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**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on the occasion of the 11th Forum Bellevue on the Future  
of Democracy "Democracy and the digital public sphere –  
A transatlantic challenge"  
at Schloss Bellevue  
on 1 March 2021**

November saw a superspreader event which the whole world has been talking about since. Hundreds of thousands were infected in a very short space of time. Not with a dangerous virus, but with a conspiracy theory.

It was the malicious tale of the stolen election, which spread like wildfire on social media. This lie sparked the attack by an armed mob on the U.S. Capitol, one of the oldest and most venerable parliaments in the world.

I welcome you to this Forum Bellevue, which is, understandably, taking place almost entirely online, on screens in Europe and the U.S. It is not the pandemic, but democracy, which we want to discuss here today – democracy and its public spaces in the digital age. There is certainly good reason to do so.

Online incitement led to attacks on democracy in connection with the U.S. elections, while online communication has enabled demonstrations in favour of democracy in Russia and Belarus. And amidst all this, here in Germany, we have seven parliamentary elections set to take place this year at federal level and in the Länder, the first in just two weeks' time. It has been clear for years, around the world, that as far as democracy is concerned, the digital revolution is at once a blessing and a curse, an opportunity and a risk.

Digital media which are accessible to all initially appear to offer great democratic promise, a public space without borders or barriers where each individual can reach and be reached by everyone. But after

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the images we saw from Washington, any remaining illusions should have been shattered. The plain and simple truth is that new freedom requires new responsibility so that the online public sphere does not end in chaos and self-destruction.

The world's democracies must ensure that they remain intact in the digital age, protecting themselves from both internal and external enemies. Social media platforms are a particular concern. Social media amplify the best and the worst in our societies. For democracy, they are thus neither a panacea nor a wrecking ball. But these online platforms have become an integral component of our democratic public sphere – more than that, they have come to set the pace, to help shape the nature of this sphere – and so it is high time that we engage with them and their societal impact more closely.

With the new U.S. administration, this problem is now high on the agenda on both sides of the Atlantic. The European Union, Ms Vestager, is working on broad-based regulation of the digital public sphere, on a common rule book for the digital economy, and recently proposed to the U.S. that we take a joint approach. President Biden is planning a summit for democracy, and in his speech at the Munich Security Conference he made the future of democracy the focus of his message: "America is back".

Liberal democracy is what unites us across the Atlantic more closely than anything else. And so there is plenty of reason to believe that the issues we aim to discuss today will form a crucial element, perhaps even the central element, of a new transatlantic agenda.

A great deal is expected of the public sphere in a democracy. It must reflect the plurality of society and be accessible to all, foster reasoned debate and open up spaces for new ideas and political goals, provide reliable information and empower people to participate in democratic processes. These ideals have guided us since the Enlightenment. Any step away from them, any damage to our public spaces, will have consequences for our democracy.

This does not justify the increasingly frequent proclamations of the demise of democracy. But Frank Schirrmacher, the former editor of the newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, warned as early as 2009 that the distribution of attention in the digital public sphere is the crucial determiner of power. Those who have direct access to people's smartphones and laptops, who decide what content will be shown next, exert power.

Today, it is social media which have the most direct access to people – and their advertising-based business model demands attention at almost any price. The algorithms of Facebook and YouTube, Twitter and TikTok, capture our attention with ice-cold precision, using our own data patterns, with two criteria in mind: What content will keep me

looking at the screen for as long as possible? And how can as much profit as possible be made during this time using targeted advertising?

It seems that nothing keeps people glued to their devices like agitation and indignation, anger and fear. The algorithms learn to make the customised news feeds and autoplay video queues increasingly exciting and sensational – even when the content concerns politics and the common good. Little consideration is given in the process to the values that our democracies are built on: respect, truth and civility, reason, facts and responsibility. Unlike even a tabloid newspaper, these algorithms are not beholden to editors, press councils or competitors which might keep them in check and exert a moderating effect. On the contrary, balance and moderation are bad for business. A purely profit-maximising algorithm does not care what is true or false or to what end a particular piece of content was created. But it can quite accurately predict what will keep each individual glued to their screen.

Rapidity and escalation are thus rewarded, bias and falsehood go unchallenged, demagoguery and propaganda too often encounter no criticism. Far too often, social media reward the quick and easy lie – at the cost of reason and truth. The business in attention thus becomes a danger to democracy.

And the enemies of democracy, ladies and gentlemen, are unfortunately the most adept at exploiting these weaknesses. They use lies and deception to fuel the attention machines of social media, skilfully manipulating them to their own advantage. And eventually, insurrectionists occupy the Capitol.

This major structural transformation of our public spaces has its cost, but not as a direct result of our new digital communication tools themselves. On the contrary, aside from their other benefits, few technologies open up greater opportunities to create pluralistic public spaces which are accessible to all, across borders, backgrounds and to a great extent generations, too.

No, the costs of this transformation of the public sphere are the result of specific democratic failings on the part of the platforms which dominate the market. These inherent flaws in their design damage the public sphere – and democracy becomes a collateral victim of their business model.

There are fundamental values at stake. When every lie can become dogma, every debate descends into a shouting match, nobody leaves their own echo chamber, every difference of opinion threatens to terminate the democratic social contract, and ultimately nobody wants to take responsibility for it all, then political institutions and the rule of law are put to the test. Not only to protect individuals. But to ensure the survival of democracy.

The intentional manipulation of our attention plays on our well-known psychological weak spots as humans. This is the failure of a market that is dominated by a handful of providers. It is creating a social evil by serving our worst instincts. And we know the enlightened response to evils such as these – institutions, regulation and the rule of law.

The major platform operators have long resisted both monitoring and their own responsibility for the public space that they have created with their infrastructure. They have relativised or played down problems and refused to accept any liability for content, preferring to portray their sites as a private room for family gossip and holiday photos – while earning billions from political content and the journalistic work of others. Regulation has long been declared the enemy of freedom.

But the opposite is true. To preserve freedom and democracy, we must have rules. Quite significantly, while it was once only players such as Apple and Microsoft – who use a different business model – calling for regulation of the advertising-based model used by their competitors, even Mark Zuckerberg has now said that “big tech needs more regulation.”

That is true, ladies and gentlemen. As long as these companies do not change course, such calls for regulation may sound cynical. But there are more and more signs that Facebook et al. are no longer able to put the genie back in the bottle – and are increasingly affected by the sharp criticism this is attracting. We should indeed take such calls for regulation at face value.

And fortunately we still have functioning public spaces, fortunately there is a wide-ranging debate on the future of the digital public sphere. An increasingly broad civil society alliance is working to combat disinformation and hatred, while also calling for better regulation. And the success of documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* shows that there is now an audience of millions around the world who are willing and able to understand the problem.

Suitable regulations have been considered for years, and indeed hotly debated, not only in Washington and Brussels but also here in Berlin – such as the Network Enforcement Act. Appropriate compensation for journalistic content, a topic which recently provoked heated discussion in Australia, is a crucial element of this debate. Almost more important is the grey area of “harmful content”, which is legal but, when shared millions of times, is damaging to democracy – such as systematic lies about the “stolen election”.

All of these debates are an encouraging sign. Because at the heart of all of them, no matter how specific and technical they may sometimes seem, is nothing less than the democratisation of the digital world. Democracy is not just another business model, a relic of the analogue

era ripe for digital disruption. On the contrary, democracy and the rule of law are the foundations of our coexistence as free and empowered citizens. Indeed, without democracy it would not have been possible to develop a free and open internet or perhaps even to have a digital revolution at all. And I believe that the major tech companies and platform operators know this. They cannot have any great interest in undermining our democracy – because their own survival, too, is at stake.

In the coming months, the U.S. and Europe have a historic opportunity to develop joint solutions in the spirit of freedom and democracy. We know that, in Russia and China, all-encompassing control over the internet has become an integral element of modern authoritarian regimes. Digital monitoring, control and discipline as well as cyber attacks on democratic states and on attractive open societies are signs of a systemic conflict which is in part digital. We must counter the model of digital dictatorship with a democratic alternative.

There are, of course, cultural, political and legal differences between Europe and the U.S., for example with regard to freedom of speech, data protection or the regulation of businesses. This makes the increasing convergence of the discussions on both sides of the Atlantic all the more valuable. In the U.S., unrestricted freedom and unrestricted profit are no longer the inevitable conclusion, while in the EU the focus has broadened beyond simply the dangers of market domination and distortions of competition.

Both sides have recognised that, in the digital public sphere, fundamental values are at stake – including the future of democracy, as President Biden has discussed. There is thus an opportunity to develop a joint agenda, to reset the transatlantic partnership.

I hope that the U.S. and Europe will rise to the occasion. It would represent a first crucial step towards a “technosphere” rooted in freedom, a kind of global instrument for the future of democracy. The digital public sphere will be a critical infrastructure for every future world order. Together with the world’s other democracies, we can successfully safeguard the open internet and defend the digital space as a space for freedom.

We want to discuss with one another today whether, and how, a transatlantic solution for the digital public sphere can succeed. I am certain that we will have plenty of opportunities to weigh up our stances and explore our common ground, with all of the different issues that are on the agenda.

The first, fundamental question is to what extent the operators of these platforms are responsible for, and should be held liable for, their content. What rules and standards are applied, and how can transparency and trust be created? How much can be achieved by

internal corporate policies and how much external, democratically legitimated regulation, monitoring and control is needed? How can we tackle the grey area of "harmful content"? What kind of intervention would be productive – temporary or permanent deletion of specific content, the banning of accounts, warning signs on Twitter and other sites, peer review as on Wikipedia, complete transparency around targeted advertising or even a ban? And where do the limits of meaningful regulation lie?

Even more fundamental is the question of whether commercial platforms can abide by pluralistic and democratic principles at all. Are their current business models even compatible with democracy in the long term? Thinking about data sovereignty among other issues, is there perhaps a need for more restrictions, new models and other forms of financing, such as paid services? And how much will our past experiences of regulating the public sphere help us?

Finally, how can we strengthen the initiatives, authorities and NGOs which are working to ensure successful public spaces in the digital age? What can we impart to people that will help them become more empowered and resilient in the digital sphere? How can appealing alternatives be developed and market shares gained in the face of the technological and economic dominance of the major players?

It will not be easy to find a common answer to these questions. We are taking this time today to try and do so – to discuss and debate with one another, Ms Vestager, Mr Nassehi, Mr Scott.

A very warm welcome to you all.

I look forward to an exciting and enlightening discussion.