

# Public Values in a Digital Society

## *Strengthening the information position of individuals in a democracy*

### 1. Introduction and background

As funders, SIDN Fund and Adessium Foundation are both committed to promoting a strong internet in a healthy, open and democratic society. In recent years, digitisation has increasingly affected the information position of individuals and, consequently, the health of our democracies. SIDN Fund and Adessium Foundation are therefore joining forces with the aim of addressing those issues.

### 2. What is the problem?

An informed public is one of the main pillars of a healthy democracy. People need to be able to reach informed opinions about relevant societal issues and engage in conversation about them with each other, with politicians and with policy-makers. Such conversations shape public opinion, facilitate the development of a shared understanding of societal issues, and inform electoral and political decision-making.

Digitisation has drastically changed the process of information production and consumption. The public debate has substantially shifted from analogue environments, such as newspapers and broadcast media, to digital environments, including social media platforms. As a result, the public sphere has become increasingly fragmented and commercialised. The new digital environments are used as public spaces, but, being controlled by private companies, they are designed to maximise profit, using fundamentally different business models from those used by traditional media.<sup>1</sup> Experience has shown that such models largely fail to ensure a strong and free public sphere. That gives rise to multiple challenges to the health of democratic societies, ranging from the security and protection of personal data and personal autonomy, through the reliability of information flows, to the tools available to individuals for discerning fact from fiction. Those challenges are considered further below:<sup>2</sup>

- 'Political micro-targeting' and deliberate dissemination of disinformation by political actors: the current digital ecosystem is much more effective in spreading disinformation than the systems that existed in the analogue propaganda era (targeted advertising, fake accounts, lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms, and promotion of sensationalist content by social media algorithms). The digital advertising industry that enables political micro-targeting goes largely unregulated. Platforms collect our data and use it to sell customised advertising space to third parties. That allows those parties to communicate their (political) messages to the public in a very targeted manner. Self-regulatory efforts by internet companies to restrict the low-quality information that drives their business models are unfortunately failing.
- Crisis in journalism: public trust in journalism and information has been declining for years, and the problem has only been exacerbated by the digital manipulation of information. Moreover, digitisation has resulted in (1) a massive shift of advertising revenues from legacy media to platforms and (2) journalists being dependent on platforms to disseminate their stories to their

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<sup>1</sup> "Free" online newspapers have "behavioural advertising" companies as their customers - while traditional newspapers have readers (and advertisers to whom they sell directly) as their customers. In other words, the former require the trust of companies that feed off clicks, while the latter require the trust of readers.

<sup>2</sup> These insights are based on the following publications:

- Kelly Born & Neil Edgington (2017) – Analysis of Philanthropic Opportunities to Mitigate The Disinformation / Propaganda Problem – Hewlett Foundation
- Samantha Bradshaw & Lisa-Maria Neudert (2018) – Government Responses to Computational Propaganda and Social Media Manipulation – Working Paper, Oxford Internet Institute
- Dipayan Ghosh & Ben Scott (2018) - #DigitalDeceit – The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet – The New America Foundation
- Emily Bell & Taylor Owen (2017) – The Platform Press – How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism – The Tow Center for Digital Journalism - CJS

audiences. That makes it more difficult for journalists to establish a direct relationship with their audience in order to (re)gain their trust.

- Data autonomy: basic digital skills are important, but are not sufficient to equip us – as internet users or as individual citizens – to deal with the bigger issues surrounding the internet and data. With ever more complex algorithms, it has increasingly become impossible for individuals to understand what is happening to their data, let alone control it. Consequently, new methods and safeguards for user control and data autonomy need to be developed. How do we minimise bias in the data used by algorithms and ensure accountability and fairness in the outcomes that algorithms produce? What does the great concentration of power in the hands of super-platforms mean for the position of individual users?
- Echo chambers and democracy: several researchers have investigated the concept of echo chambers and the extent to which they might reinforce radicalisation and polarisation. One example is a study on the connection between [Facebook](#)<sup>3</sup> conversations about and attacks on refugees in Germany. Other researchers have contested the echo chamber effect and argue that, in online environments, news consumption might actually be more diverse. Better understanding of the relationship between online behaviour (e.g. online news consumption and other online activities) and offline effects (e.g. polarisation, effects on the democratic process) is needed.
- Government measures are often at odds with (other core democratic principles, such as) freedom of expression. Both democratic and authoritarian governments have taken various steps to regulate platforms, such as imposing fines on platforms if they don't promptly take down undesirable content, criminalising disinformation, and so on. Such measures are likely to criminalise certain forms of speech and expression, curtail freedom of speech, and discourage users from posting minority views altogether. They almost always incentivise social media companies to over-comply – creating incentives to delete content but none to protect it. Authoritarian regimes have frequently copied such measures to legitimise further censorship and control. Many human rights organisations are currently experiencing the consequences of those policies.

The developments described above impact individuals' ability to exercise control over their information flows, and thus their ability to arrive at informed opinions on issues of societal importance. In order for individuals to fulfil their roles in the democratic process, they need to (re)gain control over their online information position.

### 3. Objectives of the call for proposals

SIDN Fund and Adessium Foundation are calling for proposals to address the information position of individuals within the democratic process. We are encouraging organisations to put forward strategies and/or tools that strengthen the agency of individuals as online news/quality information consumers. Proposals might, for example, involve:

- Insight into why and how individual users' newsfeeds are adjusted, and how such adjustments can be influenced or circumvented
- Insight into how personal data is processed in the context of online news consumption, and how the individual news consumer can influence the processes of data collection involved
- Strategies and tools that give individuals more control in relation to political micro-targeting
- Strategies and tools that give individuals more control over the processes by which they seek and gather information on societal issues
- Strategies and tools that give individuals more control in relation to content that has been removed, e.g. because it was deemed 'harmful' by a platform
- Etc

The suggestions made above are purely illustrative. Both proposals that build on the suggestions and proposals based on other ideas for addressing the information position of individuals within the democratic process are welcome.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/world/europe/facebook-refugee-attacks-germany.html>

The call for proposals is intended to promote responsible solutions for individual citizens. Responsible initiatives are initiatives that address users' data autonomy: the user's ability to control their own data is guaranteed, enabling them to use the internet in a secure and responsible manner, thus promoting trust in the internet.

It is envisaged that the call will result in scalable solutions and/or applications that strengthen the information position of individuals within the democratic process.