Berlin, March 2023 : Diary of the first ECHO Network study visit

From 27 to 31 March 2023, the first study visit of the European project ECHO Network took place in Berlin. This report looks back on this week of exchange on the theme of « Young people, social networks and political education », organised by the Willi Eichler Academy.

As a reminder, the participants in the ECHO Network exchange come from 7 different organisations in 5 European countries: Ceméa France, Ceméa Federzione Italia, Ceméa Belgium, Willi Eichler Academy (Germany), Solidar Foundation (European network), Centar Za Mirovne Studije (Croatia), Framasoft (France). Around twenty people took part in the study visit.

It’s a chilly spring in Berlin!
It’s a long way to Berlin!

In order to promote the values of the Ethical, Commons, Humans, Open-Source Network project, the Framasoft participants wanted to travel to Berlin by train. So Monday and Friday of this exchange week were dedicated to transport.

The day of departure was a national strike day in Germany (where a rail strike = no trains running!). As a result, only 3 of the 4 Framasoft members who had planned to take part in the project were able to make it.

When you think of trains, you think of time, where transport is an integral part of the journey. In fact, it takes 9 hours by train from Paris, or even 13 hours from Nantes... And you should add 1 or 2 hours (or even half a day) for « contingency management » (delays, cancellations, changes of train). Travelling to Germany by train was an adventure in itself (and the feeling seems to be shared!).
Tuesday 28 March: Discoveries and visits off the beaten track

After a brief meeting with the first participants the day before, Tuesday will continue with the aim of getting to know each other (arrivals will continue throughout the day due to changes in the itinerary caused by the strike the day before).

Tuesday morning will begin with a visit to the Jewish Cemetery of Berlin-Weißensee, the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe. Nature takes over in this historic place.
Weißensee Jewish cemetery, between nature and history

In the afternoon we visit a former Stasi prison, Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. This visit made a particularly strong impression on us: the site was created by former prisoners, the prison wasn’t closed until 1990, and many of the people who tortured prisoners were never brought to justice. In short, a dark page of history, but one that needs to be shared (we recommend the visit!)...

The day will end with a convivial meal in a traditional restaurant.

**Wednesday 29 March: young, old and social networks**

From Wednesday, we were welcomed at the Brillat-Savarin cookery school for our exchanges, workshops and talks.

The chandelier in the entrance hall of the cookery school is just right!
Discussion: What do we think about social networks in our organisations?

The first workshop was a round-table discussion in which each participant shared his or her use of and views on social networks, and in particular TikTok, the medium that will be used in the following workshop.

To summarise:

- There is little use of social media from a personal point of view in the group.

- On the other hand, the majority of the group use social media to promote their organisation’s activities (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Mastodon).

- No one in the group uses TikTok, which poses a problem for understanding this social media.

- As part of their organisation’s activities, the majority of the group would like to reach out more to young people and it seems interesting to find them where they are, i.e. on social media.

- The group fully agreed that social media are not neutral tools and try to monopolise the attention of their users.

This time of exchange therefore allowed us to see that we share the same values, difficulties and desires when it comes to social media. However, we felt that the ‘one at a time’ format lacked some dynamism in the exchanges and the opportunity for several people to discuss.

Feedback from a student workshop: raising awareness of social issues in a TikTok video

Alongside our morning discussions on social media, 2 groups of students from the Brillat-Savarin school worked on a video project. They had to produce a TikTok
video (one per group) to show the impact of the European Union (1st group) and climate change (2nd group) on their work as chefs. The videos were shown to us (incredible quality in 2 hours of work!) and then we exchanged views on the topic.

What we took away from this workshop:

- The students were between 18 and 22 years old and did not use TikTok. According to the students, this social network is aimed at people younger than them (« young » is too broad a term!). However, they had mastered the codes of the platform as they were regularly exposed to TikTok content on other platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

- In any case, they wouldn’t necessarily want to use a social network to watch political content, preferring a more recreational use of the network (like watching videos of kittens!), even if they claim to be political.

- They found it particularly interesting to get a message across in videos and to question themselves on issues that directly affect them.

It was an interesting experiment, even if the plenary discussions did not allow everyone to participate.
Reflect EU&US: the Willi Eichler Academy project

Funded to the tune of €500,000 by Marshall Plan leftovers, Reflect EU&US is a 2-year project (2022-2024) by the Willi Eichler Academy. Its aim? To organise discussions between students outside the university environment, remotely and anonymously.
Points to remember:

- The project involves 60 students (30 from the United States and 30 from Germany), with a physical meeting planned at the very end of the project to lift the masks.

- Topics covered include justice, racism, gender and politics.

- Following the discussions, a library of documents will be created, which will allow the various sources (texts, articles, videos, podcasts, etc.) to be validated (or not).

- Anonymity makes it easier to accept contradictory opinions.

- The management of the groups can be complicated by anonymity, but it is an integral part of the project.

From a technical point of view, the platform is based on the OpenTalk tool and was chosen to provide this space for free exchange, with the creation of coloured cards as avatars, making it possible to guarantee the anonymity of the participants. The choice of open source technologies was made specifically with the aim of reassuring participants so that they could exchange in complete peace of mind. This was followed by a live test of the platform with the students (in German, which didn’t allow us to understand everything!).
Open source meets politics

The afternoon continued with a talk by Peer Heinlein, director of OpenTalk, on « True digital independence and sovereignty are impossible without open source ». You can imagine that we at Framasoft have an opinion on this, even if we don’t feel strongly about it... Discussions with the audience followed on open source software, privacy and data encryption.

The next speaker was Maik Außendorf, representative of the Green Party in the European Parliament. Among other things, we discussed how digital technology can help the ecological transition. We learnt that German parliamentarians do not have a choice when it comes to using digital tools, and that national coherence is difficult to achieve with the decentralised organisation of Germany into Länder.

The study visit ended in a restaurant, where we had the opportunity to talk with a SeaWatch activist, highlighting the common values and reflections of the different organisations (precariousness of associations, the need to propose alternatives to the capitalist world, the need for free and emancipatory digital technologies).
This chandelier will have inspired·es (can you see the artistic side too?).

An intense week!

We were particularly surprised and excited by the common visions shared by the participants and organisations, whether it be about emancipatory digital, the desire to move towards a world that is more like us, where cooperation and contribution move forward, and the question of how to share our messages while remaining coherent with what we defend.

Although the majority of the week was built around plenary workshops, which did not always encourage exchange between participants or spontaneous speaking, the informal times (meals, coffee breaks, walks) made it possible to create these essential moments.

What next for the ECHO network? The second study visit took place in Brussels from 12 to 16 June. A summary article will follow on the Framablog (but as always, we’ll take our time!).
We couldn’t go to Berlin without visiting the murals on the Berlin Wall: here’s a photo of the trip to round off this article.

For further information:

- CEMÉA report on the exchange
- Framablog post « Feedback on the ECHO Network opening seminar, January 2023, Paris »