> There is also a separate section dedicated to the topic of media and information. Of course, some of these topics also overlap, but we said that this topic of media and the use of media and the handling of information is so important that we dedicated a separate field of action to it. (R10, 2023, L. 51-58)

The interviewee associated with Digitaler Kompass (R5) further argued that techniques to navigate the online world should be taught just like any other basic skill, that children learn.

> We teach them basic techniques, that they can navigate the online world, and I think, that is a basic right, and it should also be a basic skill in today's world, because children and young people are already online at a young age with smartphones, but also with their parents' devices, and they move around there constantly. That's something that should be learned nowadays, like reading, writing, calculating, because it's what they need every day (R5, 2023, L. 26-32).

Here, a very important role in catering for children's digital media literacy has been attributed with educational efforts. Although interviewees have criticized lack of efforts in Austrian schools and policies to support children's digital and critical skills, all respondents agreed that schools have the potential to play a major role in catering for children's digital information rights through empowering their digital and critical media literacy skills. R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) further stated:

> I think the school is a central interface for all these discussions, because every child has to go to school at some point, regardless of their parent's home, origin, or language. So, in this respect, I see the school in a very fundamental responsibility (R13, 2023, L. 224-227).

7.2.1. Digital Media Literacy Education in Austrian Schools

Even though schools have been named as suitable space to cater for children's digital media literacy, policy efforts in this regard, as well as the role of Austrian schools and their curricular in catering and supporting children's digital information rights have been critically assessed, the respondent related to the National Youth Council (R17) stated:

> From the point of view of young people, it is crucial that media education should be given greater importance in the Austrian school system […] it is simply not implemented enough. (R17, 2023, L. 39-42)

Thus, a lot of suggestions for improvement have been proposed. As main area for critique, interviewees pointed out the fact that media literacy and media education often lie in teaching children technical skills such as how to operate a tablet, a computer, or how to create a PowerPoint presentation, when the focus should rather lie on critical information assessment skills. Moreover, interviewees mentioned the need for media literacy and media education to be perceived as cross-curricular topic, that can be taught in any school subject, and should be treated as basic skill:

> In schools, the basic solution is that it (media literacy) must be seen and accepted as a cross-curricular topic. It's often the case that it's perhaps included in a computer science class, or now it is part of digital basic education. But I think it could be taught in any subject, and even in computer science or digital basic education it is sometimes lost, and this is very much since many teachers simply do not feel to have the competencies to teach it. (R5, 2023, L. 142-147)

> Teaching subjects should cover this, to be honest, preferably in as many subjects as possible, regardless of whether it is geography or biology or history, it should be dealt with how children can find out whether information on the Internet comes from a trustworthy source, whether children can trust it, and how they can verify it. (R2, 2023, L. 294-297)

The focus on handling digital devices can also be seen in the Austrian Government Program (2020-2024), that states as goal to digitalize the Austrian school education by providing digital devices for every student from secondary level 1 onwards, however also the

aim of expanding the digital skills of educators and establishing digital skills as teaching principle are mentioned (Bundeskanzleramt, 2020). In this regard, a respondent with a background in teaching and academia – currently at the University of Vienna – (R6), as well as a respondent associated with the Non-Profit-Organization "Beteiligung.st" (R16) – a center for child, youth, and citizen participation – critically mention that media education, and digital media literacy are often misunderstood with technical abilities:

> I think the biggest problem of media literacy is that it is often seen as equal or confused with computer skills, so to speak, or the focus lies very strongly on this point, and especially when you look at digital basic education, I think it's very often about how devices work and how do I do that and so on, how does Word work, how does Excel work, how do programs work. I think that's just one dimension, so to speak, and I think a lot of value is attached to it. But I believe that we must not forget that media literacy has many sub-dimensions and that is often forgotten a bit (R6, 2023, L. 208-213).
>
> I don't like the approach when you say children know how to use a tablet, but that is what I experience to a certain extent. (R16, 2023, L. 207-209)

In that regard, the policy effort and implementation of the strategy "Digital Basic Education" has been mentioned by almost every interviewee. Digital Basic Education represents an initiative to anchor digital competencies in the curriculum of secondary schools and lower grades. The initiative is part of the overarching strategy of "Digital School" and "Digi.komp" – firstly implemented in 2022 – that seek to ensure that digital skills are reliably implemented from primary school to secondary level two (Federal Ministry Republic of Austria Education, Science and Research, n.d.). All interviewees agreed that Digital Basic Education is generally a positive first step to cater for children's digital media literacy and in turn for their information rights, by preparing them to deal with the digital environment. However, what sounds good on paper, does not work as smoothly in practice, as highlighted by different respondents. The interviewees responding in regard of Saferinternet.at (R1), as well as in regard of Kleine Kinderzeitung (R15) stated referring to digital basic education the following:

> That something like digital basic education is possible in the field of education, that this initiative with the rollout of tablets and computers in secondary education, including accompanying teacher training, is not yet perfect, a lot is still missing, there is still very, very, very much room for improvement, but it is definitely a step in the right direction. (R1, 2023, L. 199-203)

> I have put a lot of hope into digital basic education, which I find fundamentally important and correct […] The truth is, there are just so many mistakes in the conception of the subject. (R15, 2023, L. 209-216)

> You learn how to use search engines; you learn how to create a PowerPoint presentation and maybe how to somehow add a graphic with free HTML to WordPress. But otherwise, there is no critical reflection, unless, of course, you have one of these teachers who go the extra mile. (R15, 2023, L. 219-221)

Furthermore, many participants highlighted that Digital Basic Education does not get enough attention and priority in the training of teachers, and teachers themselves do not have enough resources – time and expertise – to teach the new school subject. Therefore, it depends very much on the individual initiative of teachers if children are prepared to encounter digital platforms and can make use of their digital information rights or not, hence these skills are not taught systematically to children. R14 (Kijuku) answering in his role as journalist, and R4 (teacher union) underlined the stated problem in the following way:

> It (digital basic education) has been talked about for at least ten years and almost at the same time as the subject was introduced, only then the training of teachers slowly started for the first time. (R14, 2023, L. 194-196)

> Of course, this (media education in schools) varies from location to location, from teacher team to teacher team […] The demands and the wishes differ with the possibilities, with the output. (R4, 2023, L. 151-154)

Also, R6 (University of Vienna) and R17 (Austrian National Youth Council) underlined the role of teachers and the need to integrate media systematically into teaching, as well as to better establish strong media education efforts in the subject of Digital Basic Education.

> I believe that this is still dependent very much on the personal initiative of teachers, it maybe even depends on their own interests. Although there are systemic efforts to integrate media into teaching and there is Digi.komp and Digital Basic Education, I

> wouldn't say that this is happening systematically in class now. I think there is still a lot of room for improvement. Definitely. (R6, 2023, L. 121-125)
>
> In our opinion, this aspect (media education) is also not given enough space in the new school subject Digital Basic Education. Media education must be an obligatory part of teacher training and must also be included in the further training of teachers who are already practicing, so that it can be ensured that teaching does not ignore the realities of young people's lives (R17, 2023, L. 42-46).

R5 (Digitaler Kompass) similarly referred to the lack of a systematical implementation of media education and the child's dependence on individual teachers and their efforts, as well as parents, by pointing out a gap between children's abilities of digital skills and source criticism:

> There is a very big gap, because on the bottom line, whether I learn something as a child is very much dependent on how much my parents show me, how my social environment behaves and how much individual teachers are committed, but it is not institutionalized. And if I don't have that environment and a teacher at school doesn't address the topic […] if it's generally not given any priority at all, then I won't notice it as a child during my school time, and that's of course a big deficit. (R5, 2023, L. 131-137)

7.2.2. Digital Media Literacy Training for Parents

An often-mentioned group, that has a stake in empowering children's digital and critical information assessment skills, and with that in turn impact their capability of enacting their right to information, are parents, and adults with a duty of care for kids. A strong need has been formulated to teach parents about new digital developments and it's opportunities and threads in order to support their children. However, interviewees pointed out that parents often do not have enough digital media competencies to navigate the online world themselves, they do not know how to evaluate online sources and digital information they encounter. Thus, interviewees highlighted the lack of a guiding and supportive role of parents towards their children and emphasized the importance of parental education and awareness work, in order for adults to better support their children. R1 (Saferinternet.at) and R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) stated the following in this regard:

> As an organization I often see that we have a task to make new developments understandable for adults and to show them how they can be useful for children, also how adults can simply support children. (R1, 2023, L. 40-42)

> I think you also must be careful that there is no division between the discussions, just looking at the children and not getting the parents on board. Because ideally, parents can also play an important supporting role. (R13, 2023, L. 326-327)

R1 (Saferinternet.at) further referred to a lack of knowledge of qualitative journalism, and source criticism within parents, through which their guiding role for children's digital media use and information consumption is missing:

> We simply need parents who are aware of their responsibility to ensure that children really do know quality media and that the role of journalism is also recognized here. And that's where I see the problem with the parents because they don't see that either, it's not very different with them (laughs). (R1, 2023, L. 106-109)

Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the necessity that a wide range of professionals dealing with kids should ideally possess digital media literacy affinities, as underlined by R10 (Competence Center Youth and Youth Policy Department of the Federal Chancellery), and R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute):

> Every youth worker, for example, is of course also called upon accordingly to carry out appropriate media literacy trainings in their environment and it is a matter of keeping them up to date, with certain basic information. But we can't turn everyone into an expert because a youth worker would have to be a media expert, prevention expert, health expert, workplace and employment expert, of course that can't be. (R10, 2023, L. 172-178)

> It would be very important to strengthen this digital literacy, both among children and among all adults. Starting with parents, teachers and anyone else dealing with children and young people, ranging from the area of social work to the police. (R13, 2023, L. 157-159)

7.3. Child-Friendly Verified Information Offers on Digital Platforms

For children to act on their information rights, form opinions, and participate in society, interviewees mentioned the need for access to appropriate, reliable, fact-based, verified and for

children understandable information on channels relevant for them provided by public bodies and media. Information is a fundamental pillar for successful participation (Chávez, 2021), thus participants highlighted that public policies directed at kids should be designed in such a way, that it is also understandable for them. The respondent associated with the Children's and Youth Ombuds-Office in Vienna (R7) – an independent facility established for the protection of children's interests represented in all provinces (City of Vienna, n.d.) - stated the following:

> Many things are generally relevant for children and therefore this also must be translated into a language that children can read and understand. The legislator should note that, because he writes laws for citizens (...) laws should be designed in such a way that it is also understandable for all the citizens of this country and all those who stay here, and children may be a good reference for that. (R7, 2023, L. 69-77)

Children's right to find online places where information is displayed in a way that is comprehensible and appealing to them has been underlined many times. Here, the role of Austrian policymakers in offering information for kids, and supporting reliable information offers on digital channels was rated very differently between interviewees, especially respondents affiliated with NGO's, civic service, and political opposition argued that too little information in a language understandable for children is provided and supported. R9 – responding on behalf of the children's national coalition, R7 – Children's and Youth Ombuds-Office – as well as R13 – Ludwig Boltzmann Institute – adopted a rather negative stance in this regard, and highlighted that official information often does not reach children:

> Politics provides too little information in a language and in an area of interest for young people, so that they have the feeling that they are well informed. (R9, 2023, L. 42-52)

> From my perspective and from the children's eyes, it is something like a debt from the state to the children. The state must bring the information to the children, the state must create it in this way and make it available for children. And there, I think we have some catching up to do, we're not doing that yet. I mean it's great when the Federal Chancellery or other ministries provide information for children, but they'll never look there (laughs) they don't even know that this page exists, that's the main problem. (R7, 2023, L. 183-188)

> Very basic information, which is needed in our society today, simply does not reach many young people or they simply have other channels. (R13, 2023, L. 212-213)

With that the challenge of reaching children with relevant information, as well as the efforts of Austrian ministries and the federal chancellery to provide information for children on channels not known by children were underlined. In that regard many respondents referred to the importance of recognizing children in their diversity instead of seeing them as a homogeneous group, through which the need for specific information on relevant channels for different age and target groups of children was underlined. R3 – associated with the social welfare organization Volkshilfe Österreich, R10 – Competence Center Youth and Youth Policy Department – and R13 – Ludwig Boltzmann Institute – stated:

> I think it's quite a big awareness process, how information can get to target groups is a big challenge […] This is simply a huge topic, where I think other conditions are needed in order to bring all children and young people along. (R3, 2023, L. 96-101)

> The difficulty is, on the one hand, to create a diversity of channels. It is also a question of resources to reach individual target groups at all, because they are fragmented, regional, or do not use the information access that others use. (R10, 2023, L. 110-112)

> There are challenges for access to information and informational rights everywhere. In particular, the question of how child-friendly information is broken down**,** there is also this question of age groups, of target groups, that have to be differentiated too […] for all these groups, special offers are needed. (R13, 2023, L. 429-434)

In a rather positive tone R12 (WienXtra), R11 (Youth Policy Department), R10 (Competence Center Youth and Youth Policy Department), and R16 (Beteiligung.st) mentioned Austrian Youth Information Centers – represented in every Austrian province responsible for regional projects, measures, and the implementation of the Austrian Youth Strategy (Österreichische Jugendinfos, n.d.) – as positive Austrian policy effort catering for digital information offers for young people (above the age of 13).

> We are really excellently positioned in the field of youth information. We have many exemplary activities. (R11, 2023, L. 107-108)

> We have [youth information] centers that are only dedicated to the question of how to bring information to young people on a daily basis, who also work together with various other bodies. This is something that does not exist in other countries in this form […] You could say, these are very positive aspects. (R10, 2023, L. 254-262)

> I think we have upgraded areas that work well, for example the entire area of youth information […] Adolescents have the right to find places online where they can rely on the fact that this information has been checked and someone is also available for criticism, suggestions, inquiries, and this is an area in Austria, for example, that is relatively well developed. (R12, 2023, L. 41-47)

> Austria's youth information centers are doing a very good job**.** I think that works quite well. It is more a question of whether adults reach young people with topics that are important to them, which would certainly also be important, but may not be interesting for young people right now. (R16, 2023, L. 148-151)

Here, the importance of considering and incorporating the perspective of children to create authentic content to be published on platforms used by children, as well as the necessity to deliver reliable and appropriate content via the channel of social media has been highlighted. R10 (Competence Center Youth and Youth Policy Department) and R13 (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute) underlined the importance of choosing the right channels to reach children, and referred to the important role of social media in transporting information, as well as the challenge to create information appropriate for children, that catches their interest:

> Social media naturally offers us a wide opportunity to reach young people directly with information. With all the difficulties, of course, the competition from a wide range of offers and, of course, the questions of how we can also prepare this in an appropriate way for young people. (R10, 2023, L. 183-186)

> We have endless discussions about social media and algorithms, all of which are problematic. True, but you must think about how to prepare and offer appropriate information, especially for young people and then for different age groups of children, and on which channels, especially in an information age. (R13, 2023, L. 213-217)

A challenge predominantly mentioned when catering for children's information offers on digital platforms and in turn for their digital information rights, is the spread of dis- and misinformation that hinders children's access to reliable and relevant information. Here the role of algorithms in promoting disinformation, and the need for verified information on digital

platforms, that can represent a counterweight to disinformation was underlined by R10 (Youth Policy Department) and R6 (University of Vienna):

> Via social media, it is of course possible for everyone to transport the most complete nonsense, without any information filter, so as I said before, that is exactly the problem, we see it time and time again, that fake news and conspiracy theories move incredibly quickly through social media and then, of course the algorithms of certain providers also reinforce that […] This amplification of negative things or disinformation that is happening, is, of course, a major challenge, which we face. (R10, 2023, L. 191-197)

> There are always studies on this that show that a large part of the information on relevant social topics is conveyed via social media, that begs the question, what is this algorithmic approach that they put behind these media? To what extent does it guarantee, or does it actually allow access to high-quality information? And what I mean by high quality information is precisely information that has been verified, has also been verified institutionally. (R6, 2023, L. 159-165)

To overcome the challenge of algorithms promoting disinformation on digital platforms, and to cater for children's information rights in the digital environment, various respondents referred to the need for more platform regulations related to algorithms on European level, as described in the next chapter.

7.4. Joint Efforts Needed: Platform Regulations in form of Transparent Algorithms

Besides appropriate digital information offers for kids, higher awareness towards the existence of children's digital information rights among policy makers, and strengthened media literacy skills of children and parents, a technical level of catering for children's digital information rights emerged throughout the analysis. Most respondents mentioned that to promote and protect children's digital information rights, frameworks must be established that allow secure conditions for the emergence of child-friendly information on digital platforms. However, at the same time it has been highlighted that children's right to access trustworthy information is being undermined by a lack of platform regulations. Hence, platform regulations, based on a children's rights stance, created in joint efforts of policymakers, platforms themselves, and stakeholders, like NGOs, teachers, youth workers, and journalists on national,

as well as on European level are needed, to create safe digital spaces for children, as highlighted by many interviewees. This is in line with the thoughts of Vickery (2017), who underlines that a safe digital future meeting the needs of children can only be created through cooperation between policy makers, educators, technology companies, researchers, commercial institutions, and children themselves. The respondent associated with Saferinternet.at (R1), as well as the respondent answering on behalf of the political opposition party NEOS (R8) accordingly mentioned the need for joint efforts:

> That (strengthening of media competence) can only be done with pressure. And everyone has to do that, the platforms also have to do that, they should label fake news cleverly […] parents have to do that, schools have to do that, children and young people have to do that themselves. (R1, 2023, L. 241-244)

> Concrete proposals would probably also, if you take it seriously, have to be worked out at the European level and not in Austria, because these regulations for social media platforms have always had to be made Europe-wide. (R8, 2023, L. 65-69)

With that, R1 (Saferinternet.at) mentioned that platforms should label mis- and disinformation, such as fake news, so that it can be easier assessed if information is true or not. In that sense, throughout the analysis a measure regarding regulations for digital platforms to cater for children's information rights could be identified; namely the problem of intransparent algorithms that recommend and reinforce the display of dis- and misinformation, and the need to regulate them in terms of content that is shown and accessible to children. Especially transparent algorithms that are modified to prefer and recommend institutionally verified information were mentioned. In this regard the role of the European Regulation for the Digital Services Act (DSA) has been named, which came into force in November 2022, and among other things seeks to create safer digital spaces, in which the protection of the fundamental rights of all digital services users plays an important role (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022). In the case of children special emphasis is put on minors' safety and security, requiring online platforms to put measures in place to fight existing risks and

protect minors on digital platforms. Here, different targeted measures to protect children are being mentioned, like parental control tools, or age verification. Also, algorithms and their recommender systems are addressed, however not specifically in relation to children. The need that digital platform providers disclose, test, and adapt their algorithmic recommender systems, and become more transparent about their information display due to their algorithms is being highlighted in different regulation articles (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022, Art. 27, Art. 24, Art. 35d). Yet, R12 (WienXtra) argued in that regard that the Digital Services Act did not go far enough und made following suggestions:

> In the interest of adolescents, but in the end in the interest of all people, we should intervene and there would be opportunities to intervene. I see that the EU has already taken very good steps, and these laws on digital services, laws on digital markets, are good initiatives, but they didn't go far enough. Algorithms must be transparent, and it should also be possible to regulate what the algorithms flush upwards and what the algorithms are currently flushing upwards are all extreme opinions, this type of digital environment is not healthy. It is not healthy for us adults, but it is certainly not healthy for adolescents who are currently in the midst of their ethical and moral development. (R12, 2023, L. 126-130)

> There is a need for a new law that regulates the algorithms […] companies must be required to disclose their algorithms, and it should also be changed that the algorithms rate seriousness better. (R12, 2023, L. 282-284)

Also, R6 (University of Vienna) stated that regulations on the algorithm level must be established:

> I have the feeling that a lot of information or these excerpts of reality that are represented via social media is simply algorithmically structured. That means there are very complex algorithmic structures that select what you see. And I think that if you want to give preference to high-quality information, then that would have to happen at the level of these algorithms, somehow that information that has been verified should get in some way rather selected than what is now spread virally. (R6, 2023, L. 186-191)

In terms of content accessible to children on social media platforms, and for children to enact their information rights, the necessity for stronger restrictions regarding available content has been underlined. A clear framework should be established that holds online providers and social media platforms accountable and requires them to mark institutionally verified

information, as well as mis- and disinformation. This framework should additionally require social media platforms to delete inappropriate content when children are at stake. Through this it should be easier for children to navigate digital platforms by being able to verify if the information they encountered tells the truth or not. Here, the interviewees answering on behalf of the political opposition party NEOS (R8), and the interviewee associated with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute (R13) stated accordingly:

> I think there need to be stronger restrictions on what content can be shown to children and young people […] I think it should be made in favor of child protection. (R8, 2023, L. 48-60)
>
> I would find it important that a clear framework is established for companies, for social media, for the online provider, that they know when children or young people are clients, they have certain responsibilities to fulfill, if any problematic content is identified, it should be deleted accordingly. (R13, 2023, L. 182-190)

Here, R13 demanded that social media platforms should delete inappropriate content if children are at stake, however it is not always possible to determine the identity of a person behind a profile, as highlighted by different interviewees. Therefore, the need of digital identification keys, so that children can better determine who they are dealing with, to better evaluate the sources behind information they encounter, have been mentioned. Especially the respondent associated with the Children's and Youth Ombuds-Office (R7) argued contrary to respondents that mentioned the need for regulations on the content and algorithm level, that regulations related to age, and digital identifications are needed:

> Most social media are relatively generous with the distribution of qualified or disqualifying content. I don't see much regulatory potential for this at the moment and that's also because I can register there, regardless of how old I am. That is a reality and that is, from my point of view the criteria where we could start. (R7, 2023, L. 129-132)
>
> There would be the possibility to regulate and to identify people after they have authenticated themselves. So, this option would exist through a type of key, which is assigned once, at birth, just like a social security number and only with this assigned number it should be possible to operate online. (R7, 2023, L. 47-55)

8. Discussion

This paper was commenced to explore the concept of children's digital information rights – as can be found in the UNCRC (1990) and UNCRC General Comment (2021) – with the aim of investigating how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria and what needs to be done beyond existing policy efforts. To find out how children's digital information rights are addressed, supported, and promoted, as well as what Austrian policy efforts, challenges, and recommendations exist in that regard, 17 in-depth elite interviews were conducted with respondents from different professional and societal sectors that have a stake in children's digital information rights. Through thematic analysis four different themes and five subthemes could be identified.

The first theme detected refers to *limited political awareness (1)* regarding the existence of children's information rights, which became apparent when interviewees frequently mentioned that Austrian laws and public policies concerned with children's rights, but also children's rights initiatives, usually do not address children's information rights, since the legal component of children's information access and media use in the digital space is often overlooked. A possible explanation could be that, unlike other children's rights under the UNCRC (1990), the children's right to information (UNCRC, 1990, Art. 13 & 17) was not included in the Austrian constitution – the "BVG Kinderrechte" (RIS, 2011). Other aspects that showed a lack of political awareness for children's digital information rights could be found in a *lack of financial support (1.1.)* for Austrian initiatives supporting children's digital skills, their digital media literacy, their access to information, as well as their children's rights in general, as stated by respondents related to Digitaler Kompass, Saferinternet.at, or the Children's Rights National Coalition. When it comes to the ways children's digital information rights are addressed by Austrian policy makers and in existing policy efforts, rather *protectionist approaches (1.2.)* could be identified, in line with Tobin (2021) who underlines that children's media access is rather looked at through a patronizing, commanding, protection- and

preservation-driven lens, that emphasizes possible risks and dangers on digital platforms. These findings are not surprising, since the general political and legal acknowledgement of children often happens through the lens of protection and prohibition while their rights to participation, and in the case of this study, the right to information, are overlooked (Livingstone & Carr, 2016). The problem with such a protection-driven approach regarding children's rights issues lies within perceiving children as predominantly vulnerable, overlooking their citizenship practices and *the need to incorporate children's perspectives (1.3.)* in information creation and policy-making processes, as it has been highlighted by many interviewees. Here it can be argued that children in Austria especially regarding their digital information rights, are partly seen as "passive objects in need of protection rather than as active subjects with rights" (Tobin, 2021, p. 30).

Therefore, the need to cater for children's digital information rights in terms of empowering and strengthening their information evaluation skills on digital platforms has been highlighted by various respondents. In this regard another reoccurring theme could be identified with *digital media literacy (2).* Accordingly, Stalker et al. (2019) and Tobin (2021) highlight the importance of teaching children the right skills to become more critical in their information evaluation and being able to cope with online threads. Here, two important fields that have the potential to support children's digital media literacy have been determined. *Digital media literacy education in schools (2.1.)* has been identified as an important pillar to pass on necessary skills to children, however respondents agreed that media education does not get enough attention in the Austrian education system. This is in line with the study findings on concerns of Austrian Gen Z, who stated that they are not learning enough about media in Austrian schools (ORF Public Value & Hitradio Ö3, 2023 & 2024). Even though Austrian policy efforts to support children's digital media literacy through the education system emerged during the analysis – especially through the school subject Digital Basic Education – a need for improvement has been highlighted since digital media literacy skills were found to be not

catered for in a systematical way in Austrian schools. Suggestions concern a shift from a strong focus on children's digital and technical skills to put more emphasis on critical information evaluation and digital media literacy skills – in line with the thoughts of Mateus (2021) – as well as to implement media education and media literacy aspects as a cross-curricular school subject, that can be taught in any class, and to better establish media education and media literacy in teacher training.

Subsequently, another reoccurring field playing an important role in catering for children's digital media literacy skills and in turn for their digital information rights could be allocated within the often-mentioned group of parents, and adults with a duty of care, as well as professionals that are dealing with kids – namely *digital media literacy training for parents (2.2)*. Parents and adults with a duty to care have a stake in empowering children's digital and critical information assessment skills, and with that in turn impact their capability of enacting their right to information on digital platforms. However, since lacking media literacy, and information assessment skills within parents were often mentioned throughout the interviews, the strong need for awareness work and media literacy training within parents – educating them about critical, digital, media and information assessment skills – has been identified as important measure for parents to take on a supportive role for their children. These results align with the thoughts of Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2019), who underline the possibility of a positive contribution of parents towards their children's digital media skills. Therefore, empowering and teaching skills to critically evaluate digital information both in parents and kids, is more important than ever.

In the sense of empowering children, the European Commission (2021) states in their strategy of the rights of the child that no policy regarding children should be designed without their perspectives and voices. The need to better integrate children's voices, when their information rights are at stake was determined, meaning that their perspectives should be considered when designing new policies affecting children's digital media use and their

information consumption. Related to this, another theme could be identified, that is the importance of creating and distributing relevant *verified child-friendly information offers on digital platforms (3)*. Information is a fundamental pillar for successful participation in democratic societies (Chávez, 2021). The necessity of public bodies and policy makers to provide and support child appropriate and target group specific information on channels relevant and in a language understandable for them could be identified in line with the thoughts of Mateus (2021) who highlights the importance of having access to independent media and authentic sources to make informed decisions. Here, the role of Austrian policy makers in providing and supporting the production of child-friendly and age-appropriate information on relevant digital channels was rather negatively evaluated by respondents affiliated with NGO's, civil service, and political opposition, arguing that too little information in a language understandable for children on digital platforms used by children is provided. Also, the challenge of reaching children in a fragmented society was underlined many times. Therefore, suggestions were made towards an approach of including the perspective of the target group in the creation of information. In that sense, a policy strategy – the Austrian Youth Strategy – emerged throughout the analysis that entails among other things aspects seeking to enhance the digital media literacy of children and youth, as well as to support the provision of reliable youth-oriented and youth-relevant information for young people from an age of 14 years old on. The strategy was mentioned especially by respondents affiliated with the youth policy departments of the federal chancellery, as well as by civil service sectors. Yet, criticism has been expressed, that provided information offers are not well known by young people since it is not published on the right channels.

Additionally, to this individual empowerment level of children's skills, respondents highlighted the need to support children's digital information rights on a regulatory and technical level that goes beyond the national borders, meaning to create policies to protect children's safe information access on digital platforms by regulating them. Here, the need to

regulate intransparent platform algorithms (4) that reinforce the display of dis- and misinformation could be identified as last reemerging theme. A framework mentioned in that regard is the Digital Services Act (DSA) that among other things obliges digital platforms to better protect minors. It states the need to adapt platform algorithms in a more transparent way regarding their recommender systems (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2022). However, respondents referred in that context to the need to further regulate platform algorithms in terms of appropriate and trustworthy content available for children. The need to modify algorithms in a way that predominantly institutionally verified information is being promoted and recommended to children as important pillar of protecting and supporting their information rights in the digital space has been mentioned by different respondents. This aspect of changing algorithms in a way that dis- and misinformation is not pushed by algorithms can also be found in the study of Kaiser and Mayer (2023), who argue that interventions of "algorithmic deamplification" – referring to a change of the recommender systems of digital platform algorithms in a way that misinformation is not being amplified – would be effective in reducing engagement with dis- and misinformation. However, as Mateus (2021) argues, regulating media is not enough, "when the users of social media are also helping to generate misinformation" (p. 374). The importance of catering for children's digital information rights on two different levels – empowerment through digital media literacy and protection through platform regulations in form of transparent algorithms – emerged throughout the research.

9. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

To investigate the concept of children's digital information rights in the Austrian context a broad research focus was necessary. This broad focus was essential to better explore the general existence of Austrian children, youth, and media policy efforts in catering for children's digital information rights, and to find out about relevant, and undeserved aspects. Thus, children's difference – as emphasized in difference-centered citizenship theory (Devine & Cockburn, 2018; Larkins, 2013; Moosa-Mitha, 2005) – has only been considered during the research process in form of children's age difference to adults. Yet, it is important to recognize that there are not "the children", there are different groups with different preconditions and needs, childhood needs to be differentiated, as highlighted during the interviews. For example, girls need to be addressed differently than boys, or children confronted with poverty, refugee, and migrant children, as well as children with disabilities need to be considered (Kubow et al., 2023; Moosa-Mitha, 2005), when talking about children's digital information rights and how to implement and promote them. There is the need for diversified information offers and public policies that acknowledge different childhood realities and age groups to cater for their information rights on digital platforms, so that every child can make use of their information rights, navigate the digital space safely through digital literacy skills, be able to make informed decisions and participate in society. Therefore, future research should consider children's citizenship in a more differentiated way by exploring child, youth, and media policies that cater for aspects of digital information rights of a specific (minority) group of children.

Furthermore, even though this paper purposively did not consider the perspectives of children and young people when investigating Austrian public policy efforts concerning their information rights, but the opinions and estimations of different (adult) professionals, like journalists, politicians, researchers, youth workers, and NGOs, the results of this paper indicate the need to better incorporate children's voices in policy making and information creation processes related to their digital information rights. The growing awareness of children's rights

has led to the recognition, that children should be involved in evaluating and disseminating research findings on matters that concern them (Tobin, 2021). Therefore, in a next step of investigating children's digital information rights, building up on these results, it would be valuable to talk to the target group of children itself, to get better insights on their perspectives and ideas. Children could be asked how they define digital information rights, what is important to them in this regard and what they need and demand from policy makers to better act on their information rights in the digital environment. Of course, ethical considerations of working together with minors would have to be met, however it would be a necessary way of finding out about children's own understanding of digital information rights.

On a technical level, challenging factors in conducting this study lied especially in the interview preparation, recruiting, and actual interview-conducting phase. In order to recruit relevant and suitable interviewees having a stake and expertise in the topic of this study, many interview requests had to be sent out, in some cases a few weeks passed until a reply had been received and an interview date could be scheduled. 17 weeks were needed to recruit interviewees with high level expertise and insights, as well as to conduct the interviews, and to reach saturation. Reasons for the length of the interview recruiting and conducting phase can be explained through ignored interview requests, as well as due to the hierarchical high position of many requested interviewees (elite) and their busy time schedules. Therefore, during the field phase of conducting interviews, interview requests were sent out continually.

Concerning limiting technical factors, it must be mentioned that connection issues during online interviews – most interviewees preferred to have their interview online instead of meeting in person – led in some cases to difficulties and delays in the transcription phase due to unclear words and comments. However, in the end unclarities could be solved.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper represents an exploration of the concept of children's digital information rights in the Austrian context by drawing on perceptions, expectations, and claims derived from 17 in-depth elite interviews with Austrian professionals from different sectors, accompanied by policy reviews. Grounded in children's citizenship theories (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Lister, 2007a; Lister, 2007b) as well as in legal foundations of the UNCRC (1990) and the UN General Comment No. 25 (2021), the overarching research question of how and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria and what needs to be done beyond existing policy efforts could be answered as follows. Different Austrian children's and media policy efforts were identified containing aspects that address children's digital information rights, yet a lack of political awareness for the children's right to access digital media and information, as well as limited financial resources for Austrian initiatives catering for children's digital information rights emerged. Furthermore, the need for a shift from dominant protectionist approaches towards a child empowerment perspective has been emphasized.

Throughout the research it became clear that children's digital information rights need to be addressed on two different levels. On the one hand there is the level of individual empowerment, where children's digital and critical media literacy is allocated equipping children with the right skills to evaluate information they encounter on digital platforms and to act on their information and civic rights. Here, especially two Austrian policy efforts were identified as key regulatory instruments catering for children's (digital) media literacy and information access: the school subject Digital Basic Education and the Austrian Youth Strategy. Yet respondents agreed that in both policy efforts more emphasis should be put on fostering children's critical digital information evaluation instead of teaching them predominantly technical skills. Due to the mentioned lack of political awareness, sensitivity, and attention for children's digital information access and its legal component in terms of the child's right to

seek, receive and impart information in the digital environment (UNCRC, 2021), the practical implementation of mentioned policies and with that also the support and promotion of children's digital information rights in Austria is often dependent on individual initiatives of teachers, parents, children's rights advocates, and other stakeholders. Thus, the empowerment of children's digital media literacy skills needs to happen more systematically in Austrian schools, as well as in parents training, making sure that Austrian children are prepared to encounter digital platforms and to critically assess digital information they encounter.

On the other hand, in addition to the mentioned empowerment level children's digital information rights need to be supported and protected on a regulatory and technical level, in terms of digital platform regulations. Yet, when it comes to regulating digital platforms, Austrian resources are limited. In the end European efforts are needed to create sustainable and safe digital environments for children, in regulating social media platforms and its algorithms. In this regard the developments around the European Union Digital Services Act (2022) are to be endorsed, however with the remark that algorithms should be further modified towards transparent recommender systems, rating content based on a children's rights stance that prefer institutionally verified content and label disinformation.

Thus, a balance needs to be found between children's digital information access, their empowerment through digital and critical media literacy skills, and the necessity to regulate digital platform algorithms with the protection of children's information rights in mind. This could enable children to better act on their information rights, which are arguably an important pillar of contemporary children's citizenship and their citizenship practices where the capability of using (digital) media in a reflective and critical way play a central role (Harris et al., 2023; Heggart & Flowers, 2023; Mateus, 2021). In that sense, it is important that children are being empowered to enact their information rights to participate and make informed decisions in the digital spaces of democracies, representing an especially important feature for Austrian children, where young people are already allowed to vote from the age of 16. In the end, the

creation of safe digital platforms that meet children's needs to enact their information rights, and the support of children's digital media literacy skills is only possible through the joint efforts of policymakers, educators, technology companies, researchers, NGOs, youth workers, journalists, parents, and children themselves (Stalker et al., 2019; Smahel et al., 2020; Vickery, 2017) at both national and European levels.

With these insights, this paper provides a space to rethink existing approaches to children's use of digital platforms and their access to information, recognizing its legal dimension. The results of this study can be seen as starting point to further explore the complex concept of children's digital information rights in another national context or from a specific policy angle considering children's practices and differences.

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12. Appendix

Appendix A: Tables

Table 2

Descriptive Features of the Interviews

Pseudonym	Interview Length	Setting	Transcript Pages
R1	0:25:09	online	6
R2	0:52:47	online	9
R3	0:24:41	online	5
R4	0:31:05	in person	6
R5	0:29:52	online	7
R6	0:42:02	online	9
R7	0:32:45	online	9
R8	00:20	in person	5
R9	0:35:18	online	7
R10	0:29:07	online	6
R11	0:30:35	online	6
R12	0:49:12	in person	8
R13	01:26:33	online	14
R14	00:46:48	in person	8
R15	0:55:16	in person	10
R16	00:48:15	online	8
R17	/	online	4

Table 3

Final Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Codes	Exemplary Data Extract
1. Limited political awareness	No awareness of children's digital information rights Limited children's rights knowledge Lack of political efforts No awareness about the legal component of children's access to media and use of information Lack of structures catering for children's digital information rights Challenge of seeing children as legal entities with the right to obtain information Awareness needed that children must be able to navigate the digital space as competent as the physical	I don't see any political, I'm not even saying priority, I don't think it's even on the radar that this exists and that something could be done here. (R9, 2023, L. 144-145)
1.1. Lack of financial resources	Need for financial support from the public sector Need for more financial resources for non-governmental and non-profit organisations Difficulty of raising money Not enough funding for children's rights and media initiatives	I think, as with many other non-profit organizations, it's always a question of how to finance what we do in a sustainable way so that we can achieve our goals and achieve our purposes, and I think that's an area in Austria that could work better, because that's something where we spend a lot of energy to do what we do. (R5, 2023, L. 78-80)
1.2. Protectionist approach	Children framed as vicitms Focus on child protection Perception that the less time children spend on digital platforms the better Preservation policymaking and education Prohibitions for technical innovations instead of integrating it	You only have to look at how children are talked about. They are the weakest members of society", 'helpless', 'victims of violence'. I don't want to downplay those things, but that already puts them in that position of our protectees. (R9, 2023, L. 215-217)

	Children being patronised	
1.3. Need to incorporate children's perspectives	Need for more initiatives were children and decision makers work together Need to perceive children as equal stakeholders in discussions concerning their digital information rights Considering digital environments from a child's perspective Intergenerational permeability Not enough awareness of Austrian ministries to incorporate children's perspectives Problem of carrying adult perspectives on children's spaces	A discussion about the digital communication and information rights of young people cannot happen without young people. (R13, 2023, L. 628-629)
2. Digital media literacy	Need for source criticism ability of children Digital information assessment skills to cater for children's resilience Making informed decisions through media literacy Social Media as information source Knowledge and conscious approach towards social media platforms Risk of disinformation Quality journalistic media play no role for children Need for the ability to journalistic research skills	It's not just the discussion about the risks, there are already all the concerns about child protection online, all of which are justified, but I think it would be much more necessary to focus on what is called 'digital literacy'. (R13, 2023, L. 152-155)
2.1. Digital media literacy education in schools	Digital Basic Education no high priority in teacher training Digital media literacy as cross-curricular topic Digital skills and media literacy as basic skills	In schools, the basic solution is that it (media literacy and information evaluation) must be seen and really be accepted as a cross-curricular topic. It's often the case that it's then perhaps included in a computer science class, or now it is part of digital basic education. But I think it could be taught in any subject, and even in computer science or digital basic education it is sometimes lost, and this is very

	Teachers do not have enough expertise or timely resources to teach digital basic education	much due to the fact that many teachers simply do not feel to have the competencies to teach it. (R5, 2023, L. 142-147)
	Digital media literacy education depending on personal initiative of teachers	
	Missing infrastructures in schools to teach digital basic education	
	Not enough resources to cater for children's digital media literacy	
	Digital basic education often about technical and not critical skills	
	Media literacy should play a higher role in Digital Basic Education	
2.2. Digital media literacy training for parents	Parent education and awareness work needed	As an organization I often see that we have a task to make new developments understandable for adults and to show them how they can be useful for children, also how adults can simply support children (R1, 2023, L. 40-42)
	Parents as role models for children's media literacy	
	Every adult dealing with children should be a digital media literacy expert	
	Critical thinking and information assessment skills in the digital environment for parents	
	Supportive role of adults with a duty to care	
3. Child-friendly verified digital information offers	Digital accessibility of reliable information on different channels for children needed	Politics provides too little information in a language and in an area of interest for young people, so that they have the feeling that they are well informed. That is an omission on the part of politics. (R9, 2023, L. 42-53)
	Austrian ministries providing too little information understandable for children	
	The state should create and deliver all information understandable for children	
	Information for children should be created with children	
	Need for verified and checked information for children in digital spaces	

	Challenge to reach different age and target groups	
	Austrian Youth Strategy as dedicated field of action	
4. Platform regulations: transparent algorithms	Regulating digital platform algorithms regarding content display	There is a need for a new law that regulates the algorithms […] companies must be required to disclose their algorithms, and it should also be changed that the algorithms rate seriousness better. (R12, 2023, L. 282-284)
	Transparent algorithms that prefer verified content	
	Age assessment	
	Online identification keys and verifiable identities	
	Content restrictions for children	
	Creating safe digital spaces for children	
	Regulations for safe digital spaces worked out on European level	

Appendix B: English and German Abstracts

Abstract

The digital space has become a living environment for young European citizens. Especially social media platforms unveil new opportunities in accessing a variety of information, representing a popular information source for children. However, with growing threats of disinformation and algorithms reinforcing them, the question of how to protect and support children's information rights on digital platforms arises. This thesis, grounded in children's citizenship theory, investigates how, and in which ways children's digital information rights are catered for in Austria, and what needs to be done beyond existing children's media policy efforts. To answer the research question semi-structured in-depth elite interviews with Austrian stakeholders (*N = 17*), as well as secondary research in form of policy reviews were carried out. Through thematic analysis four main themes have been identified. *Limited political awareness (1)* and rather protectionist approaches within Austrian policy efforts regarding children's access to digital platforms and information, and with that the need to consider children as contributing citizens were determined. Furthermore, the empowerment of children through fostering their *digital media literacy (2)*, and their access to *verified digital child-friendly information (3),* as well as stricter *digital platform regulations in form of transparent algorithms (4)* have been identified as keys to strengthen children's digital information rights. Here especially two relevant Austrian policy strategies emerged: The school subject Digital Basic Education and the Austrian Youth Strategy.

Keywords: Children's Digital Information Rights, Children's Citizenship Theory, Digital Media Literacy, In-Depth Elite Interviews, Thematic Analysis

Zusammenfassung

Der digitale Raum stellt eine Lebenswelt für junge europäische Bürger:innen dar. Insbesondere Soziale Medien sind eine beliebte Informationsquelle für Kinder. Angesichts der zunehmenden Ausbreitung von Desinformation und Algorithmen, die diese Falschinformationen verbreiten, stellt sich die Frage, wie das Kinderrecht auf verlässliche Informationen auf digitalen Plattformen geschützt und gestärkt werden kann. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht basierend auf Staatsbürgerschaftstheorien, in welchem Ausmaß und auf welche Weise digitale Informationsrechte von Kindern in Österreich gefördert werden und was über die bestehenden medienpolitischen Bemühungen für Kinder hinaus umgesetzt werden muss. Zur Beantwortung der Forschungsfragen wurden semistrukturierte Tiefeninterviews mit österreichischen Stakeholdern (*N = 17*) durchgeführt. Durch die Methode der thematischen Analyse, begleitet von Policy Reviews, konnten vier Hauptthemen identifiziert werden. *Begrenztes politisches Bewusstsein (1)* und protektionistische Ansätze bezüglich des Zugangs von Kindern zu digitalen Plattformen und Informationen, und damit die Notwendigkeit, Kinder als mitwirkende Bürger:innen zu betrachten, konnten ermittelt werden. Darüber hinaus wurde die Stärkung der *digitalen Medienkompetenz von Kindern (2)*, sowie der Zugang zu *verifizierten digitalen altersgerechten Informationen (3)* und die Notwendigkeit einer strengeren *Regulierung digitaler Plattformen in Form von transparenteren Algorithmen (4)* als Schlüssel zur Stärkung der digitalen Informationsrechte von Kindern identifiziert werden. Dabei kristallisierten sich insbesondere zwei relevante österreichische politische Strategien heraus: Das Schulfach Digitale Grundbildung und die österreichische Jugendstrategie.

Schlagwörter: Digitale Kinderinformationsrechte, Kinder-Staatsbürgerschaftstheorie, Medienkompetenz, Eliteinterviews, Thematische Analyse