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Democracy in the feed?

How algorithms shape political reality

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The study *Digitalisiert, politisiert, polarisiert?* (Digitised, politicised, polarised?) shows that the algorithms used in social media selectively recommend political content for the feeds seen by young people, giving disproportionate visibility to fringe parties. Our Policy Brief sheds light on what this means politically. It also makes recommendations for how policymakers, civil society and social media platforms can promote constructive discourse, transparency and digital participation – to support democratically responsible communication in the age of digital election campaigns.

Social media in election campaigns

What will happen in Germany on 8 March, 22 March, 6 September and 20 September 2026? Those are the dates on which elections will be held in the states of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. What is already clear here is that social media will play a decisive role in mobilising voters, especially young people – as was seen in the run-up to Germany's national election in 2025. This role will undoubtedly continue to grow before the next national and European elections

in 2029. For political parties, getting the attention of potential voters on these platforms is crucial. Yet little is currently known about how algorithms select political content for users' feeds. To address the uncertainty caused by the lack of transparency surrounding social media algorithms, this issue of our Policy Brief first examines how content related to political parties flows into the feeds of young people on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and X. It then looks at what steps would be necessary to ensure the integrity of the electoral process in the age of so-called TikTok elections.

Methods for scientifically examining feeds

Scientifically analysing how people actually behave on social media in light of the algorithms used to recommend content is complex – mainly because platforms do not grant researchers access to their data, even for scientific purposes. Basically, there are two possible research methods. First, ordinary users can “donate” their feeds as input data – although a large number of such feeds are required to ensure sufficient comparability. Second, artificial user profiles can be created on the platforms for research purposes to simulate real behaviour – also known as sock-puppet audits (Bandy 2021; Srba, Moro, Tomlein, Pecher, Simko, Kompan and Bielikova 2023). While their feeds show a range of content from real accounts, these user profiles are based only on predefined variables – such as gender or interests (e.g. in entertainment, sports or politics) – and the recommendation algorithms used by the respective platform.

Although these methods do not reveal how the platforms work, they do provide insight into what content appears algorithmically in the feeds of young users' profiles as well as how often it appears and who posted it.

Key findings from the study *Digitised, politicised, polarised?*

The findings are based on the analysis of a total of 2.6 million videos collected between 22 January and 23 February 2025 (6:00 pm). Of that total, 120,605 videos were related to politics or a political party.

Visibility in the feeds

The analysis shows clear differences in the frequency and speed with which political content is inserted into users' feeds. Across platforms, the hashtag #afd appeared by far the fastest in the profiles of young users (on TikTok, after 11–12 minutes on average). In terms of frequency, #afd also accounted for 40–50 percent of all posts related to politics or political parties, placing it well ahead of other parties (maximum 25%).

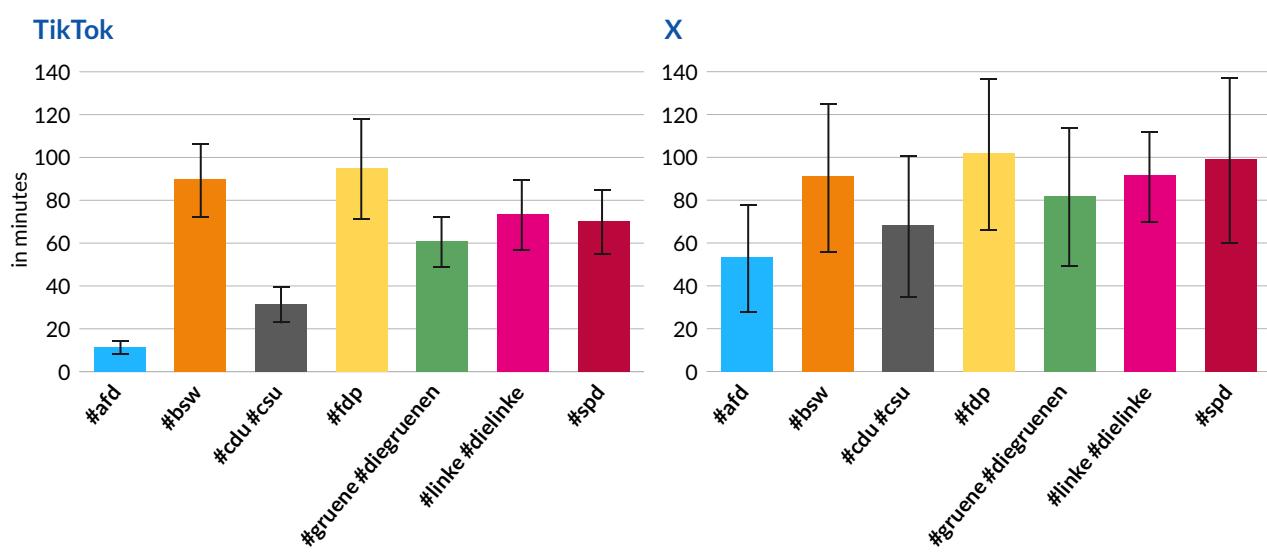
Methodology in brief

Data were collected for the study *Digitised, politicised, polarised?* by the University of Potsdam (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2025) using sock-puppet audits. A total of 268 user profiles of young people (aged 21–25) were created on TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and X. These user profiles varied according to political affinity, gender and specific content-related interests. The profiles were controlled automatically by programs that allowed the behaviour of real users to be simulated as authentically as possible. The content in the profile feeds was then systematically evaluated. Posts were classified as political if official party accounts (OPAs) or the accounts maintained by civil society organisations, content creators, private individuals, media outlets or similar users tagged a post with party-specific hashtags (#afd, #bsw, #cdu, #csu, #fdp, #gruene, #diegruenen, #linke, #dielinke, #spd) or applied hashtags that were used as keywords for Germany's national election (#btw25, #politik, #wahlen2025). Feeds on the platforms TikTok, YouTube, Instagram and X were also examined to analyse content relating to politics or political parties. Using TikTok and X as examples, the content was then evaluated to see how many of the videos uploaded by OPAs actually appeared in the users' feeds.

Looking at the number of posts from official party accounts recommended to the users, the algorithm on TikTok suggested 312 different videos from The Left party and 229 from the AfD, with the SPD represented much less frequently, at 175 videos.

When looking at the total number of posts appearing in user profiles – including videos recommended multiple times – the picture changes: AfD content was suggested 3,181 times in feeds, followed by The Left party with 2,295 and the SPD with 1,179 suggestions. A similar pattern can be seen on X: despite comparable upload activity, the AfD achieved the highest visibility in the feeds on that platform as well.

Figure 1 Time until appearance of first post with party-specific hashtag on TikTok and X



Note: N = 17,896 posts with party-specific hashtags on TikTok, N = 22,039 on X;
black lines: 95% confidence interval of the mean

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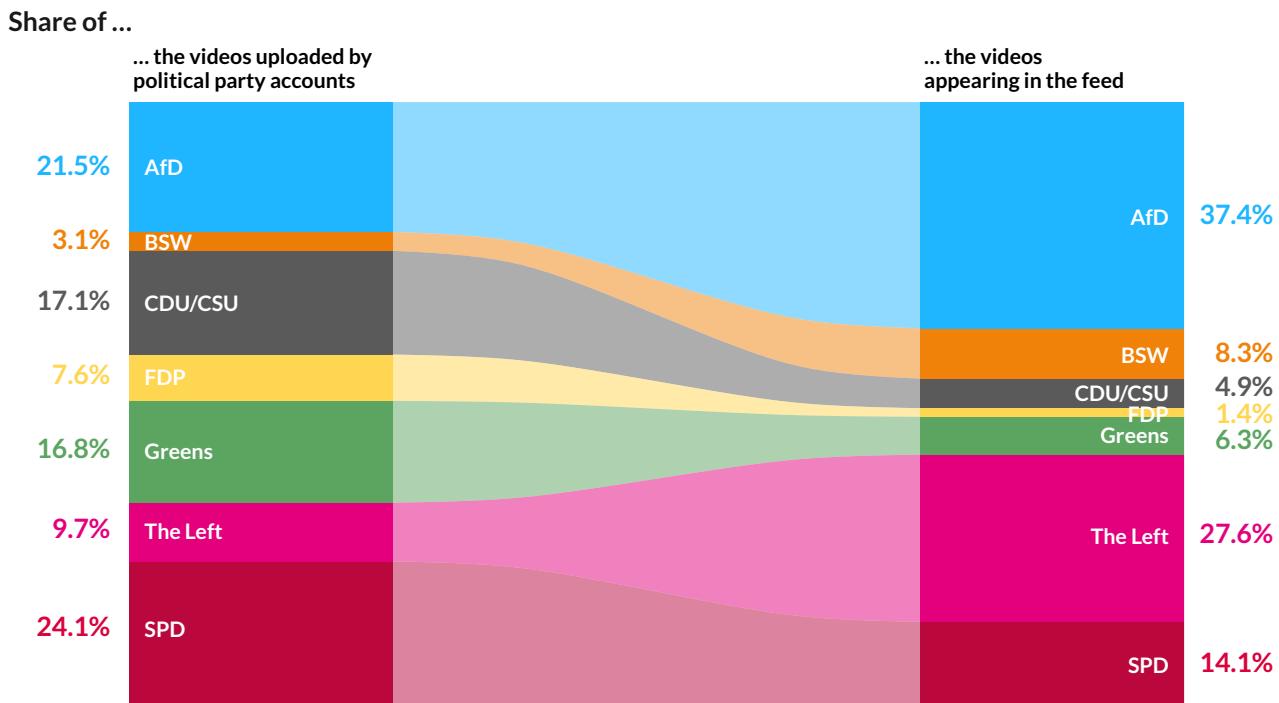
The Left party, BSW and AfD disproportionately represented in feeds compared to their uploads

When the videos uploaded to TikTok between 1 January and 23 February 2025 are compared with the videos displayed in the feeds of young users' profiles, it becomes clear that the algorithmic visibility of political parties is not proportional to their upload activity. For example, The Left party was responsible for only about 10 percent of uploads, but accounted for 28 percent of the posts appearing in the feeds – almost three times more frequently. BSW was also able to increase its visibility from 3 percent (uploads) to 8 percent (recommendations in feeds). The AfD is also significantly over-represented, with 21.5 percent of uploads and 37.4 percent of recommended posts, achieving the highest visibility in absolute terms. However, The Left party and BSW were given greater algorithmic preference in relation to the number of uploads. The Greens (uploads: 16.8 percent; feed suggestions: 6.3 percent), CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP appeared disproportionately less often. These results indicate that other factors also determine algorithmic visibility in addition to the number of posts.

Algorithmic preferences and lack of transparency

The data suggest that algorithmic systems favour certain communication styles and patterns of interaction – but exactly which ones and how these factors relate to each other remain unclear. On TikTok, The Left party received the most likes and views across all its uploaded videos, while the AfD generated the highest number of comments. Both forms of interaction may have contributed to the increased algorithmic visibility of these parties. What is striking, however, is that the SPD also had a high number of views, likes and comments, but appeared relatively rarely in the young users' feeds. Therefore, many posts and many likes do not suffice as an explanation for having a wide reach. One possible contributing factor is the tone of the posts: parties such as the AfD, The Left and BSW communicate especially often in a negative and critical manner (AfD: 70%, BSW: 90%, The Left: 83%), while other parties do so less frequently. The format of the posts, on the other hand, seems to play only a minor role, as all parties largely rely on combinations of text and images, while formats that reference trends and memes remain the exception. Overall, the logic behind the algorithmic selection process appears to be complex and mostly

Figure 2 Exposure of videos from official party accounts (OPAs) on TikTok



Source: PolSocial-Data 2025, own calculations. Notes: Between 1 January 2025 and 23 February 2025, the parties uploaded a total of 10,000 videos to TikTok. In our dataset, 7,621 videos come from official party accounts.

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Example: With 2,148 videos, the AfD accounts for 21.5 percent of all videos uploaded by the parties.

The 2,849 AfD videos account for 37.4 percent of all videos from OPAs that appeared in the feeds on our user profiles.

opaque. Greater transparency about how platform algorithms work is therefore necessary if political communication on social media is to be fair and comprehensible.

Potential for increasing visibility: official party accounts on TikTok

There are also differences in the degree to which parties exploit the potential of maintaining official accounts (see list in Philipp, Bobzien, Weißmann, Verwiebe, Wolfgram and Kohler 2025). The AfD has a strong presence on both platforms (TikTok: 73%, X: 79%). Other parties, in particular the Greens, FDP and CDU/CSU, are almost exclusively present on X (Greens: 95%, FDP: 94%, CDU/CSU: 72%), and have significantly fewer accounts on TikTok (Greens: approx. 60%, FDP: 42%, CDU/CSU: 44%). This means there is untapped potential, especially on TikTok, when it comes to visibility:

by activating additional accounts for their political representatives, these parties could increase their posting frequency and, by offering platform-appropriate content, increase the likelihood of their posts being recommended by the platform's algorithms, thus achieving greater visibility.

Political relevance of the findings

Never before have politicians been able to be as immediately present in the everyday lives of potential voters as they can today.

Presumably there is a connection between the rise of social media as the most frequently mentioned mode of contact with politics (Weiser, Fröhlich, Jost and Fecher 2025) and the significant increase in interest young people have had in political issues in recent years (Al-

bert, Quenzel, de Moll and Verian 2024). Information about political events is much easier to access, since it is not hidden behind paywalls, for example. This promotes political participation across socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the way in which platforms are used differs significantly between generations. The younger the users are, the more frequently they deploy social media as search engines (Bobzien, Verwiebe and Kalleitner 2025).

The more frequently young people use social media to learn out about political issues, the more often content on these issues appears in their feeds as recommendations made by algorithms. By 2024, around a third of Generation Z (those born between 1996 and 2009) were getting their information on politics almost exclusively from social media (Initiative D21 2025). In addition, half of young people say they frequently or very frequently come across political content on social media by chance (Weiser, Fröhlich, Jost and Fecher 2025). More and more, an active search for information is being replaced by passive consumption, with algorithmically curated feeds dictating the information seen and thus increasingly shaping the political opinions of young people.

As the results of the study *Digitised, politicised, polarised?* by the University of Potsdam show, the content from the various political parties displayed in the feeds of the sock-puppet profiles is not identical to the parties' uploads on TikTok and X. The influence of platform algorithms on the political information available, especially to young people, is becoming increasingly problematic during election campaigns. Currently, parties on the fringes – The Left, BSW and the AfD – are benefiting from this trend, on TikTok in particular. In order to ensure a stable political landscape in which majorities can be formed, centrist parties need to have a fair chance of reaching potential voters through their social media content. Political actors themselves are responsible for creating attractive content on digital platforms – they must attend to their presence on social media in a way that is commensurate with the influence these media have. At the same time, ordinary users alone cannot be responsible for controlling their feeds through their own behaviour – for example, by following specific accounts – to ensure they are presented

with a balanced range of information. On the contrary, society should be able to rely on the social media content posted by political actors being disseminated in an equitable manner.

In terms of content, the disproportionate visibility of posts by certain political actors can promote a shift in public discourse that increasingly calls basic democratic values into question. Repetition is effective: studies show that people not only rate familiar content more positively ("mere-exposure effect"), but also consider repeated statements to be more credible – even when they know they are false (Fazio, Brashier, Payne and Marsh 2015). In the fast-moving feeds found on social media platforms, this can lead to derogatory content that is presented repeatedly gradually losing its shock value and appearing to become part of normal discourse. Experimental studies have also shown that interviews with right-wing extremists on established television channels and on YouTube shift viewers' attitudes towards these positions and promote their normalisation (Bolet and Foos 2025). Critical questioning by journalists can mitigate this effect, but cannot prevent it. It can thus be assumed that this normalisation effect also applies to derogatory statements made on TikTok, Instagram and X. This is precisely why extremist parties use these platforms, which are not subject to editorial control, to spread and universalise attitudes that challenge basic democratic values.

Analyses of the 2024 European elections show that, in Germany, TikTok usage, especially among young voters, is positively correlated with voting for the AfD (Gattermann and Tulin 2025), while the AfD also dominated the platform in terms of visibility prior to state elections in eastern Germany (Verwiebe, Tjaden, Kohler, Wolfgram, Philipp, Weißmann and Bobzien 2024). This provides clear evidence of how the impact from a strategy targeting certain formats can improve a party's chances at the polls. At the EU level, numerous individual candidates and even the European Parliament as a whole returned to using TikTok as part of their strategic campaigns in 2024, since a presence there is considered essential for reaching young people; in the EU alone, the app has hundreds of millions of users across all age groups (Statista 2025). At the national level, France illustrates this connection particularly clearly,

with Rassemblement National led by Jordan Bardella receiving 31.4 percent of the vote in the EU elections. Observers emphasise Bardella's outstanding TikTok reach as a factor in his success and in mobilising young voters (Préault 2024).

The evolving interplay between social media and politics can also be observed in Germany's legislative bodies: analyses show that speeches by members of the AfD in the Bundestag are deliberately structured in segments of 60 to 90 seconds so that provocative statements can be directly extracted as TikTok clips – strategically tailored to social media (Sieben 2024). Facts and detailed content are deliberately glossed over in these algorithm-optimised videos. In sum, largely unregulated platforms unbothered to democratic standards are already having a massive impact on political realities.

It remains unclear why some content achieves greater reach on social media platforms. One hypothesis highlights the business models used by the platform operators. TikTok's recommendation algorithm is the key to its business model: it personalises the For You page based on signals derived from interactions – such as complete views, replays and comments – with the aim of maximising relevance (and thus screen time) (TikTok 2025). An auditing study by the Wall Street Journal also shows that the length of time spent watching a video is a decisive signal, as just a few extra seconds steer the feed to related niche topics (Wall Street Journal 2021). Ordinary human behaviour also plays a role in what is selected, since people tend to pay more attention to alarming content as it triggers deeply ingrained emotional and threat-related response mechanisms (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer and Vohs 2001). Algorithms optimised for dwell time and interactions reinforce this threat-sensitive behaviour.

While platform mechanisms determine the content displayed, surveys show that young people would like political posts on social media to be more respectful and less disparaging (Weiser, Fröhlich, Jost and Fecher 2025). There seems to be a clear difference, however, between what young people want and what happens when they interact with online algorithms. Something similar can be seen in the amount of time devoted to

social media, as two-thirds of young people say they spend more time on social media than they actually want to (Vodafone Foundation Germany 2025). In sum, young people's needs in terms of social media and how the latter function are at odds with the logic underpinning social media platforms and the business models they deploy.

Recommendations

The study's findings allow recommendations to be formulated for how policymakers and society can respond in the short, medium and long term. These recommendations range from measures to improve the culture of discourse in the digital space to educational initiatives, to structural and regulatory reforms – with an emphasis on the role social media platforms play in the ongoing flow of political information.

1. Discourse and communication practices (short term)

In the short term, political actors in particular should help shape the digital discourse actively and constructively. The following recommendations are designed to promote communication practices that are representative, respectful and dialogue-oriented.

1.1 Ensure presence on social media

Political representatives should be present on the relevant social media platforms to ensure political diversity in the digital space. This includes TikTok, a key source of information, especially for the youngest generation of voters. In the short term, addressing the interests of young voters should be the guiding principle when new accounts are created, since content specific to this target group can help increase the visibility of these accounts in young users' feeds.



Relevant recommendations for taking action can be found in the study "[How to Sell Democracy Online \(Fast\)](#)" (Weiser, Fröhlich, Jost and Fecher 2025). Only available in German language.

1.2 Promote respectful communication and role modelling

With a clear understanding that diversity and constructive exchange are crucial pillars of democracy, political actors should create cross-party spaces where they engage in open, respectful dialogue to break through polarising communication patterns and overcome social divisions. This would allow political actors to serve as role models for open, respectful dialogue.

1.3 Strengthen dialogue formats and counteract polarisation

Based on this understanding, both digital and physical spaces should be used innovatively to promote open, respectful dialogue. Suitable formats include live streams with Q&A sessions, interactive panel discussions and citizen dialogues – even across party lines.

2. Education and digital literacy (medium term)

In addition to the recommendations described above, the design of social media platforms and insights about their design have a central role to play. The following recommendations address this issue by improving the framework conditions for online political discourse. Since these recommendations are more long-term in nature, shorter-term options for implementation will be discussed first before a longer-term perspective is considered.

2.1 Take a broad approach to digital literacy and make it an integral part of digital education

Skills relating to the technical functioning of digital platforms should be systematically integrated into classroom instruction and extracurricular programmes to enable young people – especially those under the age of 18 – to understand these platforms and use them in a considered manner.



Example: [Preparing a classroom lesson on TikTok for Year 7 and above](#). Only available in German language.

2.2 Provide transparent information for users (user guide)

In addition, a practical user guide could be developed, making it easier to navigate the various features of a social media platform when an account is being created. The guide could explain, for example, how personal data are processed and how algorithms filter the information appearing on the user's feed. Platform operators would be responsible for creating and implementing these guides.

2.3 Make it possible for users to determine their own algorithmic feeds

In the medium term, (young) people should be able to decide for themselves what content they see in their feeds. This means making an informed choice between different algorithms that use transparent criteria to suggest content. Such a choice would allow young people to determine for themselves how they spend time on digital platforms and gain a better understanding of how these platforms work.

3. Regulation and supervision (long term)

Very large online platforms (VLOPs) and search engines (VLOSEs) are subject to special requirements under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) since their reach gives them considerable influence over social processes. They must regularly assess the systemic risks posed by their services, including risks to fundamental rights, public safety and the integrity of electoral processes.

If such risks are identified, platforms are required to take appropriate countermeasures – for example, by adjusting their recommendation algorithms, making changes to their system design or strengthening internal control mechanisms. The DSA thus creates, for the first time, a binding legal framework that holds large platforms accountable for protecting democratic decision-making in Europe (European Commission 2025).

A combination of greater transparency, effective oversight and reliable research is necessary. Algorithmic systems must become comprehensible, ver-

ifiable and scientifically evaluable if political communication is to take place on digital platforms in a fair and responsible manner.

3.1 Expand transparency requirements

To ensure fair and transparent political communication in the digital space, platforms should be required to disclose the key features of their recommendation algorithms, including the criteria used to prioritise content.

3.2 Strengthen supervision and ensure enforceability

In addition, existing digital policy regulations relating to social media platforms (DSA and Digital Markets Act) must be further developed on an ongoing basis. The relevant national enforcement bodies (such as Germany's Federal Network Agency) must also have the institutional capacity and resources to do their job.

3.3 Ensuring research, data access and evaluation

Effective regulation of algorithmic systems requires independent research and systematic evaluation. Platforms should be required to provide standardised interfaces through which researchers can access the relevant data (see Art. 40 DSA). This is the only way to empirically understand how the logic behind algorithmic recommendations works and to evaluate its social impact in a sound manner. In addition, regulatory authorities and research institutions should cooperate over the long term to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of existing measures and develop them further based on the relevant data.

4. Promoting socially responsible platforms (structural, long term)

In addition to existing regulations, those socially responsible platforms should be promoted that strengthen democratic discourse in the long term.

4.1 Understanding digital platforms as democratic infrastructures

Digital platforms are increasingly shaping political opinion and should therefore be understood as public infrastructures that must facilitate and

strengthen democratic participation. Socially responsible platforms are characterised by ad-free business models, transparent recommendation algorithms, open-source code and participatory governance structures, among other features.

4.2 Establish public funding, open-source codes and participatory governance

Federal and state authorities should strategically promote the establishment and expansion of socially responsible platforms – for example, through public funding, tax incentives and regulatory relief, and by integrating them into educational offerings and into programmes that increase participation. The goal should be to create a diverse social media ecosystem in which platforms do not pursue exclusively commercial ends, but are more specifically designed (technologically) to strengthen constructive discourse rather than undermine it.

Summary

The study reveals that in the run-up to Germany's national election in 2025, young people were shown content in their TikTok and X feeds that referenced politics and political parties, but in a way that was not proportionate to the input posted by the parties themselves.

In terms of democracy, this means that policymakers and the public must consider how algorithms are used by social media platforms to a greater extent than they have in the past.

The recommendations listed above are starting points for political actors, civil society and social media platforms to begin working together to promote constructive and democratic online discourse and strengthen the resilience of digital public spaces. They also describe the responsibilities that existing and new online platforms could potentially assume. In the long term, the goal is to shape digital public spaces so that they reinforce basic democratic values.

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A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

This policy brief from the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Democracy and Social Cohesion" programme deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. Its focus is on issues of social and political participation, public discourse and conflict resolution, civic engagement and cooperation, the functioning of democratic institutions and processes, and intergenerational justice.