

PRESS RELEASE

Vast majority views disinformation as a threat to democracy and social cohesion

People in Germany are concerned about misinformation that is deliberately disseminated online, fearing it is meant to influence both political opinions and elections. Policy makers, civil society and the media must respond to this challenge. People in the middle of the political spectrum in particular want clearer rules to be established. A comparison with the United States shows that polarization increases the perception of disinformation.

Gütersloh/Berlin – February 28, 2024. According to 84 percent of people in Germany, misinformation that is deliberately spread online is a big or even a very big threat to German society. Moreover, 81 percent believe that disinformation jeopardizes democracy and social cohesion. Those are the findings from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's new study "Disconcerted Public". "Most people are now aware that disinformation poses a threat to democratic society. For example, misinformation is being used to influence elections and undermine trust in politics, political parties and the media. Considering the series of elections scheduled to take place this year, this development is a challenge that must be overcome if we are to protect liberal democracy," says Daniela Schwarzer, member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board.

More than half of the survey's respondents (54 percent) say that the topic of disinformation receives too little attention. When it comes to assessing the reasons for why disinformation is being spread, there is broad agreement, with more than 90 percent of respondents saying that people who disseminate misinformation want to influence political opinions among the public. The figures for influencing electoral outcomes (86 percent) and dividing society (84 percent) are similarly high. This is consistent with the finding that respondents most often perceive disinformation in connection with controversial topics such as immigration, health, war and the climate crisis.

Senders of disinformation are often believed to come from the political arena

The survey's respondents most often see disinformation as being present in social media. Blogs, news sites and messenger services also play a role, however. Actors in the political arena are most often perceived as being the source of disinformation, with two-thirds saying protest and activist groups are responsible, followed by bloggers and influencers (60 percent), foreign governments (53 percent) and politicians and political parties in Germany (50 percent). In general, one person in two feels that disinformation originates both in Germany and abroad. More than half of those surveyed believe that disinformation is spread by sources on both the political right and left.

Greater awareness of the problem in the US

Data from the survey also make it possible to draw comparisons with the United States. Uncertainty about the truthfulness of content and the belief that disinformation is being spread are more pronounced there than in Germany. "Respondents in the US are more likely to blame politicians and political parties for disinformation, viewing the opposing political camp as the source. This reflects the polarization present in the US, which has become evident again and again in election campaigns," says Kai Unzicker, expert at the Bertelsmann

Stiftung for social cohesion and the study's co-author. Also striking is the fact that, while 70 percent of respondents in Germany believe that disinformation is a problem for others and only 16 percent see themselves at risk, people in the US have a more nuanced view. There, 39 percent are concerned that they themselves might be deceived by disinformation. To that end, they check content more often and more critically.

According to the authors, Germany's politicians, media and civil society must become more active in this area. "We need better guidelines. Social networks should be required to include fact checks and trust scores," says Cathleen Berger, digital expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung and co-author of the study. "In general, it should be easier for users to check and report information. In addition, a number of independent non-government actors need to monitor digital content, and a careful balance must be struck between protecting the public from disinformation and protecting freedom of speech. This can only be achieved through a broad and regular social discourse."

Additional information:

For the study "Disconcerted Public", 5,055 people in Germany and 2,018 in the United States aged 16 and over were surveyed online from October 4 to 17, 2023 on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. The survey and analysis were carried out by the opinion research firm pollytix strategic research gmbh. The data are representative and weighted, and the margin of error is 1.4 percentage points for Germany and 2.2 for the US.

Current Bertelsmann Stiftung projects for combatting disinformation

The Bertelsmann Stiftung is currently conducting several projects aimed at strengthening democracy and countering disinformation. This study is part of [Upgrade Democracy](#), which is focusing on the opportunities and challenges for democracy stemming from a digitalized public sphere. Together with other partners, moreover, the foundation has initiated the nationwide citizens' dialogue [Forum Against Fakes](#), in which members of the public work on viable solutions for combatting disinformation, including through broad online participation. In the state of Saxony, the foundation has also launched the pilot project [faktenstark](#) (factstrong), also together with partners, which is focusing on media and news literacy.

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