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Preventative, reactive, restrictive?

Measures against disinformation from the perspective
of populations in Germany and the USA

Lukas Bernhard, Leonie Schulz, Cathleen Berger, Kai Unzicker

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Key findings

Germany

In Germany, the public believes that disinformation is most effectively contained through the combined efforts of various stakeholders: Most respondents consider the efforts of schools, media, politics, platforms, and citizens themselves to be “very important” in countering disinformation.

The responsibility for implementing countermeasures is seen primarily as a political duty: One-third of respondents believe that national politics should take the lead in addressing disinformation. The role and responsibility of the European Union are considered less frequently in this context, with only 5 per cent of respondents mentioning it. However, platforms (22 per cent) and the media (21 per cent) are also seen by the German public as bearing significant responsibility.

Responsibility does not necessarily align with competence. The public perceives citizens as most capable of improving the situation, with 20 per cent believing that they and their fellow citizens are best positioned to make a difference, followed by the media at 17 per cent. Interestingly, 14 per cent believe that none of the mentioned stakeholders are competent enough to improve the situation, and only 13 per cent attribute competence to political decision-makers in Germany. The gap between expectation and trust is particularly pronounced here, which may not be directly related to disinformation but rather indicative of a general crisis of confidence in politics and government.

When balancing freedom of expression with protection from disinformation, the majority in Germany favours safeguarding citizens from disinformation: 57 per cent believe it is more im-

portant that citizens only have access to accurate information online. Conversely, 35 per cent underscore the importance of the right to say and write anything online. This perspective is more prevalent among young men and AfD voters.

The balance between freedom of expression and protection from disinformation varies depending on the topic: For issues such as the “war in Ukraine,” “COVID-19,” “immigration and refugees,” and “climate change and natural disasters,” more than 60 per cent prefer protection from disinformation over freedom of expression. Only when it comes to “elections” does this ratio shift slightly: 52 per cent favour protection from disinformation, while 43 per cent prioritise freedom of expression. AfD voters are particularly strong advocates of freedom of expression (64 per cent), while Green Party voters, as in other topics, more frequently favour protecting citizens from disinformation (70 per cent).

A wide range of potential measures to mitigate disinformation finds broad support among the public, regardless of whether they adopt a preventive, reactive, or restrictive approach: Particularly well-regarded are measures that correct or delete demonstrably false claims and enhance media literacy. Proposals involving the use of automated solutions (so-called upload filters) to prevent disinformation from appearing on platforms, the introduction of a real-name policy, and the restriction of questionable information's reach are viewed more controversially. Overall, older respondents are more supportive of a variety of measures, while younger people, especially young men, tend to be more critical. The 16 – 24 age group, in particular, views a real-name policy critically, with around one in two (47 per cent) considering it a “rather bad” or “very bad” idea. The intensive use of social media and messengers also influences assessments, with users of X/ Twitter (39 per cent) and Telegram (34 per cent) more frequently rejecting the proposed measures.

The public expects politicians to promote media literacy among citizens: 87 per cent of respondents agree with this demand, including 80 per cent of AfD voters who generally show less support for other demands. Additionally, respondents expect politicians to enforce existing regulations for platform operators more consistently and impose stricter penalties for violations (82 per cent support this). The idea of an independent, non-governmental institution dedicated to addressing disinformation is supported by 68 per cent. However, the call for increased funding for fact-checking organisations is only supported by 52 per cent, with 32 per cent opposing additional spending in this area. AfD voters are mostly against the financial support of fact-checking organisations.

Actions must follow words: There is broad public support for a more active approach to mitigating disinformation by all responsible parties (politics, platforms, media). However, the effectiveness, appropriateness, and legitimacy of different measures must be carefully weighed. Some measures, such as sanctions, upload filters, or state-mandated deletions, are viewed more critically by respondents than others. For politicians, this means acting and communicating transparently and in a differentiated manner. A resilient democracy must respond to attacks without restricting freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. How, where, and in what form solutions are implemented is not yet widely understood by the public.

Comparison with the USA

For this study, some questions were asked in the USA parallel to the survey in Germany, allowing us to compare selected results between the two countries.

US respondents also emphasise the responsibility of politics and government in countering disinformation but see citizens as having a greater role than in Germany: 27 per cent of US respondents identify the government as the most important actor, while 22 per cent see citizens as primarily responsible for dealing with disinformation. In Germany, only 9 per cent attribute this responsibility to citizens.

Unlike German respondents, Americans believe their government is capable of effectively curbing disinformation: 26 per cent of them believe their government is best positioned to make improvements. This belief is particularly strong among Democratic voters. In Germany, the gap between the responsibility and the problem-solving competence of the government is much wider. In both countries, the role of citizens in solving the problem is highlighted – especially by those with low trust in media and politics, who see citizens as best equipped to tackle disinformation.

In the USA, the question of what is more important, protecting citizens from disinformation or prioritising freedom of speech is more polarising: 44 per cent of US respondents emphasise the right to say and write anything online, while 47 per cent opt for the perspective that citizens should only have access to accurate information online. In Germany, the desire to protect citizens from disinformation is stronger at 57 per cent.

Methodology

Between 4 and 17 October 2023, 5,055 people in Germany and 2,018 people in the USA aged 16 and over were surveyed online. The survey was conducted by pollytix strategic research gmbh on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung using the online panel from Bilendi & respondi. The data are weighted, and the margin of error is 1.4 (Germany) and 2.2 (USA) percentage points, respectively. Initial results from this survey were published in February 2024 in the study “Disconcerted Public” (Bernhard et al. 2024).





1. Digital discourses and elections: What role does disinformation play?

In 2024, more attention than ever before has been focused on the integrity and resilience of democratic elections. Concerns about disinformation campaigns were high during this super election year – and remain so with the upcoming U.S. elections in November. Globally, the attention given to and investigation of disinformation campaigns, meaning the deliberate and manipulative spread of false information, has increased significantly. In November 2023, The New York Times declared the elections in Argentina as the first AI election and predicted a wave of AI-generated disinformation (see Berger 2023). Numerous analyses on Taiwan (January), Indonesia (February), South Africa (May), Mexico (June), and the European Parliament elections (June) followed (e.g., Thomson Foundation 2024; Tapsell 2024; Allen 2024; DRI 2024). The common thread: Disinformation campaigns by state-affiliated actors (Russia, China) are being launched, bots and fake accounts are attempting to influence social media, and AI-generated content is being deployed in all these countries. The crucial question is to what extent such campaigns are effective, influence voter behaviour, and sustainably manipulate digital discourses (Bochert and Unzicker 2024). This question is particularly important to answer as more pivotal elections are on the horizon – besides the U.S. presidential elections this year, the German federal election will take place next year. Against this backdrop, we sought to develop a deeper understanding of how well our societies are prepared for the challenges posed by disinformation and what measures should be taken from the perspective of the public.

Initially published partial results of our data show that the phenomenon has entered public consciousness. Concerns and attention regarding the risks to democracy and social cohesion are

high across society. People also fear the influence of disinformation on elections (Bernhard et al. 2024). The results so far also show that many still primarily rely on their own research skills to detect disinformation, often believing they handle it well and are not influenced by it. At the same time, however, they often assume their fellow citizens are more susceptible to manipulation (ibid.).

This finding, according to which people perceive the impact of mass media on others to be stronger than on themselves, is not new (Davison 1983). This media psychological phenomenon, known as the “third-person effect,” occurs especially with negative and undesirable media influences. It is likely that this effect also manifests in the context of dealing with disinformation. Despite positive self-assessments, concerns about manipulation must be taken seriously, and more people must be engaged and convinced by potential solutions. But who, from the public's perspective, is capable and responsible for effectively countering disinformation? And what should that look like?

With more in-depth questions, we examined a variety of measures against disinformation to better understand the tension between freedom of expression and protection from disinformation, as well as the responsibilities and problem-solving abilities of various actors. The survey presented preventive, reactive, and restrictive measures. Preventive measures aim to raise awareness of and immunise the public against disinformation; reactive approaches try to minimise damage once disinformation is already circulating; and restrictive measures attempt to prevent the spread of false information entirely. We wanted to know: What are the solutions that garner broad support? Where do opinions diverge?

Mitigating disinformation often involves making judgements about highly controversial topics, determining which information is considered true and which is false, and, if necessary, ensuring that false claims do not remain on social media. To what extent does the public see conflicts here with the right to freedom of expression (or: as asked in the U.S. context: freedom of speech)? On which topics do citizens believe that the right to say and write anything on the internet outweighs the desire for protection from disinformation?

For these questions, the comparison between Germany and the United States is particularly intriguing: The U.S. presidential elections in November are already making media waves, with several German states voting in September and the federal election to follow next year. On both sides of the Atlantic, political decision-makers must be judged on how well they handle these challenges and how carefully and effectively they take or support countermeasures. How much do public expectations vary here? How is the conflict between freedom of expression and protection from disinformation viewed on either side of the Atlantic?

Methodology

For this study, 5,055 people in Germany were surveyed between 4 and 17 October 2023. In parallel, 2,018 people were also surveyed in the United States. In both cases, the target population was residents aged 16 and over. The average survey duration was approximately 20 minutes (Germany) and 10 minutes (USA). The data were then weighted according to official national statistics to ensure the representativeness of the results.¹ The respective samples were provided by the survey company Bilendi & respondi. The survey and data analysis were conducted by pollytix

1 With a sample size of N = 5,055 respondents in Germany, the maximum margin of error at a 95 % confidence interval is 1.4 percentage points, while for the US respondents, it is 2.2 percentage points.

strategic research gmbh. The present analysis only covers part of the survey results. A prior analysis focused on dealing with, understanding and perceiving disinformation. It was published in February 2024 under the title “Disconcerted Public” (Bernhard et al. 2024).

Media trust

The level of trust in the media plays a crucial role in both the perception of and the handling of disinformation. In the preceding study, which is based on the same dataset, we introduced a division into high, medium, and low media trust and used this as an analytical lens. The following three questionnaire items were used for this:

1. “All in all, one can trust the reporting on political topics in the media.”
2. “The population in Germany is systematically lied to by the media.”
3. “The media and politics work hand in hand to manipulate public opinion.”

Responses were recorded on a scale from 0 (“strongly disagree”) to 10 (“strongly agree”) and then summarised into an index. Low media trust corresponds to 0 to 10 points, medium media trust to 11 to 20 points, and high media trust to 21 to 30 points. Further information can be found in Bernhard et al. 2024, pages 11 to 15.





2. Who is countering disinformation?

Most of the population views disinformation as a significant to very significant problem for society, posing threats to social cohesion and democracy (Bernhard et al., 2024). The complexity of this challenge is considerable, and respondents also recognise that it requires a collaborative effort from various groups to provide solutions. The key actors who could effectively curb disinformation include civil society organisations, political decision-makers, social platforms, and journalists. Politicians develop regulations at the national or European level. Platforms provide broad digital spaces for discourse and must both implement their own policies and enforce public regulations by, for example, developing technical solutions that curb the spread of disinformation on their sites and help users navigate information more effectively. Journalism and media professionals, committed to high standards of quality, contribute by providing well-researched information, exposing disinformation, and educating the public on the importance of research and source verification. Schools and other educational institutions teach citizens critical skills to develop resilience against disinformation, enabling them to engage confidently and securely as critical and reflective users with news and disinformation and to avoid contributing to the spread of the latter.

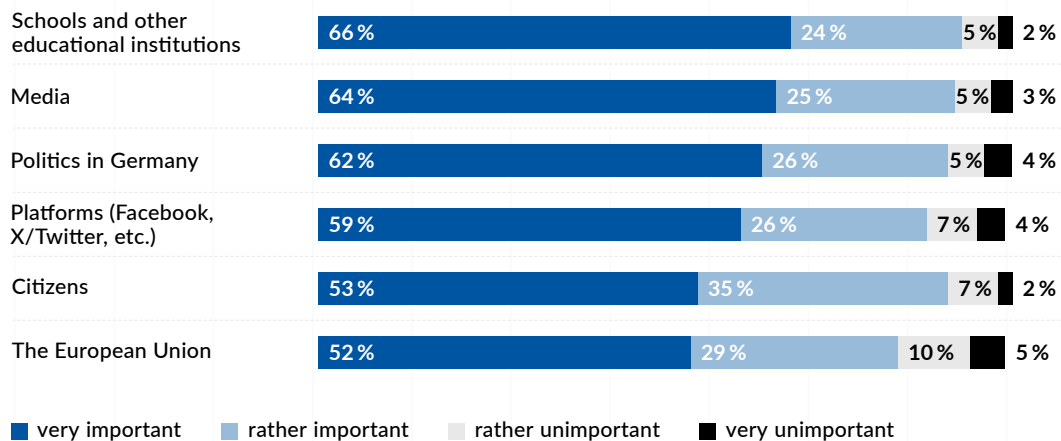
That is the ideal scenario. But how does the public perceive the role and responsibility of these various actors in dealing with disinformation? Who is seen as responsible? Who is most trusted to bring about positive change?

2.1 Who matters? Relevance in handling disinformation

When asked about the relevance of different actors or responsible parties in countering disinformation, the numbers clearly indicate that, according to the respondents, there is no single group or individual expected to solve the problem alone. The complexity and interdependence of the actors become immediately apparent.

Figure 1: Relevance of different actors in countering disinformation

There are several players that can help mitigate online disinformation. How important do you think it is for each of the following players to take action against disinformation?



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know.

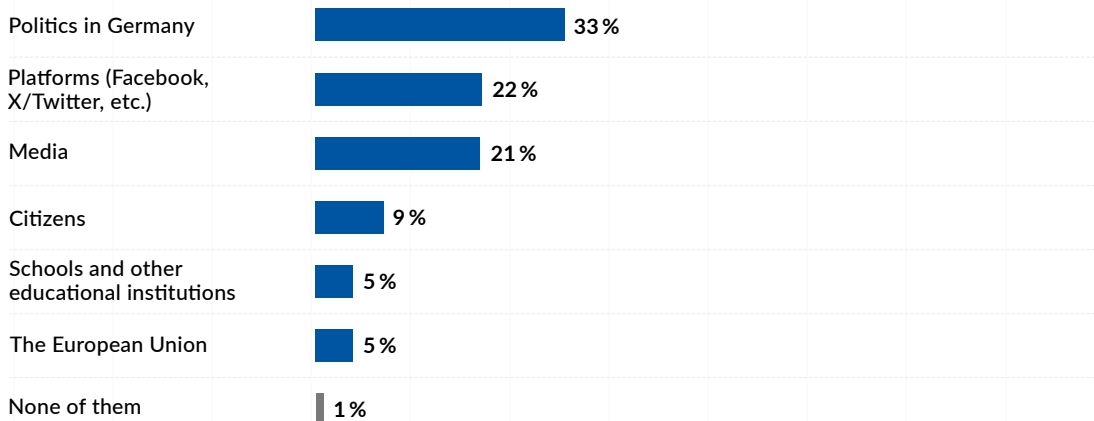
The highest relevance is attributed to schools and educational institutions. 66 per cent consider it “very important” that the issue of disinformation is addressed here. Media, politics, governments, and platforms are seen as similarly important, with 59 to 64 per cent rating their actions as “very important.” Citizens' involvement follows, with 53 per cent considering it “very important” and only 2 per cent viewing it as “very unimportant.” At 52 per cent “very important,” the European Union (EU) is also seen as relevant, although it ranks last in the list. This suggests that the issue of disinformation is perceived more in a national rather than an international context by the respondents.

2.2 Who is responsible? Accountability in mitigating disinformation

When asked who the respondents consider the most responsible for curbing the spread of disinformation, the picture becomes clearer.

Figure 2: Perceived responsibility in countering disinformation

And who is most responsible to act against disinformation?



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know.

One in three sees the German government as primarily responsible. In contrast, only 5 per cent assign primary responsibility to the EU. The attribution of responsibility to the government is particularly strong among those aged 65 and older (37 per cent), women (37 per cent), those with lower formal education (38 per cent), low media trust (39 per cent), and AfD voters (38 per cent). This finding is surprising given that the latter three groups are generally characterised by low trust in politics. A possible explanation may lie in high levels of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with politics. Unresolved tasks and problems are often attributed to politics, which, in the respondents' eyes, is "once again" failing to fulfil its duties. This also explains the relatively large gap between the attributed responsibility and the perceived competence of politics, which is particularly pronounced among these three groups.

Second in the responsibility ranking are platforms, at 22 per cent. The responsibility of platforms is mainly seen by those with high media trust, 36 per cent of whom attribute the greatest responsibility to them. In contrast, those with low media trust, at 12 per cent, see platforms as less responsible, placing more emphasis on the responsibility of politics. Platforms also rank first among Green Party voters, with 33 per cent of them seeing platforms as more responsible for improvements than the German government (26 per cent). Intensive users² of various social media platforms, however, do not see these platforms as primarily responsible for making improvements at above-average rates.

Media follow in third place, with 21 per cent seeing them as most responsible. This view is largely independent of the trust placed in media. Only 9 per cent see citizens as primarily responsible, although this figure rises noticeably among those who are active on social media and express

2 Intensive use is operationalised as using at least one social media platform multiple times per day.

political views there (13 per cent) – potentially because they have experience with the spread of disinformation or with counter-speech. Looking at the perceived responsibility of schools and other educational institutions (5 per cent) highlights that their contribution is considered particularly relevant, but for many, it is seen more as a “nice to have” rather than a necessity. From the public’s perspective, other actors should be held accountable first.

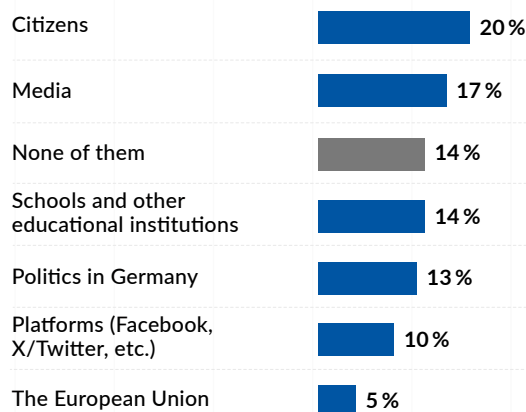
A comparison between the public and expert perspectives reveals that the role of politics and legislation is evaluated differently (Stegers 2021). Experts see the most urgent need for action on the part of platforms, closely followed by measures in education. In the area of legislation, experts mainly advocate for the effective implementation and enforcement of existing rules (Jaurisch 2022; Stegers 2021). These differences can likely be attributed to differing levels of knowledge about which legislation has already been initiated by politics and which measures have not yet been adequately implemented by platforms, despite regulations.

2.3 Who is capable? Competence in dealing with disinformation

The question of primary responsibility is not the same as the question of who is believed to have the actual competence to counter disinformation or improve digital discourse.

Figure 3: Perceived competence in countering disinformation

And who do you think is most capable to act against disinformation?



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know.

This competence is most often attributed to citizens themselves (20 per cent). Media come in second place, with 17 per cent, while third place is shared by schools and other educational institutions (14 per cent). However, just as many respondents believe that none of the proposed actors are capable of improving the situation. The German government ranks fifth (13 per cent), and platforms are even less trusted to make improvements (10 per cent). The EU again comes in last place (5 per cent).

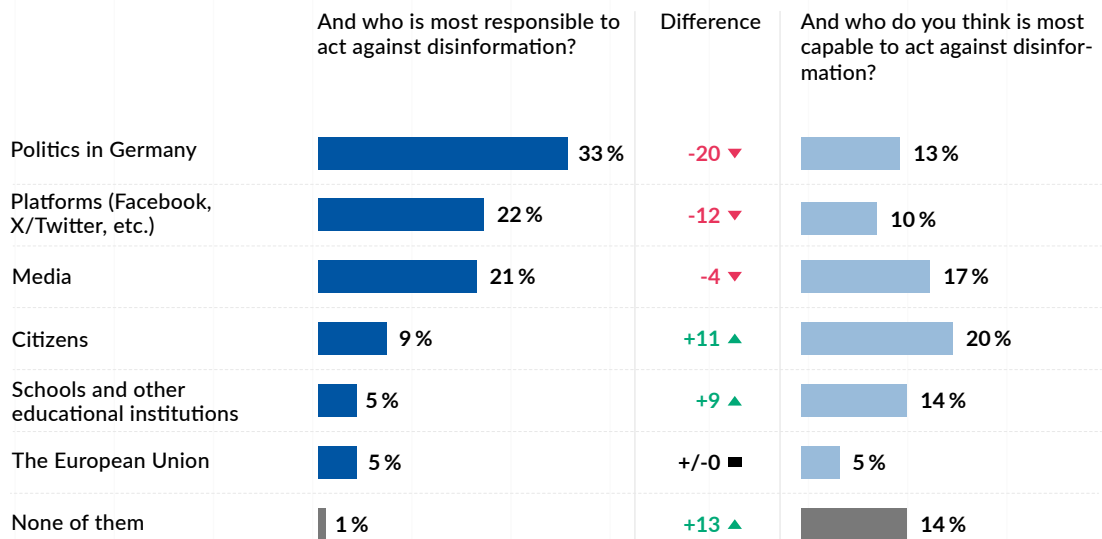
Most citizens, therefore, believe they and their fellow citizens are the ones most capable of making improvements. However, the results of the initial data analysis in this study, which focuses on how disinformation is handled, show that only a small percentage of citizens currently enga-

ge very actively with disinformation. Although about half of the respondents indicate that they have checked information on the internet at least once through their own research, only 27 per cent have actively inquired with the sender of a message. Just 12 per cent say they have used a fact-checking organisation's services. About a third of the respondents report that they have pointed out to someone through a comment or message that they were spreading false information. A quarter of the respondents have reported a post or account on social media (Bernhard et al. 2024). The results illustrate that general awareness of the dangers of disinformation is not always sufficient to bring about changes in behaviour. Another pitfall identified in the analysis is that citizens tend to overestimate their own competence. Confidence in their own resilience against disinformation is relatively high, leading them to view disinformation primarily as a threat to others (ibid.). The findings support the previously mentioned assumption that the so-called "third-person effect" is occurring here: The impact of disinformation on oneself is underestimated, while one's own resilience is overestimated. Negative effects are therefore primarily assumed to affect others. A study on news and information literacy in the population shows that the general population's news and information literacy is typically in need of significant improvement (Meßmer et al. 2021).

The media's competence to provide solutions is more often recognised by older respondents and less frequently by younger ones, and primarily when there is already a tendency to trust the media. The 16 to 24-year-old age group places more emphasis on education and the improvement of skills. A quarter of this group sees schools and other educational institutions as the most important actors in the fight against disinformation. Interestingly, the competence attributed to these institutions does not correlate with their perceived responsibility. Only 9 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds believe that schools and other educational institutions are most responsible for taking action, but one in four of them trusts that they can do so.

The German government (13 per cent) and the EU (5 per cent) are generally seen as having very little competence in finding solutions. This competence is most often attributed to the German government by voters of the SPD (23 per cent), CDU/CSU (17 per cent), and Greens (16 per cent), as well as by respondents aged 65 and older (17 per cent). The EU is most often perceived as capable by men aged 25 to 34 (11 per cent). The German government's competence is rated particularly low by AfD voters (7 per cent) and respondents who already exhibit low trust in democracy and the media (7 per cent each).

Figure 4: Comparison between perceived responsibility and perceived competence



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know.

A striking feature is the significant discrepancy between perceived responsibility and attributed competence for most of the actors. This is most evident for the national government. The competence attribution is 20 percentage points lower than the responsibility attribution (33 to 13 per cent). For platforms, the difference is still 12 percentage points (22 to 10 per cent). This indicates a certain disillusionment or disappointment among respondents towards those actors from whom more effort is demanded but little success is expected. The opposite is true for both citizens themselves and schools and other educational institutions. Here, the respondents' trust in their abilities clearly exceeds the perceived obligation to act: 11 and 9 percentage points, respectively. The differences are smaller for the media.

What are the reasons for this, and what does it mean?

The low level of trust in the government's ability to solve problems has multiple causes and is not solely attributable to the issue of disinformation, nor is it confined to this area. Studies have long shown a decline in trust in politics, particularly in its ability to address key future challenges (Hagemeyer et al. 2024). Whether due to perceived lack of political will or bureaucratic hurdles, a large portion of the population currently harbours significant doubts about the positive contribution that politics can or does make. The challenge of mitigating disinformation is no exception.

Another factor that might contribute to the negative perception of politics in this area is the presumed low awareness of already implemented or planned measures. Important legislative initiatives, such as the Digital Services Act³, were not yet in force at the time of our survey. By now,

3 The Digital Services Act (DSA) is a law of the European Union aimed at increasing regulation of online platforms such as social media and marketplaces. The Digital Services Act has been in effect since 25 August 2023 for the liability of very large online platforms and applies to smaller online services since 17 February 2024. In Germany, the Federal Network Agency is responsible for coordinating and monitoring its implementation (Die Bundesregierung 2024).

the law has been in effect for over six months and is slowly becoming more widely known among the public. Not least, the legal actions that the European Commission has since initiated against several major platforms are increasingly being covered by the media. The multimillion-euro fines being demanded from companies like Apple, Meta, Alphabet, and X/Twitter illustrate for the first time the tangible influence that platforms can wield. However, these developments – and particularly the perceived changes by users – cannot be fully assessed based on our data and will need to undergo further long-term scrutiny in terms of awareness and impact.

Social media platforms are the places where internet users report to encounter disinformation most frequently (Bernhard et al. 2024). Despite this, only 10 per cent of respondents believe that platforms are likely to improve the situation, even though they are increasingly being regulated and held accountable. However, the legal actions taken against these platforms also demonstrate that these regulatory tools have not been adequately implemented, particularly when they conflict with the platforms' economic interests. Furthermore, the functionality of these platforms remains opaque to most users, which contributes to the perception that there is little potential for improvement. The methods and technical aspects are often still discussed only within expert circles. This perception, however, appears to be gradually shifting: Younger respondents and those who use social media more intensively – especially users of TikTok, Snapchat, and X/Twitter – are increasingly recognising the necessity for platforms to effectively use their tools. The pressure on platforms to act more decisively comes from multiple sources: From the users themselves (Sängerlaub and Schulz 2021), from the Federation of German Consumer Organisations (2023), and from the European Commission (2023). Therefore, platforms should have a strong interest in emphasising the existence and enforcement of current regulations and counteracting their negative image – not least to avoid sanctions and remain profitable. Since Elon Musk's takeover of X/Twitter and the subsequent changes – including the dismissal of Trust & Safety teams responsible for content moderation, the global reduction of (multilingual) content moderators, and the restriction of access for researchers – the capacity to enforce legal regulations has been significantly reduced. Consequently, both advertising revenue and the number of active users have sharply declined (Gürtler 2023), and X/Twitter is currently regarded by users as one of the platforms where they encounter disinformation most frequently (Bernhard et al. 2024).





3. Balance and tension: Freedom of expression and protection from disinformation

Freedom of expression⁴ is guaranteed in Germany by Article 5 (1) of the Basic Law (Grundgesetz, GG). It states: *“Everyone shall have the right to freely express and disseminate their opinions in speech, writing, and pictures and to inform themselves from publicly accessible sources without hindrance. Freedom of the press and freedom of reporting by means of broadcasts and films shall be guaranteed. There shall be no censorship.”* Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right that ensures the formation of public opinion. However, this right is limited when the content conflicts with other legal provisions, such as distributing illegal content, violating youth protection regulations, infringing on personal honour, or endangering public order (Article 5 (2) GG).

Disinformation, defined as the intentional spread of false or misleading information, often operates within a legal grey area. While its content is not directly illegal or punishable, it is deliberately aimed at undermining democratic processes, inciting hate and discrimination, or endangering public health and safety. The determination of when provocative opinion crosses the line into illegal content often needs to be made on a case-by-case basis. This ensures that it is not the state

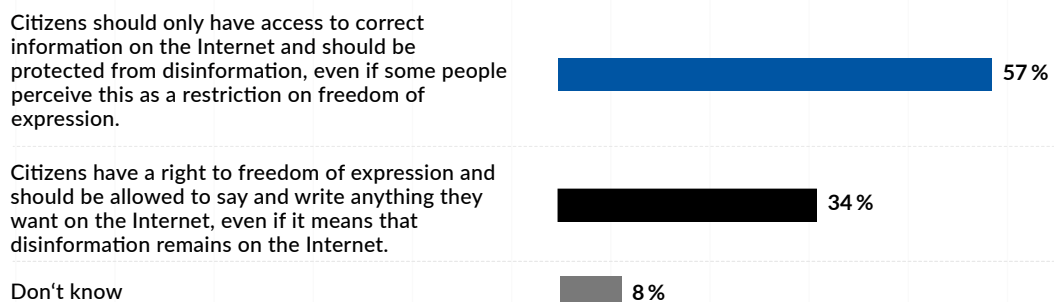
4 Even though they are often used synonymously, there is a slight difference in meaning between “freedom of expression” (German: “Meinungsfreiheit”) and “freedom of speech” (German: “Redefreiheit”). Additionally, the significance of these terms and the intensity of public debates on the topic vary between Germany and the USA. In the German survey, we used the term “Meinungsfreiheit”; in the U.S. survey, “freedom of speech.” For consistency, we will use the term “freedom of expression” throughout the text but want to clearly highlight the different connotations. This is especially relevant for the comparisons in [Chapter 6](#).

that decides which statements are worthy of dissemination and which are not (Schillmöller and Doseva 2023). Regulations like the Digital Services Act heavily rely on the self-regulation of platforms, leaving it up to them to decide which content they wish to allow and, therefore, if, when, and under what circumstances potentially harmful content is permitted or restricted. However, platforms are required to be transparent and must clearly explain the basis for their decisions, particularly how they weigh systemic risks, for example, in cases where disinformation campaigns relate to democratic processes or public health (ibid.).

It is important to note that the public's understanding of the term 'disinformation' does not always align with its scientific and legal definitions. From the public's perspective, the term is more broadly defined and can include sensationalist headlines or exaggerations. Additionally, a growing proportion of the population (13 per cent in Germany and 25 per cent in the USA) believes that 'disinformation' is a term used only to discredit alternative opinions (Bernhard et al. 2024). Similarly, the boundary between opinion and (verbal) assault is perceived differently by individuals, which also influences their perception and understanding of responsibility and competence.

Figure 5: Weighing protection from disinformation with freedom of expression

Which of the following views do you tend to agree with?



Sample: all respondents.

In weighing this tension, a majority of 57 per cent of respondents favour protection from disinformation, even if it comes at the expense of freedom of expression. On the other hand, 35 per cent consider the right to freedom of expression more important than protection from disinformation. Another significant 8 per cent are undecided between the two positions.

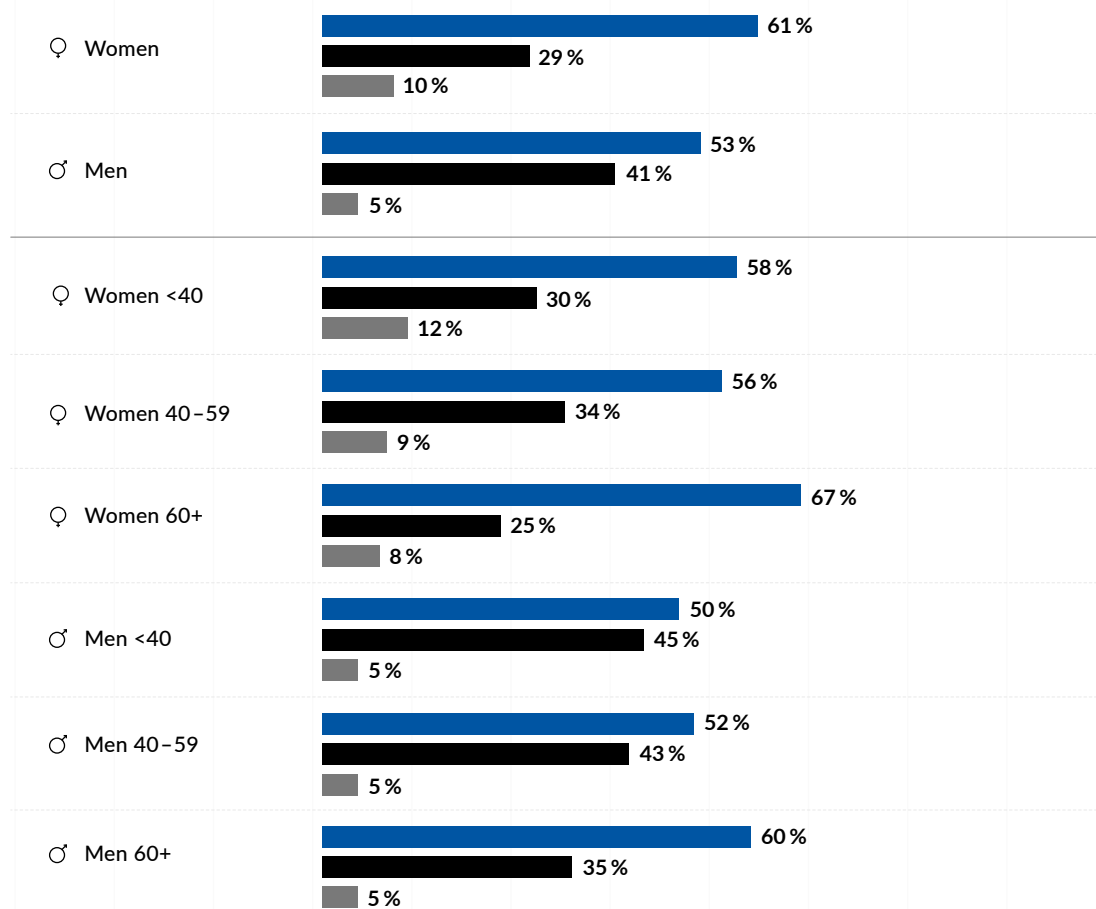
3.1 Differences by gender, age, and political orientation

The survey also reflects varying lived experiences: 61 per cent of women advocate for protection from disinformation, while only 29 per cent prioritise freedom of expression. This is likely due to personal experiences with hate speech and harassment, which are more commonly directed at women in digital spaces, prompting a stronger demand for protection against such attacks (BAG 2024). However, our data does not allow for a direct differentiation between experiences of hate speech, disinformation, and political influence that respondents reflect in their answers. Among men, responses are more balanced: While a majority (53 per cent) also favour protection

from disinformation, 41 per cent support the right to freedom of expression. The preference for freedom of expression is particularly strong among young men aged 16 to 24, with 52 per cent believing it is more important that citizens can say and write anything online. Conversely, 45 per cent consider the protection from disinformation to be the more important good.

Figure 6: Weighing protection from disinformation and freedom of expression, according to gender and age

Which of the following views do you tend to agree with?



Due to the fact that only 0.1 per cent of respondents identified as "diverse", these values are not visualised here.

- Citizens should only have access to correct information on the Internet and should be protected from disinformation, even if some people perceive this as a restriction on freedom of expression
- Citizens have a right to freedom of expression and should be allowed to say and write anything they want on the Internet, even if it means that disinformation remains on the Internet
- Don't know

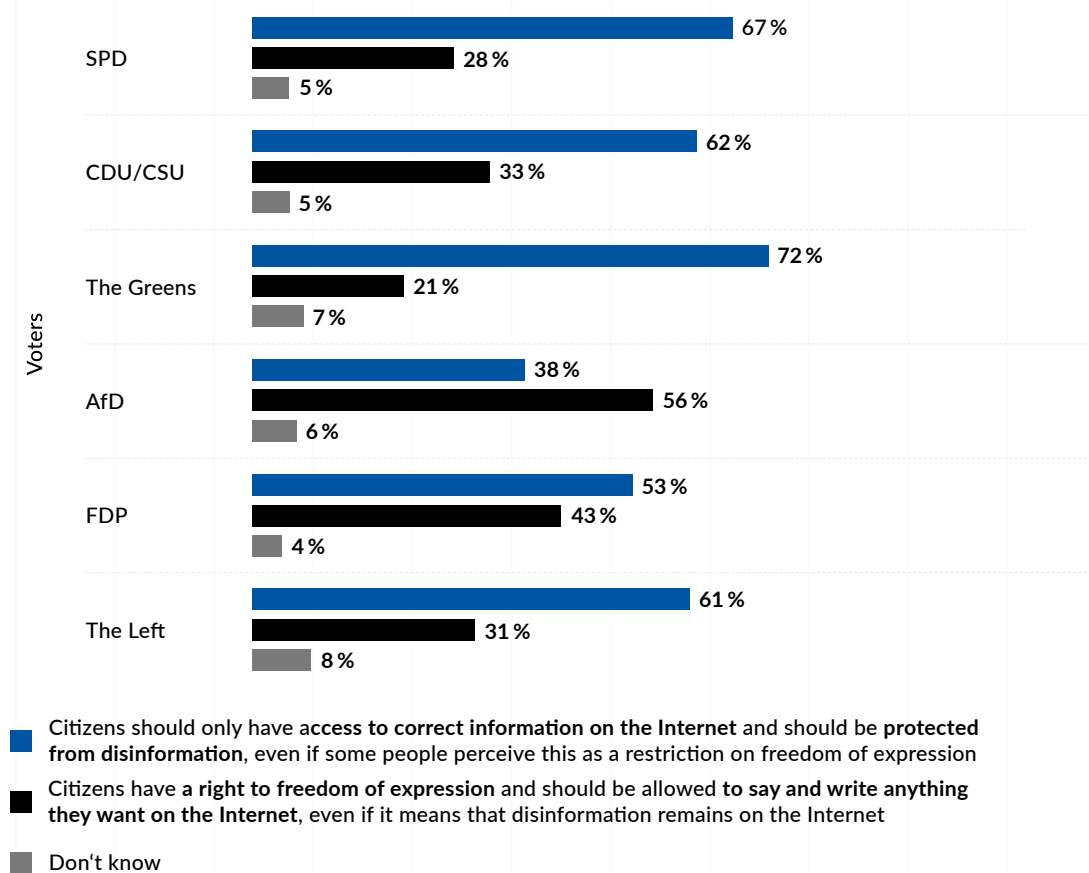
Sample: all respondents (half sample).

The view that protection from disinformation is more important than the right to say and write anything online is strongly linked to media trust and the political orientation of respondents. Those with high media trust are more likely (68 per cent) to prioritise protection from disinformation. In contrast, low media trust is associated with a preference for freedom of expression (49 per cent). The defence of the right to say and write anything online is particularly strong among those who already view disinformation as a political term used to discredit alternative opinions (69 per cent

for freedom of expression versus 28 per cent for protection from disinformation). Among AfD voters, the right to freedom of expression is clearly preferred (56 per cent). In contrast, Green (72 per cent), SPD (67 per cent), and CDU/CSU (62 per cent) voters more frequently advocate for protection from disinformation. FDP voters are more divided (53 per cent protection from disinformation versus 43 per cent freedom of expression).

Figure 7: Weighing protection from disinformation and freedom of expression, according to party preference

Which of the following views do you tend to agree with?



Sample: all respondents. (half sample).

The finding that individuals critical of media and government are more sceptical of restrictions on freedom of expression and strongly advocate for it is unsurprising. The question of protection from disinformation is always accompanied by the question of who decides which information is considered truthful and which is deliberately false and manipulative and, therefore, should not be disseminated. Although in practice, the decision is often left to the platforms, the assumption that politics influences this decision is widespread. More than 40 per cent of the population believe that the government collaborates with the media to manipulate public opinion – potentially influencing the decision on which information can be disseminated and which cannot. This is alarming and underscores how crucial the independence of the media is.

Even among experts, interventions to protect against disinformation are controversial (see Iglesias Keller et al. 2024). Similarly, Philip Kreißel from the “Ich bin hier” initiative warns: “State measures must be carefully considered as they can reinforce the impression that social media is deleting content

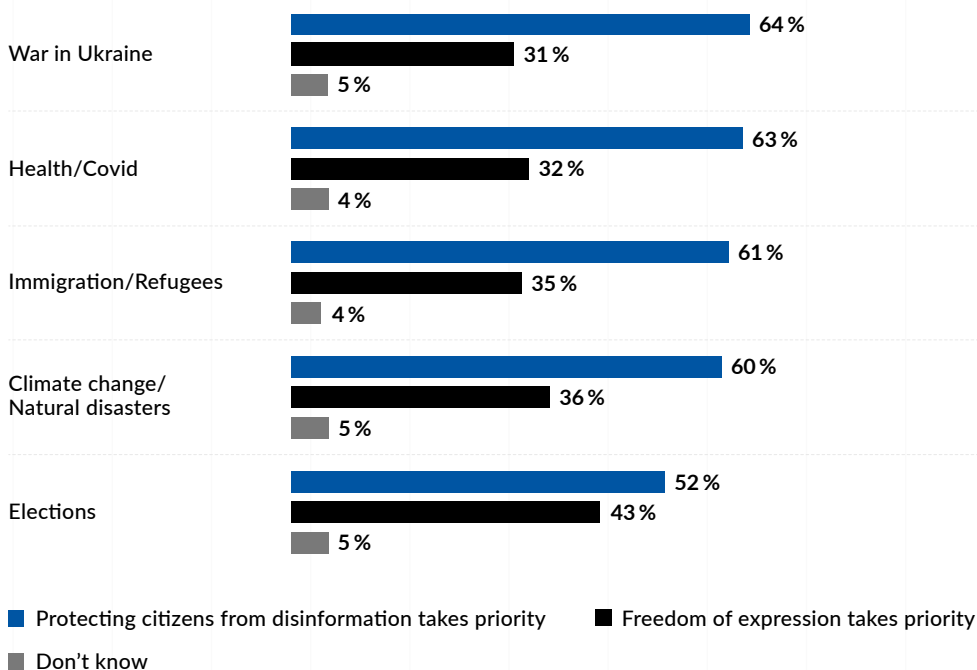
under pressure from above. The power to define what is true should never lie with the state.” (Stegers 2021, p. 24).

3.2 Different assessments of topics

There may be cases – or topics – where the balance between protection from disinformation and the right to freedom of expression is easier or more difficult to strike. This could be because the diversity of opinion on the topic is considered particularly worthy of protection; because factual claims are easier to distinguish from opinions; or, because it seems simpler to judge which information is correct and which is false. For this reason, we asked respondents to assess the tension between freedom of expression and protection from disinformation in various thematic contexts. Five topics were selected that are most commonly associated with disinformation in media coverage (EU DisinfoLab 2023). In four out of five topics, the balance seems easier to strike and tends to favour intervention against disinformation.

Figure 8: Weighing protection from disinformation and freedom of expression for different topics

When you think of some controversial topics, how do you feel about the following: Should freedom of expression take precedence, or should there be stronger actions against disinformation on the internet?



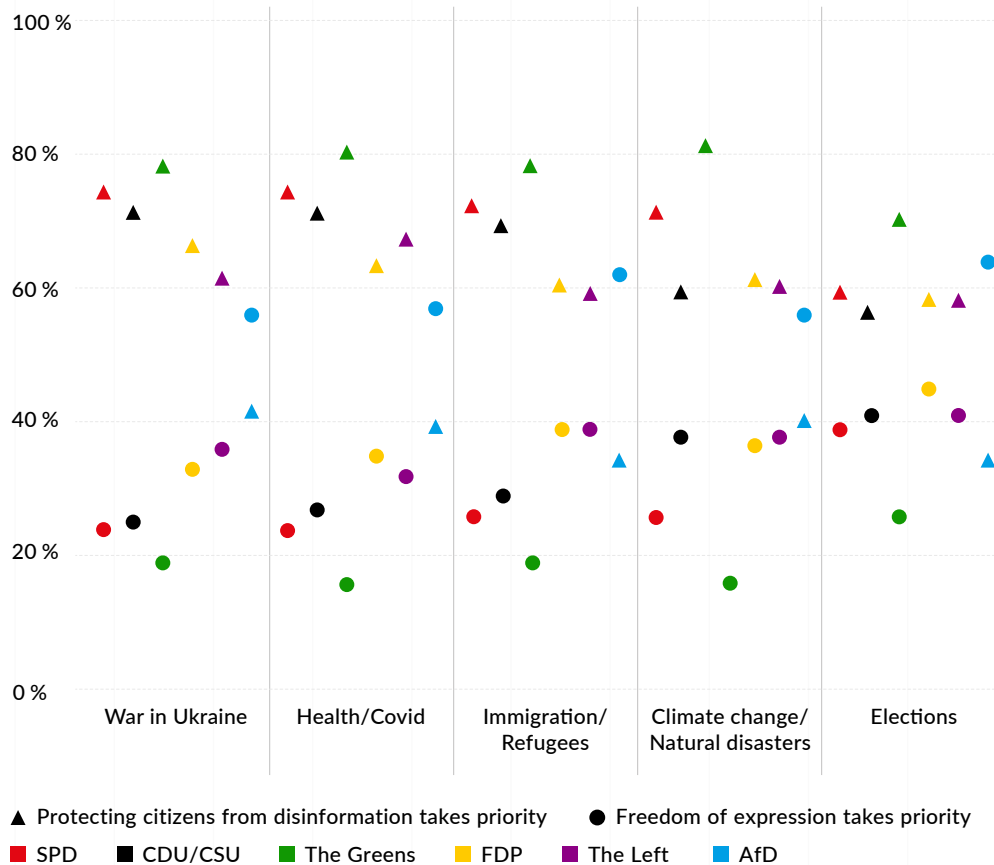
Sample: all respondents (half sample). Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

When it comes to the war in Ukraine, 64 per cent of respondents support stronger protection from disinformation. Here, Russia is involved as an aggressor, a country that is strongly associated with spreading disinformation and has a significant interest in influencing perceptions of and support for Ukraine. Since the end of 2022, elements and attacks of a large-scale Russian disinformation campaign have been repeatedly uncovered. On the one hand, “doppelgängers” have been used to create deceptively authentic copies of high-circulation newspapers like *Der Spiegel* or *Die Zeit*, with the content replaced by false statements (EU DisinfoLab 2022). On the other hand, several thousand fake accounts have reportedly shared misleading posts on X/Twitter, aiming to discredit the German government (Rosenbach and Schult 2024). This connection is also reflected in the data. It shows that those who are more likely to suspect the spread of disinformation in Germany by foreign actors are even more strongly in favour of protecting citizens from disinformation in the context of the ‘war in Ukraine,’ with 75 per cent support.

However, in the context of ‘elections,’ the trend towards prioritising protection from disinformation is not as pronounced. 43 per cent of respondents – significantly more than in general, abstract deliberations (see Figure 8) – prioritise freedom of expression in this context, even though about two-thirds of citizens are concerned that the outcome of elections could be influenced by disinformation (Bernhard et al. 2024). Against the backdrop of resilient democracies, this seems to reflect a strong awareness that elections also serve as a competition of ideas and visions, where it is essential to allow for friction. This is a positive finding. At the same time, there is a concern that a large portion of the population fears manipulation and propaganda by politicians. For example, every second respondent also accuses parties and politicians in Germany of frequently spreading disinformation (ibid.). Moreover, trust in political parties is currently at a low point: 55 per cent say they have no or little trust in political parties, and only 7 per cent have great or very great trust (see also Boehnke et al. 2024). As a result, many respondents seem to worry that restricting freedom of expression could be used to disadvantage political opponents. The diversity of opinion likely holds particularly high value here for this reason.

Figure 9: Weighing protection from disinformation and freedom of expression for different topics, according to party preference

Should freedom of expression take precedence, or should there be stronger actions against disinformation on the internet?



AfD voters are particularly strong advocates of freedom of expression on the topic of 'elections' (64 per cent). Green voters, meanwhile, as in other areas, disproportionately favour protecting citizens from disinformation (70 per cent).





4. Not just one, but many measures must interplay against disinformation

The survey data clearly show that a significant portion of the population desires protection against disinformation. However, when asked which actors are best suited to achieve this, there is no consensus. Similarly, there is considerable debate over how far protection against disinformation should go and at what point the protection of freedom of expression takes precedence. What about different approaches to dealing with disinformation? To address this question, respondents were presented with a range of possible measures that they were asked to evaluate. These measures vary in their restrictiveness and scope, targeting different aspects of the issue.

Preventive measures

Preventive measures aim to make people more resilient to disinformation or to significantly restrict the spread of false information from the outset. The range of options was deliberately chosen to be broad, so as not to exclude measures that experts might assess critically. Our survey data will be further analysed in the next step.

Prebunking operates on the assumption that people can be 'immunised' (Schaefer and Bitzer 2021). This includes measures such as educating citizens and promoting media literacy, or publishing lists of channels/profiles that frequently disseminate disinformation. Other preventive measures focus on increasing transparency on the platforms' side, such as more labelling of advertisements, bots, or verified accounts. The basic idea here is that the labelling makes it easier for users to assess what they see, thus enabling them to evaluate the credibility of posts themselves.

ves. However, this approach relies on users already having a solid understanding of these aspects and is primarily effective when the labels are clear and visible – an obstacle that is rarely overcome in practice (Meßmer et al. 2021; Die Medienanstalten 2023). Another transparency-focused measure involves demanding more openness regarding algorithms and how platforms function. The goal is to create a more conscious and critical environment where disinformation has less room to thrive, for example, because users can better understand why certain information is more visible and can more easily recognise bias and manipulation. Increased transparency also opens the platforms to independent scrutiny by researchers or journalists, which can strengthen trust and effective control mechanisms. More restrictive and far-reaching in their enforcement are severe and consistent penalties for the dissemination of disinformation, which are considered preventive mainly because they are intended to deter future dissemination of disinformation. The demand for a real-name policy in social media also plays a role here. If users operate under their real names, it becomes easier for platforms and authorities to take action against rule violations and, if necessary, initiate legal proceedings. Additional hoped-for benefits of a real-name policy include making it harder for bots and fake accounts to operate, as well as raising the threshold for spreading disinformation (and especially hate messages).

Reactive measures

Reactive measures are those that respond to disinformation that have already been spread, focusing on damage mitigation. These include correcting demonstrably false claims and using fact-checking by independent organisations to review and label content as false. This is sometimes summarised under the term debunking (Schaefer and Bitzer 2021). In addition to timely correction, debunking also has an archiving function, ensuring that false reports are not left uncorrected in historical accounts.

Restrictive measures

Restrictive measures aim to prevent or at least reduce users' exposure to disinformation. These instruments can include:

1. *Deleting demonstrably false claims by platforms*
2. *Banning users who spread disinformation on platforms (so-called deplatforming)*
3. *Implementing upload filters to prevent disinformation from being uploaded to platforms in the first place*
4. *Limiting the reach of information whose accuracy is questionable*

These restrictive measures, like sanctions and the real-name policy, are controversial among experts and tread a fine line between preserving freedom of expression and protecting against false information (see [Chapter 3](#)). Often, the decision-making power over the permissibility of content is placed in the hands of commercial platform providers – a problem that experts refer to as the “privatisation of law” (Stegers 2021). The criteria by which platforms carry out deletions are, however, little to not publicly documented. In addition to this problem, user bans also raise questions about permissible restrictions on fundamental rights.

4.1 Evaluation and assessment of potential measures

At first glance, it is evident that all the proposed preventive, reactive, and restrictive measures receive broad support. None of the proposed measures are viewed negatively by a majority.

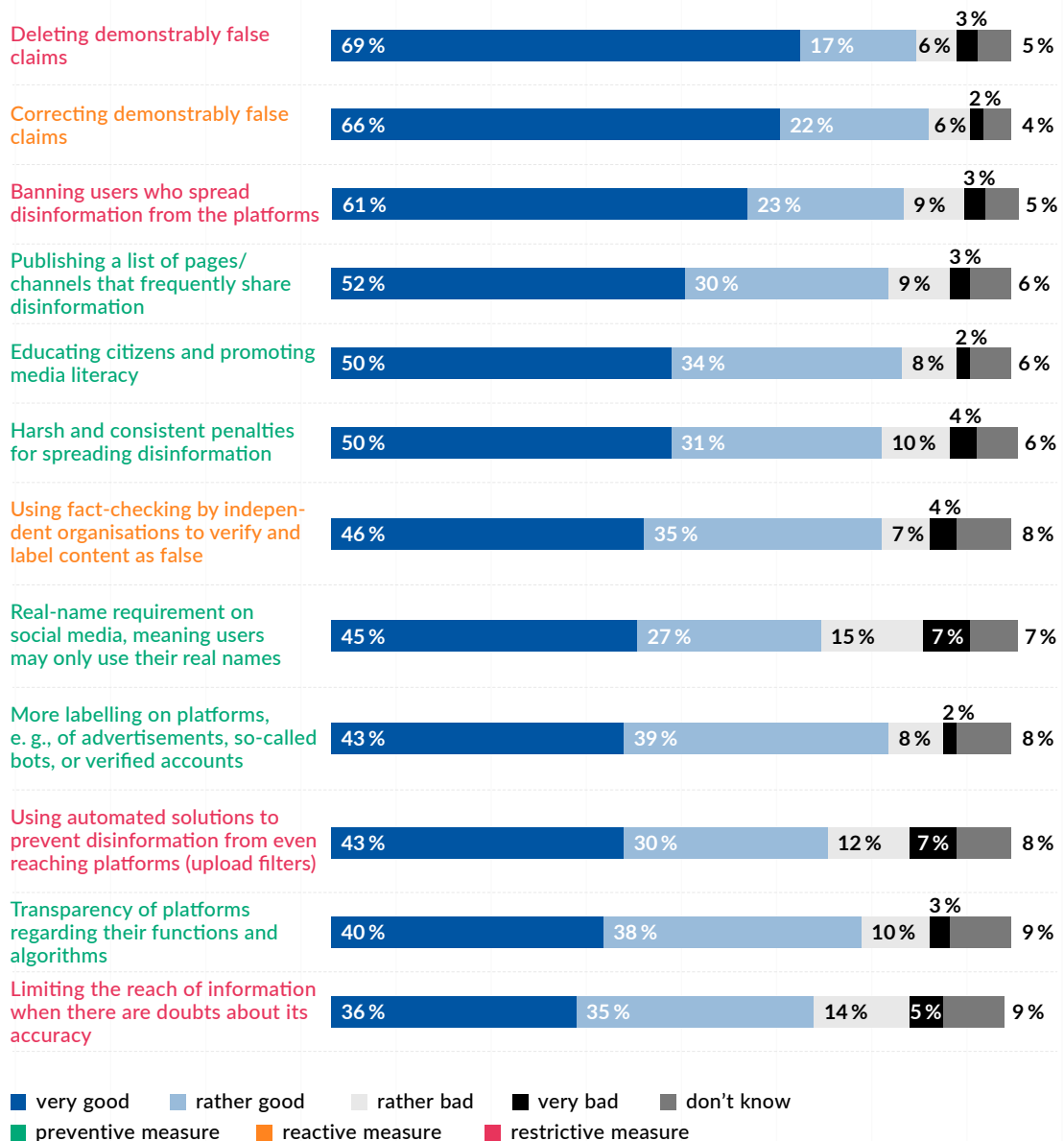
Evaluation of preventive measures

The three proposed measures – educating and promoting media literacy, publishing lists of channels that frequently spread disinformation, and imposing severe and consistent penalties for spreading disinformation – are rated as “very good” by a majority (between 50 and 52 per cent). Only between 10 and 14 per cent of respondents view these proposals with scepticism. Proposals for more transparency and more labelling by platforms also enjoy broad support, though they elicit slightly less enthusiasm from respondents (40 and 43 per cent, respectively).

The real-name policy is viewed more controversially within the range of preventive measures. 22 per cent rate the proposal as “rather bad” or “very bad.” Among the twelve measures presented, it is the one most frequently explicitly rated negatively. In the 16 to 24 age group, around one in two (47 per cent) even finds the proposal “bad” – with young men in this age group (54 per cent) slightly more critical than young women (40 per cent). Looking at social media and messenger users, notably X/Twitter users (39 per cent) and Telegram users (34 per cent) often oppose the real-name policy. Although the real-name policy may have the potential to curb the spread of disinformation, it inevitably brings further restrictions that are contrary to the free and anonymous use of the internet. For some user groups, such as activists, whistleblowers, and victims of abuse, anonymity provides important protective functions and enables many to highlight grievances and express opinions without fear of judgement or retaliation. Furthermore, alongside practical questions regarding implementation, legal and ethical concerns play a role, casting doubt on the actual feasibility of the measure.

Figure 10: Evaluation of measures against the spread of disinformation

Here are some proposals for preventing the spread of disinformation on the internet. How do you evaluate each of them?



Sample: all respondents (half sample).

Evaluation of reactive measures

Regarding reactive measures, it is evident that the correction of demonstrably false claims is widely supported and is one of the most popular and likely well-known proposals for dealing with disinformation. Fact-checking is a classic journalistic tool that probably has a relatively high level of recognition. 66 per cent, or two out of three respondents, rate the proposal as “very good.” The use of fact-checking organisations, which can assist in correcting these claims by examining content and (sometimes directly through partner programmes on platforms) labelling it as false, is also positively rated as “very good” by 46 per cent.

Evaluation of restrictive measures

Among the restrictive measures, the deletion of demonstrably false claims scores the highest. 69 per cent consider it “very good,” with a further 17 per cent rating it as “rather good” and only 9 per cent considering it “poor.” The most negatively assessed restrictive measure is the proposal to limit the reach of information where there are doubts about its accuracy. 36 per cent rate this as “very good,” 35 per cent as “rather good,” and a total of 19 per cent as “poor.” This indicates that respondents differentiate between information that is “demonstrably false” and information where “doubt exists about its accuracy,” supporting a correspondingly different level of restrictiveness. The balancing act between protecting freedom of expression and protecting against disinformation (see [Chapter 3](#)) is evident here once again. The groups of people who are more likely to reject limiting the reach of questionable information are the same groups that previously advocated more for the protection of freedom of expression: Predominantly young men aged 16 to 39 (27 per cent rate the proposal as “very poor” or “rather poor”), AfD voters (30 per cent), respondents with low media trust (27 per cent), and respondents with low trust in democracy (25 per cent). The proposal is also more strongly rejected by those who frequently express political opinions on the internet (27 per cent) and users of Telegram (30 per cent) and X/Twitter (31 per cent). A similar level of scepticism surrounds the proposal of upload filters, which involve using automated solutions to ensure that disinformation does not even appear on the platforms. Again, 19 per cent consider the proposal a bad idea, while 73 per cent support it. The same subgroups previously described are more critical of this proposal. It is also worth noting that restricting visibility or slowing down potentially harmful content (preventing ‘virality’) is less intrusive than deleting posts or blocking users. Experts often advocate this slowing down as a technical measure to better respond to digital dynamics and make life easier for fact-checkers. The individual desire for visibility (influencer status) can sometimes conflict with this, and further research into this tension could be fascinating. The high support for the concept of upload filters (73 per cent) is surprising but also shows that certain controversies remain within expert discourse: The idea was intensively discussed during the EU Copyright Directive reform, with concerns raised about technical hurdles, a high proportion of ‘false positives,’ and disproportionate intrusions into freedom of expression – and these concerns persist (Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte 2022).

Despite the occasional critical voices, it is important to note that a majority of respondents rate many of the twelve proposed measures as “very good” or “rather good.” Only 1 per cent of respondents rate all twelve proposed measures as “very poor” or “rather poor,” while 40 per cent rate all measures as “very good” or “rather good.”

4.2 Evaluation of measures by voting intent

Looking at the evaluation of the different proposals by respondents' voting intentions, both similarities and differences emerge. All voters agree that demonstrably false claims should be deleted or corrected. A majority of at least 50 per cent considers these two proposals to be “very good.” Even AfD voters, who are generally more sceptical of these and other proposals, agree with these measures. There is also broad agreement on the evaluation of the real-name policy, which, although generally positively rated, falls behind other measures.

Figure 11: Evaluation of measures against the spread of disinformation, according to party preference

Here are some proposals for preventing the spread of disinformation on the internet.
How do you evaluate each of them?



Represented values: very good. Missing values: rather good/rather bad/very bad/don't know.
Sample: all respondents (half sample).

Less agreement exists regarding how to handle users who spread disinformation. SPD voters are particularly supportive of the idea of suspending these users, with 73 per cent considering it “very good;” a clear majority of voters for the Greens, CDU/CSU, and the Left also support this proposal. FDP and AfD voters are somewhat more sceptical, but even here, around half consider the proposals “very good.”

Voters are particularly divided on the role and use of fact-checking organisations. Nearly two-thirds of Green party voters consider this a “very good” proposal, but only one in three AfD voters agrees. This finding is consistent with other results from this study and underscores the significant mistrust AfD voters have towards fact-checking organisations.

Surprisingly, voters are also divided on the proposal to counter disinformation online by increasing public awareness and promoting media literacy. There is a wide variation in those who consider this proposal “very good.” On one side, every second Green party voter finds this proposal “very good,” but only about one in three AfD voters does. The difference is somewhat mitigated when considering that 37 per cent of AfD voters still rate this proposal as “rather good.” Overall, 94 per cent of Green party voters and 74 per cent of AfD voters consider this proposal “(rather) good.”

While Green party and AfD voters are often on opposite sides, FDP and Green party voters are mainly divided by the proposal to impose strict and consistent penalties for spreading disinformation. 62 per cent of Green party voters find this proposal “very good,” but only one in three FDP voters agrees. In addition to Green party voters, SPD and CDU/CSU voters also mostly consider this proposal a “very good” idea.

More labelling on platforms is more frequently desired by voters of the Greens (53 per cent) and SPD (50 per cent). Upload filters, which are particularly frequently and controversially discussed alongside the real-name policy, are considered a “very good” proposal mainly by voters of the SPD (51 per cent), CDU/CSU (49 per cent), and Greens (46 per cent). Voters of the Left (39 per cent), FDP (37 per cent), and AfD (34 per cent) are less supportive. More transparency from platforms regarding their functionality and algorithms is also particularly often considered a “very good” idea by Green party and SPD voters.

On the proposal to limit the reach of information where there are doubts about its accuracy, voters are somewhat more united: Fewer than 50 per cent of all voters consider this approach a “very good” idea. It is most supported by Green party voters (43 per cent) and least by AfD voters (28 per cent).

Whether and which measures were known to the respondents beforehand, and thus whether they could draw on prior knowledge in their evaluation, was not surveyed in this context. However, our experience from qualitative and quantitative research suggests that, apart from individualised solutions like promoting media literacy, many of the proposals are less well known. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that public opinion might change as the population's knowledge increases and discussions about the advantages or disadvantages of a measure become more prominent in public discourse, or even targeted campaigns for or against measures are initiated. The data show that measures partially judged problematic by experts, such as sanctions or upload filters and the risk of overblocking (Iglesias Keller et al. 2024; Stegers 2021), already face opposition among the public. The discussion of measures is always tied to a discussion about the freedom of social media as a public space for discourse. A minority with a high affinity for social media is significantly more critical of restrictive measures but may also be guided by the belief that these measures target individuals rather than coordinated campaigns for influence and manipulation.

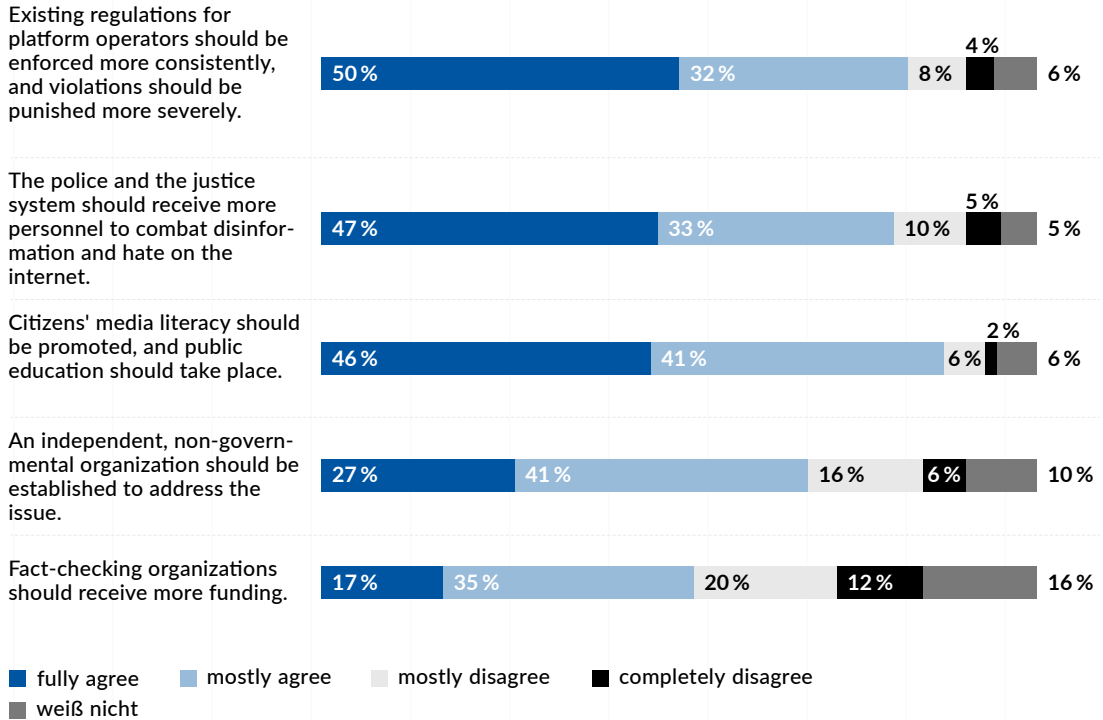


5. Political demands

Politics is being called upon to act. One-third of respondents believe that the responsibility to act lies primarily with politicians. However, there is little confidence in the problem-solving abilities of political decision-makers. On the one hand, it is important to better and more clearly demonstrate where measures have already been taken by politicians, but on the other hand, it should not be overlooked that there is no single person responsible and no single solution. A healthy digital public sphere thrives on its diversity, its spaces for discourse and participation, and the interplay of various groups of stakeholders. This means that it is crucial for politicians to understand that trust and perceptions of competence in the digital public sphere are not fostered through unilateral actions, harshness, and restrictions. Instead, they must communicate better, more transparently, and more collaboratively, ensuring that relevant actors are sustainably and independently positioned. However, to help political decision-makers navigate this issue, we asked respondents about their agreement with various political demands. A significant portion of all respondents agrees with the proposed political demands, often across all individual party preferences.

Figure 12: Evaluation of political demands for countering disinformation

Here are some demands from other people about what politics in Germany should do regarding disinformation. To what extent do you agree with each of them?



Sample: all respondents (half sample). Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 %.

1. Hold platforms accountable

Respondents overwhelmingly support the demand for more consistent enforcement of existing regulations for platform operators and harsher penalties for violations. 50 per cent “fully agree” with this demand, and 32 per cent “somewhat agree.” There is majority agreement across all political camps and voter groups. A similar conclusion is drawn by a study conducted by the Competence Network against Hate on the Internet (Bernhard and Ickstadt 2024). According to the study, a clear majority of German-speaking internet users aged 16 and older advocate for more consistent enforcement of existing laws, such as those combating insults, defamation, or incitement of hatred, on the internet.

2. Ensure personnel and resources for implementing and enforcing laws in the digital realm

The digital realm is not a law-free space. Naturally, laws and regulations, such as those regarding criminal assaults, identity theft, discrimination, and hate speech, also apply to digital platforms. At the same time, these platforms are typically privately organised (and under civil law), which presents sensitive challenges for enforcement: Protecting privacy, safeguarding the confidentiality of communications, the right to encryption, and data security. The competencies and resources of, for example, police and judiciary are only slowly adapting to this reality. Among respondents, 47 per cent “fully agree” and 33 per cent “somewhat agree” that police and judiciary should be given more personnel to curb disinformation and hate on the internet. At the same time, studies

such as the one by the Competence Network against Hate show that there is a lack of sensitivity to online issues (Bernhard and Ickstadt 2024). This need for greater sensitivity is widely supported. It is a demand that cannot be emphasised enough, as law enforcement must be effective but not at the expense of other rights and protected spaces. Experiences from other countries have shown tendencies toward disproportionate enforcement and expansion of powers (Berger et al. 2024). When police and judiciary take action, it must be done with caution, with clear processes for legal assistance, and transparent accountability to strengthen trust in their actions.

3. Strengthen media literacy among the population

Another widely supported demand is for more education and promotion of media literacy among citizens. A clear majority “fully agrees” (46 per cent) or “somewhat agrees” (41 per cent) with this demand. In total, this demand receives the highest approval among respondents. In fact, citizens themselves, at least according to their own assessment, play an important role in mitigating disinformation. Confidence in actors such as politicians and platforms to improve the situation regarding disinformation is generally low. Instead, citizens are more likely to trust themselves or other citizens to make a difference in the fight against disinformation (see [Chapter 2.3](#)). Consequently, the demand for politicians to promote media literacy among the population is also high among groups that are sceptical of the media and politics and reject restrictive and reactive measures more strongly (see [Chapter 4](#)). Even those, who have little confidence in politics and existing media offerings wish to be or see others empowered to independently assess the credibility and truthfulness of information. High media literacy provides the foundation for this.

4. Establish an independent, non-governmental body dedicated to the issue

The establishment of an independent, non-governmental body to address this issue is also widely welcomed. 27 per cent “fully agree” with this demand, while 41 per cent “somewhat agree.” Even among those with low media trust, 65 per cent “(somewhat) agree” with this proposal. The non-governmental aspect seems to be a significant factor for those who generally distrust politics and the media when it comes to dealing with disinformation. While it remains unclear to what extent a new body would gain widespread trust among the general population, this issue presents an area that politicians should further explore.

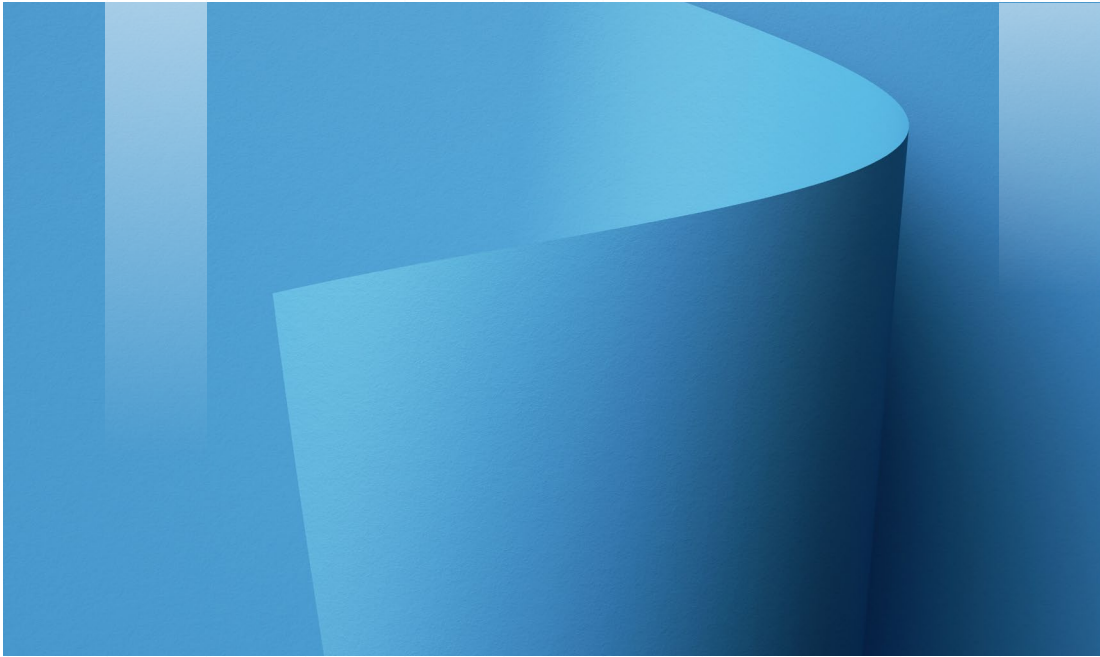
5. Ensure sustainable funding for fact-checking and other civil society resilience measures

Civil society and journalistic fact-checking organisations are also independent and non-governmental—or ideally should be, at least in a reliable democratic system. The demand for greater financial support for these organisations is the least supported among all respondents. Only 17 per cent “fully agree” with this, and 35 per cent “somewhat agree.” The demand for more financial resources for fact-checking organisations is particularly unpopular among the group with low media trust. Only 38 per cent “fully” or “somewhat” agree, while 50 per cent “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree” with this demand. The issue for this group is likely the perceived lack of independence. Fact-checking organisations, such as Mimikama, dpa-Faktencheck, CORRECTIV, ARD-faktenfinder, and Volksverpetzer, need funding and their staff need to be paid. Some companies, such as dpa-Faktencheck, do this through their own business activities. Others, like Mimikama, rely on advertising and donations. Still, others are partially funded by foundations (e. g., CORREC-

TIV). The crucial role that such organisations play was highlighted by CORRECTIV's investigations in January 2024, which uncovered secret meetings between right-wing extremists, high-ranking AfD politicians, and representatives of other organisations (CORRECTIV 2024). Following this, CORRECTIV itself quickly became a target of disinformation and defamation. Criticisms from the AfD's circles accused the reports of being a deliberate campaign to harm the party (Tagesschau 2024). Indeed, it is mainly AfD voters who are the only voter group to reject the financial support of fact-checking organisations. This also shows that other civil society organisations, particularly those dedicated to healthy spaces for discourse, democratic competencies, or other forms of education, have important roles to play. Politicians must ensure sustainable funding both for independent fact-checking and for other civil society engagements to counter hostility, distrust, or a departure from democratic principles.

The broad support for these political demands makes it clear: The responsibility for action lies with politicians. It is important to use this broad support to thoughtfully implement crucial demands in close collaboration with all relevant actors. This involves not only well-thought-out legislation but, more importantly, the enforcement of existing regulations for platform operators. Given the repeated calls for the independence of certain measures (fact-checking, centralised body), it also becomes clear how important participatory formats are and that advisory bodies and/or formats involving civil society organisations, academics, and economic actors are crucial for successfully addressing disinformation.





6. Comparison with the United States

Not only are millions of eligible voters in several German states called upon to cast their votes this year, but the United States also faces one of the most consequential elections of the year with the presidential election in November. When it comes to the topic of “disinformation,” which gains traction during election campaigns, it is worth looking across the Atlantic: Are there different preferences in the fight against disinformation in the two countries? Who do U.S. citizens trust the most to effectively counter disinformation, and how should this be approached? For a comparative perspective, a representative survey was conducted in the U.S. alongside the survey in Germany, with most of the questions asked in both countries.

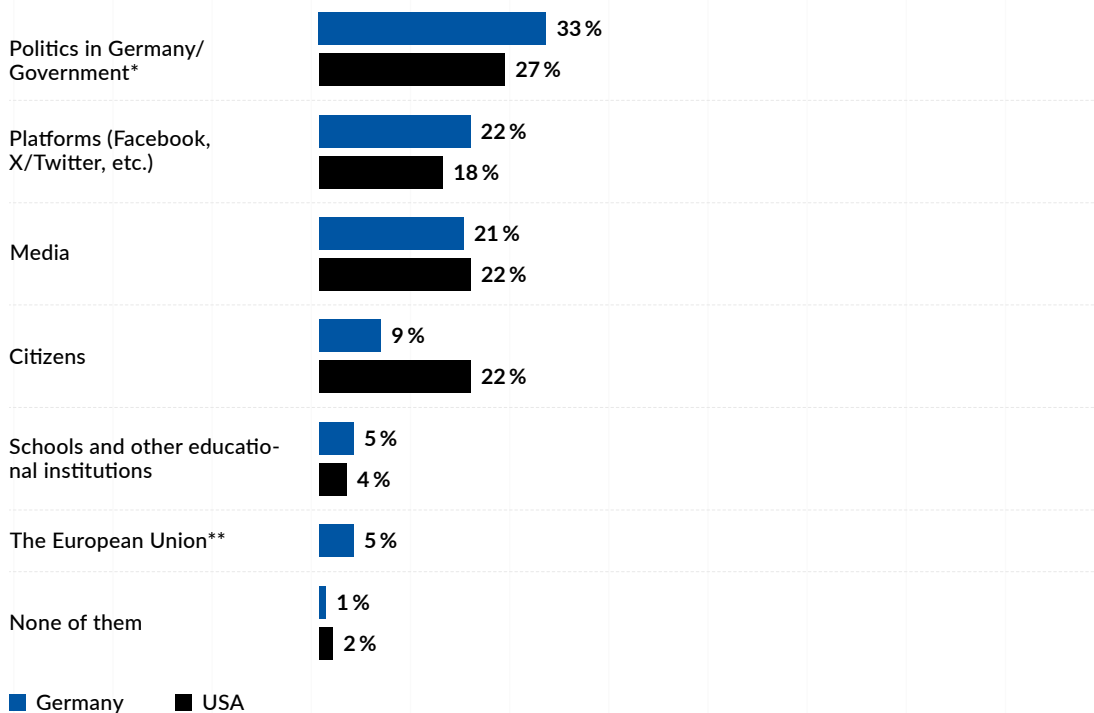
The initial analysis of the survey data, focusing on dealing with disinformation (Bernhard et al. 2024), shows that respondents in the U.S. are significantly more uncertain about the truthfulness of information and perceive disinformation more frequently than German respondents. The topic of ‘politics and elections’ is more often associated with disinformation in the U.S., and a larger proportion of people are greatly concerned about the potential influence on elections. In the U.S., the perception of disinformation is marked by stronger polarisation: About a quarter of respondents attribute disinformation to either the right or left. Additionally, a majority of U.S. respondents suspect that their own government frequently spreads disinformation. In Germany, this is (so far) a clear minority opinion.

Actors

When asked about the responsible actors, it is evident that U.S. respondents also most frequently see their own government⁵ as responsible. 27 per cent identify the government as the most important actor. However, this percentage is significantly lower than the attributions by German respondents, of whom 33 per cent view German politics and an additional 5 per cent see the EU as key actors. Unlike in Germany, in the U.S., the government is more often identified as primarily responsible by younger respondents rather than older ones. However, there are hardly any differences between Democrats and Republicans in this attribution.

Figure 13: Attribution of responsibility in the fight against disinformation comparing Germany and the U.S.

And who is most responsible to act against disinformation?



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know. *USA: Government; **USA: not asked.

U.S. respondents see much more responsibility for countering disinformation lying with the citizens. While only 9 per cent of respondents in Germany believe that citizens should take the lead in addressing disinformation, in the United States, it is 22 per cent. In the U.S., like Germany, those who have less trust in media and politics are more likely to point to citizens' responsibility in this matter. Media are identified as responsible at a similar rate in both Germany and the U.S., whereas platforms are seen as slightly less responsible in the U.S.

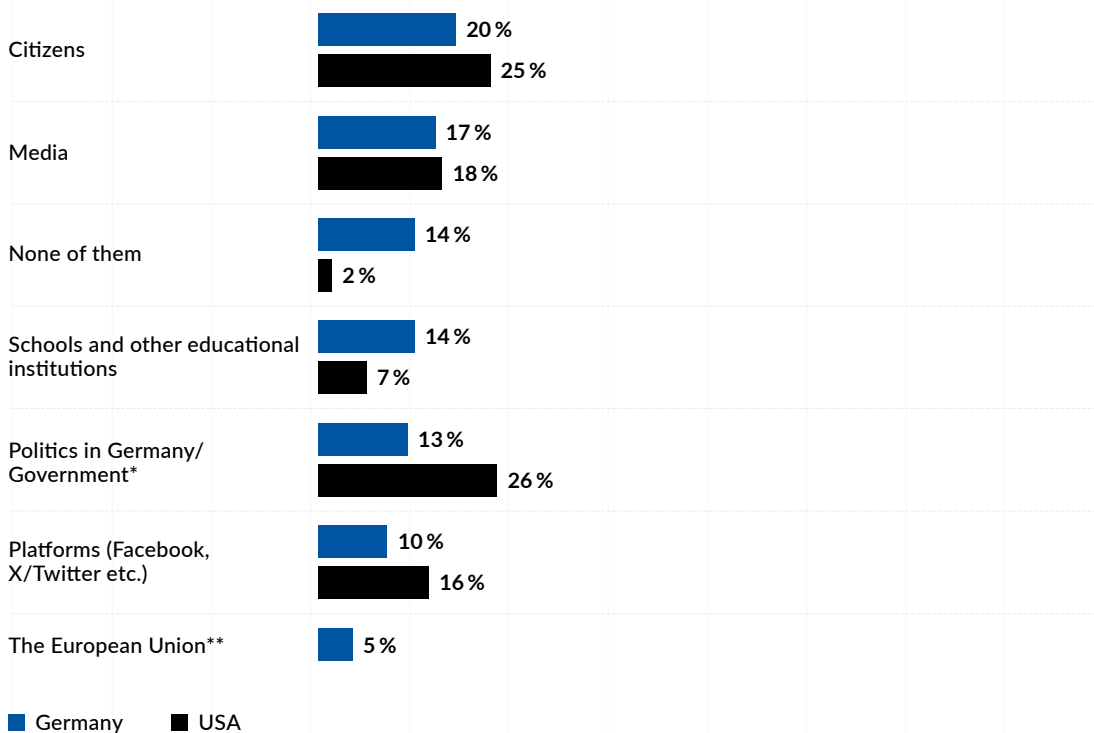
Significant differences between U.S. respondents and those in Germany become apparent when asked which actors are most trusted to improve the situation regarding disinformation. In Germany, respondents depict a situation where politics are perceived as responsible but not trusted

⁵ The German survey asked about "politics in Germany." Considering the political system and political realities in the USA, the U.S. survey instead asked about the responsibility of "the government."

to make improvements. This perception is notably more positive in the U.S. With 26 per cent, U.S. respondents rank the government highest in terms of competence to solve the issue. This is especially true for Democrats and voters who supported Biden in 2020, as well as respondents with higher media trust.

Figure 14: Attributed competence in the fight against disinformation comparing Germany and the U.S.

And who do you think is most capable to act against disinformation?



Sample: all respondents. Missing values: don't know. *USA: Government; **USA: not asked.

In both countries, citizens are seen as similarly relevant, with 20 per cent in Germany and 25 per cent in the U.S. The dangers of overestimating one's own competence in dealing with disinformation were discussed in [Chapter 2.3](#). However, U.S. respondents seem to be slightly more self-critical: 39 per cent of them believe they can be influenced by disinformation, compared to only 16 per cent in Germany (Bernhard et al. 2024). Additionally, Americans show a more active approach to disinformation: They check content more often, question it more critically, and use fact-checking services more frequently than German respondents report doing (ibid.). This may be explained by the greater presence of the topic 'disinformation' in U.S. media and everyday life, leading to a corresponding learning process among Americans. The fact is that disinformation is more prevalent in the United States than in Germany. 67 per cent of U.S. respondents were unsure in recent months whether information they encountered online was true or false, and 61 per cent reported encountering disinformation in recent months (ibid.). In comparison, only 45 per cent of respondents in Germany reported uncertainty, and 35 per cent noticed disinformation (ibid.). It is likely that since the first Trump campaign, the topic of 'disinformation' has been much more in focus in the U.S. and has appeared more frequently in everyday life. Consequently, dealing with disinformation is probably more practiced and critical, as past experiences have shown how polarised even one's own social circle can be in the U.S. The proportion of those who have

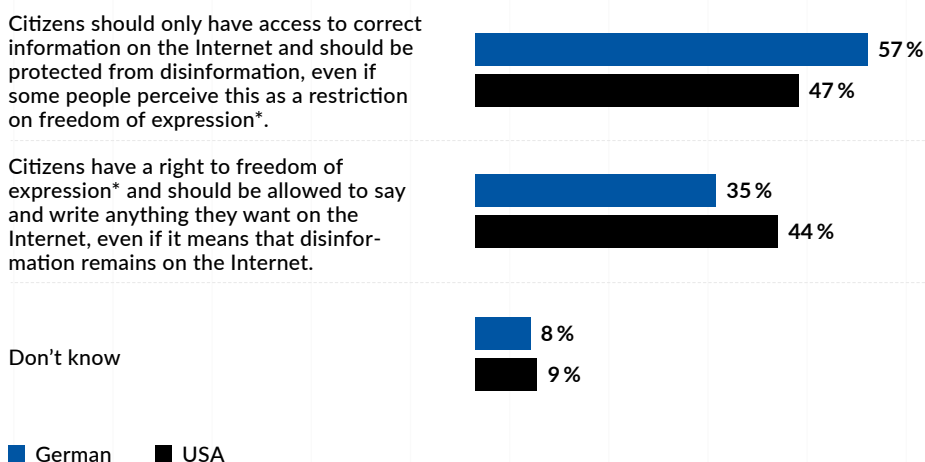
received disinformation via messenger or SMS from people within their own social network is significantly higher in the United States (36 per cent) than in Germany (10 per cent).

When evaluating the media, respondents in both countries are relatively aligned: 17 per cent in Germany and 18 per cent in the U.S. believe that the media are most likely to improve the situation regarding the spread of disinformation. On the other hand, respondents in Germany more frequently rely on schools and other educational institutions in doing so: 14 per cent in Germany versus only 7 per cent in the U.S. see the greatest competence in schools and educational institutions. In contrast, U.S. respondents have more trust in platforms (16 per cent) than respondents in Germany (10 per cent). Moreover, it is notable that about one in eight respondents in Germany does not trust any stakeholder to improve the situation regarding the spread of disinformation, whereas in the U.S., this is a very small minority at 2 per cent.

Differences between the two countries also emerge when considering how far the fight against disinformation should go. As shown in Figure 15, the balance between protecting citizens from disinformation and the right to freedom of expression⁶ is much more polarising in the U.S.

Figure 15: Weighing protection from disinformation and freedom of expression comparing Germany and the U.S.

Which of the following views do you tend to agree with?



Sample: all respondents (half sample). *USA: "Freedom of speech".

While in Germany, regardless of the specific topic, a majority of 57 per cent believes that citizens should only have access to correct information on the internet, in the U.S., 47 per cent hold this view. In contrast, 44 per cent of U.S. respondents believe that citizens should be free to say and write whatever they want on the internet. This finding is not surprising, as freedom of expression in the United States – unlike in Germany (see [Chapter 3](#)) – allows for statements that would be classified as incitement or similar offences in other countries. Consequently, Americans generally have a higher tolerance for borderline and potentially false content.

Similar to the analysis in Germany, it is evident that men in the U.S. are more likely to advocate for freedom of expression than women. However, the proportion of those who support protec-

⁶ See footnote 4 in [Chapter 3](#) regarding the use of "freedom of speech" and "freedom of expression."

tion from disinformation is equally high among men (47 per cent) and women (48 per cent) in the United States. Women in the U.S. are more than twice as likely as men to be unsure of their position, with 13 per cent answering “don’t know” compared to 5 per cent of men. Furthermore, the younger the respondents, the more they tend to favour freedom of expression in both countries. It is particularly young men aged 16 to 24 in both countries who most strongly support the right to say and write anything on the internet (52 per cent each).

In the U.S., too, the comparison between freedom of expression and protection from disinformation shows a connection with the political orientation of the respondents. Republicans are more likely to support freedom of expression, with 49 per cent choosing this option compared to 40 per cent of Democrats. As in Germany, those who consider disinformation to be merely a political buzzword used to discredit alternative opinions are especially likely to defend the right to say and write anything on the internet (61 per cent).





7. Conclusion

The results of our study reveal that the public is calling for a big push by various stakeholders.

There is a strong demand for political progress in addressing disinformation, although there is prevailing scepticism regarding the problem-solving abilities of political decision-makers. The situation is similar for platforms: The public often sees them as responsible but harbours doubt about their competencies (or their willingness?).

The understanding of disinformation campaigns needs to be broadened. The fight against disinformation is still largely conceived within a national framework, even though research clearly indicates that attacks come from both within and outside. Solutions must therefore be interlinked, including raising public awareness that manipulative content can come from multiple directions.

Citizens largely trust in their own abilities, yet media literacy is needed across all age groups.

Many citizens believe that they and other citizens are best placed to counter disinformation. This assessment is concerning given the (still) low overall news literacy among the public. Although trust in personal competencies in dealing with disinformation is high and perceived influence is low, respondents fear that especially others might fall for disinformation (Bernhard et al. 2024). The call for more education and stronger promotion of news and media literacy is likely primarily driven by the desire for politics to enhance the competencies of others. However, this demand also finds support among those who no longer trust politics and media and view internet freedoms more critically—a potentially unifying element. Extensive media literacy would also increase understanding of platform logics and dynamics (such as the consequences of virality or upload filters), contributing to a more balanced discourse.

State intervention requires narrow confines. Controversy arises whenever the state is perceived as an intervening actor deciding which information should be disseminated and which should

not. Fact-checking organisations are also criticised by some members of the public, who doubt their independence and view them as part of a system from which they feel disillusioned. This accusation is increasingly voiced by anti-democratic forces and resonates with parts of the population. It is essential to avoid this impression; transparency about decisions and research can help, although people who are unwilling to be convinced won't be persuaded. Where disinformation clearly constitutes hate speech, defamation, or other crimes, the law should be effectively enforced to demonstrate the operational capability of the democratically legitimised state.

Platforms must implement rules visibly and consistently. The benefits of European solutions and common guidelines could become more prominent in public awareness with the increasing enforcement of regulations like the Digital Services Act. At the same time, adjustments made by globally operating platforms must be visible and tangible for users. Currently, platforms only inadequately meet legal requirements. This represents a key area for political action, which must demonstrate its ability to enforce regulations and ensure that globally operating platforms, where users are frequently exposed to disinformation, are not beyond its influence.



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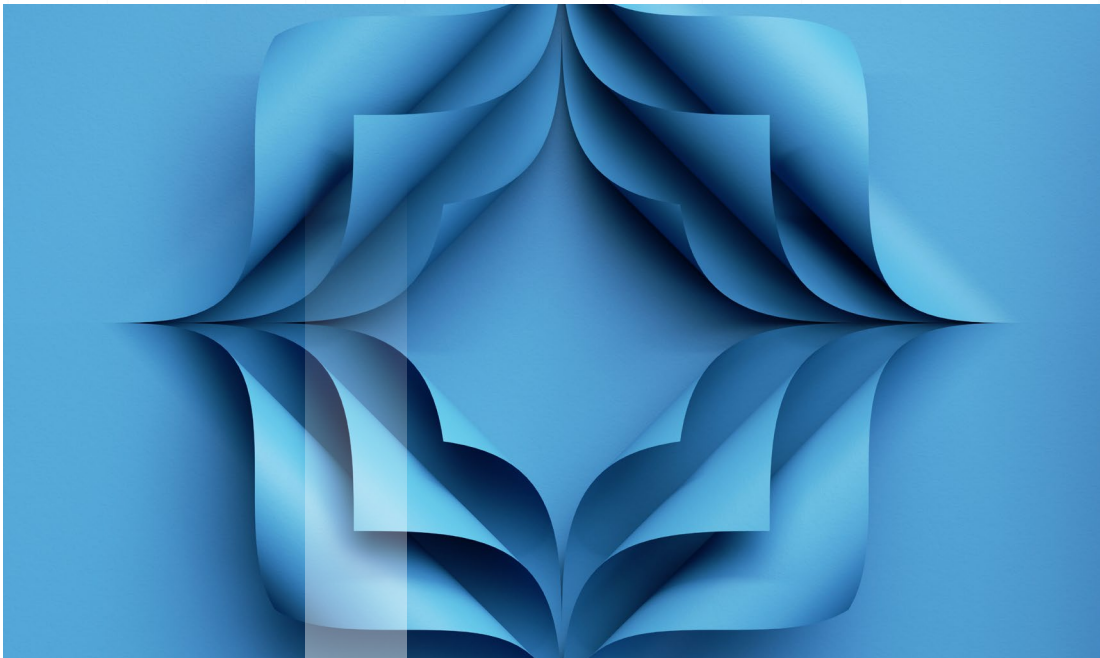
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