

Searching for Truth:
Propaganda, Technology and Social Division in Gen Z
by Lola Witzel

In recent years, our generation has been confronted with new challenges - often in fields that have only emerged recently. Therefore, these challenges are yet to be explored. Globalisation allows us, and at the same time demands from us to work together. To that end, we need to identify problems, possible solutions and our abilities we can use to solve these collectively. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the worldwide discussion. After participating in the award by submitting essays dealing with these challenges and solutions, I initiated a conversation to further discuss my topics, which will be presented in this following report.

In a conversation with the former Soviet Union citizen, Ludmilla Soldatova, I was sensitised to the topic of propaganda and introduced to the dangerous impacts of it. Then, in the course of an assignment in my previous semester, I concentrated on the white nationalist movement in the United States and saw dangerous similarities, which we addressed in our discussion. The main problem of propaganda is that neutral information is withheld from citizens/members of particular groups and instead, they are given the illusion that only they know the “truth”. As soon as members enter the group, they develop tunnel vision and get their information almost entirely from exclusively, in this example, white nationalist websites such as “Stormfront”. Of course, the major difference between propaganda in the Soviet Union and white nationalism in the US is that white nationalists have a choice. But, in our discussion we agreed that the outcomes present similar, very concerning problems. Propaganda, in general, gives a distorted picture, a danger for every society. We can even see this phenomenon in these times of the pandemic: disinformation about the effectiveness of vaccines (or the “truth” about them; there are many conspiracy theories), as well as propaganda about the origin of the virus, divide our society.

New technologies allow us, to get information from anyone, at any time and about anything. People who have little access to information and education due to their social situation have been more exposed to social debates and information through the internet and new media, which is fundamentally a development with significant positive potential. At the same time, however, the reach and influence of misinformation and conspiracy theories increased, especially since many people can hardly distinguish them from serious news. Before we had the ability to share

information via such platforms, little rumours did not spread that easily. A few people might have come up with a conspiracy theory, given out some flyers and thus, only had a small reach. Nowadays, on the contrary, rumours can be shared globally and turned into serious propaganda, the perfect ground for movements such as white nationalism.

However, there are some attempts to limit false information online. In Germany, for example, posts about Covid-19 always contain a link to the official website of the government, so that people can get their information from official sources. But, this might not be sufficient. We discussed ideas on how to banish information that is proven to be wrong. But there is a very fine borderline to freedom of speech and expression. If, for example, the state were to hire people to detect false information online, these people would have to be extremely neutral, otherwise we would adopt characteristics of a police state. Therefore, our generation has to face the challenge of finding a way to avoid fake-news and other propagandistic information, without limiting freedom of speech and expression. As a first attempt, it would be reasonable to work specifically towards better filtering of information, already at school. Especially, as agreed on in our discussion, because even relatively limited exposure to the subject matter over a limited period of time is enough to sensitise people to misinformation.

However, new technologies and especially social media are new phenomena, which have emerged rapidly and uncontrolled. They are often considered to be major opportunities: they can be used as a source of information, a chance of sharing culture, fashion and other forms of interaction. However, in our discussion we addressed psychological side effects, which recently came more and more into the spotlight. A comprehensive study about the connection of psychological wellbeing and social media¹ has indicated, that there is a strong correlation between social media and depression or suicide rates. The constant opportunity of accessing other peoples' profiles initiates comparison and can trigger body shaming or the feeling of missing out, as many interviewees agreed upon. Therefore, we identified its impact as a severe challenge for our generation. We should detect the opportunities of social media and be aware of the risks, so that we can learn how to use social media effectively.

However, in our discussion about propaganda in the Soviet Union, we also discussed general aspects of its political system, which included positive side effects as well: there was a spirit of national unity, which is often absent today. Nowadays, there are many ways to get in touch with different communities and people around the world. One can live in Germany, but have close

¹ Dhir, A., Yossatorn, Y., Kaur, P., Chen, S.(2018) *Online social media fatigue and psychological wellbeing—A study of compulsive use, fear of missing out, fatigue, anxiety and depression*. International Journal of Information Management. Volume 40,Pages 141-152, ISSN 0268-4012. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.01.012>.

(online) friends in Columbia and get familiar with the culture. Of course, this can be considered a major opportunity and enrich one's life. But at the same time, one might drop German traditions and feel less attached to one's own country. This is not fundamentally wrong, but if this is the case for many, the national spirit in Germany may weaken significantly. Now, Germany is not an ideal example as it has a very difficult past, but in our discussion we agreed, that having access to so many different cultures can be enlightening, but also entails the risk of loss of culture. Nevertheless, culture can be seen as a luxury. This is independent of whether the culture in question is national, continental or global. A rather concerning problem is the shrinking feeling of responsibility for one's own country. Take a pro-democratic person in a non-democratic country. There are two possibilities: stay and fight for change or emigrate. Changes in a system take a long time. Fighting for change can be very frustrating, and one needs to accept relapses. If, however, you have constant access to the lives of other people in other parts of the world, for example via social media, there is a danger that frustrations will overcome you and you will eventually give up the will to fight for your country and simply emigrate. However, the immigration to hotspots also means a growing population in a certain area, which entails other problems, one of which is a growing competition.

In modern society, the feeling of competition seems to be stronger than before. This is especially apparent in the job market. Not only the growing population leads to this problem, but also technology, which allows us to apply from anywhere in the world for a job and therefore, significantly increases the number of applicants. In our generation, sticking out is one of the most important traits one should have, no matter if one applies for higher education, a job or an internship. For many young people, this can be extremely stressful. Simply being good at something is not sufficient. Rather, there is the pressure of having an exciting, impressing Curriculum Vitae; but this can divide our society even more. Especially international experience is valued more than ever. Yet, not everyone might have the resources to afford that. There are attempts, such as Erasmus, that help to overcome such divisions. However, even when applying for such programs, many students feel stressed. Of course, this is common for competition and was equally a problem in the older generations. But the constant access to information about other people, who already achieved much more in their lives, makes even great achievements seem trivial. Personally, I was often in situations in which I admired people for their achievements in life, but quickly realized that they themselves thought little of their accomplishments "because there are always others who have produced something much better". This constant comparison is a grave issue that is often underestimated and needs to be addressed by our generation.

But does our generation have a beacon of hope? We identified social division as the biggest hurdle for our generation. Especially minority groups still struggle for full integration into society. Therefore, notions such as political correctness, postmodern tolerance or virtue signalling were initiated to oppose discrimination and prejudices. Of course, these are concepts that are needed on our way to social solidarity between different groups and which save us from conflicts. However, in our discussion we agreed that, although such concepts are important, in the long-term, solutions would be more sustainable if acceptance came naturally, rather than as a requirement. Forcing certain virtues upon society may divide it further, as some people may struggle to address others properly or act correctly in certain environments. As a result many hesitate before acting and thus, avoid such situations. However, we believe that the most promising concept is the coaction between cultural understanding and curiosity, an ability prevalent in our generation. A big part of our generation is not merely tolerating anyone as such, instead people are genuinely interested in others' cultural background. If we want people to accept others, they need to do so out of their own motivation. We agreed, that the best way is to simply engage in direct dialogue to raise awareness and acceptance on a far more natural, and therefore sustainable level. Thus, this ability of genuine curiosity seems highly valuable to me and gives me hope for the future.

Overall, our generation has to face a lot of challenges, many of which will take time, effort, and courage to tackle. However, it is important that the potential of our generation to contribute to society is not overlooked. Many of the indicated challenges are recent due to globalisation, technology, and other contemporary phenomena that shape our generation. Due to their different generational experience, previous generations are often suspicious of innovative efforts to tackle these issues. Take the example of Greta Thunberg. When she first skipped school to fight against climate change, no one believed that she could achieve anything significant. Mostly, one is told: to really make a difference, one has to study, collect arguments and make important contacts. Then, the 15-year-old Greta comes along and suddenly triggers a worldwide movement that ultimately even influenced environmental policy decisions. In our discussion, we agreed that the voice of the younger generation is increasingly heard and accepted. Nevertheless, it is important to guide young people and help them execute their ideas. We believe that our current development is very promising. We are therefore curious and cautiously optimistic as to what the future has to offer.

Participants of the Discussion:

Sissi Boakye Ameyaw, Sociology Student at the University of Duisburg, Germany

Katharina Lippert, Psychology Graduate at the University of Florida, US

Lorenzo Hazard, LAS Student at UCF, Germany

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Mathilda Bach, Elementary School Education at the University of Duisburg, Germany

Sören Poppinga, Economic Student at the University of Mannheim

Anna S., Participant in the Voluntary Social Year

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