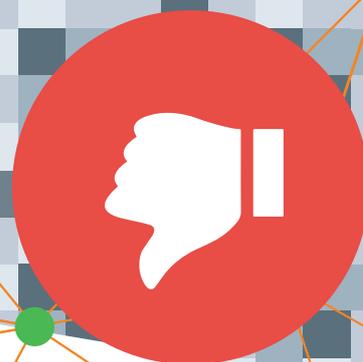


# Where democracy and digitisation meet

Abridgement of the project «Democracy and digitisation»



**Digitalisierung der Schweizer Demokratie – Technologische Revolution trifft auf traditionelles Meinungsbildungssystem**

Urs Bieri, Edward Weber, Nadja Braun Binder, Sébastien Salerno, Tobias Keller, Manuela Kälin

TA-SWISS, Stiftung für Technologiefolgen-Abschätzung (Ed.)  
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**Jugend, politische Partizipation und Digitalisierung – Eine Analyse der digitalen politischen Partizipation junger Menschen in der Schweiz**

Nora Räss, Ira Differding, Jasmin Odermatt

TA-SWISS, Stiftung für Technologiefolgen-Abschätzung (Ed.)  
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**Szenarien zu Demokratie und Digitalisierung – Ein partizipatives Zukunftsexperiment für die Schweiz**

Anna Boos, Ramona Sprenger, Jeannie Schneider, Basil Rogger, René Odermatt, David Simon

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TA-SWISS, the Foundation for Technology Assessment and a centre for excellence of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, deals with the opportunities and risks of new technologies.

<b>Democracy and the digital transformation</b>	4
<b>Democracy and digitisation: a brief overview</b>	10
Opportunities	10
Risks	11
Key recommendations	11
<b>The state v. big tech</b>	13
Rule of thumb: heads or tails?	13
Messages from the digital future. A participatory experiment	14
The gfs.bern study: how are digital media already impacting Swiss democracy?	14
Social media platforms can facilitate opinion formation and participation ...	15
... but they are not transparent, democratic instruments	16
The technological revolution meets traditional opinion formation processes	16
<b>Inclusion v. exclusion</b>	17
The mycorrhiza files: risotto ai funghi porcini	17
DSJ study: fission or fusion	18
Using digital tools to bring young people (back) to politics	19
Clear requirements for digital platforms	19
Young people, political participation and digitisation	20
<b>Conversation v. confrontation</b>	21
Obliviscis: finding happiness in the community	21
Equipping citizens to withstand the destructive powers of 'social' media	22
Digital literacy as the key	22
Conclusion: A digitised democracy is what we make of it	23

# Democracy and the digital transformation

■ **Moritz Leuenberger, Elisabeth Ehrensperger, Bénédicte Bonnet-Eymard**

TA-SWISS examines the impact of new technologies, because technological developments have the potential to change society as much as political visions and convictions. The relationship between the two – technologies and convictions – is synergistic, and the consequences digitisation has for democratic structures and basic societal attitudes are so complex that disentangling cause and effect is almost impossible. Moreover, the fact that neither digitisation nor democracy are clearly defined concepts makes analysing these interrelationships all the more difficult.

Originally, the term digitisation was used for transforming information delivered via traditional channels into digital formats; as such, digitisation must be understood as a technology. But the term is also often equated with social media, the smartphone or the internet.

Our understanding of democracy is also no less complex. It ranges from simple voting procedures to determine a majority or minority opinion on to the constitutional structure of a community that cannot be considered a democracy without rule of law and human rights guarantees.

It would therefore be presumptuous to attempt a purely objective, value-free analysis of how digitisation influences democracy. All work in this area inevitably remains a snapshot taken from a limited point of view. Nevertheless, addressing such issues is the mission of the TA-SWISS Foundation. Democracies, whether representative or direct, are continually evolving with regard to form and content, and the ongoing discussion about how and why this is the case forms part of the democratic process itself.

Our aim is to make the ways in which digitisation affects political processes comprehensible to all those responsible for upholding our democracy: voters, members of parliament and the government, administrative offices, and all individuals and institutions who influence policy and political events. For this reason, TA-SWISS issued a call in 2019 for

an interdisciplinary project that explores the myriad opportunities and dangers facing a democracy that is in the process of becoming digitised. To benefit from the opportunities and to reduce risk, recommendations and guidelines were created to encourage debate on the topic. Two elements in particular were foregrounded: political opinion formation and political participation.

To avoid a one-sided look at the topic, the project was given a modular structure and several groups were invited to submit proposals for studies. The following institutions were selected to conduct a study: polling organisation gfs.bern; Dachverband Schweizer Jugendparlamente DSJ, Switzerland's umbrella organisation to promote youth political participation; and the thinktank Dezentrum.

- gfs.bern examined the effect of digital media (social media) on opinion formation and political participation.
- DSJ analysed how young people today participate digitally and considered ways to develop a platform that accommodates as many people as possible.
- Dezentrum created fictive narratives and scenarios for future democracies, each illustrated by a speculative artefact. The idea behind this approach was to present tangible examples that provide a basis for discussion.

Independent of these studies, the topic of digitisation and democracy raises questions that demand a political debate – and that are resistant to being parsed in academic analyses. In the following, several of these issues are addressed and described from a political rather than a scholarly point-of-view.

## 1. Digital and democratic processes move at different speeds

Digital and democratic processes each have a distinct pace, making them largely incompatible systems. As digital technologies advance, the difference is growing ever greater, and it is warned that political processes must drastically speed up if they are to keep abreast of global change.

Certain urgent issues pose challenges that are difficult to resolve in Switzerland's political system, with its time-consuming consultations and hearings as well as the complex resolution procedures between the National Council and the Council of States. Nevertheless, as the examples of establishing the airline SWISS or delivering a rescue package for UBS demonstrate, it is possible for the Swiss system to respond quickly within the framework of the constitutional provisions. Indeed, delayed or slow reactions on the part of the federal and cantonal governments, as during the coronavirus pandemic, are not the consequence of an insufficient legal basis; the root causes are often diverging political interpretations or jurisdictional conflicts between the cantons and the federal government. Moreover, neither the constitution nor prevailing laws pose a barrier to faster action: even in federalist Switzerland, it is possible to find a legal basis to act quickly and thus uphold democratic principles.

However, it would be wrong to transfer the speed enabled by digital technologies to democratic processes. Public opinion formation in our democracy is designed to strike a balance between conflicting views, to seek compromise and to guarantee that all concerned have enough time to rethink an issue or situation. For instance, planning a popular vote requires time so that Swiss voters can form an opinion or, in some cases, change their views. This, then, is also the major difference between an opinion poll, in which unprepared respondents are confronted with a question by telephone, and a popular vote, which is preceded by extensive debate in the run-up.

Neither the speed made possible by digitisation nor the fast pace of political action in authoritarian regimes should be transferred to a society that

requires the acceptance of political processes on the part of all concerned, as this would violate the basic principles of a democracy. It is precisely these issues that Dezentrum brought to life in its dystopian scenarios of future democracies.

These considerations make clear why it would be wrong to delegate technological and policy-related developments to experts or algorithms. In a democracy, questions concerning the general welfare must be decided by society as a whole. This takes time and care – also in the new digital age.

## 2. Digital inequality endangers democracy

Will digitisation lead to inequality among citizens? Will society discriminate against people who are unable to keep up with the latest IT tools? And will 'offline' citizens also have access to all government services, or will they slip through the cracks because they are either unwilling or unable to use digital technologies and media?

Thanks to digitisation, public authorities can provide information and services much more quickly. But what initially seems like a clear advantage for all involved can lead to discrimination. It also violates the constitutionally guaranteed equality before the law if people who lack the skills to use digital technologies are excluded from access to services – for instance, life-saving measures. This was the case at the start of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign, when senior citizens and persons at-risk were effectively held at bay, as they were unable to understand the confusing and unnecessarily complicated procedures without technical support.

In addition, several countries that decided to quickly introduce a broad range of electronic governmental services (e-government) report difficulties in communicating with citizens: switching to online forms and digital payment transactions while simultaneously getting rid of services by phone and closing information counters and offices without retaining any conventional mode of communication has not automatically brought about greater efficiency.

Indeed, e-government measures actually threaten to cut the connection to citizens. Moreover, it is entirely possible that frustration and resistance will be directed against government structures when citizens no longer have the ability to go to or call an office directly and discuss an administrative issue that may pose an existential problem to them.

It is essential that a democracy guarantees the right of access to governmental services to all, including people who are unable to read and write and those who – for whatever reasons – wish to, or have to, live ‘offline’. This means a minimal timeframe must be ensured for an in-person meeting or a telephone conversation to have an issue explained or to learn about alternative solutions. A digital bot is simply unable to perform such tasks. DSJ has arrived at this same conclusion and thus recommends hybrid forms of political participation.

### 3. Social media

Social media – the epitome of digitisation – wield great influence in democratic processes, and the ambivalence inherent in any new technology is magnified in social media. Public debate generally focuses on the dangers they bear for democracy, as social media companies have succeeded in creating a global oligopoly that, among other things, is systematically instrumentalised by financial giants and politicians to accumulate power – to the detriment of democracies.

However, social media have the capacity to invigorate democratic processes as well – also in Switzerland, as demonstrated by the success of organisations like ‘Operation Libero’ or ‘Freunde der Verfassung’ (friends of the constitution). In addition, social media have made it possible for individuals to express their opinions to a larger audience. But the abuse of social media to the detriment of democratic processes highlights the need to create national or supranational regulatory measures, as does the fact that social media companies systematically reject all social accountability and control in order to preserve their commercial interests. For all these reasons, gfs.bern emphasises the importance of recognising the impact digitisation has on political opinion formation and the need to introduce suitable regulations (recommended course of action no. 6).

### 4. Personalised messaging to influence voters

Social media make it possible to develop personalised, targeted messaging to influence voters. This gives rise to the common fear that the practice will undermine the actual object of a democracy, which is promoting the general welfare, not personal interests. As such, it is important that people engage in debate beyond their regular circles to avoid a ‘fossilisation’ of opinions, which could lead to losing the ability to engage and empathise with others. Moreover, it is feared that such developments would erode the position of minority interests, which form an essential part of our democracy.

To be sure, the gfs.bern study demonstrates that, to date, the effects of ‘echo chambers’ on the most common platforms are weaker than assumed (cf. gfs.bern study, chapter 4.4.1). In addition, the temptation to represent one’s own interests at the ballot box is not a phenomenon first seen in the digital age, and it should also be recognised that digital media address issues concerning the general welfare. Manipulative disinformation campaigns have always existed in a democracy, despite their threat to its basic tenets. This danger, however, increases exponentially as the disinformation becomes more professional and more targeted.

That like-minded people form closed groups is also not a new development of the digital age, and like other phenomena that have become particularly obvious through digitisation, such groups are not a direct consequence of digital technologies. Nevertheless, in a globalised world, their effect seems stronger than in times past. These new dimensions multiply the potential for danger and abuse, also because national laws remain largely ineffectual in containing problematic content.

And even if the technologies merely provide the infrastructure for abuses, they are nonetheless a contributing factor for the spread of abuse and the antidemocratic consequences thereof. This makes it challenging to regulate technologies and prevent them from undermining the achievements of a democracy. This applies, independent of the limited possibilities a single state has in its ability to regulate globally active technology companies.

## 5. Digital technologies and basic democratic values

Digital technologies can calculate economic value and connections but are unable to process those values that religions, philosophies or civilisations are built on. Do these omnipresent technical possibilities therefore have the capacity to endanger foundational democratic principles and thus gradually erode the social cohesion that is a core objective of a democracy?

For instance, the fact that insurance companies, including health insurance providers, can use digital technologies to make cross-subsidisation between risk groups visible is commonly criticised, as it is feared that this transparency will further undermine the principle of solidarity, which is central to any type of insurance. In particular, there are concerns that early knowledge of a medical predisposition can call the fundamental equality of human life into question.

Equal rights for all – including linguistic and religious minorities as well as individuals in lower socio-economic groups – is, however, a political agreement in our democracy, and various instruments have been developed to ensure this equality. What is essential is the substance of the discussion on how a social balance is achieved. Indeed, this debate is crucial for a democratic society and must never be avoided – precisely in times when we are continually confronted with details about who and what is responsible for causing high costs. Concealing facts to avoid endangering solidarity would not align with democratic principles. As such, if the basic notion of solidarity is in danger, it is not the fault of digital technologies but rather due to the political weighting of societal values.

## 6. Will digitisation lead to binary thought patterns and behaviours?

Digital technologies generally use binary systems that are expressed by the digits 0 and 1. The fact that we systematically interact with binary-encoded bots instead of dealing with humans and their various reactions forces thought patterns on us that exclude differentiation and explanation. At the same time, an increase in polarisation can be observed in all democracies where voters are forced to say either yes or no to a proposal or an opinion. Nuance and shades of grey are missing.

The question is whether this is merely a chance concurrence of societal and technological phenomena, or whether there is a connection between the two developments. What is certain is that the either-or aspect of binary behaviours and thought patterns is at variance with the inner essence of a democracy.

Whether consumer or citizen, customer, client or patient, we are all being conditioned to binary behaviour patterns that we knew to avoid when we were able to explain ourselves to other people in a non-digital setting. As such, we are evolving into binary creatures who are reduced to saying ‘moo’ or ‘bah’. This tendency is chipping away at the substance of today’s democracies, while the abundance of accurate, dubious and deliberately false information can overwhelm citizens. As such, many people take refuge in simplistic opinions and refuse to engage in rational debate. Such behaviours are psychologically easier, and this type of response is cultivated by many a political leader: ‘If you’re not for us, you’re against us.’

Moreover, the essence of a democracy is frequently reduced to a vote to determine a majority and a minority; this was also the case before the advent of digital technologies. But democracy encompasses more than simply deciding on a majority opinion. It is equally important to consider minority opinions and seek compromise, and it is important that citizens feel at least partially represented in a decision – including minorities, who were listened to, and people who have been outvoted, whose arguments have nonetheless been addressed. A democratic decision considers the entirety of needs and interests.

Democratic thinking is non-binary. It consists of awareness, memory, hope and unexpected conjunctions, and it thrives on the power of the imagination and associative thinking. It is what allows us to seek and find creative solutions that binary thought patterns are often unable to deliver. This creative capacity is free from polarised interests and is what empowers us to think beyond seeming contradictions. It is also the only way to find solutions that can accommodate minority opinions. In this sense, democracy depends on both digital and traditional types of innovation. It is this creative spirit that reflects its true significance.

## 7. Calls for innovative digital projects to promote democracy

In parallel to these rather negatively framed developments, we can also observe digital innovations that facilitate the ability to creatively exercise democratic responsibilities. In politics, innovation is currently being driven by countless digital service providers – for example, on platforms to engage in debate, to provide political information or even political interference. For example, the platform *engage.ch* fosters political participation in young people; *Smartvote* offers digital systems to support voting processes; *wecollect.ch* enables electronic collection of signatures for referenda and initiatives; and *petitio.ch* promotes political participation in local issues.

These are all projects that revisit the original idea of the ‘citizen’, situating it in the age of globalisation and digitisation and lending it new meaning. This can even strengthen the essence of a democracy, for instance, by enabling signatures for a referendum or an initiative to be collected quickly, or to resolve a politically controversial issue in a short period of time.

## 8. A democracy that resists change is not a democracy

Digitisation raises hopes. We can realise these hopes if we use digital technologies in accordance with the original sense of our democracy while also taking steps to curb abuse of the new technical possibilities, be it on the national, supranational or global stage.

Our democracy has changed greatly over the centuries. This is seen not only in constitutional history, but also in societal transformations. In future, too, our democracy will continue to be in flux. Indeed, this is the nature of a democracy, which must never fossilise into an empty ritual. Only those democratic societies that change and evolve will thrive and prosper.



# Democracy and digitisation: a brief overview

**The general structural change in society brought about by the digital transformation and its massive potential to create networks has also impacted the world of politics. Digital technologies facilitate participation in public life, generate new possibilities for public debate and enrich political opinion formation processes. However, in addition to bringing benefits, digitisation is also shaping society and political decision-making. Because digital media, especially social media platforms, are believed to be highly influential in politics, TA-SWISS commissioned a study to explore how digitisation is changing democratic procedures and forms of political communication, shedding light on the topic from a variety of perspectives.**

The interdisciplinary approach to the topic is evidenced by the following three sub-studies commissioned:

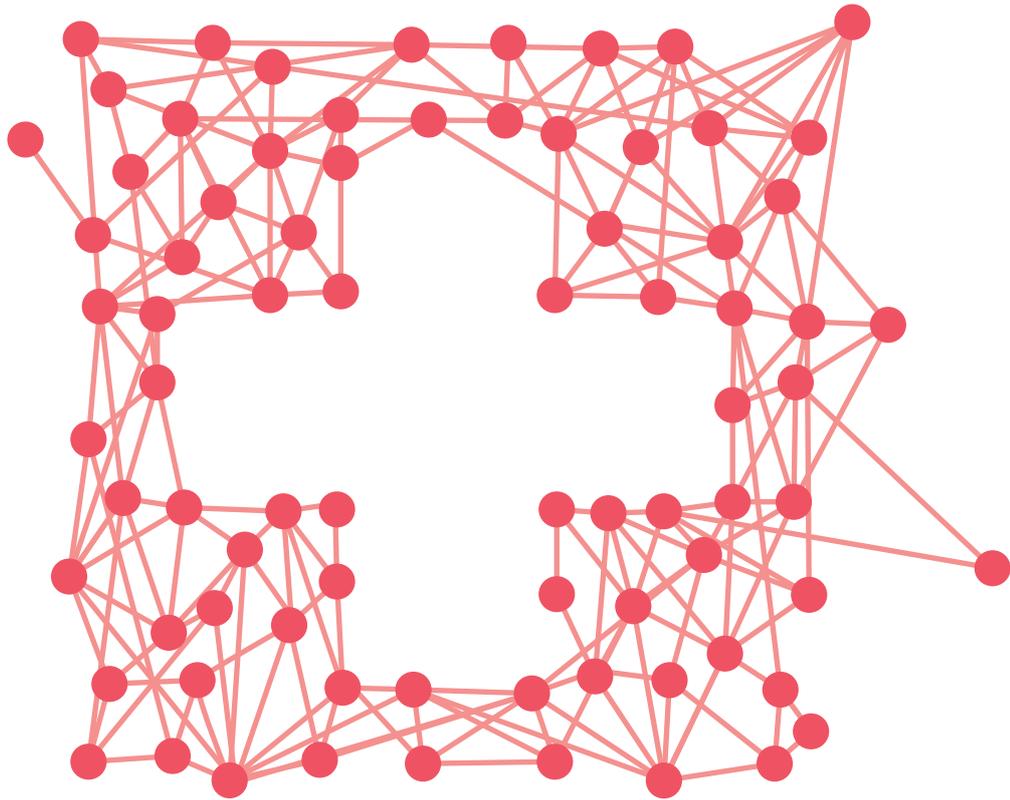
- The research institution gfs.bern analyses the status quo to identify the areas where the Swiss political system is already dealing with digitisation processes and to describe how it reacts, with particular attention paid to the ways in which social media are influencing opinion formation and political participation.
- The study of the Dachverband Schweizer Jugendparlamente DSJ (Switzerland's umbrella organisation to promote youth political participation) identifies the conditions young people need to participate online and considers how digital platforms should be designed to best encourage political participation in adolescents and young adults.
- In its experimental project, Dezentrum, a 'think-and-do-tank' for digitisation and society, ventures into the near future by creating three desirable, yet ambivalent, scenarios to depict possible digital democracies in the year 2050. Each scenario is presented as a short story and illustrated by a speculative artefact.

Although all three studies recognise that digitisation of the political sphere has significant positive potential for democratic opinion formation, they also identify several challenges. That these prob-

lematic features are entangled with the advantages of the new digital channels underscores the ambivalent character of the new technology. Indeed, the freedom of expression rights that enable citizens to participate in opinion formation processes in a safe, barrier-free and egalitarian virtual space go hand-in-hand with the danger of an unchecked dissemination of false and misleading information, of distortion and manipulation.

## Opportunities

- Digitisation opens up new channels for debate and participation, and offers citizens faster access to more comprehensive political information that has not been filtered by traditional gatekeepers; as such, it supports free opinion formation – a major advantage in Switzerland's system of democracy, which requires its electorate to take numerous, highly complex political decisions.
- Tools of 'civic technology', i.e. tools that enable digital participation via electronic signature collection or electronic political consultation, offer low-threshold ways to increase egalitarian participation in political processes and can help to overcome unequal participation patterns from pre-digital times.
- If obstacles to participation can be removed and the costs of communication and information procurement reduced, target groups with low levels of political engagement can be more easily mobilised. At the same time, it also becomes easier to raise awareness for ideas, problems and (smaller or less financially secure) organisations that otherwise receive little or no attention.
- Online platforms make it possible for political organisations to communicate their positions to citizens more directly, more efficiently and with greater transparency. Journalists and professionals as well as interested and informed users can apply their knowledge to recognise journalism quality standards when selecting and interpreting content on social media and thus extend their contribution to political opinion formation to the new media.



## Risks

- Digitisation may primarily strengthen participation among those citizens who are already politically active or who are digitally literate, meaning that the new technologies have the potential to solidify existing participatory patterns and socio-economic inequalities.
- Social media platforms were not created for political debate and are not transparent democratic instruments. The oligopolistic position of the big, commercially driven social networks means that these companies have a disproportionate influence on political discourse.
- Creators of social media content are not bound to journalism ethics and standards. As such, important quality control and fact-checking processes are lacking.
- The ability to disseminate digital content quickly makes the targeted spreading of false information ('fake news') and populist messaging much more potent, thus increasing the polarisation of society.

- New digital participation tools like e-collecting (electronic signature collection) have the potential to overburden the political system with an excessive number of referenda. New channels for discourse and participation can also make it difficult for a consensus-oriented political system to ensure that all relevant voices are heard.

## Key recommendations

Digital participatory platforms have the potential to mobilise citizens who generally do not actively engage in politics. Digital participation processes, however, should also always have non-digital features to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities and to prevent new mechanisms that lead to marginalisation. (DSJ)

Participatory platforms for adolescents and young adults should be easy to navigate, use clear language and, if possible, be available as an app. (DSJ)

Legal decisions must consider the reach of social media. In particular, this means that the time

remaining before an upcoming vote must no longer be the main criterion for ruling whether the dissemination of clearly misleading information has prevented free opinion formation. (gfs.bern)

If the aim is to ensure that as many people as possible participate, it is important that everyone has access to control mechanisms to fact-check information. Such mechanisms include content control by platform providers, fact-checking on specialised expert platforms or the obligatory disclosure of the source of a political campaign message. (gfs.bern)

In the scope of a clear mandate to educate the public, the federal government should adopt measures to improve general cognition skills in the electorate, i.e. people's ability to seek and process information. These measures should go beyond compulsory and post-compulsory schooling and, with a view to the average age of the Swiss electorate (57), also be geared towards the entire population in the form of national education and prevention campaigns. (gfs.bern)

Preventing voter fraud in a digital setting requires a highly secure technical solution as well as the trust of the Swiss electorate. Security concerns regarding e-voting and e-participation processes must be taken seriously and steered via technical solutions as well as communication strategies. (gfs.bern)

To survive, a democracy must keep pace with societal change, and an open discussion about how and why this is the case forms part of the democratic process itself. This is especially true in the case of ambivalent developments like digitisation. The consequences of digital technologies should therefore undergo regular monitoring and the population should be included in the ongoing debate on digitisation processes in democracy. (gfs.bern)

The following sections present the results of the first three studies, situating them in three areas of tension that exist between the state and big tech, inclusion and exclusion, conversation and confrontation. The three future scenarios developed by Dezentrum illustrate these tensions and guide the reader through the summary.

### More on the Dezentrum study

## Messages from the digital future. A participatory experiment

Dezentrum, the 'think-and-do-tank' for digitisation and society, uses pictorial scenarios to illustrate possible futures, making discourse on digitisation and democracy more accessible to the public. In an initial phase, experts from various fields applied scenario thinking to identify three desirable manifestations of digitised democracy in the year 2050 – and situated them within the three areas of tension that exist between the state and big tech, inclusion and exclusion, conversation and confrontation. The scenarios were then shaped as narratives; in the second project phase, the short stories were translated into speculative artefacts: tangible objects that symbolise an abstract vision of the future in all its ambivalence and transport this vision back into the present, making it negotiable. As such, they provide a concrete starting point for collective debate on what kind of digitisation we want for Switzerland's democracy.



# The state v. big tech

The basic tension between the state and big tech concerns the extent to which the new virtual public sphere created by digital platforms will strengthen the democratic state and encourage citizen participation in politics, while also asking whether it is more likely that this new form of public life will play into the hands of powerful technology firms whose business logics provided the blueprint for developing the platforms.



## Future scenario

### Rule of thumb: heads or tails?

Here it is: the rule of thumb, a futuristic machine consisting of a simple revolving device that flips a coin at regular intervals. Heads or tails? A high-speed camera records the outcome and translates the results into a sequence of ones and zeros. The rule of thumb was built when hacker community Community (a portmanteau combining 'commons' and 'community') first got their start. That was in 2039. In secret meetings, the group worked on a transparent algorithm while dreaming of a world where chance occurrences will once again have a place and where the internet will return to the democratising potential of its beginnings: a tool to promote the general welfare.

Now, in 2050, their vision remains a dream, but one that many people have come to share. Resistance has begun forming against Amago – the world's most powerful tech oligopoly, created by the merger between Google and Amazon. Over the years, more and more people have grown angry over the fact that Amago not only provides the digital infrastructure for government services, but that it also manages and processes all state-owned data. The government itself is incapable of processing its own data and has even delegated enforcement of the few, tentative attempts at regulation to the platform operators, a decision that has further cemented the power of these companies. Big tech rules the world.

But groups like Community – with a global network, decentralised organisation and focus on grass-roots activities – are putting up resistance and seeking ways out of the algorithm-based, predetermined platform logics that have eliminated all chance and personal choice in the interest of maximising profits. And rumour has it that top managers are already beginning to jump ship. Maybe there is another act to the play 'big tech v. the state' after all.

## The gfs.bern study: how are digital media already impacting Swiss democracy?

The rule of thumb examines the role that digital media – and the players behind them – have in key political processes. The gfs.bern study also deals with this question, although not in the form of a dystopian vision of the future, but by determining the extent to which new digital media are impacting democracy in Switzerland already today. The study results reveal that digital platforms used in the new virtual public sphere – including websites of established media companies as well as social networks like Facebook and Twitter – have become a fixed component of the Swiss population's media consumption. They are also spaces where people debate political issues.

Nevertheless, the study finds the impact of social media on opinion formation is, as yet, not significant. A distinct majority of Swiss voters say they do not consult digital media in the run-up to elections or other votes. In Switzerland, digital platforms are still much less important than traditional media like television, radio and newspapers. The coronavirus pandemic provides a good example: Swiss citizens turn to classical news channels when they seek reliable information.

Two other aspects help to explain the currently minor importance of social media for procuring information. First, research in political science has shown that political messaging, regardless of the specific media channel broadcasting it, is never directly incorporated when people form an opinion; rather, individuals first filter the information according to their basic political stance and their prior knowledge of a topic. The more voters know and the greater their individual ability to link new information with existing knowledge, the more information they filter out. And when voters have personal knowledge of an issue, or if they have been exposed to a topic on the ballot several times in the past, the specific media channel used to gather information becomes even less relevant.

Second, political science research does not support the common assumption that social media are responsible for the rise of populism and increased polarisation in Swiss politics. Indeed, both phenomena are long-term sociological developments whose origins predate digitisation. It should, however, be noted that the gfs.bern study concludes that social media at a minimum have the potential to intensify these phenomena that have serious implications for Switzerland's consensus democracy. Moreover, there are indications that the driving forces behind these populist tendencies are taking advantage of new, digital forms of communication and participation.



## Social media platforms can facilitate opinion formation and participation ...

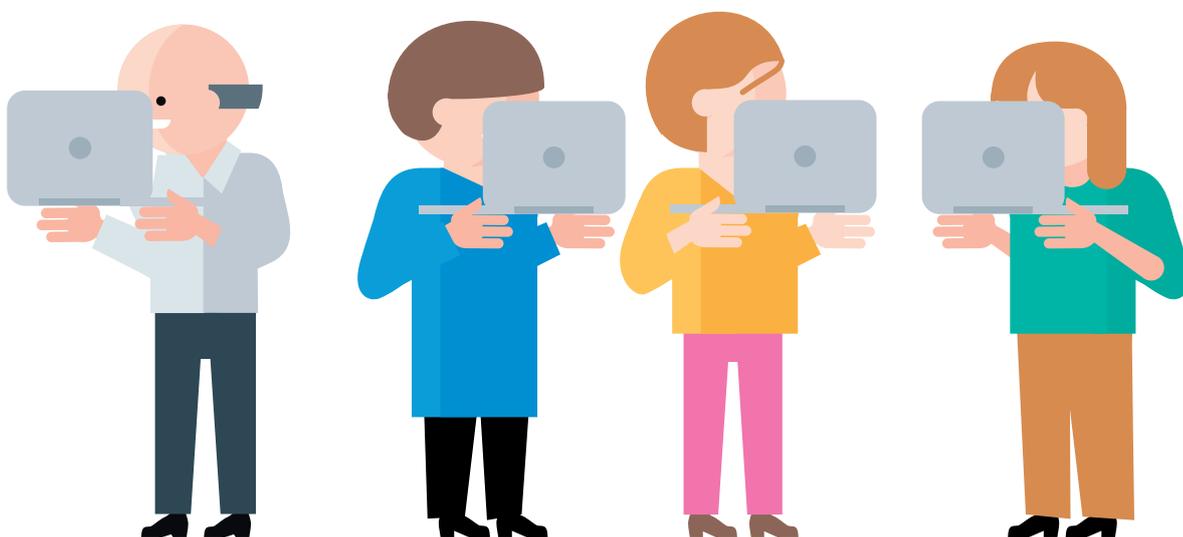
That the new virtual public sphere's potential to instigate change should not be underestimated is also confirmed by research in media studies. In addition to protest movements and parties like the Climate Youth in Switzerland or the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, social media platforms can play an important role in how politicians communicate. In such cases, social networks are used to establish more direct and transparent interactions between the political establishment and the population. Collecting detailed, personal user data makes it possible to create targeted, personalised political advertising. In addition, online platforms offer people a way to interact directly with the political system, and they grant citizens faster, more comprehensive access to content that is less likely to have been selected by journalists acting as gatekeepers. This simplifies efforts to coordinate large-scale mobilisation of like-minded individuals. Examples include movements like #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter, whose hashtags have had global impact.

New digital tools are no more likely to bring about an automatic democratisation of society than the new virtual public sphere, but they, too, can make opinion formation and participation easier in some contexts. For instance, electronic collection of

signatures for referenda and initiatives (e-collecting, already widespread in Switzerland), the hotly debated issue of electronic voting (e-voting) and an electronic ID (e-ID) certainly have the potential to lower the threshold to participating in important political processes and can thus strengthen democracy. At the same time, however, these tools – adaptive AI algorithms to directly target users, social bots and robot journalism for automated and barrier-free dissemination of information – are fraught with a wide range of potential negative consequences.

## ... but they are not transparent, democratic instruments

Collecting personal user data and information about online activity for optimised placement of advertisements (microtargeting) can quickly evolve into commercially driven surveillance that undermines citizens' data protection rights. In addition, instead of being personalised, the information selected by algorithms can be one-sided and biased, creating filter bubbles and tempting users to lose themselves in echo chambers. And familiar phenomena like 'fake news' and conspiracy theories find fertile ground on social media platforms. Another problematic issue concerns the growing influence that a few large platform providers wield over political communication. Their market power has garnered



them the gatekeeper function previously held by traditional media channels, which exercised this duty in accordance with journalism ethics and standards. But because these new platforms were not created for political debate, and because they pursue an entirely different business strategy, their decisions are based on criteria that are not transparent to outside observers. This development is doubly dangerous, as most regulatory authorities are unable to ensure that the big US platforms respect the rules; in addition, regulatory bodies further undermine their own authority by delegating the monitoring and enforcement of regulations to the platform providers themselves.

So, where are we exactly? While online and social media have become a feature of everyday life in Switzerland, their significance when it comes to procuring information is comparatively small; moreover, scholars currently ascribe little importance to filter bubbles and echo chambers. As such, the impact of 'fake news', conspiracy theories and disinformation is still low and, at present, any use of automated content in the digital public sphere is still experimental. People themselves and the political climate remain the main drivers in public opinion formation – technical innovations are at most contributing factors. In sum: the various possibilities of digitisation have so far had little to no influence on whether Swiss citizens say 'yea' or 'nay' at the ballot box. And yet, there is evidence that the scenario with the rule of thumb already exists at a rudimentary stage.

#### **More on the gfs.bern study**

### **The technological revolution meets traditional opinion formation processes**

The research institution gfs.bern is collaborating with an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the University of Basel and the University of Geneva to better understand how digitisation influences political opinion formation in Switzerland. Using tools from political science, the team assess where and to what extent new social media channels impact these processes. The study draws on investigations in the field of media studies to identify changes in media use on the part of the population and politicians, while the potential influence of new forms of digital participation – for example, e-collecting, e-voting and online political consultation – are considered from a technological standpoint. The chapter dealing with jurisprudence examines current legal provisions in Switzerland and abroad and shows how new regulatory measures could be integrated into the existing legal system. Lastly, discussions from focus groups with Swiss voters bring an additional perspective to the issue. Based on this five-pronged approach, opportunities and risks are summarised in the form of theses, and specific courses of action are recommended.

# Inclusion v. exclusion

Digital technologies have the potential to create new ways to participate in public life and to make this participation more egalitarian. But they can also further exacerbate existing inequalities and thus put democracy itself to the test.



## Future scenario

### The mycorrhiza files: risotto ai funghi porcini

The mushroom risotto was confiscated by the police, hermetically sealed and stored in the evidence room. Consuming edible mushrooms has been a criminal offence since 2050. But the prohibition was not intended. It is the type of error that occurs from time to time, now that the comprehensive digitisation of institutional processes has streamlined the slow-moving wheels of democracy.

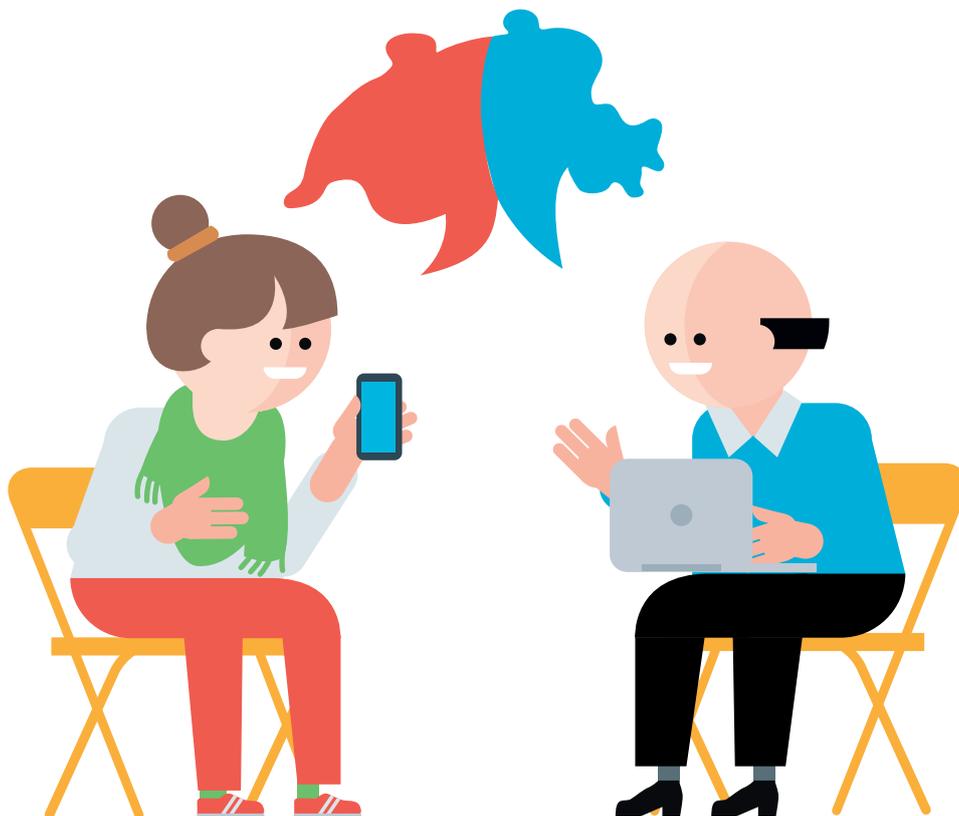
The ban on mushrooms has its origins in an issue that met with wide acceptance in the population from the start. In the tropical rainforests, mycorrhizas interact with the root systems of other plants to ensure healthy growth. In 2050, a law to protect this unique symbiosis was welcomed by a large part of the population. And after Switzerland's new 'Connected Democracy' was established, decisions on this type of legislation could be taken quickly, sometimes within hours. The government strongly supported the new responsive and inclusive processes of digital democracy, as they increased participation and thus gave social cohesion a major boost. Indeed, just a few years earlier, Switzerland had been facing a potential schism: large portions of the population felt left behind and harboured growing resentment against the 'elites' and the political establishment, resulting in their refusal to be active in any form of political participation. This changed after the Swiss constitution was completely revised. Under the new system, participation is permanent, low-threshold and direct, granting all citizens an equal say. 'Crowd-writing' procedures are used to draft bills, and AI-generated holograms visualise potential consequences of a 'yes' or 'no' to a bill. Voters then form their opinions on the basis of this information.

It all goes very fast. Sometimes too fast: by the time it became clear that edible mushrooms were included in the ban, it was already too late.

## DSJ study: fission or fusion

The consequences digitisation will have on democratic processes are still difficult to assess. Just as the new technology can make political debate more accessible and diverse, it can also distort communications. First, it is possible that part of the population – especially older citizens, people who are unpractised in using computers and individuals with low socio-economic standing – will be excluded from taking part in online political discourse. Secondly, not all politicians have joined the digital trend. To be sure, most are active on social media platforms, but they generally use these tools to raise their own visibility. In addition, others have stopped using social media entirely after being confronted with abusive language. As such, social media per se neither promote inclusive debate nor do they represent the opinions of the entire population or of all politicians. Quite the opposite: in their capacity as a virtual public sphere, the new media have the potential to reinforce current divides in political participation and to further entrench social divisions, resentment and polarisation.

Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that digital technologies offer fundamentally new possibilities for a large number of people to express their opinions and to have a say in political decision-making processes in a way that is straightforward and comparatively inexpensive; in addition, online participation can occur at any place and at any time, and it also attracts people who were previously not involved in political debate as well as those who had been excluded by the system. The term ‘civic technology’ is used in these contexts to describe tools that have the potential to transport traditional methods of political consultation into the digital realm, to further develop and expand on them and thus to facilitate egalitarian participation of as many people as possible. Civic technology instruments, especially independent participatory platforms, can form a counterweight to the large, commercially driven digital platforms. For instance, the website [demokratie-toolbox.ch](http://demokratie-toolbox.ch) (democracy toolbox, in German) lists some 60 digital tools that support participation in democratic processes, be it through creating networks, procuring information, realising civil society projects, monitoring political processes or collecting signatures for referenda and political initiatives.



## Using digital tools to bring young people (back) to politics

New ways to participate online are believed to be especially interesting to young people, who are increasingly turning away from membership in traditional political organisations, long-term civic-duty commitments and mainstream politics. Instead, today's youth have an innate understanding of the new digital possibilities and tend to join loosely organised groups and personalised networks in order to support individual topics and interests.

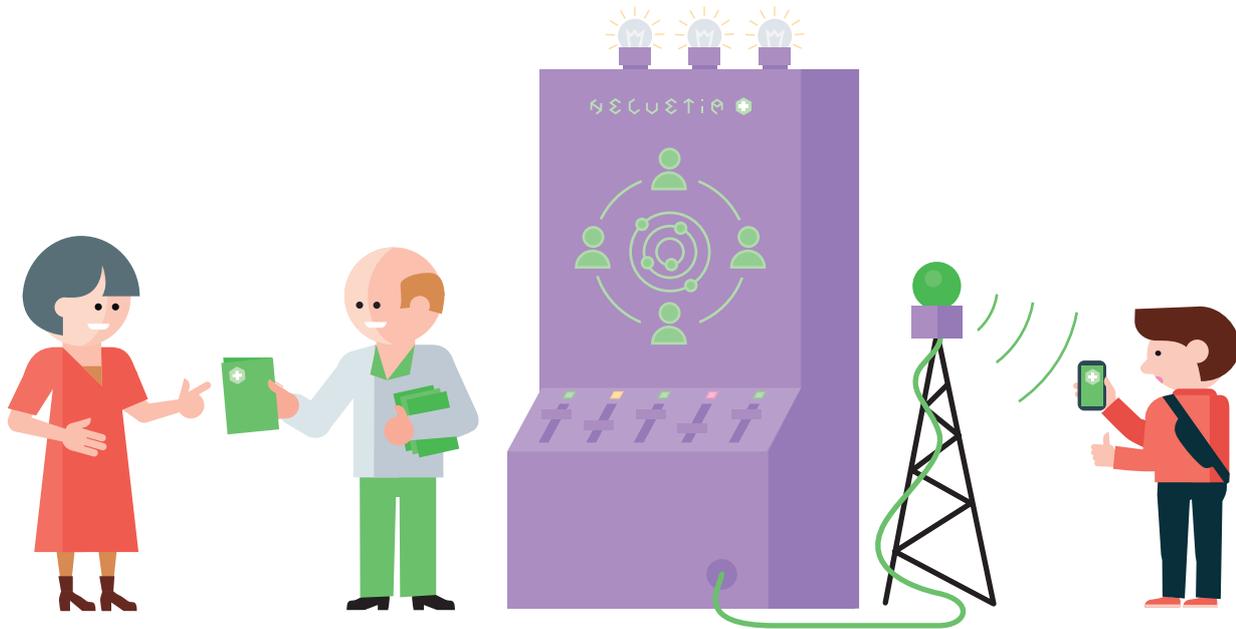
On the basis of information gathered on its platform engage.ch, the Dachverband Schweizer Jugendparlamente DSJ (Switzerland's umbrella organisation to promote youth political participation) determines the extent to which political participatory platforms actually mobilise the younger generation. It also seeks to identify who is using the tools and to find ways to better design such platforms in order to optimise participation. The DSJ platform offers adolescents and young adults up to the age of 25 an opportunity to formulate and express their ideas and concerns at the communal, regional or national level and thus to communicate directly with political decision-makers. As such, the platform engage.ch aims to support young users in setting political processes in motion, even if their input occurs outside standard and institutionalised political processes.

The study findings confirm that engage.ch is indeed successful in encouraging young people to participate, irrespective of education or migration background. As such, the platform lends itself to bridging divides that are evident in the offline world regarding willingness to participate in political processes. However, some traditional divides persist. For instance, engage.ch is unable to overcome the gender gap: boys and young men are more likely to join the political debate, both on- and offline, than are girls and young women. In addition, not all age groups can be mobilised equally well. In particular, 14-year-olds appear to be keen to participate, possibly due to the fact that schools and youth programmes can reach and motivate them more easily than is the case with older members of the demographic.

## Clear requirements for digital platforms

The young people surveyed expressed reservations about online participation mainly with regard to data protection, saying they are uncertain about what happens with their personal data and that they fear that hacker attacks will falsify the results of online voting. They are also concerned that digital participation will adversely affect political debate in the real world and exclude those adolescents who would prefer to take part via traditional channels (or those who have no laptop or smartphone and are thus unable to participate online). The young users therefore believe it is important that digital participation is a supplement to traditional forms, and not a replacement. One point of disagreement among those surveyed concerns whether digital participation should be anonymous: some see anonymity as a precondition for free expression of concerns and opinions, while others believe it could encourage spam and abusive language.

Otherwise, the demands young people place on digital participatory platforms are straightforward: they should be as easy to use as possible, have a simple structure and a clear, unfussy design. Moreover, they should be available as an app and use youth-friendly language. According to the DSJ study, it is also critical that advertising for these digital platforms attracts a broad audience, as research findings indicate that people often fail to participate in political processes because they were never asked. As such, schools, youth programmes and local youth parliaments are instrumental in communicating to young people that they have a right to take part in the political debate.



DSJ summarised the conclusions of the study in the form of the following requirements for digital participatory platforms for adolescents and young adults:

1. Digital participation should always feature offline components.
2. Collaboration with schools is recommended to encourage digital participation in adolescents and young adults as a way to reach a high number of young people and to monitor both technical features and content.
3. If possible, digital participatory platforms for a young target audience should be available as an app; they should also be easy to navigate and use simple language.
4. Whenever possible, users themselves should be free to decide whether they wish to remain anonymous on digital participatory platforms; if there is a risk of spam or abusive language, the platform should be moderated.
5. Advertising for digital participatory platforms is very important and should be transparent and youth friendly.
6. When developing and advertising digital platforms, the different understandings of political participation in Switzerland's language regions must be considered.

#### More on the DSJ study

### Young people, political participation and digitisation

The mixed-method study of the Dachverband Schweizer Jugendparlamente DSJ (Switzerland's umbrella organisation to promote youth political participation) draws on quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to examine how adolescents and young adults use digital participatory platforms. The following three questions are foregrounded: Who participates online? What features do adolescents and young adults require for digital participatory platforms? How can online platforms be made more accessible and inclusive in order to reach as many users as possible?

The quantitative data were collected from the DSJ-operated platform engage.ch and include the profiles of the platform users as well as the results of diverse surveys initiated on the platform. To improve the analysis, the qualitative part of the study encompassed group discussions with adolescents and young adults as well as talks with experts from youth programmes, youth politics and civic technology. These form the basis for several recommended courses of action to promote political participation in adolescents and young adults across all social classes and cultural backgrounds; the measures draw on civic technology tools in general and digital participatory platforms in particular.

# Conversation v. confrontation

How will our society reach political agreements in future? And what happens to freedom of expression and information when social media algorithms tend to give the loudest and most extreme opinions the most room to circulate?



## Future scenario

### Obliviscis: finding happiness in the community

Bern, 18 September 2050 (politforum.ch) – According to leaked information from military circles, Colonel Ayumi Friedman, head of training, informed this year's Service Citoyen graduates about a previously top-secret pilot project. She disclosed the information at a media event in Bern, and sources say the project concerns a mind-altering pill that permanently suppresses an individual's ability to pursue sectional interests and instead promotes logical, fact-based decisions that benefit society at large. Friedman apparently called on the recruits from cohort 78 to volunteer for the experiment, telling them the project (called 'Obliviscis') would 'go down in history as pioneering work'.

It is said that the pill, dubbed a 'state-mandated drug' on most online platforms, is designed to reinforce the impact of Service Citoyen (citizen service) – and sooner or later render the organisation obsolete. Introduced three years ago to replace the country's military training camp, Service Citoyen aims to promote civic knowledge and digital literacy in citizens but also to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility and deepen understanding for different lived realities. It is believed that these abilities will fortify citizens against the anti-democratic forces currently threatening Switzerland from within: the incendiary and confrontational tone common on digital platforms. After the last so-called 'journalism' media disappeared in the early 2020s, these platforms have dominated public discourse and are believed to be responsible for polarisation and radicalisation of Swiss society.

## Equipping citizens to withstand the destructive powers of 'social' media

In Colonel Ayumi Friedman's Switzerland of the future, the digital transformation has undermined democracy. The citizens surveyed in the gfs.bern study also express fears that adaptive algorithms or AI tools programmed to command our attention could knowingly spread false information, poison the political climate and permanently polarise or even divide society. And the DSJ study demonstrates that digital participation can further solidify existing divides. Nevertheless, experts believe that the polarising influence ascribed to 'fake news', conspiracy theories, filter bubbles and echo chambers is currently relatively small because the phenomena linked to digital channels of communication have not yet reached a majority of the population. At the same time, researchers stress that it is still too early to make a definitive statement on the matter.

As such, it is legitimate to ask how resilient the Swiss political system will be when faced with a deterioration in political discourse and a weakening of opinion formation processes that could be the result of various dynamics in social media. Exercising political rights in Switzerland's democracy requires that voters are able to form their opinions and give expression to their will, free from outside influence or obstruction. From the vantage of Swiss constitutional law, a key prerequisite for this is that open political debate is conducted throughout society. Indeed, the right to unhindered opinion formation is guaranteed in Switzerland's Federal Constitution (Art. 34, para. 2), and legal decisions of the federal judiciary ensure that no election or voting results that were falsified by undue influence will be recognised. This applies in particular when undue influence is exercised so close to a vote that the misleading information can no longer be corrected or rectified.

## Digital literacy as the key

In the run-up to elections and other votes, only government officials and institutions are bound to observing principles of objectivity, transparency, proportionality and fairness in their communications, whereas communications of private individuals and institutions are protected by fundamental free speech rights, in particular freedom of expression, although libel, slander and discrimination are forbidden. Free speech protections also apply to content posted on social media. Nevertheless, if a private person or entity publishes seriously misleading information about key issues related to a vote, the federal authorities may be required to intervene and correct the information. Under certain circumstances, the federal authorities already now have a duty to take action and correct misinformation.

In Switzerland, freedom of expression and information has generally been granted priority standing. For instance, in a formal statement from 2017, the Federal Council states that exaggerations and even falsehoods are difficult to prevent in political debate and that Swiss voters should be deemed fully capable of forming their own opinions. The gfs.bern study shares this assessment, saying that Swiss voters – who experience hundreds of elections and referenda in their lifetimes – are very practised in processing contradictory arguments in politically charged campaigns.

But will our traditional ways of dealing with misinformation also serve in the new digital reality, or is there an urgent need to modify the legal framework? Drawing on legal expertise, the gfs.bern study recommends potentially extending the authorities' duty of vigilance to encompass private communications on social media and a corresponding duty to intervene in the case of clearly misleading information. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that any measure restricting content spread online also goes hand-in-hand with a restriction of freedom of expression and information. The citizens surveyed in the gfs.bern study are also aware of this aspect, and they voiced reservations regarding regulation. If at all, they are only in favour of legal measures to protect against attempted foreign influence in online political debate or to restrict personalised political advertising (microtargeting). Apart from that, they want to be supported, not protected, when forming an opinion, i.e. they would prefer

education and further training courses to acquire additional skills in dealing with the new media. And rather than being equipped to withstand the corrosive forces of the social media, as in the 'Service Citoyen', they would like to make better use of the positive potential that social networks hold for political opinion formation.

### **Conclusion: A digitised democracy is what we make of it**

A mushroom risotto confiscated by the police, a mind-altering pill, a mechanical thingummy that relentlessly tosses a coin in the air, heads or tails, over and over again. In the three artefacts created by Dezentrum, imagined variations of a digitised democracy take the shape of tangible objects in the here and now. Objects that provoke us, that force us to ask questions. They are messengers from the future whose physical presence proves that what will be has its roots in what already is today: new digital possibilities that can both underpin and undermine our democracy.

And so, we have to talk. At present, the digital transformation is in its early days, and we still have the opportunity to actively shape and negotiate the processes. The basic elements of the TA-SWISS study summarised in this report provide a foundation for society to conduct an open debate about the new, ambivalent possibilities digitisation holds for democracy.

For example, we need to discuss what is more important: free speech rights or protecting free opinion formation through stricter regulation of

digitisation in Swiss politics. And how should we deal with the fact that social media platforms push populist messaging, or that tools of civic technology like e-collecting may result in an inflated number of referenda that could bring Switzerland's system of consensus democracy to a standstill? Should we simply accept that new digital forms in politics can accelerate problematic developments that began already before the advent of digitisation? Should we continue to criticise the big commercial platform operators whose business models were never developed for democratic political purposes, who practise an Americanised approach to data protection and who therefore actually believe that they 'do no evil', as Google's motto purports? Or would it be wiser to seek digital alternatives such as independent, non-profit open-source platforms? And should we begin to hold politicians responsible for using social media to propagate their political communications despite the fact that these networks were never designed for the purpose?

The introduction of this summary points out that the digital transformation is interwoven in the fabric of our democracy. In this sense, digitisation with its potential for change is not per se a threat to democracy. Nevertheless, the developments must be observed, monitored and, where necessary, corrected, a condition that lends greater weight to gfs.bern's call for regular, approved monitoring of digitisation. These control processes would lay the groundwork for assessing the consequences digitisation has on Swiss politics, while also initiating fresh debate on the topic and enabling political conclusions to be drawn.





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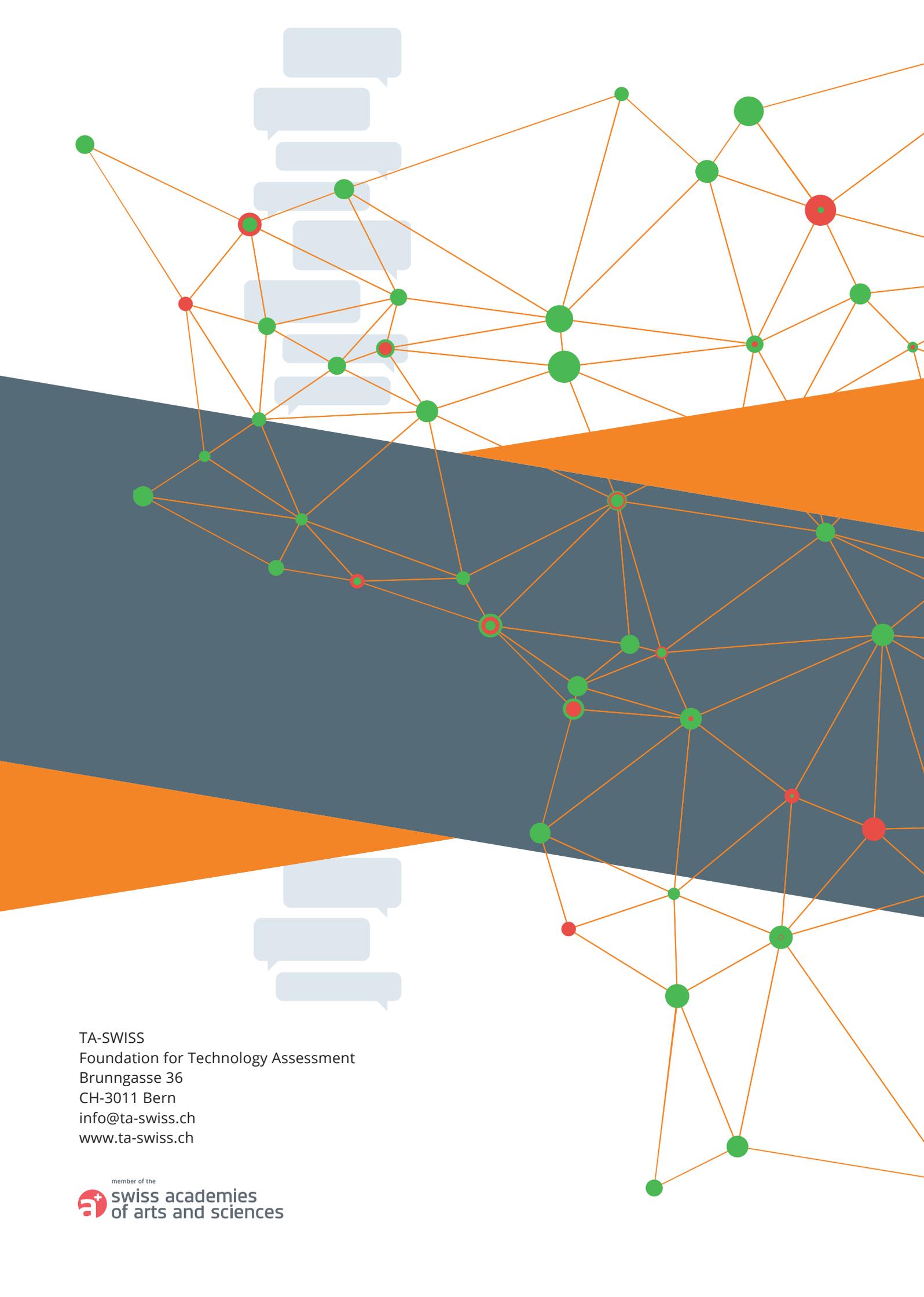
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