



Alliance for a Resilient
Information Society

Towards a Resilient Information Society: A Cornerstone of Holistic Public Sphere Policy.

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Alexander Sangerlaub

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Preface

Society is shaped on the basis of information. What information it is, how much and how we deal with it shapes our judgment. This in turn depends on various factors. This process is relevant for all of us, regardless of the political or social direction in which we orient ourselves within the framework of a free, democratic basic order. If this works well, we can speak of a resilient information society. If not, democracy cannot function either.

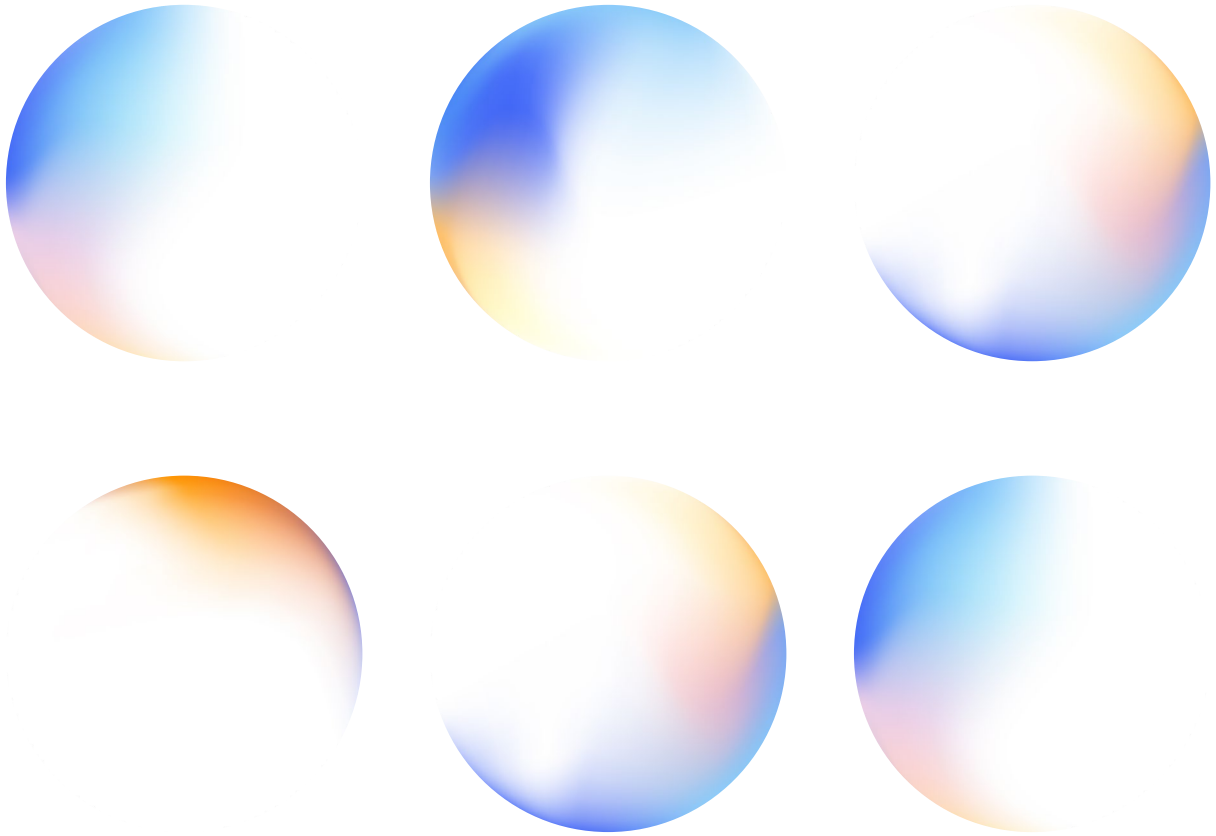
The Alliance for a Resilient Information Society is a collaborative attempt to bring together all relevant aspects of the creation and handling of information. To better understand what constitutes a resilient information society and how it can be achieved. With the hypothesis that the framework conditions and paths towards it are most effective when all those people and organizations come together who are interested in a resilient information society and want to help shape it. In a network, and even more: in a strategic thinking space that combines all relevant aspects and develops more power for change.

This paper by Alexander Sänglerlaub, who has been advising on the process of founding the alliance as an expert for many years, makes the connections of a resilient information society visible and is an offer to identify areas of action in order to further develop and link them.

At the same time, the paper outlines a utopia. The utopia of a resilient information society and the path to it, paved by a “public sphere policy” that sets the political framework. So that utopia also becomes reality.



Lukas Harlan, *Managing Director of betterplace lab and co-initiator of the Alliance for the Resilient Information Society*



Executive Summary

In January 2025, Elon Musk – as the owner of Platform X and part of the US government – makes headlines by inviting AfD chancellor candidate Alice Weidel to an interview. The conversation, peppered with half-truths and populism, impressively demonstrates the power of digital platforms over public debate. It also shows how vulnerable democratic decision-making processes are when social media giants, political players and inadequately regulated structures come together – not to mention the population's low level of information and news literacy. On January 9, 2025, Elon Musk and Alice Weidel won the “golden trophy for public attention”.

The **resilient information society** is a utopia in the democratic public sphere of the 21st century. However, it is a necessity for the continued existence of democracy. The paper lays the foundation for a holistic policy that sets **functioning public spheres** as its goal:

Those who want to make the **resilient information society** a reality must strengthen four central factors:

1. Resilience of Democracy:

Democratic structures and actors need more resilience. This means that rules are needed for political communication in the public sphere (e.g. online election advertising, party-owned media channels). This also includes more skills in dealing with digital channels. At the structural level, opportunities for genuine citizen participation are needed (e.g. citizens' councils, direct democracy) so that people who are not being heard in the currently increasingly dysfunctional public spheres are also heard. This is the only way to curb the abuse of power and manipulation.

2. Resilience of Journalism:

Economic and structural constraints lead to clickbait and tabloidization, while well-founded investigative journalism is becoming increasingly difficult to finance. A cultural shift towards constructive reporting, new opportunities for dialog between the audience and the media, more transparency and diversity in editorial offices and new financing models will strengthen the credibility and relevance of the media – and thus also that of democracy. At the same time, it is important not to weaken the bulwarks against propaganda and extremism (e.g. public service broadcasting) and to accelerate their digital and cultural transformation.

3. Resilience of Social Media Platforms:

The dominant US platforms act in part as “digital oligarchs”. Algorithm prioritization, unclear moderation standards and data exploitation encourage extremist content. This is not news to experts in the field, and since Donald Trump's second inauguration at the latest, it has become obvious to the whole world. Interoperability, algorithmic transparency and democratic control are important building blocks for a balanced information ecosystem, but not enough: European responses with a focus on the common good are needed to US platform oligarchies that are not primarily subject to the whims and political attitudes of their owners.

4. Resilience of Society:

A high level of information and news literacy coupled with real opportunities for participation – both online and offline – form the backbone of a digital, democratic society. We are still a long way from achieving this. The first pillar against propaganda and manipulation is recognizing disinformation and critically examining sources. The second pillar is significantly more and low-threshold participation processes (e.g. citizens' councils) both in politics and in the public sphere.

The result is a regulatory approach for resilient democracies in the digital age and a new term that does justice to the importance, complexity and overlapping responsibilities of the field: public sphere policy. It describes the directions towards a resilient information society. The responsibility extends to at least nine different ministries and affects several levels simultaneously (Europe, federal government and federal states): Infrastructure, Media, Digital, Education, Security (Foreign Affairs and Home Affairs), Economy and Justice.

Politics, media, platforms and society must work together to make structural, cultural and regulatory adjustments so that resources, creative power and attention are not solely in the hands of a few players – who are also increasingly displaying anti-democratic tendencies. Only then can the “game for the golden trophy” of attention be shaped fairly in the long term and a political decision-making process worthy of the name can be realized.¹

1) The author extends his gratitude to all those who critically commented on the text and enriched it with their thoughts and ideas: Dr. Julian Jaurisch, Dr. Gergana Baeva, Prof. Dr. Tong-Jin Smith, Dr. Josefa Kny, Lukas Harlan, and Marion K. Sänglerlaub.

And one preliminary remark: this paper is demanding. You read that correctly – because the topic is about as complex as human society itself. It is about nothing more and nothing less than the question of how we communicate and inform ourselves today. And that happens globally, in a networked manner, with highly advanced technology, in a multifaceted way, and – especially in this “age of digital information overload” – more complex than in the era of mass media, and thus quite overwhelming in many places. Therefore, two requests: 1. Take your time and, if necessary, use ChatGPT alongside. Ask questions about terms you don't yet understand. 2. Write down thoughts you would like to share with the author. Paper is limited, language too, and time especially. There is much more to think, say, and write about on this topic. This paper sees itself as an impulse for how we want to communicate and inform ourselves in the future. So: write to us! You can find the author's contact information at the end of the paper. Wishing you an insightful read, Alexander Sänglerlaub

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I. Turning Point and Propaganda

It's January 9, 2025, and Germany is in the midst of an election campaign. The richest man in the world and owner of the social network X, Elon Musk, is getting involved in the German election campaign in an unprecedented way. He invites Alice Weidel, the AfD's leading candidate for chancellor, to an interview on his platform.² The conversation, which revolves around the question of whether Hitler was a communist, whether Germany is the only country in Europe without nuclear power or whether people in Germany pay the highest taxes and social security contributions, dominates the public debate that evening and in the days that follow. Musk and Weidel thus win what the public – and especially the election campaign – is all about: the golden trophy for attention³.

The discourse on disinformation is no longer about the impact of individual “fake news”, as was the case in the debate in 2017 after Donald Trump's first inauguration as US president. The question of who deliberately introduces which lies into the discourse is also of secondary importance. Instead, we find ourselves in the middle of a battle for narratives⁴ and attention. Much more important is the question of who will win the battle for the resource of *people's attention* and thus achieve discourse sovereignty in order to successfully spread opinions and narratives.

This example is symptomatic of the problems of the democratic public sphere in the 21st century: from Musk to Zuckerberg, we see oligarchic structures in the digital space that dwarf all the ownership structures and monopolies of private publishing houses of the 20th century. The operators of social networks are not content with their already uncanny market power, but are interfering in political processes and affairs in previously unknown ways – far beyond their own countries. The political orientations (in Musk's case a libertarian, far-right or opportunistic worldview⁵) are favored by the algorithms on their own platforms⁶, disinformation and hate have free rein. Welcome to the dystopia that has come true, which will serve as an example below to define the opposite: the utopia of a resilient information society.

2) ZDF (10.01.2025): *Elon Musk und Alice Weidel im Faktencheck*. www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/fakten-check-weidel-musk-100.html

3) How exactly the communication strategy of Trump and Musk works – and what traditional media in particular need to pay attention to in order not to become “the trophy” – is outlined by American communications scholar Whitney Phillips (in a talk at the Augstein Foundation in 2020): www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjcZv3Brua8&t=126s

4) “Narrative” refers to a continuous story infused with values and emotions. It is part of an entire culture and its intellectual framework and is therefore, for example in a political sense, part of an ideology (in German: *Ideenlehre*), such as “democracy,” “liberalism,” “autocracy,” or “fascism.”

5) Barbara Barkhausen in an interview with political scientist Henry Maher from the University of Sydney in RND (02.02.2025): *Die “Pipeline von Libertär zu Alt-Right”: Was steckt hinter Musks politischem Wandel?* www.rnd.de/politik/elon-musks-politische-haltung-was-heisst-pipeline-von-libertaer-zu-alt-right-PGFX4CIPVZCETDJD7DBBHGAUL4.html

6) Researchers at the University of Queensland have now confirmed the pro-Republican biases previously suspected through journalistic investigations.: www.bdzv.de/service/presse/branchennachrichten/2024/meinungsmacht-per-algorithmus-wie-musk-seine-interessen-auf-x-pusht

But why do we need them? Every change begins with a utopia. It can act as a signpost when society sets out to change something.

If democracy is to be taken seriously, it requires the *participation of everyone in the political decision-making process*. What sounds somewhat abstract means by definition no less and no more than that the wishes and goals of all people are taken into account – this is how the Federal Agency for Civic Education defines it⁷. From the description of a problem, through the formulation of an idea that becomes a political conviction, to political implementation, the process is decisive for democracy (input – throughput – output). This means that the political process in a democracy cannot be separated from the ability to access information freely and comprehensively. And even more actively, it means understanding informing and being informed as a participatory act. For this process, democracies, unlike autocracies, allow **public spheres**⁸ – and everything that goes with them: from freedom of expression and assembly, to local newspapers, radio and television, to global social media platforms, search engines and AI applications such as ChatGPT. With digitalization, our democratic public spheres have created participatory spaces for communication, from blogs and forums to social media and video games.

“Freedom of the press is the freedom of 200 rich people to spread their opinions.”

Paul Sethe, 1965, founding editor of the F.A.Z. in a letter to the editor of DER SPIEGEL

“Today, freedom of the press is the freedom of around three billion people with an internet connection to disseminate their opinions online.”

Armin Wolf, 2018, Anchorman of the ORF

However, Armin Wolf’s response to Paul Sethe’s quote is only half the truth. Our digital information spaces are not immune to power structures either. Some who strive for political power sometimes also strive for power over the process of political decision-making (there are plenty of historical examples from Joseph Goebbels to Silvio Berlusconi) and thus claim to represent the will of the people. And so we are back to Elon Musk, who took over the online service Twitter in 2022, which has been called X ever since. He now heads the deregulation authority DOGE as part of the US government, runs several companies with vested interests, and controls a global communications network – all of which is problematic on many levels. Such an interweaving of journalistic, economic and political power is unique in the world, and yet in Germany it is mainly

7) Political opinion-forming as defined on the pages of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb): www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/18045/politische-willensbildung/

8) In the past, the term was used in the singular and describes – from the Greek agora to today’s digital channels – “...the sphere of social life in which people come together to discuss problems that are to be resolved through political processes. For this, access to all sources of information and media must be free, and the information must be freely discussable. In this freely accessible (public) space, the majority opinion should be able to form undisturbed by censorship and other barriers.” (This can be found in the works of thinkers from Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas; for our purposes here, we refer to Wikipedia: (<https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/öffentlichkeit>)). In today’s highly fragmented information and communication environments, one can certainly invoke the plural term “public spheres”, which does not mean that “the public sphere” (still in the singular) can no longer be created.

known from the times of National Socialism. The radio set known as the “People’s Receiver” was co-developed by Joseph Goebbels in the Reich Ministry of Propaganda during Adolf Hitler’s time and was considered one of the most important instruments of Nazi propaganda.

Those who have such powerful propaganda channels at their disposal can cause democracies and their powers to destabilize: In this respect, Goebbels’ Volksempfänger is no different from Musk’s Platform X: both give far-right voices a megaphone and thus a powerful stage.⁹

Just how important this propaganda channel is for the Americans could be seen in the speech by US Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2025. Security policy, the war in Ukraine, the transatlantic relationship – Vance only touched on all of these in passing: “The greatest danger I see in Europe is not Russia or China or any other external actor. The greatest danger is internal.” This was followed by a lecture in which Vance accused Europeans of having a degenerate understanding of democracy. Two worlds collide here: the libertarian American understanding of freedom of speech and the liberal European one.¹⁰

Are we in Germany resilient enough to withstand this as a democracy? Now, none of this is happening in a vacuum. Media and journalism around the world and in this country reported on the conversation, critically classifying facts and fakes. People are discussing it and forming an opinion as to whether Musk, Weidel and Vance’s interventions fit in with their values and beliefs. It shows how influential platform owners and political actors can dominate the democratic discourse within a very short space of time. At the same time, it becomes clear that traditional media can classify, but only counteract to a limited extent.

Our digital information ecosystem has always been heavily influenced by American platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X, etc.) and thus also their libertarian understanding of the public sphere.¹¹ Europeans are making efforts to contain and regulate this with laws such as the DMA (Digital Markets Act) and DSA (Digital Services Act) – but the dependence on Meta, Musk and Co. remains. Concentration of power and propaganda are just two of the many problems of the digital public sphere. These examples show how far away we are from the idea of enabling everyone to *participate in the political decision-making process*.

What we have lacked so far is the courage to actively shape this process and free ourselves from American dependencies. It is also a necessary step towards European sovereignty. A holistic, po-

9) New York Times (03.02.2025): *Inside Musk’s Aggressive Incursion Into the Federal Government*. www.nytimes.com/2025/02/03/us/politics/musk-federal-government.html

10) J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference on the White House YouTube channel. (14.02.2025): www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCOsgfINdKg&t=53s

11) Americans and Europeans have very different views on the concepts of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Broadly speaking, in the U.S., much more is allowed to be said, lied about, or hated than would be permitted in Europe. As a result, it is much more difficult in the U.S. to curb hate speech and disinformation. The foundation for this is the “First Amendment” of the U.S. Constitution, which almost always places freedom of speech and the press – such as in Supreme Court rulings – above other rights. In Europe, on the other hand, certain aspects are traditionally more strictly regulated, such as youth protection or the depiction of violence, and specifically in Germany, there are restrictions on displaying Nazi symbols and provisions on incitement to hatred in the criminal code. The principle of “human dignity” is central to these regulations (§1, Basic Law).

litical view of the public sphere helps to bring together the efforts that have so far been isolated and detached from each other and, above all, to define goals for the future – **in which public sphere do we want to negotiate, inform and debate democracy?** On Elon Musk's platform or somewhere else? Perhaps we Europeans need to be reminded of previous achievements – and build on them: the invention of public service broadcasting is – all in all – a European success story and one of the bulwarks against disinformation and propaganda.

As in climate policy, it can help to draw a utopia, or more concretely: to set goals for the future. For example, the EU wants to become climate-neutral by 2050. Why not also set the goal of jointly creating a European, digital, public platform by 2035? These goals can be set at local (e.g. the provision of information through local media), national (e.g. political and media education as a school subject by 2030) and European level.

In any case, DSA and DMA alone will not be enough. If we take the universally **cited turnaround** seriously, **we need a holistic approach to public sphere policy**. After all, the connections between social media platforms, journalism, political communication and information and news literacy are fluid – and with them the functioning of democracy. Therefore, the levers must be considered and developed together in order to preserve – and possibly further develop – democracy.

The *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society*, in the context of which this paper is published, is attempting to follow precisely this idea and, together with experts from all silos of society, to think about and thus shape the future of the public sphere from a desired future state.¹²

12) The *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society*: www.resiliente-informationsgesellschaft.org



II. From the Resilient Information Society to Public Sphere Policy

In recent years, amid increasing debates about disinformation, democracies under pressure, external geopolitical influence and the power of digital platforms, experts are increasingly discussing the question of how resilient our democracies are – and therefore also our public spheres.¹³

The term **resilience**, which originally comes from materials science and is also at home in other disciplines – from psychology and organizational research to sociology and biology – refers to the **resistance of systems to external (and internal) threats**.

In psychology, resilience describes psychological resistance, i.e., how well people cope with difficulties in their own lives without suffering lasting impairment. In biology, however, there is another important addition: the **adaptation of a system to new circumstances** – in other words, beyond the more defensive character of resilience – also includes a forward development. This means not only fending off crises (bounce back), but also further developing the system through innovation and learning processes (bounce forward).¹⁴ Materials science and engineering add another important component: What happens if a subsystem fails? Can the others then replace it?

The *information society*, in turn, describes the human society permeated by information and communication technologies, which defines postmodernity (i.e. our present day). If we relate this term to resilience, it is about **protecting the democratic information society from threats such as autocratic and illiberal tendencies**. This includes phenomena such as propaganda, extremism and disinformation, which undermine democratic values and decision-making, just like **plutocratic and oligarchic concentrations of power**.¹⁵

The strategic advantages of taking a holistic view of the information ecosystem as a unified whole – similar to how we approach systems like healthcare or education – lie, on the one hand, in the ability to relate its components to one another, and on the other hand, that this perspective provides the foundation for a strategy aimed at strengthening the entire ecosystem. This is particularly important given that information infrastructures are not only vital for the survival of democracy, but should also be regarded as a public responsibility – beyond market mechanisms.¹⁶ This same understanding already exists in many European democracies regarding public infrastructures, from water and electricity supply to public broadcasting.

13) Observatory on Information and Democracy (2025): *Information Ecosystems and troubled Democracy*. <https://observatory.informationdemocracy.org/report/information-ecosystems-and-troubled-democracy-report-summary>

14) See also: betterplace lab (2024): *Die Metakrise. Wie die Zivilgesellschaft zur gesellschaftlichen Resilienz beiträgt*. www.betterplace-lab.org/studie-metakrise-und-zivilgesellschaft

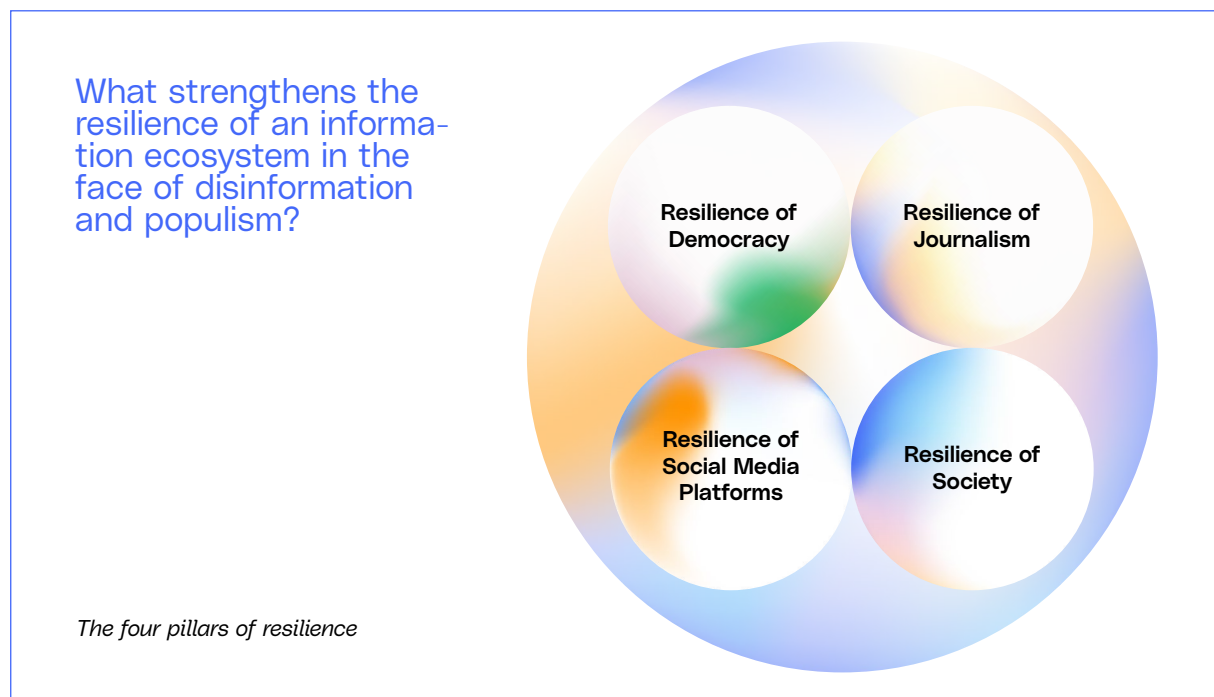
15) Aristotle describes *oligarchy as the rule of the few*, where only a small group of people exercises political power. Even U.S. President Joe Biden used the term against his successor, Donald Trump, to criticize the concentration of power within Big Tech around U.S. President Trump (Guardian (23.01.2025): <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/23/what-is-oligarchy>). The more accurate term, therefore, is plutocracy, as it sharpens the concept to mean the *rule of the rich*.

16) The publicly funded public broadcasting, organized independently from the state, was born out of the necessity for largely state- and privately independent information infrastructures in a democracy. These infrastructures are part of a public system to provide local, national, and international information and news. In the digital realm, without exception, all significant platforms are privately organized and not European.

At the partner organization *futur eins*¹⁷ the *resilient information society* is conceptualized through four key building blocks:

1. **Resilience of Democracy**
2. **Resilience of Journalism**
3. **Resilience of Social Media Platforms** and
4. **Resilience of Society**.¹⁸

These components are presented in more detail in [Kapitel 3](#), which also outlines areas for public sphere policy action.



17) *futur eins* is a Think & Do Tank based in Berlin: <https://futureins.org>. More about the organization at the end of the paper.

18) The basis for the resilience factors is the following text, published by the author of this paper, on the national security strategy against disinformation: Alexander Sangerlaub (2023): *Die resiliente Informationsgesellschaft in Zeiten digitaler Disruption*. <https://fourninesecurity.de/2023/02/22/die-resiliente-informationsgesellschaft-in-zeiten-digitaler-disruption>

Similar classifications can be found, for example, in the scientific community: including Edda Humprcht: www.wissenschaftskommunikation.de/resilienz-gegen-desinformation-im-netz-54949/

Based on the preceding considerations, I propose the following definition:

A resilient information society is a comprehensive social, political, and technological ecosystem in which democratic values and pluralism are firmly embedded, and where people have free access to well-founded and diverse information. Political institutions, media, platforms, and civil society operate within a largely decentralized and quality-oriented environment. At the same time, this system fosters media and information literacy among the population, regulates media monopolies and overly powerful online platforms, and thus ensures broad public participation in the democratic decision-making process. A key element of resilience is not only the ability to withstand external and internal crises (“bounce back”), but also to evolve through innovative strategies and collective learning processes. In short: a public sphere oriented toward the common good.

The entire information ecosystem consists of a multitude of dynamics, actors, spheres of influence, and influencing factors. The example mentioned above involving Musk and Weidel clearly illustrates the most crucial currency within this complex system: **attention** – and attention is always limited.¹⁹ Whoever manages to dominate public discourse despite all these dynamics ultimately controls the information ecosystem and the process of opinion formation.

The term **ecosystem** is therefore significant, as it implies that if one part of the system fails, others can theoretically step in. Societies with high levels of media and information literacy and a high-quality media system are better able to identify and counter disinformation – even when it originates from politics. Essentially, the information ecosystem remained relatively stable until the 1990s, as only a few had access to it before digitalization. With digitalization – and the democratization of the public sphere – came not only the flood of information, but also the increasing occurrence that people were left on their own to assess the quality of that information. Today, as social media platforms increasingly unmask themselves as digital oligarchies, figures like Trump and Musk have immense opportunities to generate unfiltered reach. Meanwhile, the other two subsystems of the information ecosystem – journalism and society – lack the necessary resilience to absorb and respond to these challenges.²⁰

In relation to the example: Musk (factor of *Resilience of Social Media Platforms*) and Weidel (factor of *Resilience of Democracy*) are not particularly concerned with **factual accuracy** (*cultural dimension*); on the contrary: polemics, ignorance, and disinformation largely dominate the conversa-

19) The systems-theoretical perspective on the media subsystem (e.g., Luhmann) also sees attention as the central currency (or “binary code”) of the journalistic system. This has not changed with the digitalization of the public sphere.

20) Why, for example, fact-checking, both in journalism and on platforms, is not a successful solution, see Alexander Sänglerlaub (2018): *Feuerwehr ohne Wasser? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Fact-Checkings als Mittel gegen Desinformation*. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resilienz-gegen-desinformation/studie-fact-checking-in-dtl/01c91e0cb3-1728053234/2018_feuerwehr-ohne-wasser.pdf

tion.²¹ A classification with regard to factual accuracy is subsequently made, among others, by the editorial team of ZDF Heute (factor of Resilience of Journalism) on their website.²² A large part of the German media has reported on it (e.g., SZ²³), comments on it (SZ²⁴) or provides context (SZ²⁵). For instance, Gabor Steingart provocatively asks how the reactions from journalists would have differed if it had been Robert Habeck, not Alice Weidel, who was interviewed by Elon Musk.²⁶ Would the journalistic perspective have been different? The AfD uses the conversation for their own communication at party conventions and on social media channels (factor of *Resilience of Democracy*), while numerous other politicians, journalists, and citizens comment on the conversation across all social media channels, some amused by Weidel's claim that Hitler was left-wing and a communist, others shocked by this statement, or others still delighted by the attention for the AfD leader – depending on their political perspective (*Resilience of Society*).

Anyone who fact-checks the interview between Musk and Weidel ([see footnote 2](#)) will find little factual truth. Democracies, however, must sometimes endure this. What is crucial, however, is that Musk's strategy succeeded in dominating the public discourse. The interview was widely discussed for days across politics, media, and the public, thereby securing the golden trophy of attention during those days, and consequently, diverting attention from political topics that interest the public, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, housing, or economic policy.²⁷

21) Tagesschau (10.01.2025): *Was bleibt vom Gespräch Weidel-Musk?* www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/weidel-musk-x-100.html

22) ZDF heute (10.01.2025): *AfD-Gespräch auf X: Elon Musk und Alice Weidel im Faktencheck:* www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/faktencheck-weidel-musk-100.html

23) Süddeutsche Zeitung (09.01.2025): *Weidel im Talk mit Musk: "Hitler war ein Kommunist".* www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/weidel-im-talk-mit-musk-hitler-war-ein-kommunist-li.3180020

24) Süddeutsche Zeitung (10.01.2025): *Loslabern, rumgackern, vollstopfen.* www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/alice-weidel-elon-musk-afd-gespraech-x-li.3180302?reduced=true

25) Süddeutsche Zeitung (10.01.2025): *Weidel und Musk: Wie Lügen verfangen.* www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/hitler-kommunist-luegen-rechtsextremismus-li.3180187

26) Kress (10.01.2025): *Steingarts provokante Frage: Was wäre, wenn Musk nicht Alice Weidel, sondern Robert Habeck zum Interview geladen hätte?* <https://kress.de/news/beitrag/148699-steingarts-provokante-frage-was-waere-wenn-musk-nicht-alice-weidel-sondern-robert-habeck-zum-interview-geladen-haette.html>

27) The "will of the people" is difficult to measure in our representative democracies, and public opinion polling attempts to do so through statistical extrapolation and sampling theory. What is interesting is how the questions are asked. If you ask, "What do you think is the most important issue in Germany right now?", you measure a media effect (migration is then most frequently mentioned, among others Statista: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1062780/umfrage/umfrage-zu-den-wichtigsten-problemen-in-deutschland/>). However, if you ask, "What issues are currently on your mind in your daily life?", completely different answers come to light (e.g., inflation, rents) (e.g., *Hart aber fair*: www1.wdr.de/daserste/hartaberfair/sendungen/die-grosse-vertrauenskrise-versteht-die-politik-die-buerger-noch-100.html).

The already cited American communication scholar Whitney Phillips ([see footnote 3](#)) refers to the media hype surrounding the conversation as the “King Midas effect”: when the media grant populist agitators enormous additional reach. This is an effect she observed both within and outside the United States during Trump’s first term. It is an effect that demonstrates how disinformation and toxic narratives “clutter” the public sphere.²⁸ Like rubble, they clog up public discourse because we are no longer discussing empirically measurable truths, but instead must first separate truths from lies. As already mentioned: attention is a limited resource.

For democratic public spheres, factors can therefore be identified and empirically measured to determine exactly where the **boundary lies between a resilient information society** and – on the opposite end – **a vulnerable disinformation society**. Below is an overview (*Table 1*) that illustrates the complexity and scope of this issue. This overview is organized into four dimensions to simplify understanding: *cultural, structural, regulatory, and technical factors*. Each dimension can simultaneously influence all four resilience factors: Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms, and Resilience of Society.

28) Claire Wardle from First Draft aptly refers to this as “information pollution” and says that our societies are suffering from a kind of information disorder: <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder>

Resilient Information Society	Vulnerable Disinformation Society
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Cultural Dimension

This refers to norms, values, and societal attitudes and competencies that shape information and communication behavior, ultimately leading to a functioning public sphere.

Functional Public Sphere Society and the population put their own issues on the agenda; functioning input, throughput, and output processes.	Dysfunctional Public Sphere Dominant actors, bots, or scandals hijack discourse; the population's issues are not heard.
Factual Accuracy High value placed on data-driven debates and fact-oriented discourse.	Lies Dominance of scandals, disinformation, and emotionalization (anger, fear).
Informed Citizens Informed (news-literate) citizens with critical thinking, active participation.	Manipulable Citizens Lack of media literacy and echo chambers, spreading rumors, passive consumption.
Long-Term Orientation Sustainable agenda setting and thorough journalistic analysis.	Short-Term Outrage Cycles Short attention spans and topic-hopping through social media outrage waves.
Diverse Sources & Perspectives Plurality of opinions, broad information base, exchange across social milieus.	Echo Chambers Homogeneous information spaces, reinforcement of personal prejudices, polarization of society.
Collaborative Knowledge Production Knowledge is verified collectively (e.g., fact-checking), Wikipedia.	Misinformation Warfare Targeted disruption and propaganda.

Structural Dimension

This dimension encompasses institutional and organizational frameworks. It deals with market and power distribution, the media landscape, and societal participation.

Public Broadcasting and Independent Media as Stability Factors Separation from the state, pluralistically structured media that function as “anchors” for an informed society.	Erosion of Independent Media and Interference by Owners or Politics in Editorial Work Influence by governments, corporations, or owners attempting to direct editorial work.
Decentralized Discourse Spaces A diverse media landscape, decentralized organization, and independence.	Monopolized Platform Power A few actors or corporations dominate public discourse = “digital oligarchs.”
Broad Participation in Political Will Formation As many people as possible having real access and influence (voting rights, citizen participation, diversity of opinion).	Economic and Political Elites Determine Political Will Formation Public opinion shaped by political and economic actors (billionaires, lobby groups).

Quality Well-founded information where editorial standards and carefulness take precedence over click numbers.	Virality Visibility and the sensationalism of discourse determined by clickbait and scandalization.
Equal Access to Information Broad, low-cost or free access to relevant news and data, including freedom of information (from the state and others).	Paywalls & Subscriptions, Information Restrictions Important information hidden behind paywalls, accessible only to a few; authorities refuse to provide information.

Regulatory Dimension

This refers to laws, state regulations, and political frameworks that shape and can (re)structure the information space.

Press Freedom Independent reporting by journalists without repression or legal threats.	Censorship and Intimidation of Journalists Censorship, pressure, and threats as tools used by governments, corporations, or groups.
Freedom of Expression Legally guaranteed freedom of expression, linked to responsibility and legal limits (e.g., against hate speech).	Censorship or Libertarian Understanding of Freedom of Expression Either a radically libertarian “anything goes” culture without consequences for rule-breaking, or state suppression of dissenting opinions.
Political Transparency Strict rules for campaigns and advertising, disclosure of all financial flows, fair competition conditions.	Dark Campaign Financing Secret donations, strawman financing, opaque lobbying power, and political stealth marketing.
Democratic Oversight of Platforms Checks and balances for big tech, e.g., through state supervision, international cooperation, and oversight boards.	Digital Oligarchies or Autocracies Individual billionaires and corporations that decide on debates and reach (or political leadership) unilaterally.
Protection of Personal Rights Opportunities to effectively report and hold accountable hate, defamation, or incitement to violence.	Information Space as the “Wild West” Lack of mechanisms to contain criminal content, minimal legal consequences.

Technical Dimension

This refers to infrastructure, IT security, and the role of algorithms, i.e., the technological basis of information exchange.

Transparent Algorithms Disclosure of recommendation mechanisms and traceable logic of reach.	Black-Box Algorithms Secrecy of algorithms, no democratic control over content visibility.
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Moderation & AI Filters A thoughtful combination of human and automated moderation that detects and limits misinformation and hate.	Unfiltered Disinformation Flood Filtering on platforms largely left to chance or purely commercial priorities.
Protected ICT Infrastructures and Data Privacy High security standards, defense against hacking, botnet attacks, data leaks, and manipulation.	Lack of Cybersecurity Vulnerable systems easily infiltrated and manipulated by states or criminal actors.
Interoperability and Open Standards Data and platform portability, exchange between different services; no monopolistic network effects.	Closed (Proprietary) Systems Providers trap users in “golden cages,” making it difficult to switch to alternative services.
Regulations for AI Technologies & Future Technologies The same questions that increasingly apply to applications like ChatGPT and similar tools.	No Regulations for AI Technologies The same “laissez-faire” approach as for digital public spheres.

Tabelle: Dimensions of a Resilient Information Society – and Areas of Action for Public Sphere Policy

Those who carefully read through the individual poles between resilience and vulnerability will recognize that we live in a simultaneity of resilient and vulnerable society. In each dimension, the pendulum swings more or less strongly towards one side or the other. It must be assessed individually from state to state and public sphere to public sphere whether more resilient or vulnerable conditions prevail and how stable the respective information ecosystem is. Other phenomena, however, are global and independent of national public spheres, as digital platforms operate globally, making the lack of moderation or transparency in algorithms international problems.

This results in areas of **action for a holistic public sphere policy**. They describe how the pendulum can be swung more strongly to the left side in the respective areas. The need for a holistic policy field arises from the current fragmentation of the cross-cutting issue, which has so far extended across several policy fields. The consequence of this is a diffusion of responsibility and political stagnation, similar to what is observed in digital policy.

The fields that encompass public sphere policy are:

- **Infrastructure policy** (e.g., network coverage, non-profit platforms),
- **Security policy** (countering disinformation, cybersecurity policy, internal and external security),
- **Economic and technology policy** (e.g., promoting industries like AI or journalism),
- **Media policy** (e.g., regulation of public service broadcasting and political communication),
- **Democracy promotion policy** (e.g., supporting civil society),

- **Education policy** (e.g., increasing information and news literacy),
- **Digital policy** (e.g., regulation of social media platforms),
- **Cultural policy** (e.g., promoting public spaces as “analog” public spheres, such as theaters, exhibitions, concerts),
- plus the various responsibilities of the respective fields at the federal, state, or European level.

The term “**public sphere policy**” introduced in this paper refers to:

The totality of political efforts to maintain and establish a functioning public sphere in order to enable the process of democratic political will formation.

It is both a cross-cutting task and a distinct policy field in its own right, encompassing parts of infrastructure policy, security policy (internal, external & defense), economic and technology policy, media policy, democracy promotion policy, education policy, digital policy, and cultural policy.

In the following, I would like to delve deeper into the four resilience factors for **Germany** and highlight where the greatest challenges lie, as well as the areas of action. Additionally, I will discuss the overarching issues that require action across all four factors.



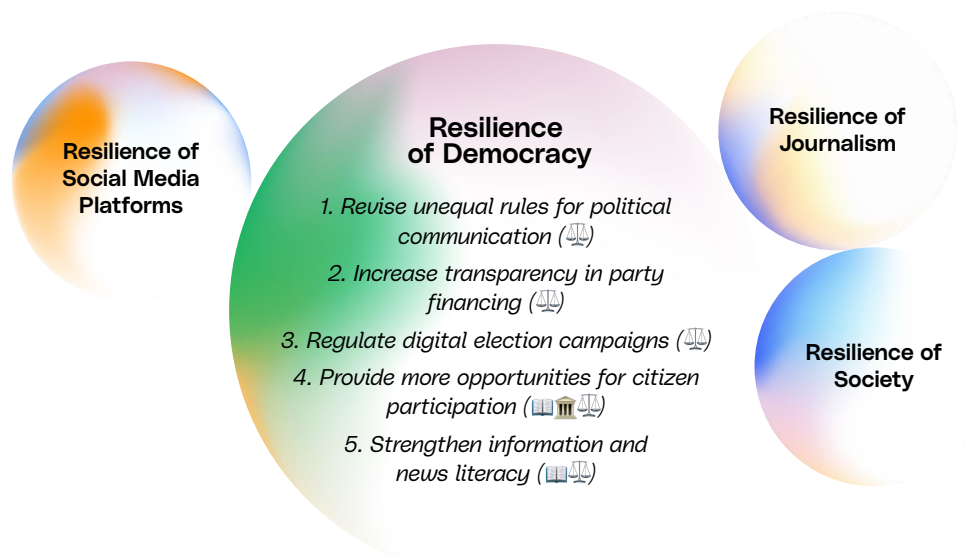
III.

Areas of Action in Public Sphere Policy: The Four Resilience Factors

The following four subsections aim to propose potential areas of action for a holistic public sphere policy in the four resilience factors. The goal is to establish functioning public spheres. Beneath these factors, there are underlying themes that are of central importance for all four: these are **public welfare orientation, participation, as well as information and news literacy**. Some of these goals are long-term, while others are medium-term. There is little room for short-term effects or immediate measures, as most challenges can only be addressed through structural or cultural changes.

The consequences of the lack of public welfare orientation, the absence of participation opportunities, and low information and news literacy are the same for the political and media systems: a **crisis of trust** in the population – which manifests in the political system, among other things, through the election of radical parties and in the media system, for example, through disengagement, such as news avoidance.²⁹

29) Digital News Report von Reuters Institute und University of Oxford (2024): https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf (Figures on trust on p. 34; for Germany, see p. 82). Studies on trust in the political system include the „Mitte-Studien“ by Andreas Zick (2023): www.fes.de/referat-demokratie-gesellschaft-und-innovation/gegen-rechtsextremismus/mitte-studie-2023



Recommended Actions to Enhance the Resilience of Democracy

📖 Cultural Dimension

🏛️ Structural Dimension

⚖️ Regulatory Dimension

📱 Technical Dimension

III.I Resilience of Democracy

A stable democratic community largely depends on the transparency of political processes, the orderly distribution of power, and the active participation of citizens in the formation of will. All of this can only happen through functioning public spheres. In Germany, many institutions – from parliaments to political parties to local structures – are fundamentally stable. However, there are clear gaps and problem areas that weaken democratic resilience. Even existing regulatory efforts (which mainly take place at the European level), such as the Digital Services Act (DSA), address only a fraction of the problem.³⁰

Key questions for the Resilience of Democracy are therefore: 1) How integral and stable are the actors in the political system, particularly in their political communication, and 2) Do democracy and its actors create the necessary framework for a functioning information ecosystem?

1. Overhaul Unequal Rules for Political Communication in Broadcast, Print, and Online

Dimension: Regulatory Dimension
Political Level: Federal and State
Policy Field: Media, Interior (Party Law), Digital

³⁰) Chris Köver via Netzpolitik (25.08.2024): Ein Jahr Digital Services Act. <https://netzpolitik.org/2024/ein-jahr-digital-services-act-ich-bin-jetzt-nicht-mehr-so-machtlos/>

<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium-term
<i>Urgency: :</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

The biggest problem weakening democratic resilience is the completely unequal rules for political communication between traditional broadcasting and digital platforms (and also print). In the analog realm, TV and radio broadcasters are subject to strict regulations regarding state neutrality: parties and governments are not allowed to own their own TV channels in order to prevent dangerous proximity between politics and public communication. However, in the digital realm, there is no comparable oversight:

- **YouTube instead of television:**

While a party is not allowed to create its own TV channel according to the German constitution, almost all parties today operate YouTube channels with considerable reach. However, these channels are not subject to broadcasting licenses or any real oversight as long as they do not formally meet the criteria of a broadcast program. Studies show that citizens have a hard time distinguishing between news and PR.³¹

- **Podcast instead of radio:**

Podcasts, like traditional radio reporting, operate without clear rules. The legislature has refrained from creating a legal separation between political influence and independent editorial work. There is not even an obligation to label content.

The consequence of this regulatory gap is the undermining of media and journalism as the often-quoted Fourth Estate in a democracy (after the executive, legislative, and judiciary). This might be acceptable if we already had a media-literate society. In practice, political communication looks as follows:

1. **Self-presentation without counter-control**

Parties can use social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, etc.) or podcasts to distribute their messages unfiltered and highly professionally. Unlike traditional broadcasting, there is no program oversight or editorial control to ensure balance, fact-checking, or counterstatements.

2. **Hybridization between PR and Journalism**

Own channels often give the impression of journalistic interviews or reports, but in content, they are purely PR formats. Viewers often do not realize that there is no independent editorial team behind them. (In the study “Quelle: Internet?”, only 62% of respondents recognized a podcast by Christian Lindner as “political public relations”).

31) Anna-Katharina Meßmer, Alexander Sänglerlaub & Leonie Schulz (2021): “Quelle: Internet”? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resilienz-gesellschaft/quelle-internet/Oe483ac499-1728053243/snv_quelleinternet_messmersaengerlaubschulz_210319.pdf

3. Bypassing Journalistic Counter-questions

Party-owned YouTube channels or podcasts provide protected spaces where political messages can be broadcast without critical questioning. In traditional TV or radio formats, it would be the role of moderators or journalists to follow up with questions.

4. Unlimited Reach through Algorithms

Unlike the limited broadcast area of a radio frequency, digital formats can be spread worldwide. Recommendation algorithms further amplify party-aligned content – without additional costs or controls. If the political views of the broadcaster align with the platform owner's, the reach is increased– just as the example cited earlier clearly shows.

This reveals a spectrum of actions ranging from stricter transparency obligations to innovative forms of digital citizen participation. The more consistently these steps are undertaken, the more the political system can be strengthened against the growing challenges of the digital age – and the better it can protect democratic decision-making from manipulation and disinformation.

What needs to be done?

Legislators and the state media authorities need to examine to what extent the principle of political independence and requirements for balance should also apply to larger, party-affiliated online channels. Such a reform would need to be discussed from a democratic-theoretical perspective to prevent misuse while ensuring legitimate party communication. A transparency requirement should be the minimum (e.g., marking content as “political communication,” similar to advertising). If the strictness of broadcast regulations were applied to digital channels, it would currently result in a ban on YouTube channels and podcasts run by political parties and actors (which is certainly not desirable). However, there is a wide range of possible actions between “doing nothing” and “banning,” which should be discussed considering the current low levels of information and media literacy.³²

2. Ensure Transparency for Party and Election Campaign Financing

<i>Dimension:</i>	Regulatory Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal
<i>Policy Field:</i>	Interior (Party Law)
<i>Implementability:</i>	Medium-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	Medium
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

32) ebd.

While there are regulations in Germany regarding the disclosure of party donations and sponsorships, they are often inadequate. For example, large donations below certain thresholds remain invisible to the public, and there are ongoing discussions about dark channels (e.g., party-affiliated associations) through which funds can flow secretly. These funding gaps allow economic elites or interest groups to buy or influence political power – a point of attack for manipulation and disinformation ahead of elections. Furthermore, lobbying groups bypass party donations through large public affairs teams that can influence political processes independently of elections.³³ For the democratic idea of will formation, this is at least counterproductive.

What needs to be done?

Recommended actions can be found, for example, at Transparency International³⁴ and Lobbycontrol³⁵. An overview of party donations in Germany is provided by the website [parteispenden.info](https://www.parteispenden.info)³⁶.

3. Tighten Regulations for Digital Election Campaigns

<i>Dimension:</i>	Regulatory Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and European
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Values & Transparency (Věra Jourová)
<i>Implementability:</i>	Short-term (Law comes into effect from October 2025)
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

Political communication is increasingly taking place online – from micro-targeting on social media platforms to disinformation campaigns. Particularly, micro-targeting enables a completely new form of direct communication, as target groups can be precisely defined and reached. While billboards, flyers, or TV advertisements are heavily regulated in Germany, there are currently no equivalent transparency and disclosure obligations for digital election advertising, even though an EU regulation on the transparency of political ads will come into effect in October.³⁷ Therefore, parties or external actors can run hidden social media campaigns, targeting voters with half-truths or emotional appeals without the public being aware of it. This opens the door to disinformation and manipulative strategies. Ad Libraries (so-called ad libraries) from social media platforms were initial steps toward greater transparency but remain confusing.

33) A whole chapter on the influence of lobbying groups on political processes is devoted, among others, to: Colin Crouch (2004): *Postdemokratie*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

34) Overview of party donations on Transparency International, here in an interview with Deutschlandfunk (16.02.2025): www.deutschlandfunk.de/korruption-parteispenden-deutschland-transparency-international-100.html

35) Overview of party donations on LobbyControl: www.lobbycontrol.de/schlagwort/parteispenden/

36) [parteispenden.info](https://www.parteispenden.info): www.parteispenden.info

37) EU regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202400900

What needs to be done?

In this case, it will need to be assessed how effective the EU directive will be.³⁸

4. Provide More Opportunities for Citizen Participation and Influence, and Promote European Sovereignty

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural, Regulatory, and Structural Dimensions
<i>Political Level:</i>	Municipalities, Federal, States, Europe
<i>Policy Area:</i>	At least Interior, Democracy Promotion, Infrastructure + Security
<i>Implementability:</i>	Medium to Long-Term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

While citizens theoretically have participation rights (elections, citizen petitions, etc.), many people feel excluded from political decisions – and they are. Research by *Die Zeit* shows that around 23 million people (27.5%) in Germany are excluded from the Bundestag election process.³⁹ This includes not only minors but also EU citizens and foreigners without a German passport, who have been residing in Germany for over 30 years or longer, paying taxes, and often being tolerated.

This can lead to political disillusionment or open mistrust towards democratic institutions. Especially in times of polarization, parts of the population are more easily swayed by radical or populist narratives if they believe that “traditional” politics does not address their concerns.

What needs to be done?

Promotion of Independent Digital Spaces

In addition to regulating party-owned channels, the state could, similar to public broadcasting, promote independent (possibly public-law) digital platforms that facilitate democratic debates. The dependency on predominantly U.S.-based platforms (Meta with Instagram, Threads, Facebook, and WhatsApp, Alphabet with Google Search and YouTube, X-Corp with X, ByteDance with TikTok, etc.) **remains one of the core issues of digital public spaces**. Not least, the security aspect should also be considered, as digital platforms frequently become entry points for information operations as part of hybrid warfare. Being able to set its own rules and standards for verification and security, without having to rely on U.S. platforms, is a significant advantage for European platform sovereignty in the current geopolitical landscape. **Interoperability or open standards** could be an important intermediate step until the development of independent platforms. This is

38) An assessment of this is provided by the Organisation European Partnership for Democracy (2024): *Political Agreement on the Regulation on the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising*. <https://epd.eu/news-publications/reaction-to-the-political-agreement-on-the-regulation-on-the-transparency-and-targeting-of-political-advertising/>

39) *Die Zeit* (26.02.2025): *Wahlbeteiligung bei der Bundestagswahl: Die Millionen, die nicht mitbestimmen*. www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-02/wahlbeteiligung-bundestagswahl-wahlberechtigte-nichtwaehler-daten

already happening to some extent with Mastodon, Fediverse, and parts of Bluesky, but the legislator is again placing obstacles in the way (e.g., recognition of nonprofit status).⁴⁰

Opportunities for True Participation in Political Will Formation

Digital and analog citizen councils or online participation processes are initial approaches to strengthening participatory democracy. For example, in 2024, the Bertelsmann Foundation, on behalf of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, conducted an exemplary citizen council on the topic of disinformation, called the “Forum gegen Fakes”, and presented 15 proposals developed by the citizens to Federal Minister Nancy Faeser.⁴¹ While 120 participants from across Germany attended the analog event, over 400,000 people participated in the online part of the process and submitted over 3,300 proposals on how to combat disinformation. From the author’s perspective, the media attention surrounding this unique process unfortunately left much to be desired.⁴²

5. Strengthening Information and News Competence – Within Politics and Society

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Regulatory Dimensions
<i>Political Level:</i>	Municipalities, Federal, and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Education, Culture, Media & Interior
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium-Term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Society

What needs to be done?

It is also the task of political actors to significantly strengthen information and news competence within political education – including within their own ranks. So far, it is mainly the AfD and Die Linke that communicate effectively and widely on social networks, while the efforts of other parties come across as “cringe,” as the target audience would describe it.⁴³

In addition, these competencies need to be strengthened within the general population. The only study to date, which has measured competencies representatively within the population, shows a significant backlog: Nearly half of the population has little to no information and news competence

40) Markus Reuter via Netzpolitik (2024): *Gemeinwohlorientierte Digitalisierung braucht Unterstützung statt Steine im Weg*. <https://netzpolitik.org/2024/mastodon-gemeinwohlorientierte-digitalisierung-braucht-unterstuetzung-statt-steine-im-weg>

41) „Forum gegen Fakes“ by the Bertelsmann Foundation (2024): www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/themen/aktuelle-meldungen/2024/september/buergerrat-forum-gegen-fakes-uebergibt-gutachten-an-bundesinnenministerin-faeser

42) This citizens’ council has received no media coverage in the major outlets. The author searched various outlets (Tagesschau, Zeit, Spiegel, etc.) on Google and found nothing.

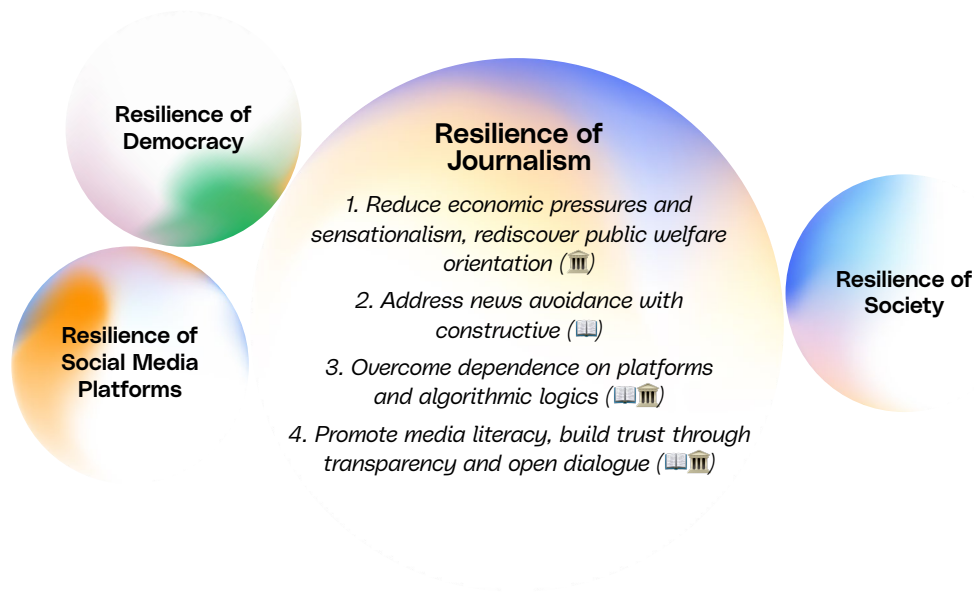
43) Olaf Scholz’ Aktentasche bei TikTok (2024): <https://www.tiktok.com/@teambundeskanzler/video/7356168303917731105?lang=de-DE>

when dealing with digital media.⁴⁴ More details are provided in Chapter III.IV on the resilience factor “Resilience of Society” ([page 40](#)).

Conclusion: Resilience Factor “Resilience of Democracy”

This outlines a spectrum of actions ranging from stricter transparency requirements to innovative forms of (digital) citizen participation – while also considering the necessary competencies for these actions. The more consistently these steps are pursued, the more likely the political system will be strengthened against the growing challenges of the digital age – and the better it will be at protecting democratic decision-making from manipulation and disinformation.

44) Anna-Katharina Meßmer, Alexander Sänglerlaub & Leonie Schulz (2021): “Quelle: Internet”? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resiliente-gesellschaft/quelle-internet/Oe483ac499-1728053243/snv_quelleinternet_messmersaengerlaubschulz_210319.pdf



Recommended Actions to Enhance the Resilience of Democracy

📖 Cultural Dimension

🏛️ Structural Dimension

⚖️ Regulatory Dimension

🔧 Technical Dimension

III.II Resilience of Journalism

A free, independent, and pluralistic journalism is considered an essential pillar of any democracy. Journalists take on a crucial role in holding politics and the economy accountable, uncovering wrongdoings, and informing the public. Especially in the digital age, where false information and manipulated narratives can thrive, high-quality journalism is more important than ever. It acts as an “immune system” for political decision-making.

However, media houses, editorial offices, and individual journalists face enormous challenges that threaten the Resilience of Journalism. Three primary factors are particularly problematic: a lack of trust, high levels of news avoidance, and the economic instability many editorial offices face.⁴⁵ The lack of trust in “journalism”⁴⁶ is also due to actors within the ecosystem who spread disinformation themselves rather than counteracting it⁴⁷, and whose ownership structures are as problematic as those of X (e.g., *BILD* or *Die Welt* of the Springer publishing group).⁴⁸

45) Digital News Report (Oxford Institute & Reuters) (2024): https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

46) *ibid.*; Few professional groups, alongside politicians, are trusted less than journalists. See also Hans Rosling. (2018): *Factfulness*. London: Sceptre.

47) Alexander Sänglerlaub, Wolf-Dieter Rühl, Miriam Meier (2018): *Fakten statt Fakes. Verursacher, Verbreitungswege und Wirkungen von Fake News im Bundestagswahlkampf 2017*. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resilienz-gegen-desinformation/studie-fakten-statt-fakes/cb8a17768a-1728053237/2018-03-26_fakten_statt_fakes.pdf

48) NDR (04.05.2023): *Springer-Chef: Berichte auf Bestellung?* www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/panorama/archiv/2023/Springer-Chef-Berichte-auf-Bestellung.doepfner130.html The discussion about the guest article by Elon Musk published in *Die Welt* in December 2024, which led to the resignation of the newspaper’s head of opinion, is also relevant here, see ZDF heute (28.12.2024): *Meinungschefin kündigt: Musk-Gastbeitrag in der “Welt” sorgt für Streit*. www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/elon-musk-gastbeitrag-welt-100.html

The guiding question for the Resilience of Journalism is, on the one hand, how susceptible it is to spreading disinformation unfiltered and whether it is able to produce high-quality and trustworthy information that addresses the informational needs and topics of the people – and on what financial basis this should occur.

1. Economic Constraints and the Boulevardization: Reducing Them and Rediscovering a Focus on the Common Good

<i>Dimension:</i>	(primarily) structural dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Media, Economy
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium- to long-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

Many media companies are in an economic crisis directly related to the trust crisis described above: declining advertising revenues, falling circulation, and intense competition with online platforms. As a result, editorial teams often seek clickbait headlines and quickly viral content to secure reach. The tendency toward boulevardization and emotionalization is increasing⁴⁹, while thoroughly researched, independent quality journalism is comparably harder to finance. However, this may just be the fallacy of an industry that focuses too much on short-term numbers and does not factor in the trust crisis as a medium- to long-term consequence of this development in its economic considerations. Media scholar Bernhard Pörksen from Tübingen University formulates the consequences as follows: “Public attention is stuck in the wrong time sphere in the face of the looming climate catastrophe (...). We react in a short-term mode to dangers that require a long-term mode.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, economic pressure leads to a devaluation of investigative research and the rise of superficial scandals – which in turn undermines the credibility of journalism – creating a vicious circle.⁵¹ Above all, these mechanisms ensure that journalism falls into the hands of propagandists, as described in detail in the [introduction to this paper](#) (Whitney Phillips’ “King Midas Effect”).

Another consequence of the economic crisis, and extremely dangerous for the functioning of the public good, are the so-called “news deserts.” These are regions where the number of newspapers has decreased so significantly that there is no longer a supply of information at the local

49) Bakker, Piet (2012): *Aggregation, Content Farms and Huffinization*. In: Journalism Practice, 6(5-6), 627 – 637.

50) Bernhard Pörksen im Deutschlandradio (26.10.2021): *Neue Zeithorizonte – Neue Perspektiven*. www.deutschlandradio.de/gastbeitrag-bernhard-poerksen-102.html

51) Recommended: Digital News Report (Oxford Institute & Reuters) (2024): https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

level (a phenomenon primarily in the United States).⁵² In Germany, especially the number of single-newspaper districts has increased dramatically in the last 30 years, as shown by the “Desert Radar” of the Hamburg Media School⁵³. Although there are still no “deserts” in Germany, the “desertification” is increasing. The massive negative effects of news deserts on democracy have already been sufficiently researched in other countries (mainly in the United States).⁵⁴

What needs to be done?

Recommendations for action can be found in the study referenced above. In the UK, for example, the issue of “news deserts” is being addressed through increased cooperation between public broadcasting (BBC) and local newspapers.⁵⁵ The New York Times, on the other hand, is working to better understand the needs of its audience⁵⁶ by focusing on what Dimitry Shishkin first described as “User Needs.” This refers to the informational needs of the audience. The study describes that people not only want to stay “up-to-date” with news but also have additional user needs such as “Keep me on trend,” “Give me perspective,” “Educate me,” “Divert me,” and “Inspire me”.⁵⁷ The fact that this knowledge has been “lost” in journalism, which has been recognized in communication science under the “Uses & Gratification Approach” paradigm since the 1970s, speaks volumes about the lack of communication between journalism and science, as well as the media’s blindness to the common good orientation and thus its own audience.

2. Addressing News Avoidance Through Constructive Journalism

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Media, Economy
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium to Long-Term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Society

The **User Needs** described above are particularly addressed by **Constructive Journalism** – a Scandinavian method of reporting that is now widely used internationally, from the New York Times to The Guardian to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. The prevailing journalistic paradigm, which still dominates in Germany, disproportionately emphasizes conflicts, scandals, and

52) Kevin T. Greene et al in Nature (13.11.2024): *An evaluation of online information acquisition in US news deserts.* <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-77303-y>

53) Hamburg Media School (2024): *Wüstenradar – First nationwide study on the decline of newspapers* <https://rudolf-augstein-stiftung.de/aktuelles/msh-studie-wuestenradar>

54) *ibid.*

55) Deutschlandfunk (08.05.2019): *Lokaljournalismus in Großbritannien – BBC bezahlt Zeitungsreporter.* www.deutschlandfunk.de/lokaljournalismus-in-grossbritannien-bbc-bezahlt-100.html

56) SmartOcto: <https://smartocto.com/research/userneeds>

57) *ibid.*

grievances. This negativity is one of the strongest reasons people actively avoid news.⁵⁸ While critical reporting is essential, there is often a lack of a constructive approach that highlights solutions, examples of success, or potential improvements in local communities. The result is that traditional journalism is increasingly losing its audience. Constructive Journalism is not only widespread in Scandinavia but also highly successful.⁵⁹ Helmut Schmidt, former Chancellor of Germany and co-editor of *Die Zeit*, wrote in the foreword of Ulrik Haagerup's book *Constructive News*:

“Media democracies do not produce leaders. They produce populists. A change in the way the press operates and a stronger focus on playing a more constructive role in our society is welcome.”⁶⁰

The lack of financial resources, the absence of prominent German flagship projects, the fear of being accused of “activism,” and ingrained routines have so far hindered this cultural shift in Germany.⁶¹ Nevertheless, some prominent media outlets are more dedicated to this approach than others (e.g., *Die Zeit*, *Tagesthemen*) – but still lag far behind their Scandinavian counterparts.

What needs to be done?

Support programs that enable constructive reporting, along with a cultural shift within public service media editorial offices, are necessary to reshape journalism in a way that builds public trust, reduces active news avoidance, and encourages people to pay for journalism. In countries like Norway, Denmark, or Sweden, where Constructive Journalism is much more widespread, the willingness to pay for journalism is also significantly higher (for example, in Norway, 40% of the population pays for online news, whereas in Germany, it is only 13%).⁶² Moreover, Constructive Journalism also stands for a reporting approach that offers broader perspectives, which relates both to diversity within editorial teams and the diverse reporting that results from this. In Germany, the representation of the population in the leadership of German media houses is still in need of significant improvement.⁶³

58) Reuters Institute & University of Oxford (2024): *Digital News Report 2024*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

59) Ulrik Haagerup (2017): *Constructive News*. Århus: Aarhus University Press.

60) *ibid.*

61) We focus extensively on the topic of “Constructive Journalism” at *futur eins*: <https://futureins.org/schwerpunkte/konstruktiver-journalismus>

62) Reuters Institute & University of Oxford (2024): *Digital News Report 2024*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

63) Neue Deutsche Medienmacher (2020): *Viel Wille. Kein Weg. Diversity im deutschen Journalismus*. <https://neuemedienmacher.de/zahlen-fakten/diversitaet-im-journalismus/>

3. Overcoming Dependence on Platforms and Algorithmic Logic

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Structural Dimensions
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Media, Economy
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Mid-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Social Media Platforms, Resilience of Society

Whether through Facebook, YouTube, or X: Just like politicians and political parties, many editorial teams primarily reach their audience through digital platforms, whose algorithmic logic they cannot control. Content deemed “relevant” by the platform algorithms – often emotional, confrontational, or sensational – is prioritized, while serious background reports can easily disappear beneath the surface of public attention. Additionally, editorial teams become dependent on click counts and platform-driven reach, making long-term investigations and in-depth reporting more difficult. Interestingly, the logic of algorithms and tabloid journalism are not so different because they are both driven by the same attention dynamics (such as emotionalization, often through fear or anger).

What needs to be done?

For journalism, the development of independent platforms (as outlined in [Chapter III.I & III.III](#)) should be a key focus. Furthermore, payment and revenue models, as well as corresponding platforms (“Spotify for Journalism”), still remain largely undeveloped, failing to meet the habits of users. As a result, more and more users get stuck behind the paywalls of news websites, with the willingness to pay for content remaining low in Germany (as mentioned above). In politics, funding programs could be established to ensure equitable access to information based on the public good.

4. Contributing to Information and News Literacy and Building Trust Through Transparency and Dialogue with the Audience

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Structural Dimensions
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Media, Economy
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Mid-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Society

The promotion of information and news literacy is increasingly becoming a focus of organizations within journalism and civil society, which play an important role (e.g., Journalismus macht Schule, Lie Detectors, Correctiv, SPREUWEIZEN, UseTheNews, Bucerius Lab at Zeit Stiftung Bucerius, BR Faktenfuchs, Mimikama, etc.). However, the efforts of individual figures, such as Ingo Zamperoni visiting an 8th-grade class for an hour, cannot replace comprehensive media education throughout a person’s entire educational journey.

What needs to be done?

Ultimately, journalism can only unfold its effect of immunizing against disinformation if users possess basic information and news literacy. This competence can be systematically promoted through educational opportunities in schools, adult education centers, and universities, but also beyond that via the media's own channels (especially in public broadcasting). Journalism can not only support the task of conveying these competencies itself, especially as state structures continue to fail widely in this area. It can also help by placing fewer additional obstacles in the path of users in digital public spheres – by checking sources, avoiding clickbait, and better distinguishing between advertising, commentary, and independent reporting through clear labeling.

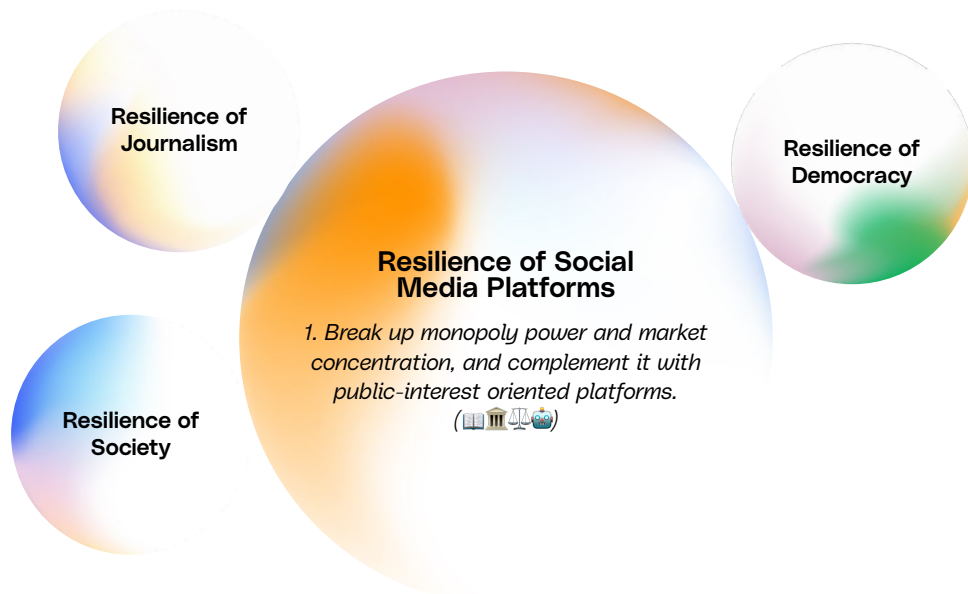
Moreover, the more transparently media professionals disclose their research processes, sources, and methods, the more easily readers can understand how a story comes into being. Such openness, referred to in English as “show-your-work,” can contribute to greater trust in the media.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the simple and clear labeling of commentary, opinion pieces, and sponsored content is a basic part of journalistic craft – yet it is often neglected in the digital world.⁶⁵ If it is also explained why certain topics are selected or how fact-checks are conducted, a new form of dialogue with the audience emerges. This is similar to what crowdsourcing or digital and analog dialogue formats between journalism and the public make possible – helping society and journalism to reconnect.

Conclusion: Resilience factor “Resilience of Journalism”

Resilient journalism must be economically viable, more technologically independent, and credible. In addition, a cultural shift is needed, in which methods of constructive journalism are more strongly integrated into reporting. Only then can journalism effectively fulfill its role as the Fourth Estate, combat misinformation in a targeted way, and regain the trust of society. In doing so, journalists must always bear in mind that their work itself is the “trophy” that populists and other actors seek to capture for their agenda. The goal must be to actively shape the agenda together with the public, rather than being driven by third parties. Ultimately, this is an indispensable building block for protecting the entire information ecosystem from manipulation and disinformation.

64) see as reference: Trusting News Project: <https://trustingnews.org/>

65) Anna-Katharina Meßmer, Alexander Sänglerlaub & Leonie Schulz (2021): “Quelle: Internet”? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resiliente-gesellschaft/quelle-internet/Oe483ac499-1728053243/snv_quelleinternet_messmersaengerlaubschulz_210319.pdf



Recommended Actions to Enhance the Resilience of Democracy

Cultural Dimension

Structural Dimension

Regulatory Dimension

Technical Dimension

III.III Resilience of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms are no longer merely places for exchange: they have become important gatekeepers of public communication, determining through their algorithmic logics which topics and actors receive attention. Whether Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, or X, as well as Twitch, Discord, or Reddit – their business models, handling of disinformation, and internal moderation procedures significantly shape how resilient or vulnerable a society remains to attempts at manipulation. Today, users can no longer agree on whether social media platforms are still an enhancement to democratic discourse. Increasingly, people are visibly withdrawing from these spaces due to the overwhelming prevalence of disinformation and hate.⁶⁶

The key questions for social media platforms are: 1) How can blueprints for digital spaces be developed and enabled that are capable of creating a real environment for exchange, participation, and information? 2) How can the seeds of lies, propaganda, and hate be reduced in the current digital echo chambers?

66) Leonie Schulz & Alexander Sangerlaub fur reset tech (2021): *Hate, Disinformation and the Culture of Debate in the Federal Election Campaign*. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resilienz-gegen-desinformation/debatten-kultur-in-deutschland-btw21/e92e93f86a-1728053234/211112_reset_pollytix_bundestagswahl_en.pdf

1. Breaking up Monopolies and Market Concentration, and Supplementing with Public-Welfare-Oriented Platforms

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural, Structural, Regulatory, and Technical Dimensions
<i>Political Level:</i>	Europe, Federal and State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Cross-sectional
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium to Long-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Society

Although there are many platforms, a few large corporations (Meta, Alphabet, X-Corp, and Byte-Dance) control the lion's share of user data and advertising revenue. Market concentration not only strengthens their economic power but also their editorial power: A handful of platform operators decide, in case of doubt, which content appears to billions of people and which is deleted or algorithmically rendered invisible. These “digital oligarchies” threaten the diversity of debates. At the latest, since the reinstatement of Donald Trump in January 2025, it should be clear to everyone what power Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg can wield and the irresponsibility they exhibit towards democratic public spheres ([see Chapter I](#)).

What is missing is successful alternatives to these private-sector models, which are oriented towards the public good. However, this will not be possible without interoperability, as the platform effects (i.e., keeping people on the platforms) are too strong.

What needs to be done?

A complex multi-step approach is required here. The EU has embarked on two laws aimed at curbing the power of platforms. The **Digital Markets Act** (DMA) and the **Digital Services Act** (DSA) are first steps in the right direction. However, the current geopolitical challenges show that, for the sake of consistent European sovereignty and from security policy considerations, these steps need to be pursued more quickly and more decisively:

Promote Interoperability and Reduce Lock-in Effects

Policy could ensure through legally anchored **open standards** that platforms are interoperable and that users can switch between different services without losing their networks and content. Just as the email protocol or telephone network connects⁶⁷ different providers, social networks could operate in the future according to the same principles. This would revitalize competition and limit the power of a few digital giants.

Support for Publicly-Oriented Platforms

To reduce monopolistic market power, **competition law tools** (e.g., merger controls or breakups) should be consistently applied. In Europe, the Digital Markets Act (DMA) already imposes some rules on platform gatekeepers, such as the obligation to open certain data

67 At the beginning of the telecommunications age, for example, you couldn't make calls from D1 to D2.

access. However, without decisive implementation and clear sanctions, loopholes for the “digital oligarchs” may arise.

Leverage Network Effects through Decentralization

Approaches like Mastodon or the Fediverse demonstrate that decentralized architectures can work. Government funding programs or discounted server capacities could help professionalize such projects and make them more attractive to a broader user base in the long term. Targeted support for **local, linguistically, or thematically focused nodes** could facilitate community building – an approach followed by New Public, for example.⁶⁸

Trustworthy Moderation and Algorithm Transparency

Even publicly-oriented platforms need **clear moderation rules** and understandable algorithms. When messages are algorithmically prioritized, the criteria for doing so must be disclosed. Automated detection of hate or disinformation campaigns should be combined with human review to reduce errors.

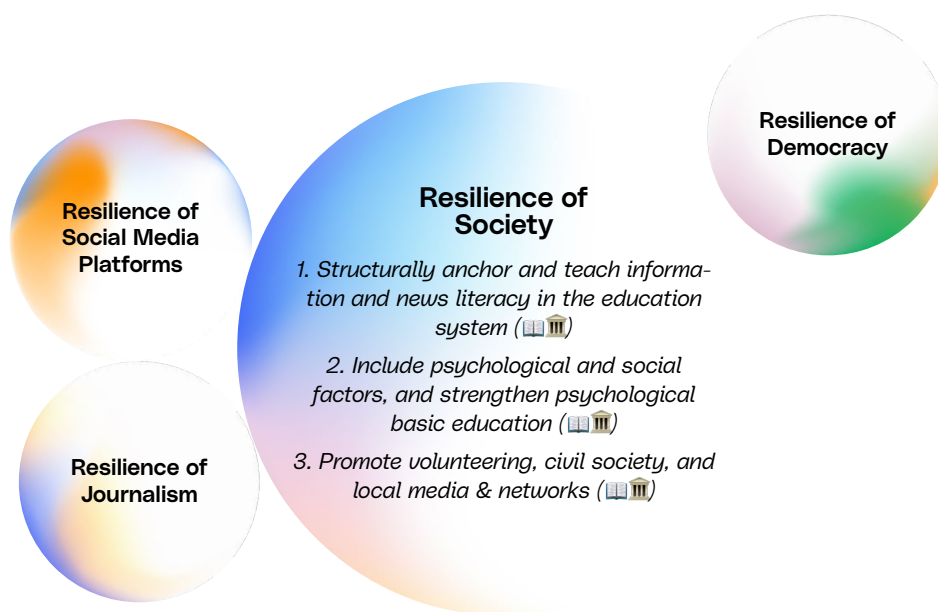
Promote Awareness in Politics and Society

The power of a few corporations over digital discourse is often underestimated. A **comprehensive political approach** – ranging from regulation to funding, as well as educational and awareness initiatives – can highlight that alternatives to the “mainstream platform” exist. Only when citizens are aware of how platform structures function and where their weaknesses lie, can they actively choose or demand other options.

Conclusion Resilience Factor “Social Media Platforms”

Resilient social media platforms would be those that embed transparency, diverse participation, and democratic control as core principles, without imposing tight restrictions on free speech. In practice, however, a handful of digital oligarchs dominate, with their algorithms and moderation policies remaining largely opaque. Anyone aiming to create an environment that curbs disinformation and hate speech while promoting open discourse can hardly continue relying on the platforms of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, and must instead support independent, European, ad-free alternatives. Otherwise, the platforms will not become a crucial, strong pillar of a resilient information ecosystem.

68) New Public: <https://newpublic.org/>



Recommended Actions to Enhance the Resilience of Democracy

📖 Cultural Dimension

🏛️ Structural Dimension

⚖️ Regulatory Dimension

🔧 Technical Dimension

III.IV Resilience of Society

A democracy relies not only on strong institutions and independent media but primarily on its citizens who actively shape the common good. Maturity, participation, and critical thinking are crucial factors in protecting democratic processes from misinformation and manipulation. However, the modern information society presents new challenges: While digitalization has increased opportunities for self-expression and participation, it has also multiplied the risk fields (misinformation, hate speech, social media outrage waves, echo chambers, propaganda, and more). Therefore, entirely new competencies are needed to navigate the flood of information without drowning in it.⁶⁹ The only study on the population's information and news literacy conducted in Germany (2021) shows alarming results, with notably low competency scores.⁷⁰

The guiding questions for the Resilience of Society (in the sense of responsible citizens) are: 1) How can information and news literacy be increased so that people are empowered to navigate through the flood of information? 2) How can we democratize our public spheres so that they enable genuine participation, from topic setting to political decisions?

69) Anna-Katharina Meßmer & Alexander Sänglerlaub (2020): *Verstehen, was ist. Auf dem Weg in die nachrichtenkompetente Gesellschaft*. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/resiliente-gesellschaft/quelle-internet/91ae3d8769-1728053243/2020-06-messmersaengerlaub-verstehen-was-ist_snv.pdf

70) Anna-Katharina Meßmer, Alexander Sänglerlaub & Leonie Schulz (2021): *“Quelle: Internet”? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test*. https://futureins.org/media/pages/schwerpunkte/nachrichtenkompetenz/quelle-internet/0cbb5868f8-1728053243/snv_quelleinternet_messmersaengerlaubschulz_210319.pdf

1. Anchor and Convey Information and News Literacy Structurally in the Education System

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Structural Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and primarily State
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Education, Media, Culture
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Medium-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms

A central problem is that many people are inadequately equipped to navigate the digital space. Complex issues are often greatly simplified or emotionally charged, while serious fact-checking is barely noticed next to sensational headlines. Information and news literacy (i.e., the democratically relevant part of media literacy) includes the ability to verify sources, recognize misinformation, distinguish between reporting and opinion, and understand basic technical mechanisms (e.g., algorithms). Without this competence, citizens quickly fall into digital echo chambers or become victims of targeted propaganda.

However, the efforts of the federal states so far have been very hesitant in anchoring what is likely the most important competency of the 21st century in the education system. The majority of corresponding initiatives have so far come from civil society ([see Chapter III.II 4.](#)).

What needs to be done?

Although this competency is recognized as “important” in many curricula and is mentioned under the term “media education” or “digital education,” it often remains superficial and is treated as a mere cross-sectional task. In practice, this leads to teachers – who are already heavily burdened – being asked to take on additional responsibilities for which they neither have specialized training nor sufficient time resources. This is also reflected in the five years of experience from our work at Futur Eins in schools.

To meet the growing demand, there needs to be a **structural and binding anchoring** of information and news literacy in the school system. Either as an independent subject or as a fixed part of the (already existing) subject of Politics/Social Studies. What is important is that these contents are not taught in isolation or on a project basis, but rather permanently and with clear learning objectives.

Why an independent subject or a clearly regulated component?

1. **Expertise and Continuity:** Only when teachers receive appropriate subject-specific training and enough instructional hours are available can the teaching of research methods, source analysis, and ethical questions around the information ecosystem be consistently implemented.

2. **Reduction of Overload:** Teachers need dedicated space in their curriculum to prepare for this topic in a focused manner. If information and news literacy is simply added “on top,” it risks leading to overburdening and superficial treatment.
3. **Sustainable Impact:** Children and young people who systematically learn over several school years to classify media content, verify sources, and recognize disinformation develop a solid foundation to navigate the digital public sphere with confidence.⁷¹

Since disinformation, social media dynamics, and algorithmic filter bubbles have long been part of everyday life, lawmakers should not rely on voluntariness in this matter. A **nationwide initiative** (possibly within the framework of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs as a new version of the Digital Pact for Schools) could ensure that all states – while preserving their respective autonomy in the education system – define and implement common minimum standards for news and information literacy. This would not only enable the education system to respond to the challenges of the digital world, but also proactively promote democratic resilience.

Moreover, information and news literacy must also be taught outside of schools: in adult education centers, universities, through employer initiatives, in public service broadcasting, etc.

2. Incorporating Psychological and Social Factors and Strengthening Psychological Basic Education

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Structural Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and mainly states
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Education, Health
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Mid-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Journalism, Resilience of Social Media Platforms

Studies show that people are more susceptible to conspiracy narratives and populism during times of high uncertainty (e.g., pandemics, war fears, social upheavals).⁷² For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an accompanying “infodemic” during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷³ When fears and frustrations are skilfully manipulated via digital channels, a sense of being overwhelmed quickly arises. Resilience here also means that citizens learn how to deal with the information overload and emotionally charged topics, rather than quickly resorting to simplistic scapegoating. Social factors such as loneliness, political frustration, or economic inequality also increase the risk that users will drift into radical thinking and groups.⁷⁴

71) Finland is particularly ahead of other countries in this regard. How the Finns integrate media education holistically can be read on the pages of the National Audiovisual Institute (KAVI): <https://kavi.fi/en/>

72) Jan-Willem van Prooijen & Karen M. Douglas (2017, 2018): *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. Abingdon: Routledge.

73) Infodemic on the pages of WHO: www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1

74) See footnote 72.

The state could, for example, use targeted funding programs to train teachers, social workers, and media professionals to explain the psychological dynamics behind conspiracy and fear narratives and to counteract them preventively. In collaboration with civil society initiatives (e.g., counseling centers for digital violence), early intervention could be established before people drift into toxic online communities or extremist groups. Ultimately, it is necessary to firmly integrate psychological and social factors – from loneliness to everyday frustration to traumatic experiences – into all strategies for promoting democracy and media education, rather than merely treating them as a marginal issue.

3. Promoting Volunteering, Civil Society, and Local Media & Networks

<i>Dimension:</i>	Cultural and Structural Dimension
<i>Political Level:</i>	Federal and mainly states
<i>Policy Area:</i>	Democracy Promotion, Internal Affairs, Local Affairs, Media, Culture
<i>Feasibility:</i>	Mid-term
<i>Urgency:</i>	High
<i>Impact on:</i>	Resilience of Democracy, Resilience of Journalism

Resilient citizens are not only news-literate but also more locally rooted and socially integrated. Whether through sports clubs, cultural initiatives, or neighborhood projects, civil society networks can help strengthen community values and counteract disinformation. Where people know and trust each other, “fake news” and manipulative campaigns are less effective. At the same time, these networks offer spaces to exchange experiences and knowledge and to foster political engagement. The rural structural change has, over recent decades, reduced the democratic community. However, democracy thrives primarily from its visibility and opportunities to shape things locally.

What needs to be done?

First, politics should, ideally through non-governmental structures, support local media and citizen journalism more strongly. One model could be a basic funding system for local reporting, where the goal is not profit maximization but providing independent information. Countries such as Luxembourg or Canada already practice funding positions for local journalism to preserve democratic debates locally. Second, further education and mentoring programs can help engaged citizens gain the tools for “hyper-local” reporting – such as neighborhood blogs or club newsletters, which serve as low-barrier formats at the local level.

Such combined support for basic local journalism and citizen journalism helps people better network locally, exchange information, and work together on solutions. Whether through sports clubs, cultural initiatives, or neighborhood projects, trust thrives in these small communities, making it much harder for disinformation to spread. At the same time, citizens, through active media work or participation in local editorial teams, experience how democracy can be concretely shaped – and how important reliable information is for the common good.

Conclusion Factor “Resilience of Society”

Democracy cannot function without an active community and news-literate citizens. A resilient society does not passively consume information but reflects upon and evaluates it. It actively participates in democratic processes – both online and offline – thereby strengthening the societal immune system against disinformation and extremism. Ultimately, a vibrant democracy depends on people who engage, critically question, and take social responsibility. Only with an engaged, news-literate, and locally rooted citizenry can the entire information ecosystem be stabilized against manipulation and fearmongering. Politics, media, and social media platforms are called upon to create the necessary frameworks for this.



IV.

Conclusion: From the “Golden Goblet” to a Functional Public Sphere

“Democracy is not a state, democracy is a process.”
(Helmut Schmidt)

The example outlined at the beginning – Elon Musk inviting Alice Weidel to his platform and dominating the public debate for days – clearly illustrates what is increasingly at the heart of modern democracy: **attention as a political commodity**. Whoever controls it shapes the discourse and shifts the boundaries of what we perceive as true, important, or negotiable.

However, this episode is merely a symptom of deeper challenges. The information ecosystem in democracies has become unbalanced: whether it is billionaires who buy political influence and control over platforms; political, digital communication and advertising without clear rules; media houses, under economic pressure, resorting to clickbait instead of listening to the needs of their readers; or social media platforms, which maintain their algorithms as secret black boxes and amplify propaganda rather than curbing it. And all of this impacts citizens, who are often inadequately trained to distinguish between appearance and reality in the digital noise.

Instead of getting lost in individual issues (disinformation, social media regulation, future models for journalism, etc.), a **holistic approach** is needed: **public sphere policy**.

At its core, public sphere policy means actively promoting and protecting functioning public spheres – from broadcasting to social media to the local spaces where citizens shape their everyday lives. The fragile thread holding democracy together is the shared exchange of problems, goals, and values. If this thread breaks because disinformation, hate speech, or plutocratic oligarchies tear it apart, democracy itself begins to falter.

To create the public sphere that a resilient democracy needs, four factors are crucial:

1. **Democracy:** Structures and rules must be designed to ensure that power remains transparent and citizens have real influence.
2. **Journalism:** It needs economic and cultural strengthening to be able to report factually and constructively – and must not sacrifice its role as the Fourth Estate to the pull of tabloids or clickbait.
3. **Social Media Platforms:** They must move away from pure profit and algorithmic logic and instead prioritize transparency, the common good, and interoperability.
4. **Society:** A critical, news-literate citizenry that strengthens local communities and constructively supports democratic processes is the foundation of any functioning democracy.

These **four resilience factors** are linked in a shared vision: an information society that not only wards off crises (bounce back) but also continuously learns through smart innovations and learning processes (bounce forward). It recognizes the immense danger potential of monopolies, disinformation, and political populism – and, with public sphere policy, lays the foundation for ensuring that everyone can participate in the democratic decision-making process.

Whether we succeed in turning the “turning point” into a shift toward a resilient information society will largely determine the future of our democracies. Those who remain passive now risk allowing a few super-rich individuals or loud populists to continue winning the “golden trophy of attention”. On the other hand, those who have the courage to engage in public sphere policy lay the groundwork for a strong, pluralistic, and sovereign Europe where transparency, participation, and the common good are not just buzzwords, but lived realities.



Annex

About the Author

Alexander Sänglerlaub supports the betterplace lab as an external consultant as part of the *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society*, and in this capacity, he authored this paper.

He is the Minister of Future and founder of [futur eins](#), focusing holistically on digital public spheres and the question of how to achieve the utopia of an informed society.

This question shapes the themes he works on: from 2017 to 2021, he contributed to building the “Strengthening Digital Public Sphere” division at the Berlin think tank [Stiftung Neue Verantwortung](#) (now Interface), where he led projects on [desinformation](#) (“Fake News”), [fact-checking](#) and [digital information and news literacy](#). For the “Source: Internet?”, he was awarded the [Hans-Bausch Media Prize](#) of SWR and the University of Tübingen in 2022, together with Anna-Katharina Meßmer and Leonie Schulz.

In 2014, he founded the utopian political magazine [Kater Demos](#), where he led editorial and creative work until 2019. The magazine was Germany’s first constructive political magazine. Before that, he was a research associate at the University of Hamburg and the Free University of Berlin in the fields of Journalism & Communication Science. From 2013 to 2014, he worked for the Berlin agency Blumberry, including in the Bundestag election campaign of Angela Merkel.

As the Managing Director of futur eins, he frequently provides strategic guidance to other organizations over extended periods. . From 2024 to 2025, he co-conceptualized the program “Fake Train” with Rezo in collaboration with the [Federal Agency for Civic Education](#). In 2022, he returned to constructive journalism as the “Program Director for the Future of Journalism” for the [Bonn Institute](#). In 2019, he was invited as an expert to the [German Bundestag](#).



Contact

alex@futureins.org
+49 171 206 256 8

About the *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society*

The *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society* creates a strategic thinking space, pools forces, and strengthens civil society in the digital age. Its partners strengthen democratic information ecosystem, e.g. through investigative journalism, the promotion of information and news literacy, accompanying research, or the development of policy recommendations.

The Alliance for the Resilient Information Society is a network of civil society organizations. It was founded in 2024 by betterplace lab together with **CORRECTIV**, **More in Common**, **Publix**, and the **BUCERIUS LAB**. Other current partners include **SPREUWEIZEN**, **futur eins**, and **Das NETTZ**. The alliance creates a strategic thinking space for these organizations to collectively work towards a resilient information society. Current sponsors include the ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS, the Schöpflin Foundation, and the Deutsche Postcode Lotterie.

www.resiliente-informationsgesellschaft.org

About futur eins

As part of the *Alliance for a Resilient Information Society* initiative launched in 2024, futur eins is an Alliance partner.

futur eins is a Think & Do Tank based in Berlin. The organization creates spaces for thought and action for the future of society. Psychological, media, and political resilience are prerequisites for the survival of democracies. We want them to not only survive but to grow and thrive.

www.futureins.org

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Allianz für die resiliente Informationsgesellschaft
c/o betterplace lab
Schlesische Straße 26
10997 Berlin