

Young but not Naive: Leaders of Tomorrow Expect Limits to Digital Freedom to Preserve Freedom

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KEYWORDS

Freedom of Choice, Internet, Social Media, Algorithms, Survey, Leaders of Tomorrow

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The downsides of unregulated online freedom ✕ In the year 2020, the downsides of unregulated online freedom have become more obvious than ever before: There have been various examples of online bullying, fake news – which in times of a global pandemic have caused unprecedented harm – and populist propaganda, which shaped, for instance, the American presidential election. This has put pressure on social media platforms to abandon their laissez-faire approach, rejecting responsibility for online content by claiming they are “just the messenger,” instead of preventing hate speech and fake news on the Internet. While such demands are not new, in our survey, they come from an unusual corner: digital natives.

Against unlimited freedom of speech on the Internet

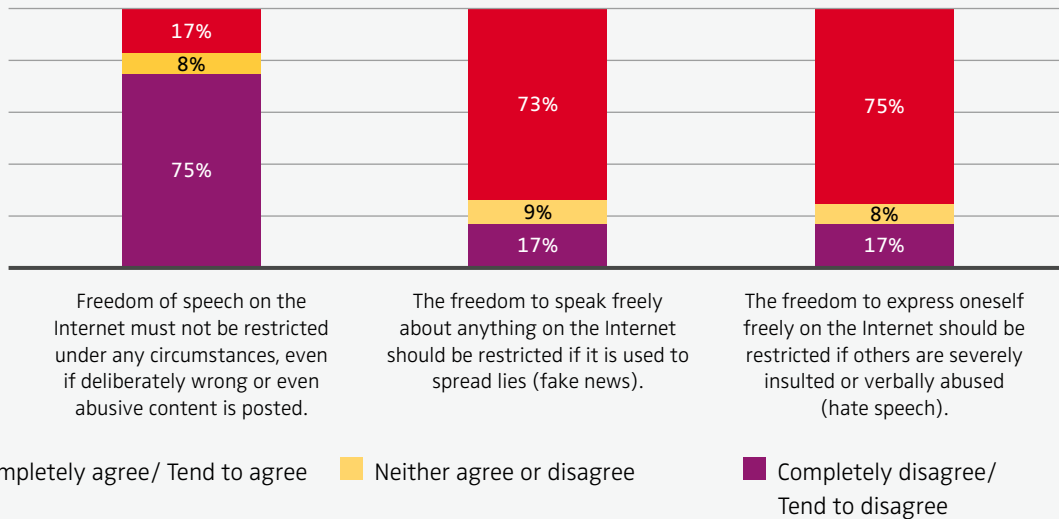
✕ Where should the boundaries of freedom of speech on the Internet be drawn? The Leaders of Tomorrow take a clear position against unlimited freedom of speech on the Internet and demand restrictions against hate speech and fake news (Figure 1). Women view the limiting of hate speech as particularly favorable. They agree more strongly than men with the statement that the freedom of the Internet should be restricted to prevent it, while there is no striking difference to men regarding the statement about fake news. One reason for the gender difference may be that hate speech is not only more prevalent against women but frequently takes the form of sexual harassment.



Results of a survey indicate that even digital natives do not embrace new technologies unquestioningly, but with some skepticism and caution.



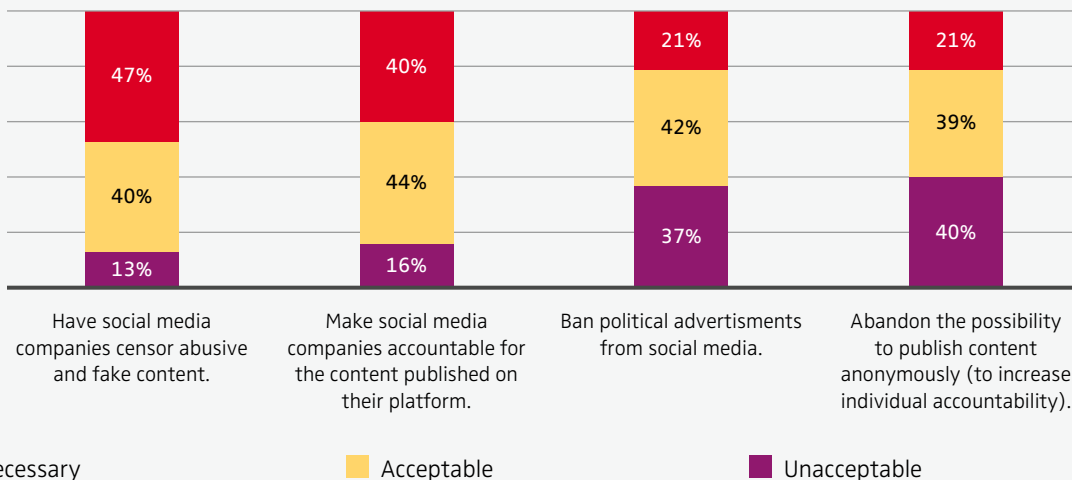
FIGURE 1 > The Leaders of Tomorrow take a very clear position against unlimited freedom of speech on the Internet



Social media companies should be held responsible ✕ A variety of measures against malevolent behavior on the Internet are currently discussed in the media, and all raise considerable controversy. The Leaders of Tomorrow see social media companies in particular as being responsible for curtailing malevolent behavior (Figure 2). Almost 90% say

that it is at least acceptable to have social media companies censor abusive and fake content, and more than 80% would even make them accountable for it. Compared to their clear position on the responsibility of social media companies, they are more reserved about a general ban of political advertising in social media: 63% consider such a ban – as

FIGURE 2 > The Leaders of Tomorrow think that social media companies should be obliged to prevent and censor abusive content on the Internet



BOX 1



The “Voices of the Leaders of Tomorrow” survey

The St. Gallen Symposium is a yearly conference taking place at the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland). At the two-day event, key decision-makers from the fields of economics, politics, science, and society meet and exchange with the next generation of leaders. These “Leaders of Tomorrow” qualify either through a global essay competition aimed at graduate students, or they attend based on their professional or academic merit through a strict hand-selection process. Most likely, this selected group will have a significant influence on future economic developments and societies. The entire conference is organized by the university’s International Students’ Committee, a team of 35 students who pause their studies for 10 months to engage in the realization of the intergenerational dialogue at the conference.

Each year, the Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions and the St. Gallen Symposium join forces and ask this group of young talent – mostly aged under 30 and therefore digital natives – about their views regarding a topic of current interest. In February 2020, 898 promising young people (62% male, 38% female) from more than 90 countries all over the world accepted the invitation to share their opinions about “the impact of new technologies on human freedom of choice.” In this article, we summarize their views concerning the “dark sides” of online freedom. The full report, “Human freedom and choice in the light of technological change” is available at nim.org and symposium.org.



Most Leaders of Tomorrow support the idea that data collection by platform providers should only be allowed with explicit consent.



recently included in Twitter’s business policies – at least acceptable. Finally, despite possible detrimental consequences for minorities in many parts of the world, 60% of the Leaders of Tomorrow even consider abandoning online anonymity to increase individual accountability at least acceptable.

Personal data should be controlled by its owners ✕ Young people are sometimes accused of being too generous or even careless with their personal data. Questions such as whether the collection of this data should be allowed or forbidden by default, or to what extent users should be remunerated for it, have been topics of heated discussions. Data breach scandals have further fueled the debates. It seems that these

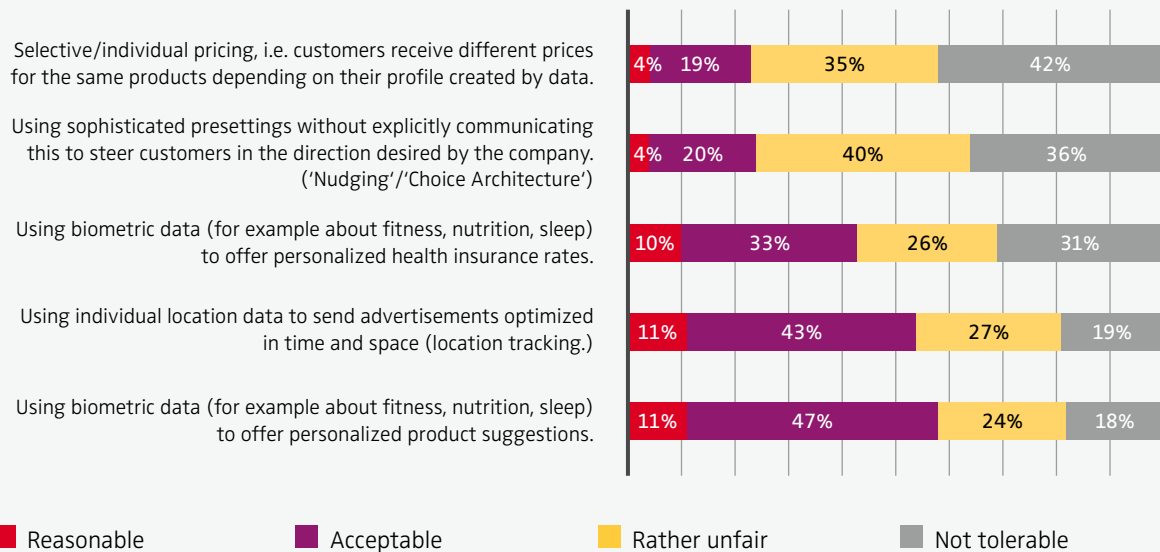
discussions have left their mark: Most Leaders of Tomorrow support the idea that data collection by platform providers should only be allowed with explicit consent. Furthermore, they take a skeptical view on different smart digital applications that companies may use (Figure 3). “Selective pricing” – offering customers different data-based prices for the same products to maximize profits – and “choice architecture” – steering consumers in the direction desired by the company without disclosing this strategy – were rated particularly poorly. Three quarters assessed these measures as rather unfair or even not tolerable. The majority flips, however, when personal data is used for different purposes: 54% find the use of individual location data to optimize



Balancing the opportunities of disruptive technologies like AI with retaining more than a mere illusion of free choice will be an important challenge for the future.



FIGURE 3 > The Leaders of Tomorrow take a critical and differentiated stance towards companies' usage of personal data by means of new technologies



advertisements reasonable or at least acceptable, and 58% would accept that biometric data is used for personalized product suggestions. But these are narrow majorities. Even for these measures, the share of votes against is quite high.

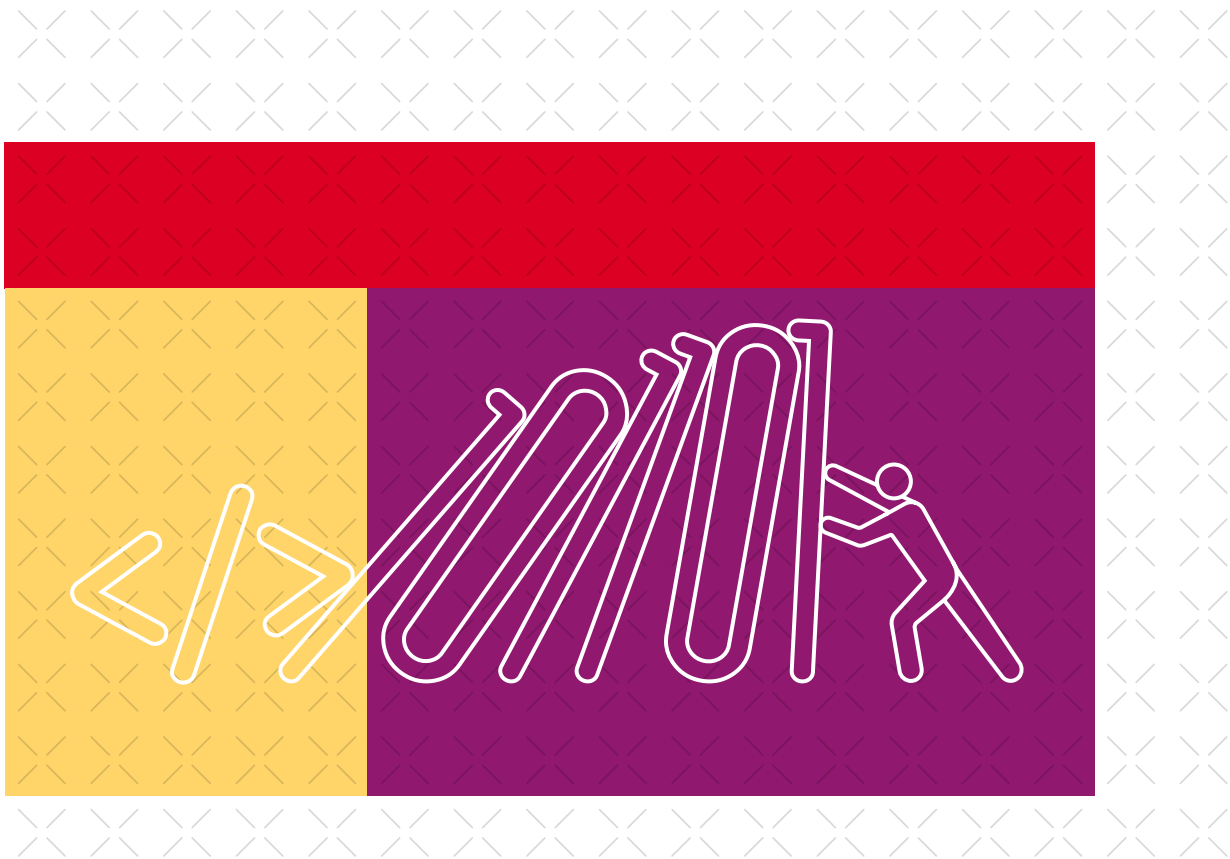
Against technology that limits users' freedom of choice

✗ Of the above-mentioned applications, those that lack transparency and cannot be influenced by the customer are met with the highest extent of objection. The question of who is in control of personal data matters to the Leaders of Tomorrow, and their position is clear: They want to stay and feel in control. This is a common theme in the survey results and becomes apparent in the answers to other questions

as well: Mobile technology and filtering algorithms are also not unanimously appreciated for their convenience, but they spark skepticism because they restrict, patronize or simply interfere with a person's free choice.

Have we reached a turning point?

✗ In many areas, we have already become used to simply following recommendations that technology makes for us. We are, for example, fine with receiving information about "reality" that is no-longer shared and objective but is customized and tailored for each of us, and many of us enjoy the convenience of preselected choice options offered by algorithms. This raises the important question of whether we are still guiding technology



or if technology has started guiding us. The Leaders of Tomorrow are very aware of the new types of constraints and dependencies that come with increasingly sophisticated technologies. Apparently, the younger generation is keeping an eye open for threats looming behind new technological developments – and it demands changes that give control back to the users. They also see the risks arising from the behavior of people who are abusing the freedom of the Internet and the power of new technologies – and they want to see these risks mitigated by governments and companies as well as individual actors. Taken together, the survey results indicate that they do not embrace new technologies naively and unquestioningly but with some skepticism and caution. Such a critical stance appears helpful when defining the scope with which new technologies should be allowed to take control in our daily lives. Balancing the opportunities of disruptive technologies like AI with retaining more than a mere illusion of free choice will be an important challenge for the future. Whether the new generation of leaders will be up to it remains to be seen. ✕



FURTHER READING

Gaspar, C.; Dieckmann, A.; Neus, A. (2020): Voices of the Leaders of Tomorrow: Human freedom and choice in the light of technological change. Nuremberg Institute for Market Decisions & St. Gallen Symposium