CIRCE

Empowering Democracy: Corporate Strategies for Enabling Participative Social Media Campaigns Inspired by the Cultural and Creative Economy

CIRCE Creative Impact Research Centre Europe

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Contents

1. Summary

The project "Empowering Democracy: Corporate Strategies for Enabling Participative Social Media Campaigns" addresses the critical challenge of countering the dominant influence of right-wing populism on social media, where extremist narratives often overshadow democratic voices. The rise of politically polarized content has left democratic values struggling to compete in an environment overwhelmed by sensationalist and radical messages (Hartwell & Devinney, 2024). This initiative seeks to create a nurturing ground for developing participative social media campaigns that amplify perspectives and narratives resonating on an emotional level. The Cultural and Creative Economy (CCE) plays a pivotal role in this process (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022), offering innovative solutions during times of significant societal change. By encouraging unconventional thinking and breaking traditional boundaries, the CCE enables the creation of impactful, emotionally engaging content that fosters trust and a sense of belonging, crucial for reconnecting people with democratic values.

To achieve scalable impact, the project has evolved to include companies as essential partners. Companies, often seen as stable institutions, authorities and sources of belonging, are well-positioned to lead these efforts within their social media strategies and organizational culture. The proposed platform enables companies to implement these participative social media campaigns internally and externally.

2. Problem and Evidence

The project "Empowering Democracy: Corporate Strategies for Enabling Participative Social Media Campaigns" is grounded in the pressing need to counteract the disproportionate influence of right-wing populism on social media in Germany. This challenge is particularly evident with movements like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which dominates political interactions on platforms such as YouTube, claiming up to 82% of political engagement on these channels. This digital imbalance reflects broader societal divides and exacerbates polarization, posing significant risks to democratic cohesion, especially in vulnerable regions such as East Germany (Kinderman, 2024).

Data from recent analyses, such as those conducted by Correctiv, reveal that the AfD has strategically invested in a robust social media presence, with a team of around 160

3

social media managers compared to just seven for the SPD, one of the main democratic parties. This heavy investment enables the AfD to effectively shape the political perspectives of many, particularly young voters, whose views are increasingly influenced by online interactions (Correctiv, 2024). The resulting disparity has led to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the normalization of extremist content, underscoring the urgency of addressing these issues.

This project seeks to provide a counter-narrative by focusing on the narratives, beliefs, and concerns of undecided or swing voters, who may be particularly vulnerable to populist messaging. By understanding these perspectives, the project aims to design participative social media campaigns that resonate on an emotional level, creating an inclusive and engaging digital space for democratic values. Engaging companies as partners in this endeavor adds a strategic layer, as businesses are often seen as stable and trustworthy institutions that foster a sense of belonging (Edelman, 2023). Through these collaborations, the project not only counters right-wing narratives but also enhances its scalability and impact, positioning companies as essential contributors to democratic resilience.

At the same time, companies are confronting a dual predicament: managing internal ideological conflicts stemming from rising right-wing influences among employees, while simultaneously striving to attract skilled international talent. This situation necessitates the cultivation of an inclusive and diverse work environment, a task made more complex by the pervasive influence of right-wing narratives in social media (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).

Research indicates that corporate engagement in promoting democratic values not only addresses these internal challenges but also enhances competitive positioning in the global talent market (Randstad, 2023).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the risks associated with **impact washing**—a phenomenon where companies overstate or misrepresent their contributions to social and democratic causes without delivering meaningful change. To address the risk of **impact washing** and ensure meaningful corporate engagement in democratic initiatives, this project proposes the introduction of a **"Democratic Impact Certification"** (or "Democratic Badge"). This certification would require participating

4

companies to commit to a transparent and measurable framework of criteria (see impact section for more details).

3. Journey

The project began with the idea of using social media campaigns to counteract right-wing populist trends and strengthen democratic values. The initial aim was to develop participative social media strategies that would reach a broad audience, inspiring people to engage with democratic principles and resist radicalization (Weisskircher, 2020). However, it quickly became clear that the impact would be greater by actively involving companies, positioning them as key actors in promoting democratic values through both external and internal social media campaigns (Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020). A participatory approach ensures that the content resonates with the target audience, as it incorporates their narratives, concerns, and lived experiences, fostering a deeper connection and engagement.

Step 1: Initial Research and Expert Consultations

In the first phase I conducted interviews with several political activists and academics in the democratic space as well as 2 social media experts specialized to work with swing voters to better understand their narratives, beliefs, and social dynamics and to analyze the reach and scalability of similar, earlier campaigns. The results showed that individual social media campaigns often have limited reach and minimal impact on influencing voter behavior or political engagement (Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, & Hegelich, 2020). This insight led to the consideration to actively involve companies, enabling them to create effective campaigns with a broader societal influence.

Step 2: Narrative Analysis and the Role of Companies

A deeper analysis revealed that many swing voters, particularly those leaning toward the AfD, are often searching for a sense of belonging, which they sometimes hope to find in far-right communities (Pesthy, Mader, & Schoen, 2021). In East Germany, there is a growing mistrust of governmental institutions and political actors, whereas employers are still often seen as moral and stable institutions that can offer a sense of community and direction (Nyberg & Murray, 2023). Conversations with two representatives from two different federal business associations confirmed that companies are increasingly facing internal right-wing tendencies and are interested in

5

maintaining a positive image as democratic employers to remain attractive to international talent. These findings underscored the potential of integrating companies as key actors in promoting democratic values.

Step 3: Workshops with Company Representatives, Social Media Experts, and Connection to the Cultural and Creative Economy (CCE)

To accelerate my learnings and findings, I organized two workshops, each with two company representatives and two social media experts. A key focus was the close connection to the CCE. The CCE fosters new ways of thinking and creative solutions in times of uncertainty and change, contributing to solving societal challenges through unconventional ideas and innovative practices (Baumgarth et al., 2020). In this context, social media enables an immense reach and offers a space for creative forms of expression, such as memes, short videos, and interactive content, which enhance engagement with democratic values.

During the workshops, all participants underlined that participative social media campaigns, similar to effective brand initiatives, need to be anchored both internally and externally to be truly effective. Internally, two workshop formats were developed to actively engage employees and create a sense of belonging to counteract internal right-wing tendencies. Externally, the developed campaigns are designed to publicly demonstrate the company's democratic commitment and strengthen its employer brand. The connection to the CCE is underscored by the use of creative and interactive methods in these campaigns, which raise public awareness of democratic issues and motivate active civic engagement (Flew, 2019).

Moreover, social media serves as a vital platform that enables the CCE to amplify its transformative impact on democratic engagement. It provides immense reach and allows for the rapid dissemination of creative content, creating a space for innovative formats that are aesthetically appealing and easily accessible. This democratization of access to culture allows a broad population to engage with cultural content and societal debates, which is essential for a functioning democracy (UNCTAD, 2022).

Step 4: Campaign Strategies developed in workshops with social media experts

In the workshop with the two social media experts, two main campaign approaches were developed.

6

The first approach focused on evaluating the effectiveness of existing campaigns targeting swing voters and individuals with tendencies toward right-leaning ideologies. Research indicates that awareness campaigns addressing disinformation are significantly more impactful than counter-campaigns. For example, the Cambridge "Inoculation Experiment" demonstrated that exposing individuals to the tactics of misinformation through short, engaging training videos reduced their susceptibility to manipulative narratives (University of Cambridge, n.d.).

Building on these findings, the proposed campaigns leverage **20-second educational videos** designed to deliver key insights in an engaging, digestible format. These videos expose viewers to common manipulation tactics, such as emotional framing or false equivalence, and explain how these methods are used to spread disinformation. The brevity of the videos ensures they are easily shareable and accessible on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, allowing them to reach diverse audiences effectively.

To enhance their impact, these campaigns adopt a **participative approach** that tailors content to specific target audiences. Workshops and focus groups with members of the target demographic are conducted to identify the issues and narratives most relevant to their concerns. Insights from these sessions are used to co-create video content, ensuring it resonates with the audience's experiences and addresses their unique vulnerabilities. By involving the target audience in the development process, the campaigns foster a sense of ownership and engagement, making them more likely to share and internalize the messages.

The second approach emphasizes participatory campaigns, placing a stronger focus on addressing internal rightward shifts and strengthening the organization's internal and external employer brand. This method involves embedding democratic and inclusive values into organizational practices and communication, ensuring these principles are deeply ingrained in the company's culture and operations.

A key element of this approach is the implementation of internal workshops on democratic values. These interactive sessions enable employees to actively engage in discussions and activities that highlight the importance of democratic principles, inclusivity, and critical thinking. The workshops can include analyzing case studies on disinformation, participating in group problem-solving exercises, and collaboratively

creating team charters that reflect the organization's commitment to fostering a democratic work environment.

Another integral aspect is employee-led campaign development, which involves forming a cross-departmental task force of employees to co-design and lead campaigns that promote inclusivity and democracy. These campaigns can include producing impactful social media content—such as short videos featuring employee testimonials about diversity—or organizing initiatives like open forums to facilitate meaningful discussions on societal issues.

By integrating these participatory measures, the second approach not only addresses internal challenges but also reinforces the organization's values as an employer of choice. This ensures that democratic and inclusive principles become a visible and actionable part of the company's identity, resonating both internally and externally.

Step 5: Scalability and Digital Platform together with an IT developer and UX designer

The final step of the project focused on scalability. To make the two campaign strategies more sustainable within organizations and scalable across other organizations, an IT platform was proposed. This platform would provide easy access to the same methodology, materials, and resources for organizations looking to implement the campaign strategies effectively. A similar approach in the field of climate tech, demonstrated by Leaders for Climate Action, has shown the success of creating centralized, scalable platforms for widespread impact (Leaders for Climate Action, n.d.).

As part of this effort, I developed a detailed concept for the digital platform and created initial design mock-ups. The concept, core functionalities, and initial designs for the platform have already been developed, laying a solid foundation for its implementation. However, professional technical execution is still required, including backend development, database integration, user interface refinement, and rigorous testing to ensure scalability, security, and a seamless user experience.

This process was a significant journey, beginning with a simple idea and culminating in the concept for a product that has the potential to make meaningful, scalable change across organizations.

Conclusion and Title Development

Throughout the project, it became clear that a company-focused approach would have a greater impact than isolated social media campaigns. This realization led to the adjustment of the project title from "Empowering Democracy: Participative Social Media Campaign Strategies Inspired by the Cultural and Creative Economy" to "Empowering Democracy: Corporate Strategies for Enabling Participative Social Media Campaigns Inspired by the Cultural and Creative Economy." The new title reflects the platform's dual focus on enabling companies to lead both internal and external campaigns and sustainably embed democratic values within their corporate culture, without altering the original goal of the project.
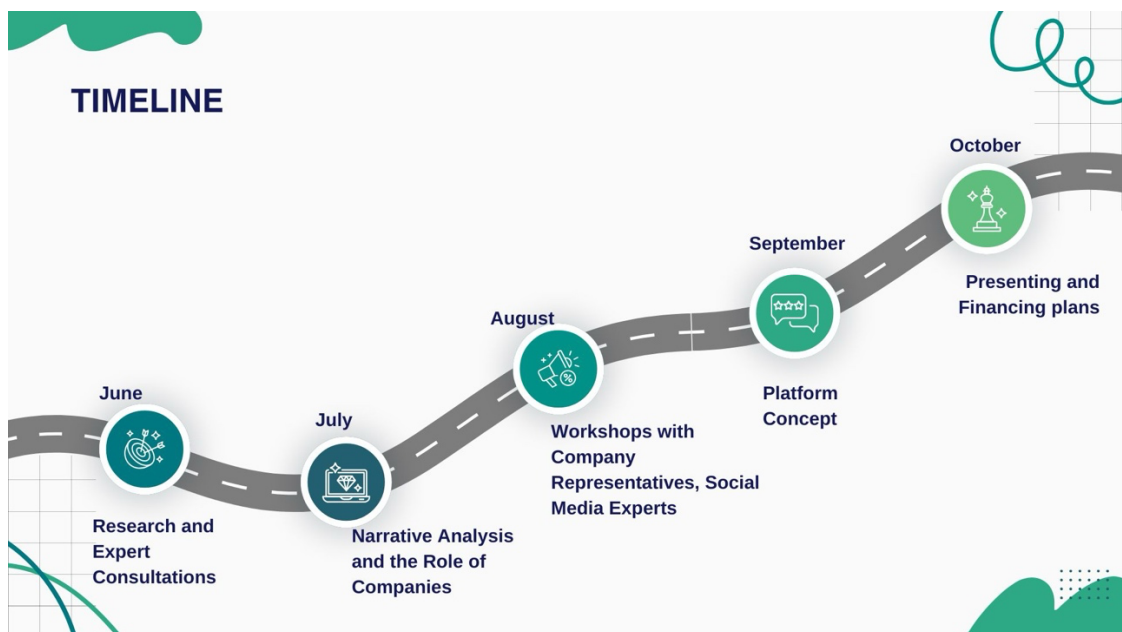

Fig.1: Timeline of the Project Journey

4. Impact

The Impact of the Campaign Strategies and IT Platform

The project delivered a comprehensive framework for building resilience against disinformation while fostering democratic participation within organizations. The core impact lies in empowering organizations to counter disinformation, promote internal democratic values, and influence societal attitudes positively. This was achieved through two interlinked campaign strategies supported by a scalable IT platform.

9

Strengthening Resilience Against Disinformation

One of the project's most significant impacts is its ability to combat the influence of disinformation through targeted educational campaigns. This "psychological vaccine" equips employees and the broader public with cognitive tools to recognize and resist misinformation.

Participatory storytelling further amplifies this impact. Workshops allow participants to share personal experiences related to conspiracy theories, hate speech, or misinformation, transforming them into relatable narratives. This approach fosters emotional engagement, which is 22 times more memorable than factual communication alone (Morgan, 2019). Emotional connection is key in influencing swing voters and countering extremist narratives, as it resonates on a personal level and builds trust in the organization's messaging.

Embedding Democratic Values in Organizational Culture

The campaign strategies also prioritize embedding democratic values within organizations. By creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and decision-making, companies strengthen internal cohesion and mitigate the risks of polarization. This alignment of organizational culture with democratic principles not only improves employee engagement but also positions companies as progressive leaders in societal discourse.

To address the risk of impact washing and ensure meaningful corporate engagement in democratic initiatives, this project proposes the "Democratic Impact Certification" (or "Democratic Badge"). This certification requires companies to commit to a transparent, measurable framework that demonstrates their genuine contributions to democratic values. Key criteria include CEO commitment, active participation in campaigns, employee training, and participatory workshops.

The CEO and executive leadership must publicly pledge to integrate democratic principles into organizational operations and campaigns by signing a declaration to uphold the outlined criteria. Each certified company must annually engage in at least one democratic impact campaign to counter disinformation, promote media literacy, or foster inclusive public discourse, with outcomes such as reach and engagement rigorously tracked. Additionally, 70% of employees are required to complete annual

training on countering disinformation, while 50% must participate in at least one four-hour participative campaign workshop, focusing on campaign design and relevance to the organization's mission.

Companies must provide an annual report detailing their compliance with these criteria, including campaign impact metrics, training participation, and workshop outcomes. An independent committee evaluates the report, ensuring all benchmarks are met. Certification is valid for one year and must be renewed annually by demonstrating continued adherence to measurable standards. Failure to meet these requirements results in loss of certification, ensuring transparency and accountability in the process.

Scaling Through the IT Platform

The project's impact is further extended through the development of an IT platform designed to scale these initiatives. The platform includes an integrated video and training center that provides organizations with resources to educate employees on recognizing and countering disinformation. Additionally, the platform offers tools to streamline the adoption of participatory campaign methodologies and to measure their effectiveness. Social media amplification plays a critical role in scaling these efforts, as it both monetizes creative content and promotes democratic values (UNESCO, 2022).

Broader Societal Influence and Urgency

The project demonstrates the crucial role businesses play in safeguarding democracy during this transformative decade. Edelman's Trust Barometer (2023) found that 64% of consumers expect businesses to address societal issues, underscoring the importance of corporate involvement in defending democratic values. The framework offered by this project provides organizations with actionable solutions to build societal resilience and address emerging challenges in a crisis-ridden global environment.

By leveraging the CCE's potential for creative impact and combining it with scalable IT tools, this project offers a unique and sustainable model to foster societal change. Its emphasis on inclusivity, emotional engagement, and measurable progress makes it a blueprint for strengthening democracy and countering the disinformation that threatens its foundation.

5. Learnings and Contributions for CIRCE

A key takeaway from this project is the urgent need for pro-democratic content to counter the social media dominance of right-wing populists. Traditional political parties have not adequately addressed this challenge, making their active participation essential. This project underscores the role corporations can play in bridging this gap but also highlights the need for a large-scale, paid offering to ensure long-term sustainability.

Through this project, I have deepened my understanding of narratives and psychological phenomena during times of transformation. Personally, I have realized that while I will never be a social media expert, my strengths lie in being a "company builder." "I believe in the positive impact that digital entrepreneurs can create in the world, provided they are value-driven, committed to social impact, and use their innovative spirit and execution skills to deliver meaningful and responsible solutions."

I have also learned that the CCE plays a vital role in building bridges and reaching people on an emotional level. In a healthy and vibrant democracy, citizens must freely express their opinions, choose political representatives, and actively participate in decisions shaping their future. The CCE fosters innovative ways of thinking and creative solutions during times of uncertainty and profound change. It provides a platform for addressing societal challenges through unconventional ideas and practices. Creative actors within the CCE often aim to achieve not only commercial success but also positive societal change. This concept, known as "Creative Impact," focuses on addressing social issues related to democracy through creative processes that develop new products, services, and organizational models (UNESCO, 2022).

Social media plays a pivotal role in monetizing creative content and facilitating economic opportunities. This strengthens the financial foundation for creative projects while expanding the societal influence of the CCE. Moreover, social media helps shape popular culture by influencing societal trends, thereby expanding the space for democratic values and inclusion (Edelman, 2023).

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Interview Partners and workshop participants to be kept anonymous due to security reasons

AI Tools have been used as a support in research, planning, brainstorming, coaching, and writing

Appendix

Leaders for Democracy Designs

LEADERS FOR DEMOCRACY

Home   About   Services   **CONTACT**

OUR SERVICES

Transform your workplace culture

Democratic workplace assessment ›

Evaluate your workplace culture to promote democracy.

Brand development for democracy ›

Create a brand that stands for democratic values.

Workshops for democratic leadership ›

Empower your leaders with democratic leadership skills.

LEADERS FOR DEMOCRACY

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WHO WE ARE

Creating change together

At Leaders for Change, we are dedicated to helping companies establish a strong pro-democratic workplace culture and brand. Located in Berlin, we believe that a thriving workplace fosters innovation, encourages diverse perspectives, and drives success. Our platform connects businesses with the tools and resources needed to promote democratic values and practices, ensuring that every voice is heard and valued.

Get in touch