

## Leave no political waste behind

### Challenge Collaborator: Who is behind this challenge?

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### Introduction

Digitization and digital technologies offer numerous opportunities to address major societal and political challenges of our time. Different stakeholders (policymakers, academics, tech experts, and NGOs) have paid special attention to both the opportunities and threats that accompany the digital transformation for sustainability and sustainable development. These debates have primarily focused on economic and ecological challenges that accompany the digital turn. Concerns about the political and societal sustainability of digitization have received less attention.

The digital transformation poses several fundamental **challenges to democracy** and, **in turn**, to the sustainability and development **of just, peaceful, and inclusive societies and institutions** (SDG16). Technological innovations have been increasingly anchored in underlying economic structures that strongly hinge profit on the wide-scale accumulation of information on people and societies (data gathering). Moreover, innovations in technologies such as AI, and developments of new technologically-assisted structures such as smart cities also rely on the acquisition of large amounts of data (e.g. algorithmic training). This has **primarily** awakened concerns about citizens' right to privacy and has, in turn, motivated democratic governments to ensure citizens consent to the gathering of their data (for instance via GDPR). Nevertheless, democratic societies fall short of holistically addressing the threats that emanate from the digital transformation, particularly those that stem from the increasing reliance on data gathering for technological innovation and profit.

Below, I highlight three interrelated challenges that emanate from the digital transformation and its reliance on data gathering. I chose these three challenges because (i) they are of particular importance, and (ii) their effect on democracy remains largely underrecognized in policy circles and among the general public. The digital transformation poses challenges to (1) the information environment of citizens and societies, (2) democratic sovereignty, and (3) social cohesion and peace.

## Problem Definition

Research in several academic fields has documented how "Big Data" could be used to influence citizens' (voting) behavior and consumption patterns. There is, however, a rather understudied negative effect that Big Data, coupled with innovations in AI algorithmic technologies, has on what I call the **information environment of citizens and societies**. Inclusion and universal suffrage are integral elements of democracy; they rest, however, on the idea that well-informed citizens determine the political agenda and choose between different elaborated alternatives. In the absence of adequate information, citizens cannot evaluate the different choices. Leading political theorists have, therefore, considered adequately informed citizens crucial requisites for democracy.

The digital transformation is reshaping and destabilizing how citizens are exposed to, and deal with, information both online and offline. To increase profit, online platforms utilize user data to target citizens with information that increases their "screen time" – sometimes exposing them to identity/worldview enforcing narratives, and other times to content that triggers controversy (think of algorithms on social media platforms). The result is that citizens are exposed to unprecedentedly abundant, and often contradictory, narratives. Citizens also find it increasingly difficult to adequately evaluate the reliability and trustworthiness of information because these targeting mechanisms obscure the original source from which information emanates and rely on psychometric trickery in targeting users. The result is not only widespread misinformation but also widespread agnosticism as to whether any reliable information exists.

This destabilization of citizens' information environment affects **democratic sovereignty**. While much research discusses digitized foreign intervention (think of Russian pro-Trump online campaigning in the U.S or Pro Brexit Campaign in the U.K), I refer here to democratic sovereignty as the sovereignty of the demos in democracies; that is, that citizens' free will – to use the words of John Locke – is the determinant of decisions taken in a democratic system. Foreign intervention is thus **not only** problematic for its ability to drive citizens toward antidemocratic attitudes and choices, but also because it challenges **the very foundation of democracy**; that choices result from the sovereign deliberation of the demos – the citizens.

Moreover, the destabilization of citizens' information environment consequently shakes the **information environment of society as a whole** and **jeopardizes social cohesion**. Social scientists have understood social cohesion to stem from commonalities between citizens. In cohesive societies, differences are cross-cutting; individuals who differ on one issue might find themselves agreeing on several other issues. This positively contributes to societal peace, inclusion, and stability. In polarized or fragmented societies, differences are reinforcing; individuals disagree on fundamental issues and across all issues. Several empirical works have shown that fragmented and polarized societies are more prone to civil war, violence, and exclusion.

Inclusive and peaceful societies thus require a stable information environment in which citizens differ in opinion, interest, and interpretation of information but share a common foundation of how to evaluate and engage with information as well as a common understanding of the basic elements that distinguish reality from fraud. Several recent examples illustrate how the absence of such common ground upsets societal peace and triggers some toward violence and the exclusion of fellow citizens. In the U.S. and Germany, for example, this has played an important role in the polarization that led to the capitol riots violence and the societal polarization around the corona regulations in Germany. The abundance of contradictory information and psychometric targeting of citizens create informational bubbles and cause a cognitive dissonance that triggers the delegitimization of opponents and a general polarization and fragmentation in democratic societies

## What is the waste challenge?

How to protect the political and social sustainability of democracy in the face of these challenges, and without jeopardizing technological innovation and development? **The challenge is to pursue technological innovations without jeopardizing peace, justice, and inclusion (SDG16): To pursue technological innovation without leaving political waste behind.**

- How to counter the negative effects on citizens' information environment?
- How to avoid digitally-facilitated fragmentation, polarization, and violence?
- How to shield democratic sovereignty, especially from foreign intervention and transnational authoritarianism?
- How to do all that without jeopardizing technological innovation, which also alleviates a lot of Human suffering and offers unprecedented opportunities for sustainable development?

## Desired Impact of Challenge

All actors who are interested in sustainable technological innovation and development should realize the complex and multifaceted political challenges for democracy and SDG16 that accompany the digital transformation. Such awareness should drive different actors to the realization that these dangers cannot be simply countered only with measures of data protection and algorithmic neutrality. Instead, wide-ranging coordinated efforts among technical experts, social scientists from different fields, policymakers, and NGOs are needed to, first, accurately identify the risks, and then adequately respond to them. The change here should, therefore, be (1) increased awareness of the multitude of risks, which is only achievable by linking different strands of research from different academic fields that are interested in the same theme but rarely talk to one another. (2) To utilize such knowledge to motivate technological innovations without leaving political waste behind, which is only achievable by linking this combined academic effort with stakeholders from different practical fields (policy-makers, NGOs, interest groups...etc.).

## Skills needed/recommended

The only skill required is the ability and, more importantly, the willingness to critically think. These skills are not only abundant among students but also among the general interested public in Germany.

## Relevant considerations for the challenge/theme

The groups should be aware that the challenges presented are some among many others, and that solving these challenges would not alleviate all challenges to democracy, justice, peace, and inclusion. But for concerns of time and scope, I chose to highlight four challenges that, based on my research, constitute major threats to SDG 16

## Relevant links

<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16> (SDG 16)

<https://citizenlab.ca/> (for empirical examples of different challenges to democracy, including the ones we highlight)

<https://www.sef-bonn.org/en/publications/global-trendsanalysis/022022/> (my paper on the characteristics that make digital technologies susceptible to authoritarianism and the impact of COVID-19 on these characteristics.)

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/713719> ("the road to digital unfreedom" by Larry Diamond – accessible via TUM). This article reviews some ways digitization strengthens authoritarianism and threatens democracies).

<https://www.cigionline.org/articles/authoritarianism-has-been-reinvented-for-the-digital-age/>

("authoritarianism has been reinvented for the digital age by Marie Lamensch). The article examines transnational digital authoritarianism and its impact on democracies