Technology Talks Austria 2026: Resümee des Workshops 10

How Can Technology Serve Democracy? Digital Humanism, Democracy and Peace

Teilnehmer:innen:

- Joan Donovan, Boston University
- Peter Knees, TU Wien
- Fariba Karimi, TU Graz / Complexity Science Hub
- Gerda Binder, UNICEF
- Nathan Coyle, AIT
- Moderation: Elka Xharo, FHWien der WKW

Digital technologies increasingly shape how democracies function and how societies deal with conflict. The workshop “How Can Technology Serve Democracy? Digital Humanism, Democracy and Peace” brought together experts from academia, international organisations and practice to discuss how a human-centred and values-based approach to technology can safeguard democratic values, protect fundamental rights and contribute to peace.

After opening remarks by Barbara Weitgruber, Director General for Scientific Research and International Relations, who stressed **that technological leadership must go hand in hand with democratic values, fundamental rights and peace, highlighting the responsibility to shape digital technologies in a human-centred and socially responsible way,** moderator Elka Xharo introduced the topic and the diverse perspectives represented on the panel. Five short impulse statements by Fariba Karimi, Peter Knees, Gerda Binder, Joan Donovan and Nathan Coyle provided the starting point for the discussion.

Panel Discussion: Main Topics and Debate

The panel explored **how digital technologies can be designed, regulated and used responsibly at the intersection of Digital Humanism, democracy and peacebuilding.** It focused on how technology can strengthen social cohesion and democratic participation while helping to reduce societal tensions and conflicts.
The discussion also addressed the relationship between digital technologies, fundamental rights and conflict. The concept of digital humanism provided a framework for asking how technological development can remain centred on people, democratic values and societal responsibility.

Fariba Karimi highlighted how AI systems can reproduce and amplify existing social inequalities, drawing on her research on algorithmic fairness and the development of fairer algorithms for online social networks. **Peter Knees** emphasised Digital Humanism as an interdisciplinary approach that recognises technology as shaped by societal and political choices, calling for digital systems that strengthen democracy, fundamental rights and participation. **Gerda Binder** presented the Oky app, which was developed together with girls to provide accessible and inclusive information on menstruation and reproductive health, illustrating how digital technologies can promote knowledge, confidence and participation. In particular, Binder emphasised that the involvement of groups traditionally excluded from technological development must be meaningful and have tangible consequences, rather than serving as a box-ticking exercise. **Joan Donovan** challenged the perception of the internet,

AI and emerging technologies as something almost “magical” that simply appears, highlighting instead that these systems are created, shaped and governed by people and therefore subject to democratic influence. **Nathan Coyle** brought a PeaceTech perspective, emphasising the need to develop and deploy digital technologies in ways that contribute to peace, human dignity and social cohesion. He also warned that current discussions of data sovereignty often focus narrowly on Europe, overlooking the exploitation of data and digital resources elsewhere in the world.

World Café: Looking towards 2035

The workshop continued with a 20-minute World Café, in which participants discussed the future of technology and democracy in three groups facilitated by the panelists. The guiding question was: **“Imagine it is 2035 and digital technology is strengthening rather than weakening democracy. What has changed?”**

The groups discussed how technology development can put people and their needs at the centre: starting by understanding people’s lives and the societal challenges they face, and only then developing human-centred technologies that are grounded in and respect fundamental democratic values. They also emphasised that public funding should be directed exclusively towards technologies that follow these humanistic principles.

Conclusion

The workshop demonstrated that the relationship between technology and democracy is ultimately a question not only of technological development, but also of values, rights, power and societal responsibility. Bringing together perspectives from data science, digital humanism, critical internet studies, gender equality and PeaceTech highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to shaping technologies that strengthen democratic societies. The lively participation in the World Café discussions showed that participants’ views resonated strongly with the themes raised by the panel and that they share a desire for a more human-centred approach to digital development.