



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at re:publica 2019
in Berlin on 6 May 2019**

Thank you for inviting me to re:publica 2019! I was very happy to be invited and I'm happy also to tell you exactly why – in a second. But first of all, I may need to address some of you here in this room, who may be wondering what business the Federal President, the very embodiment of an analogue institution, has speaking at re:publica, a quintessentially digital event. And those who are particularly critical may ask: what on earth has this free-thinking, independent and non-hierarchical conference come to that it has invited the Head of State to its opening ceremony? Will he – God forbid! – make us sing the national anthem when he is done?

No, ladies and gentlemen, I can assure you that it is not protocol and etiquette that have brought us together today, but rather the subject at hand! I believe it is indeed a common cause. Because this year's re:publica is dedicated to the long argument, it is committed to research, nuance and deliberation. You are taking a stand against ignorance, crudeness and false simplification. Your motto is a wake-up call to the culture of political debate – and not only in the internet, I might add, but quite generally speaking – a wake-up call against the tide of our age, of contraction and simplification.

That's why I'm happy to be here. During my term in office so far, I have spoken more on the importance of a good culture of debate for our democracy than on almost any other topic. Those who value nuance, thought and subtlety, who permit and tolerate ambiguities, who want to look at issues from various angles, and who, to this end, are also willing on occasion to listen for longer than a minute, in other words, those who do not see subordinate clauses as the enemy, ... all those have a natural ally in this Federal President!

As you explicitly endorse detail at this re:publica, I'm sure you won't mind if I start by looking into the past. A few weeks ago, we

marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of the great author Theodor Fontane – another staunch believer in the long read, by the way. Some of you may remember him, with dread, from back in your schooldays. As I was doing some background reading for the event, I came across a wonderfully ironic episode in his masterpiece, “Der Stechlin”, published shortly before his death. The novel is about the decay of the old world and of its morals. Naturally – and maybe this sounds familiar to you? – the story also raises the spectre of the imminent downfall of the Western world. Why? Because an innovation in communication technology has shaken the Kingdom of Prussia to its very core. The telegram had been invented!

“The thing about telegraphing...,” says old Dubslav von Stechlin in the novel, “[is that] brevity is a virtue, but being brief mostly also means being coarse. [...] Finer morals certainly suffer as a result.” Unquote.

What I mean: technology changing cultural practices, promptly followed by some people deploring moral decay, all that’s not new at all. In hindsight, we certainly know that it wasn’t the telegraph that caused Prussia’s downfall! So please do not fear cultural pessimism from my side today – but neither should you expect me to be naively euphoric. I firmly believe that neither telegrams nor tweets on their own can corrode democracy. And technology, on the other hand, certainly can’t replace democracy!

From the field of market research we know the term “hype cycle”, used in the context of new technologies and products. I’m afraid that there is also a “hype cycle” in political debate, particularly when it comes to democracy and the digital revolution.

I recall a time not long ago when communism had collapsed and the triumph of liberal democracy worldwide was seemingly unstoppable. Everywhere you went, “the end of history” was near. The pioneers of the internet, especially of social media, were seen heading off into the sunset at the vanguard of this caravan of change. The idea was that the digital revolution would break down borders and hierarchies, and boost democracy, at the speed of light. Those were also the hopes for the Arab Spring a few years ago.

And today? Today, all those certainties appear upside down. Liberal democracy is being called into question. Authoritarian rulers are adopting an increasingly confident stance on the global stage – and make ruthless use of digital technologies and efficiency gains, ranging from big-data monitoring to troll armies. In contrast, the Western democracies seem to be digitally vulnerable – their election campaigns have been rocked by manipulation, disinformation and polarisation. Hardly a week goes by these days without a new swan song to liberal democracy – and without social media being described as the final nail in its coffin.

I guess you won't be surprised that I have never found either extreme of this narrative convincing.

I want us to finally leave false dichotomies behind – and that is also how I understand the idea of this year's re:publica.

- The question is not whether the internet is a good or a bad thing for democracy, a silver bullet or a wrecking ball.

- And we certainly shouldn't support the notion that there is a generational gap between a supposedly homogeneous "online community" and a group of clueless "offline oldies".

The truth is that 90 percent of Germans are active online in some form. And quite simply, this means that online political discourse has become one established part of our democracy. However, it has not replaced newspapers, TV shows, the market square or party-conference debates. Nor does it happen separately from these traditional forms, but right in their midst. And that means democracy can only succeed in the future if it succeeds in the digital sphere.

That's why I said we had a "common cause" at the start of my speech. We no longer have analogue institutions or digital events. It's not true that one side has nothing to do with the other. The deciding fact is: we only have this one democracy.

If the future of this democracy matters to us, we need to work together on the culture of online political debate. And I would like to expressly thank the people behind re:publica for their impetus.

How can this be achieved? First of all, one thing is indisputable – the internet has brought about more communication on more topics and between more people than ever before. The benefit to humankind is immeasurable – to science and research, to culture and creativity, to the economy and our prosperity. Back in Fontane's day, emigrating meant saying goodbye forever. Nowadays, parents communicate with their children, companies with their clients, and scientists with their research partners around the clock and around the world. Marvellous forms of collaboration, creativity and cultural progress develop everywhere in the niches of the internet. And naturally, this digital progress can also benefit democracy – its potential is certainly nowhere near exhausted.

Nevertheless, I often find myself wondering why political debates online tend to be toxic. I ask myself what is feeding this rampant loss of reason and fierce longing for scapegoats. Why does the appeal to our lowest rather than our highest instincts get so much attention?

It is good that re:publica makes room for such questions. It is not old-fashioned, but very relevant and necessary, to ask once again the fundamental question: what makes a good democratic debate? My answer would be twofold: both reason – the willingness to convince

others through the force of argument and to allow yourself to be swayed by better arguments – and civility. And civility means valuing, trusting and respecting others, empathising with all those who – no matter how much the internet protects individuality or anonymity – always have a legitimate part to play in the debate.

Both traits – reason and civility – need to be protected. And both require space and perseverance. Naturally, a tweet can also be reasonable and civilised. Some short hashtags have launched extensive and important debates. However, any important debate – if it's going to be a good debate – needs time. That's why I'm glad that interest in the long form seems to be growing in the internet – interest in podcasts, for example, or in long reads and ever-better online journalism.

Reason and civility are the currency of a good debate. But every successful debate needs a foundation. And this foundation is made of rules.

The upcoming 70th anniversary of the German Basic Law reminds us of a connection that pre-dates "online" and "offline": liberty needs rules – and new liberties need new rules. Furthermore, freedom of opinion brings with it responsibility for opinion.

I am aware that rules have been a topic of heated debate every year here at re:publica. From the Network Enforcement Act to the Telemedia Act, from laws on expression to the General Data Protection Regulation – we already have many rules, and we will need to debate many others more to come.

But no matter how justified these heated debates may be, one thing is certain – and I say this particularly with a view to the large platforms: companies that do big business in Germany and Europe must stick to our rules! Those who do business here must respect our laws – instead of continually testing boundaries, looking for loopholes and dragging their feet. Those who still choose to do so must expect to face consequences and penalties. And that is true in general, from data protection to competition law all the way to the penal code.

And since we're discussing political debate today, I'd like to add one thing: those who create an online forum for political discourse also carry responsibility for democracy – whether they like it or not! A business model of maximising advertising revenue certainly doesn't maximise the quality of debate. That's why we need democratic rules. I think people in Silicon Valley now understand this, too. But I still find one thing lacking: following a lot of talk and many announcements, following panel discussions and photo-ops with politicians, it's time that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and all the others finally step up and take on their responsibility for democracy, finally put it into practice!

For example, in the area of transparency: as long as casual lies and reputable news reports, as long as checked facts and mere opinion, as long as reason and hate speech appear one after another in people's newsfeeds, with nothing to distinguish between them, demagogues will have it far too easy. We need the sources of our information to be crystal clear, particularly when political ads are concerned.

Those who target tailored political messages at specific audiences must be forced by the site operators - and where necessary by law - to show their face, to reveal who exactly sent the ad, who financed it, and what other ads this person or organisation is sending. In other words, they must make transparent whose game are they playing - and how we can opt out of the game.

Responsible citizens should know all this. And by the way: creating transparency about cash flows and dependencies involved is still the most effective way to take the wind out of the sails of demagogues and populists. We have seen a few cases of this, both in Germany and abroad - and we should keep this up! As any politician or journalist with a social media account will have realised, and studies repeatedly corroborate this, relatively small groups cause disproportionate amounts of noise.

We have to admit that far too often, it's those who want to harm liberal democracy that are better organised online, far better than those who stand up for it. This means we need to enforce our rules more clearly, but more importantly, that the democratic majority should not retreat, should not allow itself to be driven back by the clamour of a mere handful of people. Why do we allow the haters to be so loud and the voices of reason to be so quiet? Why do we allow the few to appear so strong, and the many so weak? Yes, it may be more comfortable in our own liberal comfort zones, but we must have one goal: not to cede the political spaces online to what seems like an angry giant from afar, but turns out to be a dwarf when seen close-up.

I know how many people here in this room are fighting for that cause. I would like to thank you all for your tireless efforts, efforts that are both stressful and usually unpaid. I would like to thank those who launch new initiatives, formats or alliances; people such as Nanjira Sambuli, who aim to overcome digital division; those who teach media literacy; those who work on ensuring that everyone has free access to knowledge; those who nurture a culture of debate, where one exists, or those, like the initiative #ichbinhier, who go where civilised debate is at risk of collapsing.

But we in Germany are not driven by laws and rules only. Our strong civil society also defines who we are. As Federal President, I hope this strength will also be brought to bear in the internet - to a far greater extent still than have been able to make out so far. I would

welcome more exchange between digital civil society and long-standing structures, as well as with political institutions – always in the mutual understanding that nobody has ready-made answers to all the formidable questions that arise in the space between the freedoms of the internet on the one hand and protection of the individual on the other..

Isn't that what ultimately defines democracy? Democracy requires that we permit one another to be on a search – on a search for answers.

That is how I understood your invitation to speak today, and that's how I ask you to understand my speech to you. Only through discourse, debate, research and nuances do we get closer to finding solutions – together.

Digitisation means being connected. Democracy, however, means being conjoined. In a democracy, we need each other in a deeper, a more political sense than merely by "likes" or "dislikes". This step, from the connected to the conjoined, is our next, paramount task. Our success won't be determined by constant leaps in technology, but rather by a democratic culture of debate online – and by winning back the political spaces dominated by an attitude of "too long, didn't read", by purely economic motives and by the concentration of power in the hands of the data giants. Let me be very clear: instead of digitising democracy, we must democratise the digital sphere!

And that is why I am so grateful to re:publica for its motto this year. Advocating the long read is more than a matter of taste. It is a profoundly political appeal – because democracy is the "long read" of politics.

Populists value simple answers, short processes and blunt tweets.

Democrats don't content themselves with that – and you here at re:publica certainly don't either. That's very good news. With that in mind, I wish you – and us all - long debates to come!