Abstract for the general public

People living in modern, digitized societies have to process an unprecedented amount of online information on a daily basis. Crucially, they often actively participate in the development and spread of this information through the online social networks they belong to. Although these changes in the distribution of information have a democratizing potential because they take power away from media companies and governments, and empower a large number of formerly passive consumers, they also bring serious challenges. In particular, the spread of false information (colloquially referred to as "fake news") can undermine a constructive and facts-based public discourse about the big issues of our time. For instance, the spread of misinformation through online social networks can undermine democratic institutions, benefit populism and extremisms, and nurture anti-science skepticism. It is thus important to understand the processes that facilitate the spread of misinformation, and to identify and study ways through which individuals and communities can stop it. Against this background, our research project asks the overarching question: what can make online users immune against the spread of misinformation and bad ideas? We call this hypothetical resilience to online misinformation "webimmunity."

To answer this question, the project combines perspectives from epidemiology, psychology, philosophy and computer science. Its main goal is to develop tools that can reliably assess the immunity of individual actors and entire networks of online users against misinformation. Moreover, it aims to test how this webimmunitization influences behavior online and ultimately how it can be increased. Importantly, the project also has a clear focus on ethical dilemmas related to the concept of webimmunization. For instance, what constitutes misinformation may not always be clear cut and agreed upon when one discusses ethical and political issues, as well as whether or not one should aim for an immunization of individuals and networks touches upon questions related to individuals' autonomy and agency.

In sum, our project aims at providing novel empirical insights into the mechanisms and processes leading to and resulting from web immunity, including its ethical challenges. This knowledge we expect to inspire critical future research and to help address some of the most pressing societal issues of our time.