

Promotion of Democracy and Prevention of Radicalization through Participation and Engagement online

A Research Project by Stiftung Digitale Chancen in co-operation with betterplace lab / gut.org gAG

Management Summary

"Social Media for Good" is the theme under which the projects and initiatives analysed in this study are active for society. Social media are, however, also used successfully and to a considerable extent in anti-democratic projects; this has been the subject of a large number of recent research projects. In the German Government's Report on Civic Engagement, the engagement of individuals or groups for society is attributed a fundamental promotion of democratic values (cf. German Bundestag 2nd Report on Civic Engagement 2017: 6f.). The analysis of the 620 individual project activities from the entries to the Smart Hero Award (SHA) in the years 2014 to 2017 shows that this promotion of democratic values also occurs when the engagement is exercised with and through social media. The positive effects of civic engagement can be reinforced through the use of social media and can achieve a greater scope.

The analysed projects use social media channels to draw attention to a specific topic or concern, to initiate and moderate a dialogue on the topic and motivate engagement in the short or long term. The various forms of combining online and offline engagement that were identified have an equally socio-political impact. The predominantly apolitical self-perception of the actors is therefore quite surprising. For the projects, their direct objective, for example the support of refugees or homeless people, is always the focus of attention. The positive long-term effects their work has for democracy are often beyond the awareness of those involved.

The study also substantiates that the use of social media for civic engagement has the potential to preventively counteract tendencies towards radicalisation. Extremist communication often utilises so-called narratives, which seem inherently consistent but are not necessarily based on facts, and which are widely disseminated with recognisable intent through social media channels and thus multiply their damaging effect on democracy. Civic engagement projects, on the other hand, create alternative narratives that aim to offer and stimulate reflection on an alternative, i.e. different view

on a particular subject, by disseminating curated and contextualised information about their activities via social media. Unlike counter-narratives – that expressis verbis explicitly oppose the extremist narrative – they therefore tend to cause rather implicitly the promotion of democracy and contribute to the formation of opinions in a positive sense.

Study Overview:

Study timeframe: September 2017 to January 2018.

Study sample:

620 individual project activities from organisations or individual persons in Germany that conduct their civic engagement in or via social media and submitted their projects to at least one of the Smart Hero Award contests between 2014 and 2017. The Smart Hero Award is organised each year by the Digital Opportunities Foundation together with Facebook.

Scope of the study:

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of altogether 620 individual project activities, based on the information provided by them in their application to the Smart Hero Award contests and assessments of their activities by utilisation of a criteria catalogue. To examine the projects' different approaches, activities, and effects on the promotion democracy and prevention of tendencies to radicalisation, the study took a closer look at 26 projects, including qualitative interviews and in-depth description of the goals and methods of six exemplary project approaches.

Contact: Michael Raeder, Phone: ++ 49(0)30-43727744, email: mraeder@digitale-chancen.de

Study conducted by:

Stiftung Digitale Chancen (Germany) in co-operation with betterplace lab / gut.org gAG

Full Study report available at https://www.digitale-chancen.de/DL_Research_EN as of August 2018.

Funded by:

German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth