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## **Myth #20: Social media is an accurate mirror of society**

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# **BUSTED!** THE TRUTH ABOUT THE 50 MOST COMMON INTERNET MYTHS

with  
summaries in  
**German, Arabic,**  
**Chinese, French,**  
**Russian and**  
**Spanish**

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# MYTH #20

Jozef Michal Mintal

## Social media is an accurate mirror of society.

**Myth:** Social media adequately reflects societal trends and public opinion. As everyone is on social media these days, one can determine the overall attitudes of a population by looking at what people are posting and sharing online.

**Busted:** There are at least two fundamentally wrong assumptions with regard to this myth. First, the notion that everyone is nowadays on social media. Even though Internet penetration and social media use saw a steep increase in the last decade, there are still vast differences in Internet and social media penetration around the world, with Internet penetration in some countries being as low as 10%. But social media users are not representative in countries with high Internet usage either. Gender, income, age and other disparities matter (Blank/Lutz 2017). Minorities, including linguistic minorities, also tend to be underrepresented on social media.

But there are also other factors which even further make it simply not possible to deduce the overall attitudes of a population just from posts and likes. (→#24)

For one, when using social media, we have a tendency to be drawn to those we perceive to be most like ourselves. (→ #21, → #22) This translates to us being exposed on average mainly to beliefs and attitudes like ours, which is a very bad base for assuming what most of the people think and like. Further, user activity on multiple social media platforms seems to follow an approximate power law distribution. (→ #41)

This means that a small number of users generate a large part of the overall content. For instance, a recent Twitter study suggests that 10% of users in the U.S. are responsible for 80% of social media content (Wojcik/Hughes 2019). The opinions of a few highly active users therefore seem far more prevalent than they are in reality.

There are also many more principles at play, like the majority illusion paradox, algorithmic bias, the creation of fake social media persona(e), etc. We should therefore be very critical of what we see online and recall that when looking at social media we cannot assume that it is an accurate mirror of society.

**Truth:** Social media depicts a very skewed image of society as a whole. Even though social media use is rising, social media platforms are still far from being representative of the general population. Together with factors like highly active media users, algorithmic bias and the tendency to be drawn to like-minded people and posts one agrees with, we cannot accurately determine the overall attitudes of a population just by looking at what people are posting and sharing online.

### ■ Source

Grant Blank and Christoph Lutz, *Representativeness of Social Media in Great Britain: Investigating Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, and Instagram*, *American Behavioral Scientist* 61 (2017) 7, 741–756; Stefan Wojcik and Adam Hughes, *Sizing Up Twitter Users*, Pew Research Center (2019), <https://www.pewInternet.org/2019/04/24/sizing-up-twitter-users>.

## Soziale Medien sind ein exakter Spiegel der Gesellschaft.

Nein, sagt Jozef Michal Mintal: Soziale Medien zeichnen ein stark verzerrtes Bild der Gesellschaft als Ganzes. Auch wenn die Nutzung sozialer Medien zunimmt, sind Social-Media-Plattformen noch lange nicht repräsentativ für die Bevölkerung. Zusammen mit Faktoren wie hochaktiven Mediennutzer\*innen, algorithmischer Verzerrung und der Tendenz, sich Gleichgesinnten anzuschließen und Beiträge zu lesen, denen man zustimmt, lässt sich die allgemeine Einstellung einer Bevölkerung nicht präzise dadurch ermitteln, dass man sich anschaut, was online veröffentlicht und geteilt wird.

### وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي مرآة دقيقة للمجتمع.

كلا، هكذا يقول جوزيف مينتال: تقدم وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي صورة محرّفة للغاية للمجتمع ككل. فعلى الرغم من أن استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تزايد ما زالت منصات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بعيدة كل البعد عن كونها صورة تمثل أغلبية الناس. وبجانب عوامل أخرى كمستخدمي الوسائط بالغي النشاط والانحياز الخوارزمي وميل الشخص إلى الانجذاب نحو ذوي الفكر المتشابه معه والمنشورات التي يتفق معها، لا يمكننا أن نحدد بدقة المواقف العامة لفئة سكانية استناداً إلى ما ينشره الأشخاص ويتشاركونه على الإنترنت فحسب.

### 社交媒体是社会的准确镜像。

不，Jozef Michal Mintal 写道：社交媒体描绘的是非常扭曲的社会整体形象。尽管越来越多人使用社交媒体，但社交媒体平台仍远未代表一般人群。加上高度活跃的媒体用户、算法偏见、吸引志趣相投人士的倾向以及某人同意的帖子等因素，我们无法通过查看人们在网络上发布和分享的内容准确地确定人们的整体态度。

## Les réseaux sociaux sont des miroirs fidèles de la société.

Non, écrit Jozef Michal Mintal: les réseaux sociaux dépeignent une image très biaisée de la société dans son ensemble. Même si l'utilisation des réseaux sociaux augmente, ces plateformes sont encore loin d'être représentatives de la population en général. Avec des facteurs tels que les utilisateurs très actifs de ces réseaux, les biais algorithmiques et la tendance à attirer des personnes partageant les mêmes idées et les mêmes avis, nous ne pouvons pas déterminer avec précision le comportement général d'une population en nous contentant de regarder ce que les gens publient et partagent en ligne.

### Социальные сети безошибочно отображают общество.

Это не так, говорит Йозеф Михал Минтал: Социальные сети в целом изображают очень искаженный образ общества. Несмотря на то, что использование социальных сетей растет, их платформы все еще далеки от того, чтобы представлять население в целом. Учитывая такие факторы, как высокоактивные пользователи сетей, алгоритмическая предвзятость и склонность притягиваться к единомышленникам и постам, которые нам по душе, нельзя точно определить общее отношение населения, просто взглянув на то, что люди публикуют и чем они обмениваются в Интернете.

## Las redes sociales son un reflejo fidedigno de la sociedad.

No, dice Jozef Michal Mintal: las redes sociales presentan una imagen muy sesgada de la sociedad como conjunto. Aunque el uso de las redes sociales va en aumento, estas plataformas aún están lejos de ser representativas de la población en general. Unido a factores tales como usuarios de medios muy activos, sesgos algorítmicos y la tendencia a sentirse atraído hacia personas con ideas semejantes y publicaciones con cuyo contenido se concuerda, no podemos determinar con exactitud las actitudes generales de una población solamente viendo lo que la gente está publicando y compartiendo en el internet.

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