
EU: JRC Report, online technologies and social media influence political behaviour and democracy. “Risk of misleading information”

48% of Europeans use social media every day or almost every day to stay informed, be entertained, shop and stay in touch with friends. “These platforms have revolutionised the way we experience politics, by engaging more citizens in the political process and enabling minority voices to be heard”. This is according to the Report “Technology and Democracy: understanding the influence of online technologies on political behaviour and decision-making” published by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) today. The Report shows that platforms “also allow polarising messages and unreliable information to be spread easily” to the detriment of “our ability to make informed political decisions”, which can have “a dangerous impact on our democratic societies”. Four key “pressure points” are identified: the “attention economy”, that is, the ability to capture and keep our attention as well as to shape our political views and actions without us realising what is behind that influence. Then there is the “choice architectures” of platforms which encourage people to interact, without them being aware of what data they produce and provide to others. Then the “algorithmic content” - third pressure point - is so complex that it raises problems for transparency and accountability. The final pressure point is “disinformation”: people have a “predisposition to orient towards negative news”. When coupled with algorithms that promote content with “a high level of engagement”, online platforms can “easily amplify the reach of false and misleading information”.

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