



DIGITAL CIVIL COURAGE SUMMARY

#TAKEPART-Stories - an initiative of Deutsche Telekom AG



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DIGITAL CIVIL COURAGE – SUMMARY (1/9)

DEFINITION DIGITAL CIVIL COURAGE

A definition of digital civil courage: Courageous, public actions, in the digital world, aimed at defending basic democratic values or human rights. This includes actions that can entail negative consequences for the person showing civil courage – consequences such as exposure to attacks. Digital civil courage can play an especially important role in social media, in which hate speech and fake news are spread.

Examples of basic democratic values and human rights, in this context, include:

- human dignity
- the right to life in liberty and security
- the right to adequate living conditions
- the rejection of any and all discrimination based on gender, background, race, language, nationality, origins, beliefs, or any religious or political opinions
- freedom of speech

Civil courage is diametrically opposed to apathy and ignorance.

Examples:

Supporting a friend who is bullied on the internet because of her headscarf.

Exposing a picture on Facebook as fake.

Programming an app for reporting hate posts.

That said, we need to remember certain key ways in which the internet differs from the real world. They are certainly relevant in social media e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or WhatsApp:

- **Coverage:** Way back, you would tell a person about something, and then, a day later, that person would tell it to someone else. Now, because of the possibility of following each other on social media, your message can reach huge groups of people, around the world, in seconds.
- **Speed:** Bots – robots working online – play a major role in the spread of hate speech. Bots today are able to autonomously write messages and post them, using false identities, to large numbers of groups. Nowadays bots are thought to be responsible for up to 30 percent of all hate posts. The reactions to their posts come from people – or from other bots.



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DEFINITION DIGITAL CIVIL COURAGE

- **Anonymity:** Because of the anonymity that often prevails online, users are often unable to know who the other users really are, or what those users' real motives and aims are. In addition, users often underestimate the real impacts of the things they post online. Roles start to blur: Politicians often communicate online as private individuals, and not in their official capacities. Private individuals, on the other hand, become journalists. This kind of role-changing can be very difficult to recognize.
- **Legislation:** The legal situation on the internet differs from that in the real world. The internet lacks key supervisory bodies such as Press Councils, which monitor compliance with accepted ethical rules for journalists. But we'll come back to the issue of the legal situation later on!
- **Information overload:** When people are online, they often read little more than headlines, simply because the online world is flooded with information. And people often like or share content, simply because they like the person who posted the content, and because they want to belong to that person's group. Often, they don't bother to actually read the content or try to understand it.

ONLINE HATE AND FAKES ARE ON THE RISE!

Hate speech and fake news affect society as a whole.

Hate speech ranks highly among the types of illegal content people in Europe report encountering on the internet. In addition, most Europeans say that they see fake news at least once a week.

While hate can manifest itself on both an individual and a group level, hate between groups is often especially strong and relentless.

Populism plays an important role in the inciting of hate. It drives hate by emphasizing and dwelling on the differences between groups. In the process, it eliminates virtually all space for factually based discussion. People who fall victim to populism often repeat and spread slogans without really thinking about it. Contrary opinions are experienced as a threat, even on a personal level.

At the same time, algorithms in social networks ensure that people see more and more of the kinds of content they have liked or commented on in the past. This hampers people's chances of forming balanced opinions. It eliminates many of the important perspectives that people need in order to be able to weigh and challenge arguments.



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ONLINE HATE AND FAKES ARE ON THE RISE!

The problem is compounded in that people tend to stick to their opinions fiercely, once they form them. They tend to show little willingness to consider evidence that contradicts their opinions. In fact, they can even see evidence to the contrary as confirmation of their positions. Does that sound unlikely? Well, there is a name for this: the “backfire effect.” The backfire effect refers to the phenomenon whereby people’s opinions become all the more strongly held the more strongly they are called into question.

IS HATE SPEECH LEGAL?

Fundamentally, acts that are illegal in the analog world are treated the same way when carried out online. Criminal laws do not make a distinction between “offline” and “online.”

On an international level, there are a number of conventions that are relevant when it comes to online hate:

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) gives everyone the right to freedom of expression. But the exercise of this right is restricted e.g. to protect the reputation or rights of others.

Article 4(a) of the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) obligates signatories to make “all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred” a punishable offense.

Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) requires the outlawing of “any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.”

At the same time, we need to remember that most of our laws stem from a pre-online era in which the media consisted of newspapers, radio and a handful of TV channels. In other words, an era in which it was not easy for anyone to influence the media, at any time.

Currently, there is much discussion about the need to change laws and adapt them to the digital world.



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IS HATE SPEECH LEGAL?

Besides the international frameworks there are also corresponding national laws. Therefore, it makes sense to gather evidence and report offences.

Why does reporting hate make sense?

- Reporting is digital civil courage at an entry level. It's easy to do and entails no risk for the person doing the reporting. But it still sends a message of unwillingness to tolerate negative content.
- Furthermore, statistics on such reporting can inform policy makers about what types of action need to be taken and about how the public as a whole view this issue.

REASONS NOT TO ACT ...

Potential risks involved in pushing back online and in intervening when others are being attacked:

- **Shitstorm:** A person who intervenes can suddenly become the focus of ire and attacks on the internet. The mood online can suddenly shift against them. And then they receive a storm of negative posts. In social media, it is not uncommon for the attention of people involved in discussing a certain subject to suddenly shift completely away from that subject.
- **Blaming:** A person can be made out to be a perpetrator of some kind, and then get attacked on that basis. Example: In a discussion on human rights, a person states that everyone has a right to be free in their lives. The person then gets attacked for not offering any solutions to the refugee crisis and for supposedly supporting illegal immigration. The person even gets attacked for supposedly aiding and abetting illegal migrants.
- **Silencing:** Vilifying people with the aim of pushing them out of social media. Journalists and politicians are often the targets of hate speech. Strategically implemented hate speech becomes especially frightening when it includes threats of real-world repercussions. This happens often. Such threats can take the form of publication of the victim's private address or telephone number. There is a special term for publication of such private information:
- **Doxing:** Publication of a victim's address and contact data, with the aim of making the victim a target in the real world.



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REASONS NOT TO ACT ...

But: Many people who regularly practice counter-speech online find that while they may get some angry responses, they'll usually get at least as much agreement as irate disagreement or attacks. Of course, you can simply have the misfortune of coming across a truly aggressive person. When that happens, remember that while a bot will not spend a lot of time firing back, a strategic hater or troll may simply be relentless. It can then make sense to ask others for help or simply to back out of the fray.

Those most often targeted include journalists, politicians and other people with similar public exposure. Haters often seek to marginalize such people.

When things get really nasty, report what's going on, bring in groups such as #IAmHere or file a police report.

REASONS TO TAKE ACTION...

It is vitally important to ensure that hate speech does not become the norm. Unfortunately, hate speech is already trending in that direction. The problem is that if certain types of normally unacceptable language are used often enough, many people will start considering them acceptable. If an absurd argument gets repeated often enough, many people will no longer find it absurd, and may consider it to contain a grain of truth.

When no one speaks out against hateful messages or fake news aimed at social exclusion, the people behind the posts often feel confirmed in their efforts.

In any case, there are always many undecided readers out there. Often, the point of pushing back against hate speech online is not to try to change the hater. The real point is to reach the readers out there, many of whom may be still be unsure of what to think. The idea is to offer those people a different perspective. One that can get them thinking and talking about the issue. In other words, the idea is to re-open the door to constructive dialog.

You feel great when you overcome your own shock and paralysis and take action! People who get involved, and take action gain a sense of belonging and feel less helpless than they otherwise would.



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HOW TO TAKE ACTION

Support victims – demonstrate solidarity!!

- When posts are not acceptable – because they are untruthful, hurtful, or defamatory – then say so! But always use clear, objective language, to ensure that your message – even if it is very short – will be properly understood.
- Try to set a good example! In chats, speak up early, or even first, before the discussion goes off the rails.
- Support victims. That can include contacting them (and not the haters) outside of the chat framework and offering them consolation and encouragement. Contacting haters in such ways is not recommended. Often, people will use chats as an opportunity to post other people’s personal messages and emails, for purposes such as ridicule. Such practices can include posting other people’s email addresses without permission.

Seek and accept help!

- One way to seek out help is to directly address other people reading the chat, and to ask them, “What do you think about this?”, “I would be interested in learning your opinion about xy.” or “I am sure that there are experts about xy here among us. Who knows more about xy?” As in the real world, it is a good strategy to get others involved – don’t try to do it all yourself.
- #IAmHere, for example, offers to help out in cases in which problematic posts are being reported and users are joining forces in order to respond collectively.

Strengthen supporters!

- This complements “seeking help”. It’s important to back up those who are standing up against hate. That can take the form of likes, or of useful added comments – for example, comments you have added because you’re an expert on the subject.
- Show solidarity with (potential) victims, yes, but also with other helpers. That reinforces your cause, and it shows passive readers that the person who is coming under fire is not alone in their views. By the way, this is a strategy that haters use very effectively ...



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HOW TO TAKE ACTION

Do not allow yourself to be provoked

- Admittedly, that's easier said than done! Often, people try to provoke others into reacting negatively, simply so they then can say, "You see, you're not one bit better!"
- Call on others to stick to the rules for the discussion, or to the rules in force for the group.
- It is good to answer promptly, but it's not always necessary. If you find yourself taking something too personally, it is definitely a good idea to take a few deep breaths and turn your attention elsewhere for a little while. You can jump back in once you have calmed down and are seeing things a little more clearly.

Do not answer hate with hate.

- Answering hate with hate often just escalates the discussion emotionally and even generates solidarity for the haters.

Set limits and recover!

- When you get involved, remember that tried-and-true general rule: enough is enough. It's also important to protect your own feelings. One good exit strategy can be to inform your readers that you plan to leave the discussion. When you do that, however, be sure to follow through! Other options include disabling notifications, blocking the group or the hater and, of course, reporting violations.
- Discussions with people who don't really want to discuss often lead nowhere. Some experts advise that you answer twice, make your point clearly, and then exit the discussion.
- Make use of the advantages inherent in the digital world: Retain your ability to disconnect!

Be prepared – practice counter-speech!

- Many of the groups that work against online hate speech, and against hatred aimed at specific groups, offer free online courses with practice in protected (offline) settings and with opportunities to try out new strategies. Such courses are offered regularly and are open to anyone.



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HOW TO TAKE ACTION

Use fact-checking – publish sources!

- People seeking to marginalize and exclude certain groups often make use of stereotypes and fake news. In the process, their stereotypes and fake news often go unchallenged, and then get adopted by others.
- It's a good idea to draw on reliable sources and use them in your own arguments. If you fail to find any useful sources, do not be afraid to ask, "How do you know that? What exactly are you referring to?" Important: Be sure not to let absurd claims go unchallenged, even if the best challenge you can muster is "I can't believe that!"
- Fact-checking is easier than many people would assume. Often, you'll find the same fake news items coming up again and again in chats. In such cases, the items have often already been checked by experts, and their findings and sources are available on the internet (the Duke University Reporters' Lab offers a database of local fact-checkers, for example).
- A word of caution: Never introduce made-up results, and never try to combat prejudice and fake news with hearsay. If you lack facts, pose counter-questions and ask for pertinent background information.

Often: write for all the silent readers, and not to the haters!

- this is a good strategy to ensure that you do not get pulled into a negative discussion.

Report violations!

- The simplest – but not always the most successful – way to report hateful posts is available on many social media platforms, for example on Facebook: Click on the three dots at the upper edge of the post and then answer the questions about the reasons for the report. Facebook will then look into the matter and give you at least one answer.
- Report hateful or harmful content to the police: Take a screenshot or save the link – ideally, along with the pertinent name and the date/time. You can file reports either online or at any police station.



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ORGANIZATIONS, INITIATIVES & PLATFORMS

- **Facing facts:** European program tackling hate crime and hate speech. It offers online courses for private citizens, activists, decision makers and many more.
- **GoSpeakUp!:** International app for schools to prevent (cyber)bullying. Students can anonymously report incidents via web browser or app.
- **Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD):** global ‘think and do’ tank to understand and create innovative responses to polarization, hate and extremism. Besides research and grassroots networks they also developed an educational program.
- **Common Sense Education:** Supports parents and teachers with everything they need to empower the next generation of digital citizens.
- **Reporters’ Lab:** Center for journalism research. On the website they offer an overview of fact-checking initiatives worldwide.
- **#IAmHere:** Founded in Sweden by journalist Mina Dennert. Today, there are 14 different facebook groups practicing counter-speech in their respective languages.
- **International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH):** Combats discrimination on the internet e.g. by supporting groups and institutions who want to set up a complaints bureau.