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Abstract

Purpose: Loneliness' impact on health and wellbeing has emerged as a public health issue in several countries. Young people are increasingly understood as a 'risk group' and intervention target for loneliness-reduction. This research paper presents a discourse analysis of policies and political speech about young people and loneliness.

Methodology: Using discourse analysis inspired by Carol Bacchi's 'What is the Problem Represented to Be' (WPR) approach, this cross-cultural analysis studies loneliness policy in the UK and Norway. In doing so, we ask: What is the problem of loneliness among young people represented to be in UK and Norwegian welfare policy?

Findings: Our findings indicate paradoxical problematizations of the role technology plays among lonely young people, who, in this context, are divided in two categories: ablenormative and disabled youth. We reveal fundamental differences in beliefs about the impact of technology on these groups, and corresponding differences in the proposed solutions. The problem of young peoples' loneliness is represented as uncertainty about potential harms of digital connectedness and reduced face-to-face interactions. In contrast, the problem of loneliness among disabled youth is represented as impeded access to social realms, with technology serving a benign role as equalizer.

Originality: Little research has examined this new policy field. Our article contributes to filling this gap and encourages policymakers to consider how political discourses on loneliness may lead them to overlook digital interventions young people could find beneficial.

Keywords: Loneliness, technology, social media, discourse analysis, social policy, public health, young people, disability, Norway, United Kingdom

Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward loneliness as a matter of public policy concern. A focus on health consequences of loneliness has resulted in the development of guidelines to reduce loneliness in several countries. Two countries that stand out for being among the first to make loneliness a policy priority are the UK and Norway. In 2018, a 'loneliness minister' was appointed in the UK (Prime Minister's Office and the Office of Civil Society, 2018). In Norway, the government made prevention of loneliness one of three key priorities in its 2019 white paper on public health. On careful comparative reading, we find this white paper introduces a loneliness strategy that draws heavily on England's strategy, *A Connected Society* (Great Britain. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2018), for inspiration (Norway. Health and Care Department [HCD], 2019a).

Despite increased political engagement, little research has explored the discursive constructions of loneliness in policymaking and their effects. This cross-cultural discourse analysis studies loneliness policy in the UK and its introduction in Norway. Using Carol Bacchi's What is the Problem Represented to Be approach (WPR), this policy import becomes interesting. Bacchi understands policymaking as the process of constructing impactful problems (Bacchi, 2012; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). We, along with Bacchi, understand the term 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense, as constituting knowledge and forming boundaries of what can be spoken of and how, as well as who is permitted to speak (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2013). The documents studied range from 2017, when the first loneliness-centered policies emerged in the UK, through the beginning of 2020[1] before pandemic-related lockdowns.

In our preliminary analysis, one prominent theme we uncovered is the role technology is said to play in the making and mitigation of loneliness. The rise of technology for reducing social isolation and loneliness has generated vigorous debate about whether technology can provide authentic connections to alleviate loneliness or if it contributes to the phenomenon. In our close reading of the documents, we discovered that the categories which receive most attention are the age-related categories 'young people' and 'older adults.' Given that political interest in young people and their experience of loneliness is a relatively new development, this paper focuses on how technology is tied to loneliness in this population. We sought to answer the question following question: What is the problem of technology, loneliness and youth represented to be? A clear finding in the text material is that young people's relationship to technology is viewed differently dependent upon whether they are categorized as disabled or non-disabled [2]. We compare the politicized loneliness discourses about the ablenormative youth majority with those about disabled youth as a sensitizing issue to draw attention to alternative problematizations that may exist within the same documents.

Background

Historically, and across cultures, fears that new communication technologies increase loneliness have arisen, indeed, the telegraph, telephone, and television were once hypothesized to increase loneliness (Fernandez and Matt, 2019). Young peoples' use of new media has long been a source of anxiety for adults, from fears that screen time reduces time spent on more traditional childhood activities, to the impact of video games and television on behavior and development (Haldar and Frønes, 1998). Thurlow and Bell have argued that British media discourses on youth and technology have been overwhelmingly critical, whereas the use of the same technologies by adults

is praised as innovative (2009). Imaginaries about young peoples' technological prowess have been utilized in British policy to sell cultural change, while their use-patterns are often represented as deviant, revealing dystopian anxieties about the future (Selwyn, 2003).

Increasingly, the impact of social media on young peoples' experience of loneliness has become a matter of concern across western societies (Boyd, 2014). Research has, however, produced contradictory findings as to its role (Campbell, 2016). These contradictory findings may be more likely to arise due to individual differences than from the medium itself (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Beliefs about the intimacy of social media may influence whether it helps mitigate loneliness (Pittman, 2018). Lonely individuals may be more likely to use social media problematically (O'Day and Heimberg, 2021). Loneliness in young adults has been tied to fabricating self-representations on social media (Thomas, Orme and Kerrigan, 2020; Fardghassemi and Joffe, 2022) and social comparison (Dibb and Foster, 2021; Fardghassemi and Joffe, 2022).

Studies support a 'rich get richer' hypothesis of social media use, where extraverts and socially adept young people reap rewards from social media, while those who are shy, have low self-esteem or are already experiencing low mood may respond negatively (Smith *et al.*, 2021). Depending on how it is used, social media can enhance social capital, expand social networks, or contribute to loneliness (Ryan *et al.*, 2017). Nowland and colleages contend that for those who utilize it to augment existing relationships or build new ones, social media acts against loneliness. Those who use it in an escapist manner that leads to social withdrawal can experience the opposite effect (2018). Some evidence shows that the type of social media may play a role whether it fosters loneliness in users (Pittman and Reich, 2016). Ramo and Lim discovered apps

that provide guidance to young people on social skills and cognitive framing can assist in the reduction of loneliness (2021).

Social media has been employed by students to cope with loneliness, maintain connections at home, and seek information about potential new friends (Boyd, 2010; Vasileiou *et al.*, 2019; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Mahoney and colleagues found disclosure of loneliness on social media led to support and destigmatizing statements from other users (2019). Some teens use social media to gain social support they lack in their immediate environment (Boyd, 2010). Other research has found young people may find it easier to reveal vulnerabilities and gain social support about stigmatized issues online (Pascoe, 2010; Margalit; 2010). Increasingly, multiplayer online gaming is also understood as a social medium that young people use to mitigate loneliness (Margalit, 2010).

While some pessimistic discursive constructions represent young people's use of technology as asocial, non-loneliness centered research has revealed the complex 'networked publics' (Boyd, 2014) that mobile phones and social media enable. Miller and Sinanan remark that the denigration of social media has become something of a 'national pastime', whereas their fieldwork on social media use in a London-adjacent suburb revealed positive uses of social media by young people to provide social support and reinforce friendships (2017). Teenagers often use the internet in much the same way as previous generations used physical gathering places (Boyd, 2010; Haugen and Villa, 2007).

Research shows disabled youth are more likely to experience loneliness than their peers due to stigma, peer marginalization and attitudinal barriers toward disabilities (Valås, 1999; Bridger, 2020). Physical barriers, low incomes and difficulty using public transit can also limit social contact and create loneliness (Olsen, 2018).

Technology has been used to cope with barriers to social participation present in offline life (Dobransky and Hargittai, 2016). Studies show disabled young people overcome attitudinal barriers using online social arenas, where they can control perceptions (Bowker and Tuffin, 2002; Obst and Stafurik, 2010). Disability-specific online communities can expand social support (Obst and Stafurik, 2010).

Dobransky and Hargittai found that disabled people utilize social aspects of the internet as often as those without disabilities but face more barriers in doing so. They argue that rather than working to ensure disabled people stand on equal footing accessing the same tech as others, there has been greater focus on assistive technologies (2016). Macdonald and Clayton found that obtaining necessary adaptive equipment to access the internet can be hampered by prohibitive costs in the UK (2013). The same cannot be said of Norway, where these assistive technologies are free, provided by the welfare state (Moser, 2006).

Ericka Johnson suggests that 'as discourses are read through material artefacts in changing contexts, their authors norms and values become articulated' (2020 p.11). Thus, we wondered how examining loneliness discourses at the intersection of technology might bring new insights. Additionally, we believe a critical analysis of loneliness as a policy field can help uncover implicit societal beliefs about loneliness as a 'problem', as well as normative beliefs about what a 'good life' entails for young people.

Theoretical perspective and analytical methods

In our analysis, we utilize Bacchi's WPR framework as a guide to examine policies from two contexts. Discovering how political problems are imported between cultures confirms Bacchi's point that problems are something politics seeks. Taking

ownership of a problem widely recognized as important is politically effective and productive.

Some theorists have studied how issues garner attention and are legitimized in processes of political agenda setting (Solesbury, 1976; Dery, 2000). Others examine processes of problem definition (Weiss, 1989; Dery, 2000). WPR is a poststructuralist approach which works backwards in contrast to other policy analysis approaches, taking the solutions themselves as its starting point on 'the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change)' (Bacchi, 2012: 21). By thinking backward from proposed solutions, one can uncover implicit problematizations silent in the policies themselves. According to Bacchi, policies are productive in that they construct the very problems they purport to solve (Bacchi, 2012; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). Problems are 'given shape and meaning' within policies (Bacchi, 2016), and to study them is to deconstruct and understand their implications and effects, including that which remains unsaid (Bacchi, 2012).

Drawing inspiration from Foucault's concept of 'subjugated knowledges', WPR draws attention to how different problematizations often warrant different responses, even when policies are stated to be directed at the same 'problem' (Bacchi, 2012). Our aim in utilizing a vast cross-cultural corpus is to uncover alternate problematizations and proposals. Given that policy has the power and potential to shape societal understandings and ways of being in the world, the discovery of alternate ways of constructing problems can lead the way for political and societal change.

Data material

Public documents have a special position in democratic welfare states. They formalize social life, define societal problems and authorize decisions. By studying

public documents, one can gain insight into core societal ideologies. There is no other place that gives better insight into cultural ideas about what is considered a problem and what is perceived as a good solution than in public documents (Asdal and Reinertsen, 2022). Our corpus includes white papers, green papers, parliamentary debates, political speeches, and press releases from British and Norwegian governments, along with a smaller collection of statements made by politicians to the press.

Documents studied range from 2017, when the first loneliness-dedicated policies emerged in the UK, through the beginning of 2020 before the pandemic started [2]. We draw our starting point from two foundational documents from each country. In the case of the UK, this is the English loneliness strategy, *A Connected Society* (Great Britain. DCMS, 2018). With Norway, we take our point of departure from the 2019 Public Health White Paper's loneliness strategy (Norway. HCD, 2019a).

Documents were procured through searches for the term 'loneliness' in hansard.parliament.uk and www.gov.uk for the UK data and '*ensomhet*' (Bokmål Norwegian) and '*einsemd*' (New Norwegian) at www.regjeringen.no and www.stortinget.no for the Norwegian data. Occasionally documents were located through references in documents we previously obtained. Approximately 8 months were used for text collection, systematic reading, and increasingly graded sorting. Figure 1 describes this process.

[Insert: Figure 1: Document Sorting Overview]

In this article, we focus upon problematizations pertaining to young people affected by loneliness and therefore exclude documents that do not mention this age group. We use the same definition of 'young people' that the policy documents tend to employ, thereby including children through young adults in this categorization.

Because our interest is how discourses on loneliness, communication technology (such as smartphones, telepresence, social media, online gaming, and social apps) and young people intersect, documents without mention of technology were also extracted. As social media was the most referenced technology tied to young people and loneliness in the corpus, these discourses dominate our analysis. Online gaming is increasingly understood as social media due to streaming, live chat and multiplayer games, and mention of these is therefore also included.

In Figure 2, we provide an overview of the number and types of documents included in the analysis per country to demonstrate the diversity and breadth of the data upon which we base our findings. The number of certain types of documents and volume of material varies per country, perhaps reflecting differences in governmental approaches to loneliness or methods of communication. For example, while multiple loneliness strategies exist for England, Wales and Scotland in the UK, several municipalities also have their own dedicated strategies. In Norway, there is one dedicated strategy for loneliness reduction, consisting of ten pages within the 2019 public health paper. However, in Norway, loneliness is integrated into other policies ranging from digital inclusion to mental health. These numbers would also vary had we not excluded texts without mention of young people. Most documents in our corpus address loneliness in the public as a whole, which is divided into 'risk groups' within the text. The quotes we utilize as illustrations derive from portions that specifically address young people.

[Insert: Figure 2. Table of Documents Included in Analysis per Country]

Analysis

Analysis followed a step-by-step process patterned after LeGreco and Tracy's discourse tracing (2009), paired with WPR. First, the selected material was closely read with notes taken as we identified dominant themes, for example, 'risk', 'age', 'presence' (face-to-face and virtual) and 'technology', which informed our direction of inquiry. Next, the data was imported into the qualitative analysis tool NVivo, with a separate file for each country. Documents were organized and analyzed in chronological order to catch how discourses change over time. We also alternated between countries throughout the analysis process, for example, working with British documents from 2019 and then with Norwegian documents from that same year.

Closer analysis and coding of documents in Nvivo led us to develop sub-themes such as 'social media', 'screen time', 'online harms', 'welfare technology' and 'disability'. These steps were primarily utilized for thematic sorting. Excerpts pertaining to dominant themes were then further analyzed in Microsoft Word, drawing upon WPR for inspiration while closely scrutinizing our analysis against the broader documents to ensure validity. As the UK documents are credited for having a direct influence upon the Norwegian (Norway. HCD, 2019a), we saw how a cross-country comparison could yield insights into how politically productive problematizations are translated to new contexts with potential 'benefits'. The first author is a native English-speaking immigrant to Norway, while the second author is native Norwegian. We found our different linguistic and cultural backgrounds enriched our discussion of our findings and aided us in challenging our individual assumptions.

Findings: How is the problem of loneliness, technology and youth represented?

In Norway and the UK, we find a significant split in problematizations of loneliness and technology tied to young people.

> Problematization 1: Social media and other communications technology are potential solutions for some groups, but are a likely cause of loneliness in young people.
>
> Problematization 2: Young people with disabilities or long-term illness lack access to social fields. Technology, primarily *welfare* technology, is an indispensable tool for the prevention of loneliness in this population [3].

In the following we explore problematization 1, moving on to problematization 2 thereafter.

Technological solutions to loneliness, from apps to telepresence devices, are suggested as key to solving the loneliness problem for most 'risk groups'. When it comes to young people, the notion of technology as a solution becomes far murkier.To illustrate this point, in a 2018 debate in the House of Commons, the following exchange occurred between Conservative MP Rachel Maclean and (now former) Minister of Loneliness, Tracey Crouch:

> Maclean: I would be interested to hear more from the Minister about what she thinks the role of social media is [in loneliness]. Social media can often have a negative influence, particularly on young people, but does she think it could have a positive role to play in tackling loneliness?
>
> Crouch: I said that there is no single cause of loneliness and therefore there is no single solution, and the same logic applies in respect of social media. We

> know that 16 to 24-year-olds are more lonely than other groups in society, and that is quite often attributed to the fact that they are much more digitally connected. At the same time, social media can also provide solutions for those who do find themselves lonely. A huge number of apps have been developed to support various groups in society, including Mush, which helps young mums. Technology has also been developed to keep older people connected to their families. As much as social media can be described as a cause, it can also be the solution (Hansard HC Deb 15 October 2018).

Here, Maclean claims social media can have negative impacts, which she states are especially problematic for young people. Simultaneously, she wonders if social media couldn't also have positive impacts on loneliness. In response, Crouch states that young people are more impacted by loneliness precisely because they are heavily connected, albeit via technology.

Crouch next offers the view that certain technologies and social media reduce loneliness for other groups (here, young mothers and the elderly). The implication is that social media may make people lonely, but once one is already lonely, technology may help. Crouch refers to technology developed for the lonely, as opposed to standard social media. The problem is not technology, then, but the qualities of that technology and its users. While apps to connect adults may offer ways out of loneliness, apps that connect the young are risky in terms of their ambiguous impact.

England's loneliness strategy, *A Connected Society,* constructs young peoples' loneliness as partially tied to the use of social media, and reflects similar uncertainties:

> Social media is often highlighted as a cause of loneliness, particularly among young people, but research implies that the picture is more nuanced. The extent to which it increases or reduces loneliness could depend on which platform is

used and whether it is used as a substitute for real life interaction or as a complement to it (Great Britain. DCMS, 2018 p. 20).

Social media, used as a replacement for offline interactions, is insinuated to produce negative effects, whereas connections made in person and supplemented by online contact are preventative against loneliness. Given the logic employed in the segments presented above, it appears the underlying belief is that young people may simply be using the wrong platforms in the wrong way, thus increasing loneliness. Again, other platforms are deemed capable of establishing or maintaining connections in meaningful ways for other groups.

One proposed intervention in *A Connected Society* includes adding relationships education to school curriculums. Quoted in the strategy, Minister for School Standards Nick Gibb states, 'The curriculum will also help to teach young people about the realities and joys of relationships beyond the confines of the internet" (Great Britain. DCMS, 2018 p. 51). This assumes three things: the relationships of today's youth occur primarily online, they don't realize what an 'offline' relationship looks like, or how they may benefit from one, and relationships formed face-to-face are inherently superior to those forged online. Teaching the benefits of offline relationships then becomes an antidote to loneliness.

Increasing the number of physical meeting places is also proposed in many loneliness strategies. This implies the problem of loneliness in the young is the lack of physical places for young people to go (and assumingly lure them away from digital arenas).

Norwegian policies present no less mixed views of technology and its relation to loneliness. In the Norwegian loneliness strategy's section detailing interventions for young people, social media is also addressed:

> Developments in the use of social media change forms of community. They can make it easier to attend to friendship but can also strengthen feelings of being lonely. Several studies have found that there is a connection between high use of social media, loneliness, and mental health issues. At present, we do not know if increased use of social media leads to loneliness or if the use is a result of being lonely (Norway. HCD, 2019a p. 45).

The Norwegian discourse appears more cautious in designating social media as a primary factor contributing to loneliness among young people. Like the UK, there is an acknowledgement of lacking evidence about the effects of social media on loneliness. It highlights use of the medium to maintain friendships as a benefit. Unlike in the UK, young people are clear beneficiaries. However, it does express anxieties that social media is changing society itself, impacting 'forms of community'. No mention is made of whether social media might be *preventative* against loneliness. Instead, social media is only a cause or remedy.

Like British policy, the Norwegian loneliness strategy presents beliefs that face-to-face relations are superior to online relations. However, the Norwegian Health and Care Department's *Escalation Plan for Children and Young Peoples' Mental Health* (2019-2024) is quicker to make explicit claims regarding digital media's effect:

> The new media habits provide new possibilities for development and learning, but also new challenges. Digital media can contribute to increased self-esteem, social capital, and social support, be a source of help and information, and give possibilities for opening oneself to others. Among the negative aspects are pressures to conform to ideal body standards (*kroppspress*), social isolation, the experience of loneliness, increased comparison with others, increased potential for exposure to damaging or upsetting content, increased likelihood for being

bullied on the internet and an increased risk for being a party to grooming activities (Norway. HCD, 2019b pp. 29-30).

The discourse here presents a balanced focus on positives and negatives in young peoples' technology use. It draws attention to an array of themes associated with loneliness in the literature, namely self-esteem, social capital, social support, social isolation, social comparison, and bullying.

In both counties, a lack of evidence demonstrating clear links between loneliness and technology is problematized, whether it be social media's impact or the efficacy of loneliness-reduction technologies. Therefore, a proposed solution to uncertainty is increased research. In Norway, the loneliness plan suggests revisiting previously collected datasets to see if correlations can be found (Norway. HCD, 2019a p. 49). In the UK, this task is delegated to the What Works centers for policy research (Great Britain. DCMS, 2018). Utilizing Bacchi's (2016) perspective, we could ask: How does loneliness shape research economically and technologically? Could loneliness be a driver for progressive research-futures?

The paradox of the disabled young person as a politicized and mediated problem

The tone shifts dramatically in the Norwegian and British corpus when disabled and chronically ill young people and the use of technology are considered. For them, 'welfare technologies', including telepresence robots and social apps to assist those unable to participate in school or extracurricular activities, are presented exclusively in a positive light.

These welfare technologies are created for those who, in addition to facing exclusion from society, were also previously excluded as users of technology (Hofmann, 2013). In the Norwegian and British political discourse, technologies tailored to this group are envisioned as 'technological tools', suggesting an

instrumental understanding of the devices and apps. An example from Norway representative of the political discourse in both nations, states:

> Technological aids, among them digital tools, can both be social aids for increasing contact and function as learning aids for people who for various reasons cannot participate in social activities [...] or societal life in the same way as others (Norway. HCD, 2019a, p.48).

These interventions are envisioned as instrumental, enabling disabled youth to participate in society, levelling the playing field (Norway. DHC, 2019a; Great Britain. DCMS, 2018), at times literally, as seen in a narrative in the English loneliness plan concerning a teenager whose telepresence robot enabled him to fulfill dreams of being a football mascot (Great Britain. DCMS, 2018). In both contexts, assistive technologies are proposed to prevent loneliness in youth who face barriers to social realms due to illness or mobility issues.

Social media, however, is not considered. Its absence is interesting considering that in a video from DCMS' #LetsTalkLoneliness Campaign, a young person states they find it easier to make friends online, where their personality is what others encounter, rather than their disability (DCMS, 2019, 01:40). This implies social media could be a tool to mitigate stigma and access the social remotely in the same way as welfare technologies.

Discussion: Effects, Silences and Alternatives

In political problematizations of loneliness, technology plays a dual role of panacea and poison. This is especially true of discourses about loneliness in young people. In our study, we see how policymakers across countries maintain that recent technological developments have positive and negative effects on loneliness. British

and Norwegian discourses proved similar in their ambivalence, presenting anxieties that communication technologies, especially social media, are transforming young people's social worlds, resulting in increased loneliness. The problem of loneliness becomes an expression of anxieties about an increasingly digitized society and uncertainties about its social impact.

Where there is uncertainty, both countries call for research to support evidence-based policy. Evidence-based policy is frequently used by politicians to assert objectivity in policymaking. However, scholars argue that research agendas and what evidence is deemed relevant is often tainted by political ideologies and desires for findings that support political agendas (Dorey, 2014; Skogen, Ruud and Krange, 2019). Research for evidence-based policy is often performed by centers that are peripherally university-affiliated and there is fierce competition for the next big contract (and its funding) (Pawson, 2006 p. 3). Such calls benefit politicians by garnering public support for policymaking decisions, and researchers, in terms of grant money. Thus, loneliness is productive, shaping the future of research. While clearly, more research on the matter is needed, researchers and policymakers alike should take care not to let bias result in research questions that examine only pathological responses to social media rather than potential benefits.

In lieu of solid evidence on the causes of loneliness, the problem of loneliness in Norwegian and British policy is frequently represented as one of disconnectedness. Young people in general may be too virtually connected, lacking face-to-face relationships. The problem for disabled young people is lacking or disrupted social connections. Our findings suggest connections mediated by social media are frequently deemed less valuable that those achieved in person. Other research finds young people see little difference between their online and offline lives, with both sustaining

friendships and social activity (OfCom, 2019). Given young people see little difference in the quality of connections generated and maintained online versus those created in the analogue world, the push to emphasize the 'joys' of offline relationships may represent bias against digital presence that an older generation possesses while younger generations do not.

Technologies are presented as solutions to loneliness if used in the right way, by the right demographic. The primary focus when it comes to young people, loneliness, and technology, however, overwhelmingly lies on social media unknowns and encouraging offline relationships. Although apps teaching young people social skills and new cognitive frames to overcome loneliness show some success in their aims (Ramo and Lim, 2021), these are not presented as interventions for this demographic. If indeed social media's role in loneliness concerns individual perceptions and patterns of use (Ryan *et al.*, 2017; Pittman and Reich, 2016; Nowland *et al.*, 2018), apps and curricula that teach social and cognitive skills could help young people use social media in a way that mitigates loneliness.

Other policy fields laud the community building that occurs on social media and creativity of youth-created online content, acknowledging that it is often made for engagement with friends. Those centered on youth culture, or the gaming and tech industries, are prime examples. Take this quote from a government report on young people and gender equality: 'Social media contributes to the creation of new social arenas. Many young people have close friends that they exclusively have contact with via the internet' (Norway. Culture Department, 2019, p. 200). Loneliness policies, however, frequently focus on negatives. One unintended effect may be reinforcing negativity around the social technologies young people value. These discourses could lead us to overlook forms of social support lonely young people may prefer. Shared

norms that favor physical contact produce the same solution: physical meeting places and relationships education that encourages face-to-face encounters. Discourses from other policy fields may help us appreciate new forms of community that young people already enjoy, rather than envisioning them as destroyers of traditional forms of togetherness.

In both countries, the problem of loneliness for disabled youth is represented as one of access to the social domain. Technology is one dominant solution. There are no nuances and negatives, only assistive technologies developed to connect those with disabilities and long-term illness. To paraphrase Turkle (2011), here technology is 'better than nothing', whereas for others, the fear is that it becomes 'better than anything'. Ensuring disabled youth access to the same communication technologies as their peers is rarely discussed, perhaps because discourses about digital communication are so negatively laden. Disabled people often face exclusion from technologies others take for granted (Macdonald and Clayton, 2013). Considering disabled people use the internet to meet peers on their own terms and avoid social stigma (Bowker and Tuffin, 2002; Obst and Stafurik, 2010), ensuring equal access may prevent loneliness and challenge the stigma that can lead to it. While some British strategies encourage skills training for 'disabled and elderly' people, these groups are often conflated, suggesting the intended target is adults. One may also argue that technological solutions ignore ableism in society. An alternative problematization could see the problem as structural issues including financial and physical barriers, paired with social stigma (Olsen, 2017). When constructed in these ways, it's clear welfare technology alone may fail to substantially reduce loneliness.

In 2019, an article on the Norwegian Royal Broadcasting Network's website (NRK) began making the rounds on social media due to the moving phenomenon it

illustrated. In it, the father of a disabled young adult named Mats spoke of the international community of social support his son built through multiplayer online gaming, the worth of which they failed to recognize until his death. When Mats died, the family was overwhelmed by tributes from friends they never realized he had, who never met Mats in 'real-life', but for whom he was so important that some made the trek from around Europe to attend his 'real-life' funeral. Previously, the parents thought his screen time excessive and socially isolating, failing to recognize that the connections he struggled to make in the 'real world' were easier to build in virtual spaces. They believed Mats was lonely. He was not (Schaubert, 2019).

Mats' story took the Norwegian (Schaubert, 2019) and international media (Norsk Telegrambyrå, 2019), by storm. Questions arose asking if adults weren't overlooking an important source of social support for young people, especially those with disabilities. The story also has political implications. Mats' father, Robert Steen, is a politician (Schaubert, 2019). It has been recontextualized from media to policy via its inclusion in Norwegian governmental reports (Norway. Culture Department, 2019).

The constitution of young people as 'disabled' and 'ablenormative' subjects (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016) in loneliness policy may place limitations on which solutions are legitimized for both groups. We include Mats' story because it also challenges the problematization of mainstream social technology used by *non-disabled youth*. The friends Mats made online were non-disabled. The relationships they built through online gaming were cherished, which one can see from their pilgrimage to Mats' memorial. Bacchi and Goodwin caution that researchers should be wary of political dividing practices, and how, like problematizations themselves, policies produce subjects, with subject positions that limit behaviors and possibilities (2016). Does this differentiation signal a blind spot when it comes to the positives digital

togetherness can offer all young people, and might stories like Mats' reveal new possibilities?

Indeed, Mats' story has led some within the Norwegian media to reconsider the tone of their public discourses around gaming and digital connections, also where non-disabled young people are concerned (Norsk Telegrambyrå, 2019). Media discourses in return have strong implications for the development of political stances and policy (Lahusen and Kiess, 2019; Mejias and Banaji, 2019). This case illustrates how discourses that demean digital social connections may undermine the cause of alleviating loneliness by discouraging and devaluing its use.

Conclusion

In loneliness-oriented political discourse from the UK and Norway, technological ambivalence is a key pattern we observed in the discourse. Discourses from both countries demonstrate normative beliefs that face-to-face connections are inherently superior and young people's digital connectedness is a major contributor to loneliness. Recommended policy interventions, namely relationships curriculums and the creation of more physical meeting spaces, suggest other facets to the problematization: that young people are unaware of the benefits of face-to-face contact and lack physical facilities to meet their social needs. When addressing disabled young people, digital connectedness to mitigate loneliness, often mediated by welfare technologies, is presented as purely beneficial. While policymakers appear biased toward face-to-face connections for one group, digital connections are good enough for another. Might we better tackle loneliness by adopting a more balanced view of technology's role in its making and mitigation, recognizing the potential of digital connections to benefit all young people?

End Notes

[1] We study discourses prior to the pandemic because they may be informative about how loneliness was discursively constructed before the increased attention it received during it.

[2] We treat the term 'disabled' in the same manner as it is presented in the documents themselves: as a specific category of young people facing loneliness.

[3] While young carers and care-leavers are included in the UK discourse, the discourses about these groups is sparce and does not tend to involve technology, thus we do not include them in our discussion.

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Figure 1: Document Sorting Overview

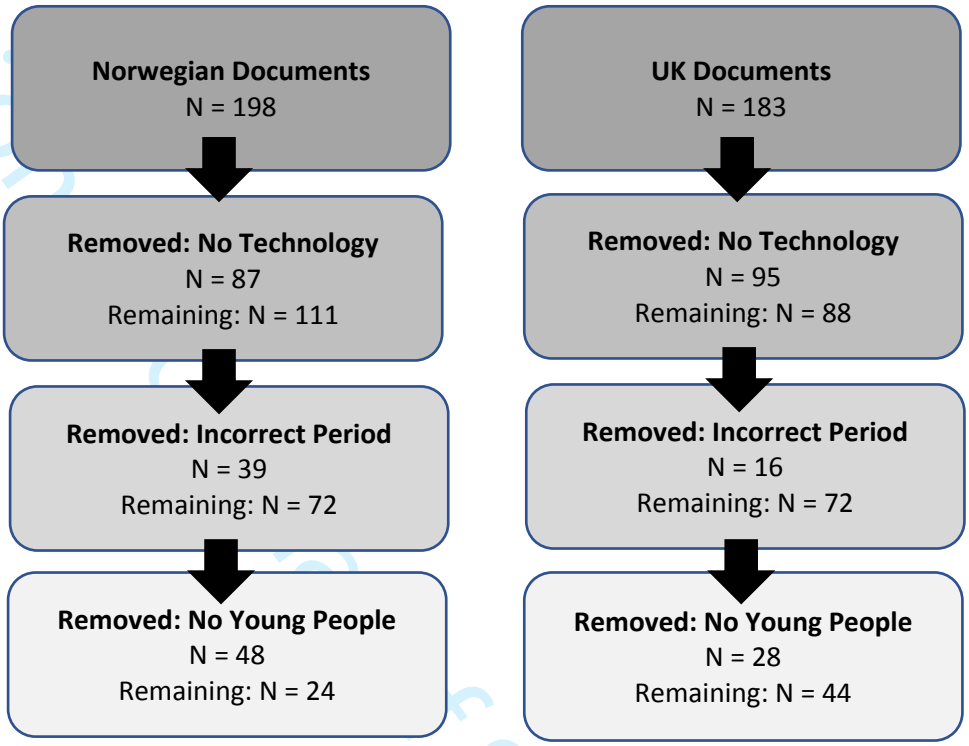

Figure 2. Table of Documents Included in Analysis per Country

UK

Document Type	# of Documents Included in Analysis
Debate Excerpts	5
Internal Briefings	3
Policy and Strategies	11
Political Speeches	1
Press Releases	1
News Articles	0
Government Inquiries	10
Other	3
Related Non-Loneliness Policies	10

44 documents in total

Norway

Document Type	# of Documents Included in Analysis
Debate Excerpts	4
Internal Briefings	0
Policy and Strategies	9
Political Speeches	2
Press Releases	3
News Articles	3
Government Inquiries	2
Other	2
Related Non-Loneliness Policies	5

24 documents in total