**RX Radio’s Child Contribution to Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment**

**Who RX Radio is:**

RX Radio is a radio station run by and for children operating from the Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital in Cape Town, South Africa. It is the first radio station in the world that trains child reporters to broadcast from within a hospital. In the last 2 years, RX Radio has trained 87 child/young reporters (ages 4 to 18), 67% patients at Red Cross and 33% siblings or friends. A team of five staff, volunteers and former reporters (ages 18+) work behind the scenes to train, coordinate, and support the reporters – but the children are always behind the microphones and are active participants in the production; they design their own shows, choose the music, invite guests, write interview questions, and even plan fundraising events.

**What we do:**

RX Radio broadcasts 24/7, LIVE and Pre-recorded programmes (including shows, music, podcasts, and radio diaries). The station transmits audio and images through the hospital’s internal television system to all wards and public spaces in the hospital. We also live stream the same content on our website and app, and frequently update our social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). Magazine-format shows consist of music, interviews, stories, news, weather, and traffic updates. Children in the hospital can also participate in the shows through song requests, dedications, live games and prize giveaways by calling or interacting with our social media. To become an RX Radio reporter, children first complete basic training: a week of workshops about important life skills (e.g. listening, storytelling), radio reporting and production skills. At the end of the week, children produce a five-minute audio-visual “radio diary” where they tell a story of their choice, and many narrate their experience in hospital. After basic training, they have the choice to become an official RX Radio reporter. They then can participate in on-going training: workshops led by staff and guest facilitators from a variety of fields.

**Objectives: We strive to**

* Improve children’s experiences of hospital and of their illness;
* Increase adult understanding of children’s experiences of chronic illness/hospital;
* Inform improved health worker and hospital practice;
* Contribute to the healing process;
* Produce quality audio programmes by children and for children.

**A brief history:**

RX Radio officially began operations on November 1st 2016, under the wing of the Red Cross Children’s Hospital Facility Board and supported by the Children’s Hospital Trust. The station is now a registered Non-Profit Company under the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission. The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) has put a moratorium on the issuing of community radio licenses since 2015, so RX Radio has not yet been able to broadcast over FM frequencies, but the station will apply for the FM license once the moratorium is lifted and is now exploring zero rate access to data to listen to RX Radio via internet with different service providers.

**Moving forward:**

RX Radio is partnering with the WC Provincial Department of Health to increase the reach of our broadcasts in other hospitals. This year (2019) we are starting a pilot program with Paarl Hospital. By 2021, we plan to reach another four hospitals with paediatric wards in the Western Cape. The vision is to reach every hospital with a paediatric ward in South Africa.

**Workshop and Survey on Children’s Rights for the Internet Age:**

**Methodology**

On 27 April 2019, we ran Rethinking Children’s Rights in the internet environment workshop for reporters. This workshop’s aim was to gather information on children’s rights in the internet and to look specifically on children’s opinions and experiences on how they navigate the space. The workshop was a build up to the invitation by The Committee on the Rights of the Child for various organisations to contribute in the process of drafting a concept note of the General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment.

The 1-hour workshop refreshed the participants on their understanding of children’s rights and a discussion on rights in the digital space was also conducted. There were 8 children in the workshop, 2 boys and 6 girls aged 11 to 19. We covered issues like privacy, harm, parent’s involvement, health, responsibility etc. were tackled. A survey was also sent to three boys aged 15, 18, and 18 asking the same questions that were asked during the workshop discussion.

We used the qualitative approach for gathering the information.

**Access to Information and Freedom of Expression and Thought**The children in the workshop and the survey access the internet in a variety of ways, namely through WiFi at home, school, or public spaces, and using data on their cell phones. In order to get data, the children rely on either their parents or their own pocket money.

In terms of the devices that the children use, all of them use cell phones to connect to the internet (with one of the younger girls only using her mother’s phone). Not all of them have access to computers or tablets, but those that can, often access the internet using these devices along with their cell phones.

When asked why they need to access the internet, all of the children said that the internet helps not only with their school work, but it also allows them to self-educate and to entertain themselves with videos, articles and games. Many of them believe that this access to information is important in their school and social lives.

**Right to Education and Digital Literacy**

As stated above, all of the children use the internet to access information for educational purposes, however, the children all have different levels of access to educational materials online – including both at school and at home. Half of the participants don’t have any access to the internet at school, while the rest have some level of access at school during computer classes or utilising the school WiFi. One of the boys who answered the survey said that his school has an advanced level of access and utilisation of the internet in the classroom:

*I have access to past papers and memos for a variety of subjects through Google Classroom. I am also able to communicate with my friends and peers through Google Classroom. Information regarding exams and what to study are communicated to us through our school’s academic website. We also have an online student portal where details like our timetables, reports and sports are available.* (boy, 15)

As was touched on in the previous section, children also use the internet to educate themselves about topics outside of their school curriculum. An example of this is when the children use the internet to look up more information about their health conditions. More examples include when one of the younger girls said that she uses the internet to find DIY hacks, and one of the boys uses the internet to find home remedies to lose fat.

In terms of digital literacy, all of the children seem to have at least basic knowledge of accessing the internet and navigating social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. However, digital literacy seems to increase depending on the age of the children and the level of access that they have to the internet. An example of this is that the older children and the children who go to a school where they have internet access, they are clearly more adept at using various features of the internet, including Google Classroom and other applications. Another example of age being a determining factor when it comes to digital literacy is when one of the younger boys spoke about using Wikipedia for school projects, while one of the older girls countered this point by saying that Wikipedia is an unreliable source due to anyone having the ability to edit the pages on the site.

*So I had to do one [a project] on a South African artist. So I did it on Cassper Nyovest, and they gave me his biography. Telling me, where he came from, what he is now and from the past how he it all started. Like Wikipedia gives different types of sites.* (boy, 14)

*But Wikipedia is fake news. Cause you are allowed to access and update the information, so Wikipedia is not actually a good resource for information.* (girl, 17)

**Protection of privacy, identity and data processing**

When it comes to the protection of privacy, identity and data processing, there was one main concern expressed by the children. This concern has to do with the fact that the children don’t know how their private information will be used on the internet. This comes from a fear of being hacked or companies using privately entered information for advertising or malicious purposes. An example is when one of the older girls said that a South African political party contacted her on her cell phone number, despite the fact that she was not aware of this party even having her number. Another example of this is when one of the girls said that chatting to random people on the internet could lead to hacking or phishing.

In contrast to this concern of keeping information private, the majority of the children claim to have lied about their age/information in order to access restricted sites, social media platforms or age restricted games.

*When I started Facebook, I was like less than 18, I was 15 so I said I’m 18. And they didn’t verify and I got the account.* (girl, 19)

*I have entered false ages to gain access to sites necessary for the work that I do in media, for example when I was 10 I created a Gmail account … something that you had to be 13 years old to do.* (boy, 15)

While most of them did this for innocent reasons (such as being a year or two younger than the required age for a social media platform or online game), they do agree that lying about your age on the internet could lead to trouble. Two of them suggested that maybe websites and other online platforms should consider checking a ‘certificate’ that verifies user’s ages and other pertinent information that isn’t too private.

**Protection from violence, sexual exploitation and other harm**

When talking about sexually explicit or harmful content on the internet, many of the children have witnessed pop-up adverts that include either sexually explicit images or harmful computer viruses. While some of the children have reported these types of pop-ups, many of those in the workshop discussion agreed that there should be an age warning or some other type of restriction before you can view the advert or video.

*I was watching a video and then a pornographic ad popped up, I reported it immediately* (boy, 18)

*I think that there should be warnings, like if you want to search like ‘how a child is born?’ They should like give you a reminder saying, ‘are you sure you want to see this?’ Cause [it’s] very aggressive, you can get traumatised by this video.* (boy, 14)

With regards to violence, the issue of children or adolescents filming themselves beating up or talking about beating other children/adolescents came up. One of the boys gave an example of a girl posting a threatening video on Facebook directed at another girl and how this constitutes as cyberbullying – especially as the video was shared multiple times.

*Like on Facebook it was long time ago, a girl got cyber bullied. This girl [was] saying she is better than this other girl and she is going to hit the girl and this. So everybody who … [knows] her on Facebook wanted to see the video, some people got hold of the video shared it as their status.* (boy, 14)

Phishing and predatory behaviour online was also touched on by one of the boys who answered the survey. He spoke about how sometimes anonymous or known individuals contact children in order to engage in sexual conversations or in order to conduct other malicious behaviour. This boy gave his own personal experience with someone on a social media platform trying to engage in sexual conversation with him.

*There has also been an incident on Facebook where someone tried to have a sexual conversation with me.* (boy, 18)

One of the younger girls in the workshop discussion also expressed concern about this saying that sometimes chatting to a random person could lead to the hacking of private information.

The topic of lying about their ages also came up in relation to violence, sexual exploitation and harm, with some of the children lying about their ages to gain full and explicit access to content that may have age restrictions or may be traumatic for young children. One of the older girls spoke about how accessing this harmful content could traumatise young people for years.

Many of the children suggested that maybe there should be child versions of different online platforms – pointing out the success of such kid-friendly platforms as YouTube for kids. They all agreed that a Google for children could also work to help protect privacy and protect the children from harm.

*I think they should make a separate Google for kids so they can’t access adult things, like Google for kids.* (boy, 14)

*Same like they have YouTube for kids.* (girl, 17)

**Family environment, parenting and alternative care**

As was spoken about in the ‘Access to Information’ section, many of the children rely on their parents to provide either data, WiFi, or the devices that the children use to access the internet. This means that parents do have some control over the children’s internet usage – although this could be limited depending on 1) the level of independence the children have with regards to using the internet or 2) the level of digital literacy of caregivers.

However, despite the fact that some of the children have limited supervision over their internet usage, they all mentioned the fact that parents/caregivers should have strict supervision and evaluation over a child’s use of the internet. They believed that this could limit the amount of inappropriate or traumatic content that children are exposed to.

*I think parents should be open about the internet and what is happening in the internet. And they should also, like keep on checking what the kids are doing because when the child sees something in the internet like it stays in their mind. And also be honest tell the child that this is right for you and this is wrong for you.* (girl, 19)

**Health and wellbeing**

Due to the fact that we are a radio station based at a children’s hospital, we were able to touch on the topic of health and wellbeing quite effectively. Many of the children have said that they have looked up their medical conditions online in order to either gather more information about their illness or to avoid having to ask medical professionals directly. However, it seems to generally be the older children who are interested in this information.

*I can research things about my illness and certain things I can research instead of asking the doctor.* (boy, 18)

Some of the children also look up information about medical procedures or extra health information that could help them in life or with their illness. For example, one of the boys who is a burns survivor said that he has researched different types of scarring treatments that are available. Other examples of this is one of the girls looking up information about lung transplants and one of the boys looking up images of ileostomy bag.

*So, when Sister told me that I have one lung and all that stuff so I wanted to know if this may be possible. If something happens to my lung will I be able to get the lung transplant so yeah I wanted to know about that.* (girl, 19)

*I wanted to see what is an ileostomy bag and they showed me pictures of people and what it is and how you can get and if you have it for Cancer. They were just giving examples. I was looking because I wasn’t pretty sure of what my doctor said, it was, how can I say, very sophisticated the way he said it, so I wanted the easier way for people to say it.* (boy, 14)

None of the children saw any issues with using the internet to Google medical conditions and treatments. However, one of the boys did say that there should be an explicit content warning on videos that relate to health topics – such as a video of a woman giving birth.

**Conclusion**

Overall, while many of the children were not aware of any children’s rights on the internet, they did feel that maybe this should be a topic that needs to be focussed on. For example, one of the boys mentions a few times that children’s rights are not clearly enforced or are ignored in the internet space.

When giving advice on how to protect children’s rights on the internet, the children suggest that children, parents, schools, and internet content generators and platforms should have some levels of responsibility. For children, they should be careful of what they browse online and to talk to an adult if they are not sure of the content that they want to access. For parents or caregivers, they need to be hands-on when it comes to monitoring their children’s online habits and what they are browsing. They also need to be open and honest about the internet and discuss the dangers and risks of the internet. For schools, they should limit the access to only necessary academic sites. For internet content generators and platforms, they need to be responsible, filter content by age restrictions and maybe create child-friendly versions of their content/platforms.