

Opportunities and threats in relation to the impact of tech-information intermediaries on the Swiss public

Management summary

Intermediaries mediate content between providers and end-users. Intermediaries can include search engines, social media (Facebook), multimedia platforms (YouTube), microblogging services (Twitter) and messenger services (WhatsApp, Telegram). In digital societies, it is increasingly these specific online platforms that select and algorithmically structure news and relevant information to allow searching for, and access to, such information. These intermediaries are considered to be central and increasingly important sources of information. As such, they exert a significant influence on modern opinion-forming processes, especially in the run-up to elections and popular votes. It is in this context that questions of the (potential) challenges and opportunities presented by intermediaries arise for the public.

The following summarises the central findings with regard to various aspects (communicator/user, content and impact of intermediaries) and uses these findings to identify the need for regulation and/or research.

Opportunities and threats in the communicator/user aspect

- The increased importance of intermediaries is fundamentally shifting the weight of communicators in the digital public. Cuts are being made in professional information journalism as a result of lower advertising revenues and decreased willingness to pay for journalistic content. In a public sphere made up of intermediaries, traditional standards of journalistic quality are falling.
- Switzerland has a very high internet usage rate. It is only older and/or educationally disadvantaged groups of people which are comparatively inactive on the internet. It is therefore only possible to apply the “first level digital divide” described in the literature, which identifies differences in internet access, to a very limited extent in Switzerland. In principle, everyone in Switzerland has the opportunity to receive information on relevant political processes and decisions, and to actively participate in discourse and information exchange.
- Greater differences can be observed in digital media literacy. In this case, older respondents in particular assess their online skills as comparatively poor, which indicates a second level digital divide in terms of internet skills. Here there is at least a risk that a lack of skills may lead to older people not having access to information circulating on intermediaries and that this information may be necessary to form opinions. Here, for

example, adult education programmes in the relation to media literacy could be envisaged.

- If we look not only at access but also at the participation of various stakeholders on intermediaries, we can see that the population has the opportunity (and also takes advantage of the opportunity) to make itself actively heard on Twitter. Intermediaries are therefore in a position to create opportunities for stakeholders in civil society to participate, which creates potential for democratisation and *power-sharing*. However, these results must also be seen in relation to the fact that not all Swiss people are active or passive users of Twitter.
- While the large number of heterogeneous stakeholders in civil society who have their say on Twitter indicates a reversal of traditional political and economic power structures, analyses of the representation of political decision-makers show that comparatively high-ranking officials (and persons seeking to hold such offices) have a particularly large network of followers and that the resource-related differences in power are therefore also encountered on intermediaries. However, politicians also enter into direct contact with citizens across party lines. Twitter has opened up a forum for direct, unfiltered exchange between political decision-makers and the electorate.
- There is also little empirical information about the Swiss public on intermediaries with regard to the influence of social bots, which have the potential to distort opinion through unlimited communication activities, especially during elections and popular votes. There is therefore a risk that human stakeholders (who do not communicate automatically) will no longer be heard or will be heard to a lesser extent. There is also a risk that users will be given a false picture of the distribution of opinion within the population and, as a result of a spiral of silence, no longer dare to participate in discourse. It is necessary in this case to examine the extent to which an obligation to provide identification could be effective, for example in the context of bot disclosure initiatives or other forms of self- and co-regulation for transparency.

Opportunities and threats in the content aspect

- There are a limited number of studies that deal with the responsiveness, deliberation/factuality and diversity of the content disseminated on intermediaries from a Swiss perspective. Findings to date give reason to assume that the prevalent focal points and positions differ only partially from those of traditional media reporting.
- The low barriers to access and the opportunity for anonymous communication also offer users a forum to publish defamatory, incivil, false and disparaging statements. There is no empirical evidence as to the exact extent of the phenomenon of hate speech and disinformation in Switzerland. There are, however, indications that populist

content and populist stakeholders often reach the public via intermediaries. The benefit to the user of forming an opinion or making a decision on the basis of such content (which is typically heavily truncated and polarising) must be considered doubtful.

Opportunities and threats in the impact aspect

- There has to date been little evidence of fragmentation among users in filter bubbles or echo chambers. Findings that suggest significant polarisation usually refer to the US context, which is characterised by a highly polarised political and social climate. In the case of Switzerland, which is a strong dialogue-oriented consensus democracy, there is currently little reason to fear the emergence of significant echo chambers or filter bubbles.
- There should, however, be a critical discussion with regard to the fact that the selection or addressing of persons with similar views and opinions can be strengthened by algorithmic selection in a manner that cannot be recognised and is not transparent. It is particularly concerning that the mechanisms and logic of selection have remained largely opaque to users and research due to a lack of transparency on the part of platform operators, who act primarily according to economic maxims. It would appear that considerations and measures to enforce a duty of transparency for intermediaries are required in this case.

Finally, it should be noted that the opportunities and threats of intermediaries are still not completely understood. The results presented in this report and the assumptions made regarding opportunities and threats must therefore be regarded as incomplete and provisional.