

# Does the Internet Deliver?

Eight Values as a Yardstick for the Production, Moderation and Regulation of Public Communication on the Internet

0/ Introduction

# 1 Freedom or Control?

- 2/ Equality or Inequality?
- 3/ Gains or Losses in Diversity?
- 4/ Power Levelling or Power Concentration?
- 5/ Integration or Disintegration of the Public Sphere?
- 6/ High or Low Information Quality?
- 7/ High or Low Discourse Quality?
- 8/ Security or Vulnerability in the Network?

# Freedom or Control?

## IN SHORT

*The notion that the Internet public sphere is a sphere of unlimited freedom, has now turned out to be cyberutopia. Conditions for free communication on the web are set not only by the state, but also by intermediaries who are vital for enabling broad participation by citizens in public communication.*

The value “freedom”, which is stressed in the liberal tradition, is restricted or implemented by states, companies and other social forces. The individual freedom of communication and reception can be distinguished from the institutional freedom of the media. This is associated with different areas of protection for different types of communication: namely individual and mass communication.<sup>2</sup> The British historian Timothy Garton Ash<sup>3</sup> in his book “Free Speech – Ten Principles for a Connected World” distinguishes four reasons given for freedom of expression in the tradition of Western thought: it is a necessary precondition for achieving individual humanity, for discovering the truth, for good governance and for diversity.

## Gains in Freedom on the Network

How are the conditions for realising these freedoms changing on the Internet? The *optimistic view* is that it gives greater freedom to citizens around the world. In his famous cyberspace declaration of independence,<sup>4</sup> network activist John Perry Barlow<sup>5</sup> has called on governments and industry not to interfere with the network. He sees no need for government regulation of third parties because users can regulate their own affairs. Not only is it not necessary, it is also not possible to control the Internet from the outside. It is also looked on as a useful instrument in the struggle for freedom in authoritarian states<sup>6</sup> – an expectation that was nurtured during the “Arab Spring”.

Less euphoric, but nevertheless clearly positive, Garton Ash assesses the gain in freedom that has already been achieved with the help of the Internet: “In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first, the combination of the First Amendment legal tradition in the world’s most powerful state and the pro-free speech cultures of private American platforms such as Wikipedia, Twitter and Google produced a great leap forward in transnational freedom of expression.”<sup>7</sup>

## Loss of Freedom on the Network

The *pessimistic view*, on the other hand, assumes increasing control by states, companies and other social forces.<sup>8</sup> The NSA affair<sup>9</sup> has shown that state monitoring of data traffic also takes place much more intensively in Western democracies than was previously the known. The most prominent critic of cyberutopias and cyber naivety is the Belarusian journalist Evgeny Morozov, who deems the Internet to be a powerful instrument of oppression.<sup>10</sup> He doubts that there have been any so-called Twitter revolutions, i. e. that the web ever served as a tool for liberation from authoritarian systems.<sup>11</sup> He also criticises the West’s technological determinism: “The problem is

that the West began its quest for Internet freedom based on the mostly untested cyberutopian assumption that more connections and more networks necessarily lead to greater freedom or greater democracy.”<sup>12</sup>

Freedom House collates and evaluates information about censorship, the persecution of network activists and other restrictions of freedom on the Internet for *countries* worldwide. The report “Freedom on the Network 2018”<sup>13</sup> awards (minus) points for access barriers (max. 25 points), content restrictions (35) and violations of user rights (40). Out of a total of 65 countries, only 15 were classified as “free” (0–30 points), but 30 as “partly free” (31–60) and 20 as “not free” (61–100). Germany ranked fourth in the world with 19 points. The highest level of restriction was observed in China (88 points). “Internet controls within China reached new extremes in 2018 with the implementation of the sweeping Cybersecurity Law and upgrades to surveillance technology.”<sup>14</sup>

The freedom to inform and speak publicly without hindrance must not be taken for granted on the Internet either. It is *intermediaries* such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google that make it possible to exercise these fundamental rights as “privately owned public spaces”,<sup>15</sup> while also being able to restrict them.<sup>16</sup> They therefore share responsibility for their implementation. The values of the intermediaries’ operators, the private power they wield in a large number of countries due to the (effective) monopoly position of their offers, and the conflict between economic and social goals, i. e. the “constant tension between the public service they offer and the private profit they pursue”,<sup>17</sup> give cause for concern. There is a threat to free communication particularly whenever intermediaries and – not only authoritarian but also democratic – states work together.<sup>18</sup> The non-commercial online encyclopaedia Wikipedia offers an alternative model with its “balance of democracy and authority”.<sup>19</sup>

- 1 McQuail (1992: 67–70, 99–140, 2003:70, 79–81, 2013: 61–64). As an overview of the research on freedom of communication and the situation by continent see Czepek (2016: 35–41). On the role of the USA, Europe and China in securing and restricting freedom of communication see Garton Ash (2017: 31–47).
- 2 For example, in Germany Article 5(1) of the constitution (Grundgesetz) covers freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of the press, freedom of broadcasting and freedom to film. In addition to the subjective-legal function of freedom of opinion, which applies to the individual as a ground of defence, freedom of the media has an objective/legal function, which relates to guaranteeing the free formation of public and individual opinion. These demarcations are open to scrutiny by media convergence and especially by the multi-optional potential of the Internet (Deutscher Bundestag 2013: 9–14).
- 3 Garton Ash (2017: 73–79).
- 4 Greenberg (2016).
- 5 Barlow (1996).
- 6 A comparative study confirmed the relationship between increasing internet use and a rising number of protests in authoritarian states (Ruijgrok 2017).
- 7 Garton Ash (2017: 53).
- 8 The abuse of freedom must also be taken into account. Morozov (2011: 245–266), referring to anti-democratic, nationalist, religious and criminal groups that use the possibilities of the Internet to better network themselves, emphasises that more freedom alone does not mean social gain. Garton Ash (2017: 86–114) discusses the legitimacy of grounds for restricting freedom of expression, especially harm to others and insults. He sees considerable problems in laws against insult, hate speech and discrimination, because the subjective feelings evoked on the victim side can easily be exploited (Garton Ash 2017: 214–229). Garton Ash (2017: 94) argues for a liberal “culture of open debate and robust civility” in the global “cosmopolis”.
- 9 National Security Agency
- 10 Morozov (2011: 227).
- 11 Morozov (2011: 1–31).
- 12 Morozov (2011: 253).
- 13 Freedom House (2018: 5). As another report on Internet censorship in 45 countries see Zittrain et al. (2017). On the “Mapping Digital Media 2011–2014” project, which examined the situation in 56 countries, see Nissen (2016). On the method and criticism of such rankings see Czepek (2016: 28–35).
- 14 Freedom House (2018: 6). See also Strittmatter (2019).
- 15 Garton Ash (2017: 48).
- 16 Garton Ash (2017: 47–56, 167–170).
- 17 Garton Ash (2017: 50).
- 18 Garton Ash (2017: 53–56).
- 19 Garton Ash (2017: 172).

## Literature

- B** Barlow, J.P. (1996, February 8). A declaration of the independence of cyberspace. *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.eff.org/de/cyberspace-independence>
- C** Czepek, A. (2016). Pressefreiheit – Hindernisse und Grenzen. In K. Meier & C. Neuberger (Eds.), *Journalismusforschung. Stand und Perspektiven* (2nd ed., pp. 23–45). Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- D** Deutscher Bundestag (2013, March 19). *Neunter Zwischenbericht der Enquete-Kommission „Internet und digitale Gesellschaft“. Zugang, Struktur und Sicherheit im Netz. Drucksache 17/12541. Deutscher Bundestag, 17. Wahlperiode*. Berlin: Deutscher Bundestag.
- F** Freedom House (2018). *Freedom on the net: The rise of digital authoritarianism*. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN\\_2018\\_Final\\_Booklet\\_11\\_1\\_2018.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FOTN_2018_Final_Booklet_11_1_2018.pdf)
- G** Garton Ash, T. (2017). *Free speech: Ten principles for a connected world*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Greenberg, A. (2016, August 2). It's been 20 years since this man declared cyberspace independence. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2016/02/its-been-20-years-since-this-man-declared-cyberspace-independence/>
- M** McQuail, D. (1992). *Media performance: Mass communication and the public interest*. London: SAGE.
- McQuail, D. (2003). *Media accountability and freedom of publication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McQuail, D. (2013). *Journalism and society*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: How not to liberate the world*. London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books.
- N** Nissen, C.S. (2016). Media freedom revisited: The widening gap between ideals and reality. In U. Carlsson (Ed.), *Freedom of expression and media in transition: Studies and reflections in the digital age* (pp. 53–59). Göteborg: Nordicom.
- R** Ruijgrok, K. (2017). From the web to the streets: internet and protests under authoritarian regimes. *Democratization*, 24(3), 498–520.
- S** Strittmatter, K. (2019). *We have been harmonised: Life in China's surveillance state*. London: Old Street Publishing.
- Z** Zittrain, J.L., Faris, R., Noman, H., Clark, J., Tilton, C., & Morrison-Westphal, R. (2017). *The shifting landscape of global internet censorship*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society. Retrieved from <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2993485>



## The Author

Christoph Neuberger is a full professor for communication science at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and the executive director of the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society ('The German Internet Institute'), Berlin, which is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Previously, he was a professor at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (2011–2019) and the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (2002–2011). After his dissertation and habilitation at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt, he held a visiting professorship at the Universität Leipzig (2001/02). He is a regular member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BAdW) and the National Academy of Science and Engineering (acatech). He was awarded with several prizes, such as the Schelling Prize of the BAdW for outstanding scientific achievements (2016). His fields of research include the Internet public sphere, online journalism, activities of the press and broadcasting media on the Internet, search engines, social media, journalism theory, media quality, as well as media regulation.

## Imprint

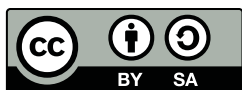
### Contact:

Anna Hoffmann  
International Media Programmes  
European and International Cooperation  
T +49 30 / 26 996-3388  
[anna.hoffmann@kas.de](mailto:anna.hoffmann@kas.de)

Dr. Sören Soika  
International Media Programmes  
European and International Cooperation  
T +49 30 / 26 996-3388  
[soeren.soika@kas.de](mailto:soeren.soika@kas.de)

### Published by:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2020, Berlin  
Editor: Philippa Carr (MA), Freelance German into English Translator and Proofreader  
Cover page image: © shutterstock/raigvi  
Design and typesetting: yellow too Pasiak Horntrich GbR



This publication is published under a Creative Commons license:  
"Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 international"  
(CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>

ISBN 978-3-95721-693-9

[www.kas.de](http://www.kas.de)