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‘AI with European values’

How Europe can find its own way when it comes to Artificial Intelligence, data protection and democracy

Read this article in German.

You warn against the Internet’s influence on public debate, for example through social bots and troll factories. Are Artificial Intelligence (AI) and social media a threat to our democracy?

We see massive changes in social discourse online and especially in social networks. Unfortunately, the culture of debate is becoming increasingly more aggressive, hurtful and often hateful. Trust in the media landscape is also in danger when the US President denounces the media as fake news; when in Germany media coverage is denigrated as ‘Lügenpresse’ [lying press] and as ‘state radio’; and when journalists are attacked and harassed in carrying out their reporting obligations. Or when fake news is amplified by bots and troll factories. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves, what must we do to be able to maintain a free, open and fact-based discourse as a basic precondition of an open and free society?

How can we avoid manipulative interference in public opinion and who would be responsible to prevent this?

All of us have an obligation to prevent this. In the end, it’s also about taking a stand against abuse. Apart from the issue of dealing with illegal content, we have to ask ourselves how to counter the brutalisation of social discourse and how to re-establish a respectful culture of debate. The fact that people on the Internet deliberately spread fake news or even hatred cannot be solved by legal action alone.

Politicians, political parties, the media, society and each individual need to repeatedly make clear that they are not prepared to accept targeted false allegations of fact and manipulation, either online or offline. If, in discussion and debate, people’s dignity is attacked or defamed, there must be a firm objection in response. If targeted false reports are distributed, they must be rectified accordingly. The

providers of communication platforms are particularly responsible and must take this into account when it comes to enforcing German and European law.

In 2018, Facebook was involved in several data scandals. What concrete steps do we need to prevent the misuse of private data?

With the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) we have created a Europe-wide framework for the protection of personal data, which service providers can no longer evade. Now we have to make sure to enforce this right. In the privacy-compliant and privacy-friendly design of social networks, and especially on Facebook, I see quite a bit of room for improvement.

It's now up to the Data Protection Supervisors to press for compliance with the law and to sanction their non-compliance. Facebook and the other providers need to examine their business models and their implementation to see whether they are compatible with European law. They also need to do much more to safeguard their users' data in order to prevent such data scandals.

The big digital companies have developed an incredible dominance within a very short time. Can their monopoly positions even be broken up?

In case of doubt, we must also make use of competition and antitrust law in order to oppose the tendency for digital platforms to form monopolies. That's why we need to update antitrust laws, to take action against market abuse faster and more effectively. The German Federal Cartel Office is already taking the first steps, against Facebook for example. What I find particularly problematic – and even consider unacceptable – are cases like the intertwining of Facebook and WhatsApp.

You support the initiative of World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee for a free and open Internet. This is intended to curtail data misuse, disinformation, hate messages and censorship. The first signatories include Facebook and Google. Do you really see a genuine interest on the part of the digital companies or just a PR campaign?

Yes, I strongly support this important initiative by Tim Berners-Lees for a new regulatory framework for the freedom and openness of the Internet. The aim of this new treaty is to ensure high standards for a free and open network, in particular better Internet access and more effective privacy.

I also think it's good that companies such as Google and Facebook are

accepting this proposal. But I also expect this not to just be a PR campaign, but instead having real consequences. We need both: international initiatives like this one are important in triggering debates. But, of course, we also need strict social standards, such as the protection of personal privacy, the right to a fast and secure network, and net neutrality.

In November, the German Federal Cabinet adopted the 'Artificial Intelligence' strategy. What does the strategy specifically provide for?

The strategy is to pursue the goal of turning Germany into a leading AI location, providing a total of three billion euros in subsidies by 2025. AI is a crucial technology for future competitiveness here in Germany. There are some central points to mention: research and development and their transfer to the economy, the use of start-up dynamics, the importance of AI for the working world and labour market and the shaping of structural change, the issues of education and training, as well as the question of the importance and availability of data. In addition, it deals with the regulatory framework and standards to be created, but also ethical issues, where the limits lie and where humans are obliged to maintain their decision making authority – for example, when it's a question of life and death, or right and wrong.

What opportunities does Europe offer in the field of AI? After all, many critics argue that it won't be possible to catch up to either China or Silicon Valley.

Yes, globally, Europe needs to close the gap. Nevertheless, Germany and France in particular have important potential that needs to be expanded. And that's exactly the opportunity: AI with European values. This is the opportunity for Germany and Europe to position themselves between China on the one hand and Silicon Valley on the other. In my view, it's imperative that European society also agrees on the major ethical and legal issues that are related to this technology and its huge potential.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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