

PRESS RELEASE

Europeans want decisive action against disinformation on the Internet

More than half of all EU citizens doubt the truthfulness of the information they find online.

Recognizing false content and actively responding to it is easier for the young and the educated. Almost nine out of ten Europeans feel tech companies and policymakers both have a responsibility to combat disinformation.

Gütersloh – August 10, 2023. People in the EU want more to be done in the fight against the deliberate spreading of untrue and fake content on the Internet. Overall, 85 percent of the EU's citizens feel that policymakers should do more to prevent the spread of disinformation, while 89 percent say that the operators of social media platforms should take more action as well. The desire for a greater response goes hand in hand with a clear recognition of the problem among people living in the EU. Those are the findings from a new study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Upgrade Democracy project. According to the study, more than one in two respondents (54 percent) are often or very often unsure whether the information they find on the Internet is true, while 39 percent say they are aware of having encountered disinformation.

"Reliable information is the basis for forming sound opinions and, as a result, for democratic discourse. People in Europe are very uncertain about which digital content they can trust and which has been intentionally manipulated. Anyone who wants to protect and strengthen democracy cannot leave people to deal with disinformation on their own," says Kai Unzicker, author of the study and expert for democracy and social cohesion at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Younger and educated people respond more actively to false information

The survey data make it clear that action must be taken: Less than one in two Europeans (44 percent) say they have verified information they find online. Even fewer (22 percent) flag disinformation or point it out to others. Yet age also plays a role: The younger and more educated respondents are, the more actively they consider whether information is true and take steps to counter disinformation. "The ability to recognize and stop false information should not depend on age or level of education," Unzicker says.

As the Upgrade Democracy study also shows: The more social media channels respondents use regularly, the more often they encounter disinformation. In terms of the different platforms, Twitter and Telegram users see false information particularly often and report it more frequently. In terms of social media's impact on democracy, Europeans are divided: While 30 percent of respondents tend to see disadvantages, 28 percent see advantages, and 42 percent say there are both positive and negative aspects. The findings also vary by country: Critical attitudes predominate in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, while people in Poland are much more positive about social media's influence on democracy.

Regulation from above, competence building from below

Given the survey's results, the Bertelsmann Stiftung recommends that systematic monitoring by independent experts and civil society actors be introduced and expanded in Germany and

Europe in order to better identify and label disinformation. Digital platforms must also have consistent and transparent content moderation. The transparency reports are also being eagerly awaited that the major social media providers must release by the end of August as part of the implementation of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). "Many things must mesh if disinformation is to be combatted," says Cathleen Berger, expert for digital policy at the Bertelsmann Stiftung. "In addition to regulation from above, there must be competence building from below. We must make the general public more aware of the risks of disinformation. At the same time, we must ensure that people across all generations are more capable of checking and classifying news and media content, since, as the survey shows, people are more willing to take action against disinformation when they recognize it."

To support society in responding to disinformation, the Bertelsmann Stiftung launched the project [Upgrade Democracy](#) earlier this year. The project presents ideas and initiatives that effectively combat and defuse disinformation and manipulation on social media. It also explores new technologies and methods that promote fair and lively political discourse.

Additional information:

The survey data used in the study were taken from eupinions, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's European opinion research tool developed in cooperation with Latana. The survey for the current study took place in March 2023 throughout the EU. With a sample size of 13,270 people aged 16 to 70, it is representative of the EU as a whole and the seven member states Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Additional information on the survey's methodology can be found in the publication itself.

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