WHO ARE YOU ON THE DIGITAL STAGE?

The Internet has made it possible to exchange experiences and opinions across the globe. But this digital world is under siege from virulent hate speech, which poses a threat to our communities, as well as to democracy. What do we do now?

T he World Wide Web has given many people a voice and a platform by introducing almost limitless possibilities for communication. Comments can be quickly composed and posted even faster, especially anonymously. Emojis and likes are often just a click away from personal insults, threats of violence, and pure hatred. Anyone can become the target of this hatred, especially if they post in comment sections under blogs, in forums, and on social networks. The United Nations has warned about the rise in hate speech on the Internet, particularly in relation to discrimination and intimidation. Trolls who post hate speech tend to want to draw the greatest amount of attention on themselves, influence public debates, and create division in society.

A MINORITY PROPAGATES HATRED

"The danger that hate speech could undermine democracy from the inside is huge," says Gerald Hensel. The German brand consultant founded the association Fearless Democracy e.V. in 2017 after personally experiencing hate online due to his No Money for Right-Wingers campaign. It was only when he had given up his job and feared for his life that the trolls left him alone for good. Hensel wants to use Fearless Democracy to expose the structures of digital extremism, help

people who have been affected, and make society more resistant to populism. Its first project, Hate Aid, is a resource for people who have gotten caught up in online debates and been intimidated by hate campaigns. It was supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

STAND UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT

"The problem is that the minority propagating hate are being heard over the silent majority," says Hanna Gleiß. She runs Das Nettz, a network that was initiated by the Robert Bosch Stiftung to tackle hate speech. In reality, only a small number of users post and like comments with this type of content. "Unfortunately, however, these trolls and keyboard warriors are experts at disseminating hatred on the Internet through a multitude of fake identities. And they are very active," says Gleiß. "This creates the impression of a large majority of opinion that does not actually exist." Das Nettz promotes moral courage online and supports activists in their work against hate speech.

THE ROLE OF POLITICIANS AND CORPORATIONS

"Politicians and major digital corporations like Facebook and Twitter are failing to put clear regulations in place," says communication expert Hensel. Companies in particular will eventually have to invest more money in hiring trained moderators to monitor their websites and react more quickly to complaints.

Hensel believes that every individual is responsible for standing up to hate speech on the Internet, as well as creating a positive online debate culture. Hensel quotes a guideline for how to communicate online: "When you post publicly on the Internet, you should imagine that you are standing on a stage, and that your mother and your boss are among the audience." However, rules of thumb like this won't change the behavior of people who strategically post insults and hate speech online. "We will need regulations in the future. All we can do right now is block and resist. And we're well within our rights to do that." ⬅

Alexandra Wolters

HATE SPEECH IS A GLOBAL TREND

Julia Ebner works for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in London, and focuses on online communication as a researcher who studies extremism.

How has debate culture on the Internet developed across the globe?

Hate speech and disinformation campaigns have increased significantly over the last few years on the Internet. Some of the trends that could at first only be seen in the United States, such as media manipulation, hate speech, and doxing [posting an individual's personal information with malicious intent], have since arrived in Europe. The tactics used are similar across the globe. Most campaigns are carried out on major social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram with the aim of swaying mainstream debates or infiltrating opponent filter bubbles.

Who coordinates these campaigns?

They are often right-wing groups and influencers within a global network. Their goal is to intimidate and silence their political opponents, as well as confuse normal users of social media.

What can we do to create a better online debate culture?

We need an all-encompassing approach. The responsibility for this lies in the hands of politicians, the private sector, and civil society. I would recommend the following measures: Increasing a sense of transparency and responsibility by means of new regulations, enacting laws against the targeted dissemination of misinformation, and expanding existing regulations for online communication on smaller platforms and extremist sites. We should also optimize moderation techniques for handling hate speech, and support the initiatives of anti-hate speech NGOs and activists.