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Universität Passau

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Team from the University of Passau develops legal framework for public interest news platform

Caught between privacy, public interest and fairness: The BMBF project 'Demokratie-X' aims to develop a concept for a decentralised and independent news platform. A team from the University of Passau led by legal scholar Professor Kai von Lewinski is also involved.

A few large American tech companies such as Alphabet, Meta and X also dominate the digital news market in Germany. They control which news items are presented to users and can thus influence democratic opinion-forming. Unlike established media providers, these platforms are not subject to strict quality controls and editorial criteria. In many cases, they also fail to adequately protect users' privacy.

The 'Democracy X' project aims to develop a new decentralised and independent non-profit news platform. The project is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The researchers are pursuing an interdisciplinary approach that combines expertise from the fields of economics, computer science, sociology and undergraduate law programmes. The legal expertise comes from the University of Passau: a team led by Professor Kai von Lewinski, Dean of the Faculty of Law and Chair of Public Law, Media and Information Law, is involved in the project.

'In the legal sub-project, we are focusing on issues of privacy protection and the common good,' explains Professor von Lewinski. This is challenging because privacy and the common good actually have opposite effects. There are also very practical questions, such as how to provide users with detailed information without tiring them with consent options – keyword: cookie fatigue.

Graduate teaching and research assistant Benedikt Leven, who is doing his doctorate in the project, is initially looking at existing regulations. 'I am describing the extent to which such a platform would already be possible under current law and how it would have to be designed.' Lukas Köllnberger is also a graduate teaching and research assistant on the project. 'Our goal is to develop a legally secure foundation that will serve as the basis for practical work on a privacy-friendly, public-interest-oriented and fair news platform,' explains the legal scholar.

Decentralised European data infrastructure as a basis

The project is coordinated by business information scientist Professor Thomas Hess, Director of the Institute for Digital Management and New Media at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich (LMU). Researchers from the University of Kassel are also involved. The interdisciplinary team is testing the technical feasibility of the platform based on a decentralised data infrastructure such as Gaia-X. The European Gaia-X project is creating a digital ecosystem of networked data spaces on an open-source basis.

At the end of the 'Democracy X' project, the aim is to have a viable concept for a news platform that guarantees informational self-determination, democratic values and a diverse information landscape. Finally, design and action

recommendations for implementation will be provided.

The project started in September 2024. The BMBF is funding the project with 1.69 million euros over a period of three years. More than 330,000 euros of this will go to the University of Passau.

This text was machine-translated from German.

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Symbolic image: A user scrolls through a news platform on their mobile phone.

Colourbox

Colourbox