



DIGITAL DEMOCRACY MODULE SUMMARY

#DABEI-Geschichten – An Initiative of Deutsche Telekom AG



LIFE IS FOR SHARING.

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#DABEI-Geschichten – an initiative by Deutschen Telekom
AG Barbara Costanzo, Vice President Group Social
Engagement Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 140, 53113 Bonn

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CONTACT

engagement-bonn@telekom.de

DEMOCRACY?

(Digital) democracy – what is it?

The internet offers many opportunities – also for democracy. Thanks to online petitions and digital elections, it is becoming easier to form an opinion and become politically active. But unfortunately, it has also become just as easy to manipulate the opinions of others – hate speech and fake news spread quickly on the internet and endanger today's democracy.

This module presents how we can react to manipulation of opinion and use digitization to foster democracy.

Democracy – for everyone?

“Only four percent of the world's population lives in states where they can fully exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association.”

This is how the development and relief agency “Brot für die Welt” describes the result of its “Atlas der Zivilgesellschaft 2019” (Atlas of Civil Society 2019). But what about the other 96 percent? The atlas distinguishes between impaired, limited, oppressed and closed civil society. The rights of citizens in these societies are progressively declining, from the prohibition of certain demonstrations to the imprisonment and ill-treatment of activists. One thing is certain: Co-determination, participation and democracy are not self-evident, but a privilege!

What does digital democracy mean ?

Elections

Putting your cross on a ballot is actually quite simple – yet fewer and fewer people vote. Digital voting, so-called “e-voting”, would motivate more people to vote in the future. Estonia has been the first country to offer e-voting since 2005. Votes are collected and protected online using a personal ID card. With success: The proportion of online users has increased with each election (approx. 30%, as of 2019). Voter turnout is also on the rise again. In some countries, e-voting still raises security concerns.

Have a say

Citizens are the pillars of democracy! Therefore it is important for people to participate.

Participation

The internet changes the political debate and opens new possibilities for people to have a say. There are some examples below.

Change.org

In 2018, thanks to online petitions, approximately 65,000 supporters succeeded in helping a woman with muscle atrophy. Despite her serious illness, official authorities only guaranteed her four and a half hours of care per day.

E-Petitions

An easy way to join or to start a petition is openpetition.eu.

OPIN

OPIN is a web-based platform for digital and mobile youth participation and enables young people to state their opinion and start their own project.

Freedom of information

A functioning democracy also requires that the state discloses its governmental actions. This means that all citizens have the right to participate in public meetings (including online meetings) or to have access to minutes or files. This right is part of the legislation of many countries. Freedom of information also means that citizens have the right to ask the state and the government questions – and must receive an answer.

Freedom of expression

According to the “Charter of fundamental rights of the Europe Union” everyone has the right to freedom of expression. But that does not mean that we are allowed to say everything. The freedom of expression ends where other people’s right are violated. In companies or groups in social networks, other rules may apply – e.g. “Only available apartments are posted in this group” or “We only use this program to exchange information about work”. In these cases, the operators decide which contributions are deleted under which circumstances.

Freedom of the media

„The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected.” (Charter of the fundamental rights of the European Union, Article 11).

The media and press are currently subject to many prejudices – “lying press” and “fake news” are only some of them. But journalistic work is indispensable – because most journalists have opportunities that other citizens do not have. They can double-check, inquire and research things. They can uncover wrongdoings and make them public. In many countries journalists are allowed to report on anything that does not restrict the rights of others. But there are also countries where this freedom of the media is limited. Journalists are not allowed to draw attention to problems, their articles are censored or they must fear for their lives.

Learn more about this in the Darknet module.

A legal vacuum – yes or no?

Digital democracy is an important part of democracy. When we talk about democracy, we talk about our rights and duties as citizens. There are many misunderstandings about freedom of expression. For example: Do these laws also apply to the internet? The problem here is that the legal situation can only be partially transferred to the digital world.

Some legislation, e.g. the “Grundgesetz” (Basic Constitutional Law) was written in times when the digital world was far away. Nevertheless, the internet is not a legal vacuum.

FORMING AN OPINION

Forming an opinion vs. manipulating an opinion

Forming an opinion means weighing up different opinions and then, with the help of this knowledge, forming your own opinion. Forming an opinion is seen as a neutral or positive way of finding your own opinion. On the other hand, there is the manipulation of opinions, which can be defined as the attempted to influence the opinions of others. The term “populism” is closely connected to this. In populism, beliefs are often expressed in an over-dramatic manner, people are told what they want to hear, and simple answers are given to very complex questions.

Inform yourself

The internet – it has never been easier to stay informed! The question that increasingly arises is: Where do I start? That is where platforms such as “The Perspective” can help. On websites like these, relevant topics are discussed from different perspectives. In addition, the sites compile articles and opinions on various topics. The individual points of view can then be evaluated up by the users: Which opinion is more coherent? Which opinion do I disagree with? Why is that? The internet and the different points of view help to form one's own opinion.

Listen and Learn!

Learn more about politics – in just a few minutes. Political podcasts are a good way to give citizens who are less interested in politics access to socially relevant topics. The good thing about it: Podcasts are currently very trendy. On the next page you will find some tips for political podcasts. The links to the podcasts can be found in the additional information.

The Daily

The Daily is a podcast from the New York Times and discusses various political topics.

The Guardian UK

This podcast is making different questions to a subject of discuss each week. Often the team of The Guardian is also joined by experts – sometimes also by politicians – to get different perspectives together and help people forming their opinion.

The Weeds

The Weeds is everything but superficial. It digs deep into various political topics and is released twice a week, each podcast being about one hour long.

MANIPULATING OPINIONS

Methods of manipulation

Repetition

When using repetition as a method of manipulation, information is not substantiated by facts, but repeated over and over again via different channels (e.g. social networks). If fake news turns up again and again on the internet, there is a high risk that many will perceive it as true – “If everyone says that there is something to it, then it must be true!”

Language abuse

Words have power – In order to assert their personal opinion, many people use a language that belittles the opposing opinion. One example for this is the reaction to young activists publicly committed to shaping the future. Opponents of these activists describe their commitment as “political child abuse”, among other things. Negative words such as “abuse” have an unconscious effect on listeners and influence their opinions.

Leave no doubt

Much false information is written so that there is no doubt about the accuracy of the statement. The authors also do not shy away from unfair methods: In order to support the credibility of their statements, they invent or lie about their alleged “facts”.

Powerful allies

A lot of misinformation is believed because it is spread by powerful people. This can be politicians, but also other famous or well-known people. As soon as information is linked to a famous face, its credibility increases in the eyes of many.

Silencing others

One means of influencing opinions is to silence other opinions. This is called “silencing”. People are sometimes silenced by being massively threatened and insulted, particularly in social networks. Many of these people then withdraw and no longer want to reveal their opinions publicly.

Stay on the offense

With many people, especially in social networks, discussion is impossible. The people in question argue even harder or do not respond to questions as soon as they are asked about their opinion. Here is how to react: Only engage in a discussion if the other party is also prepared to discuss.

Generalization

Through the use of generalization, social problems are talked about in such a way that they appear trivial or contrived. However, the authors do not use facts as a reference, but rather link the problems to individual cases – they generalize them. Here is an example: An employee of a large fashion brand steals from a customer. Generalization: Scandal! Theft amongst employees of the fashion brand XY.

Inciting fear

Deliberate misinformation undermines the trust in our governments or the media. Statements such as “Lügen Presse” (“lying press”) convey the idea that citizens can no longer trust the information in newspapers or on television. This also deliberately fuels fears, e.g. of terrorist attacks.

Concealing Facts

A citizen can only obtain a clear overview if he knows what is going on. That is why facts are often concealed when propaganda is used to influence opinions. If important information is missing, this is called “disinformation” – what people do not know cannot hurt them.

Digital phenomena of opinion manipulating

Political opinion manipulation has many different faces. From hate speech to fake news to dark posts, below you will learn more about the different phenomena of opinion manipulation.

Hate Speech

Hate speech describes the politically motivated dissemination of hateful statements or messages. The desired effect is called “silencing” and means that dissenters are silenced by massive hatred, for example as a comment on a post in social media. For example, many female politicians receive terrible threats with promises of sexual violence.

Hate speech can also be used to discriminate against specific groups of people. Again, the point is that the person towards whom the hate speech is directed no longer wishes to express himself because he feels intimidated or does not want to attract further hatred.

Fake news

Fake news is false information that is hard to distinguish from real news. Fake news is also used to manipulate opinions: Lying becomes a political strategy. Fake news is often considered to be true and is shared and spread. Unfortunately, fake news is still considered true by many even if it is refuted.

Deep fake

The next generation of fake news will be the so-called “deep fakes”. The term is composed of the words: “deep learning” and “fake”. Deep fake means that videos and live transmissions will be manipulated in real time with artificial intelligence in such a way that the speaker says something other than what he is actually saying by perfectly simulating his facial expressions and voice. Technically this is not easy, because facial expressions and voices are very unique.

Dark post

What is actually intended as an advertising tool is also used for political opinion manipulation. Why? A “dark post” is nothing more than a message that is displayed to certain groups of people in social networks. Algorithms determine who belongs to this group. For example, because someone made it clear through their “likes” that they support a certain political opinion. Dark posts are difficult to track because they automatically disappear after a certain period of time and can no longer be found. The addressees have the impression that all users received the same message.

Echo chamber and filter bubbles

In social media in particular, we are given the opportunity to follow or like people. However, this also leads to people only receiving information that corresponds to their own personal opinions. With regard to opinion manipulation, this means: Other opinions are no longer perceived, which makes constructive discussions about topics even more difficult. As a rule, readers of social media are not even aware that they can trigger this effect with their likes and dislikes.

Trolls and bots

Trolls are real internet users who influence discussions, moods and opinions on the internet through their comments and contributions. A typical characteristic of trolls is: They publish a large number of comments with provocative and offensive content within a very short time. Bots are computer programs. They perform certain tasks automatically. It is estimated that bots play a major role for hate speech. They produce a large number of comments with little effort and are programmed, for example, to post a ready-made hate comment whenever a keyword such as “refugee” is posted by a specific user, for example to a political group on the net.

YOUR OPINION COUNTS!

Strengthening democracy

There are many ways to strengthen democracy in society – even on the internet. The examples in the following chapter show how you can live democracy as an individual or in a group. Take a look at the examples and let them inspire you.

Fact check

During a fact check, statements from for example, social media are checked for their correctness on the basis of verifiable and objective sources. Fact checks can have a positive effect on the reduction of fake news. This is shown in a study by political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. They divided politicians into three groups.

Group 1 received a letter clearly stating that fact checks would be used in election campaigns.
Group 2 received a letter with a vague reference to fact checks.
Group 3 served as a control group and received no letter.

Results of the study show: Politicians who believed that fact checks would be used in election campaigns made much more moderate statements than those who did not know about the alleged fact checks.

Tools for fact checking

Reporterslab.org

The Reporters’ Lab is a center for journalism research in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. On their website you can find a database of fact checking sites and also relevant information on current trends for fact checking.

Guide for fact check

Real Simple published an interview with veteran journalist and American Press Institute (API) staffer Jane Elizabeth, who guides through the world of fact checking.

Google Fact check tools

Google offers two tools for fact checking : the Fact Check Explorer and Fact Check Markup Tool. Fact-checked news can afterwards also be integrated into the search engine of Google.

Media competence

We have to learn to deal with social media ourselves instead of calling for laws and politics to exercise censorship! But that also means that we have to understand what lies behind digital phenomena, from netiquette, the rules of the internet to how algorithms work and filter bubbles develop. The modules in #DABEI-Geschichten do just that! Teachtoday is suitable for kids and their adult caregivers.

Democracy competence

A lively exchange of different opinions and views is important for a democracy. The ability to discuss or argue without hatred or violence is part of a citizen's democracy competence – as is participation in elections and the ability to critically question opinions.

Take a stance!

The project “Stand up for human rights” by the United Nations helps people who want to stand against injustice and violence. Everyone can take a pledge online and find templates to spread the message through social media. They also present options for action in different situations.

Satire

An important tool of resistance is satire. It criticizes injustices and problems in society – by using pointed, exaggerated humor. The german “heuteSHOW” is an example for that. One can find satire in various media.

Reporting

Anyone can report things they do not like on the internet. Many social media platforms offer the possibility to report things very easily. Due to the “Network Enforcement Act”, you can also report things to all social media site operators, e.g. directly to facebook. Criminal offences such as incitement to hatred, can of course also be reported at every police station.

Your opinion counts!

Digital democracy is an important part of democracy. The internet in particular offers many new opportunities: more transparency, more participation and more opportunities to form political opinions. On the other hand, digital phenomena such as hate speech and political opinion manipulation are becoming more and more widespread. In this module you have been given numerous tips on how to counteract this.



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