



ILLUSTRATION: SOPHIE KETTERER FOR MPG

FIVE QUESTIONS

ON NEW DIGITAL COMPETENCES

FOR ANASTASIA KOZYREVA

Researchers from Berlin, Stanford, and Bristol have identified “critical ignoring” as a new way for people to gain more control over their use of online media.

Ms. Kozyreva, you were part of the team. Why do we spend so much time reading things online in the first place?

ANASTASIA KOZYREVA For us humans, it has always been very important to get information from our community and share it with others to survive. Negative or very emotional news grabs our attention, in particular, because it prepares us to avoid possible dangers, for example. This has served us well for millennia. But for a few years now, online media have been virtually flooding us with information. They are designed so that we spend as much time as possible on them, which means providers can place as much advertising as possible. We have not had time to adapt to this, which is why we need new digital competences. My colleagues and I consider critical ignoring to be just as important as critical thinking in dealing with online media.

How does critical ignoring work?

You can use three strategies here. The first one is *self-nudging*, which means that I design my environment in such a way that I can control what I really engage with. We can and we should actively decide how much

time we spend on our smartphones, tablets, or PCs, and you can do this by setting up time limits on the devices, for example, or enabling do not disturb mode at night. This frees up time for offline activities that bring value to one's life – such as time spent with family and friends.

When I am online, though, quite a lot of news reaches me. How can I find out which bits are fake news?

There is a strategy for this, too, called *lateral reading*, i.e. reading sideways. In school we learned to critically examine a text by going through it very carefully from beginning to end. Fact checkers proceed differently: they open another tab in the browser – i.e., sideways – and do internet searches on who's behind the website. There is an astonishing number of sites that appear to be quite legitimate but in fact display inaccurate information (e.g., climate change denial), for example, in the interest of certain lobby groups, who try to influence public opinion in this way. We should always be suspicious of sources that we can't identify – whether they are websites, videos, or forwarded posts. With *lateral reading*, it often takes just a few minutes or even seconds to find out whether information is trustworthy.

A big problem in chats or on social media is hate speech. Should I respond when I read insults or racist and sexist comments?

No, absolutely not! Because that's exactly what these people want to achieve in spreading that kind of thing: they aim to provoke, and they feel vindicated when they get a response. The point here is to protect ourselves: engaging in discussions with online trolls and cyberbullies can be really damaging for our mental health and our relationships with other people. It's better to ignore the provocateurs, to block them, and in order to prevent them from damaging others, to report abusers to the platform operators.

Who did you develop your recommendations for?

This really concerns all of us, young and old alike. But I think it is particularly important to teach these strategies in schools. They are easy to learn and very effective. By teaching young people critical ignoring, you empower them to allocate their attention to online content consciously and intentionally.

Interview: Mechthild Zimmermann

Anastasia Kozyreva works at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in the research area of Adaptive Rationality.