Annual Report 2025

Illustration: Still from "Environmental Costs of AI", Time Prints KG for AlgorithmWatch, CC BY 4.0

ALGORITHM
WATCH

ALGORITHM WATCH

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Image based on a photo by Markus Spiske on Unsplash

By placing AI-generated summaries above conventional search results, Google's AI Overviews can reduce traffic to journalistic sources, weakening media pluralism and access to reliable information.

Editorial

Exceptional times call for exceptional measures. That's what we were thinking in mid-2025 when Google rolled out their "AI Overviews" feature in Germany. Similar to what happened in the US before, the visits to journalistic websites took a nosedive. Figures vary (also in reliability), but the pattern is clear: AI-generated answers displayed at the top of Google's search result page crowd out almost any "organic" search result (Google's parlance for search results that are not paid for or prioritized for other reasons). At the same time, when users receive a comprehensive answer to a question, their motivation to visit the source of information drops. This is amplified by the fact that AI Overviews rarely link to other websites at all. Combined, this leads to a "zero-click" situation: Users stay on Google's site and don't follow any link provided.

Why is this a problem? For many reasons.

First of all, why create information when no one sees it? Media and civil society organizations produce news, journalistic investigations, policy analysis, and original research to provide the basis for an informed debate by the general public – one of the cornerstones of a working democracy. Billions of euros are spent on this – an investment that companies like Google and others free-ride on when they ingest this information for free and hand it back to users as condensed snippets. Snippets that are all too often incorrect and shallow. Combined with Google's market share of more than 90 percent of search engine traffic in many countries, the company's gatekeeping power is enormous. To a large extent, it defines what reality looks like to us online.

Secondly, and in a sense that's the flip side of the same coin: for news media and many civil society organizations alike, attention is the basis for their survival. Commercial sites need the clicks to generate income via advertising and convincing readers to buy subscription services. Public broadcasters like the BBC in the UK, ARD in Germany, or SRF in Switzerland need the clicks to justify the need for information financed by fees. NGOs can show individual and institutional donors that there is demand for their work.

This monopoly position at the core of our public sphere, combined with Google's sheer unlimited financial resources (the company's 2025 net income was 132 billion USD), poses a massive threat to preserving access to reliable information for all of us.

This is why we teamed up with news publishers' associations and journalism federations to file a complaint with Germany's Digital Services Coordinator – the enforcement body for the Digital Services Act (DSA), a European law that aims to protect our societies from the risks of unfettered platform power. It was not an easy decision, because commercial companies – in this case publishers – also have demands that are at odds with what we fight for. But at the same time, we need to be willing to create new alliances in the face of such powerful adversaries.

The good news is that it was worth it: The German DSC endorsed our complaint and the European Commission is now investigating! Fingers crossed they'll take a hard line on Google.

These wins are only possible because of your support – both morally and materially. The more we are, the louder is our voice. If you've become a "Friend of AlgorithmWatch" already, a huge shout-out to you! And in case you haven't: Please consider signing up to support us with a monthly or yearly donation (see page 19).

And now, have fun reading up on our other 2025 activities, including a poll on how much people dislike data centers (page 12) and the associated data center investigations by our journalism team (page 14), our fight against deepfake tools to "undress" people against their will (page 10), our "Digital Democracy Day" in Berlin (page 16) and much more.

Kristina and Matthias

Kristina Hübner
Deputy Director

Matthias Spielkamp
Executive Director

Kira Mössinger (left) and Matthias Spielkamp of AlgorithmWatch, together with Felix Hoffmann of Campact (right), hand over more than 50,000 signatures against biometric mass surveillance to Dr. Anna Lührmann, Vice Chair of the Committee on Digital Affairs and State Modernisation, in front of the Bundestag.

Stronger Together: Our Community in 2025

An AlgorithmWatch tote bag makes support for digital rights visible in everyday life.

The challenges surrounding AI and the protection of fundamental rights make a strong and connected civil society all the more important. 2025 was a year dedicated to community-building, exchange, and collective engagement. Together with partner organizations, donors, and our supporting members, we created rooms to share knowledge, bring together perspectives, and connect people with shared values.

An important milestone was our first collaboration with the platform WeAct. Together, we launched a petition against the expansion of biometric mass surveillance, which more than 50,000 people supported. The signatures were subsequently handed over to Dr. Anna Lührmann, Vice Chair of the Committee on Digital Affairs and State Modernisation (Alliance 90/The Greens) in front of the Bundestag. This strong signal against overreaching state control shows how much can be achieved when people come together for a common cause.

To accompany the petition, we hosted a public webinar on the topic of AI-powered surveillance. During the event, we discussed current developments, contextualized political debates, and engaged in conversations with the attendees. In addition, we organized an exclusive exchange format for our supporting members, the Friends of AlgorithmWatch. Here, our supporters could speak directly with the director of the organization, gain insight into our work, and share their questions and perspectives.

We would like to thank the numerous people who participated in our community survey in the autumn of 2025. Your feedback helps us to better understand which topics matter most to our community, which formats are best received, and how we can further improve our work and communication with our audience.

Our heartfelt thanks to everyone who has accompanied, supported, and helped in shaping AlgorithmWatch over the past year. Through your commitment, your donations, and your trust, you help to ensure that we can continue our work in the name of fundamental rights in the digital space and a democratic digital society.

Lea Wolff
Junior Fundraising Manager

Photo: AlgorithmWatch

At a press conference in October 2025, AlgorithmWatch presents new research findings and answers questions from journalists.

Communications & Campaigns

The work of the Communications & Campaigns team showed remarkable results in 2025. The continuous mix of active outreach to journalists, professional and fast reactions to press inquiries, regular newsletters to different target groups, activating campaigns and intensified social media work created an even stronger public presence for AlgorithmWatch.

In terms of press work, we responded to 120 press inquiries which in the majority of cases led to a mention of the organization and our experts. Thanks to a new professional monitoring service, we were able to access more press clippings than before and counted more than 1,500 mentions in print and online media as well as radio and TV throughout the year.

We closely monitor social media trends and platform developments and therefore decided to become active on the new short message platform Bluesky while reducing our efforts on Facebook. We continue to monitor user behavior and reach on all platforms. In total, we were able to win new followers on all our channels, with the strongest growth being recorded on LinkedIn and Instagram – the latter of which saw a 30 percent increase. As we reduced our overall posting quantity, we can make the assumption that the growth results from a better quality in content and production as well as a deepened understanding of our target groups. In addition, we invested heavily in the quality of our video content to make complex AI issues accessible to broader audiences.

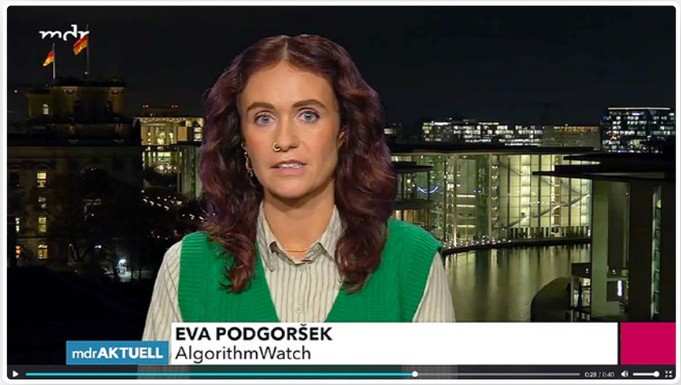
Nina Galla
Head of Communications & Campaigns

Screenshot: AlgorithmWatch

Meredith Whittaker supports AlgorithmWatch in a social media video.

Our campaign activities managed to pick up timely topics and provided emotional, activating and easily supportable elements to engage with us. We set up our first online petition together with the renowned campaign organization Campact. This cooperation increased the reach and impact of our campaigns significantly. With the creation of an analysis and search tool and forms to report cases of algorithmic harms, we brought together our expertise from policy and tech research to position AlgorithmWatch as the go-to address for both interested and affected people as well as activists in Germany and beyond.

Thematically, the Communications & Campaigns team built on AlgorithmWatch's deep and long-term expertise on AI-related regulation and surveillance in Germany and Europe. We also reacted to timely developments such as the growing debate around deepfakes and AI-based digital violence. Our biggest success was the early anticipation of the negative climate effects of AI: In a joint development of policy knowledge combined with campaign and communication tools, we were able to position AlgorithmWatch as one of the leading voices in this evolving field of expertise and public debate.



Screenshot: MDR Aktuell

Eva Podgoršek represents AlgorithmWatch in an interview with MDR Aktuell, bringing the organization's expertise to a wider television audience.

Tech Research: Data for Advocacy, Advocating for Data

The Tech Research Team continued its work across multiple topics, collaborating with policy, communications and fundraising colleagues and utilizing our networks to promote impact-driven research.

In 2025, Google launched AI Overviews, which displace search results on Google Search with short, AI-generated summaries responding to the user's query. Given the evident risks to media pluralism posed by this new feature, we submitted a formal complaint to the German Digital Services Coordinator in October together with an alliance representing media organizations. The complaint has been taken up by the European Commission.

2025 saw much talk of Non-Consensual Sexualization Tools (NSTs), often called "nudifiers", which use AI to create sexually explicit images of real people without their consent. To address this problem, we set up a crowdsourcing form to collect sightings of such tools, requested data from major online platforms under the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), and created a bespoke tool to search app stores as well as Meta's Ads Library to find cases of such software. This research informed complaints and policy proposals against NSTs that we developed, building on both the Digital Services Act and the AI Act.

Photo: Jason Ekvidi, CC BY-SA 4.0

Philipp Lorenz-Spreen, Brandi Geurkink, Kimberly McArthur and Oliver Marsh discuss new approaches to protecting democracy online at re:publica 2025 in Berlin.

FOCiS, a two-year project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection, examines the credit scoring system in Germany. Private bureaus such as Schufa collect vast amounts of personal data and shape access to core goods and services by assigning credit scores that banks, landlords and other entities use to estimate reliability, while consumers get limited insight into these processes. FOCiS combines foundational research with a feasibility study in the search for more transparent, equitable and democratically accountable credit assessment mechanisms. In 2025, the project produced several analyses contrasting Germany's system with that of France, examining both approaches from legal, economic and data science perspectives. This research was complemented by events bringing together stakeholders to debate the findings and gain external insights.

ALGORITHM WATCH

Continuing our work on risks to democracy through the deployment of AI and algorithms, we studied how chatbots are used by governments in Germany, Switzerland and the UK to generate policy ideas and legislation, and interrogated the accompanying safeguards and guidelines, including by submitting three Freedom of Information requests, among other methods. The findings were published in early 2026. In addition, we worked with the DFRLab at the Atlantic Council to investigate how Elon Musk's ideology impacted election discussion on X.com during the German federal elections. This investigation received international attention, with reportage in The Washington Post.

Photo: Coalition for Independent Technology Research, all rights reserved

Panel discussion "The New Wild West of Artificial Intelligence" at the Finance for Society Forum, December 2025.

We kept pushing for more data access to online services under the EU's Digital Services Act. Together with the Mozilla Foundation and the DSA40 Data Access Collaboratory, we ran a Data Access Hackathon that led to a coordinated "mass data access request" for viral posts across six large platforms. Our request for data on AI Overviews from Google was one of the first uses of new EU rules for requesting internal company data. We raised awareness of data access opportunities more widely, including via webinars and a one-page "how-to" document that we developed and shared. Building bridges between research and impact also motivated other activities, including the founding of an informal network of researchers and CSO representatives in Berlin and speaking as guest lecturers at universities in Bremen and Regensburg, at Sciences Po and at the Hertie School to share lessons of evidence-based advocacy.

Photo: Finance Watch, all rights reserved. Source: Flickr

Researchers and civil society representatives call for greater platform transparency and access to data, May 2025.

Dr. Adriana Cuppuleri
Senior Researcher

Dr. Oliver Marsh
Head of Tech Research

Photo: Mike Auerbach / ecoCompute 2025

At ecoCompute 2025 in Berlin, AlgorithmWatch Senior Policy Manager Julian Bothe discussed public attitudes towards the energy consumption of data centers and the need for stronger political safeguards.

Policy: AI, Data Centers and Sustainability

2025 was once again an exciting but also demanding year for the policy team: We continued working on topics that AlgorithmWatch has been pursuing for several years, including biometric surveillance, the European AI Act, and the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA). After the German federal election in February, we familiarized ourselves with the new German government, analyzed the coalition agreement and drafted a new Agenda for an AI for the Common Good.

On top of that, the policy team started to put its weight behind addressing the risks of the current AI hype, the corresponding data center boom and the climate and sustainability problems this development entails. And rightly so: In 2025, these topics gained more and more traction – not only in politics, but also in the media and among the public.

One highlight in this strand was the publication in October of a representative survey conducted with several partners on the data center boom in Germany, Switzerland and other European countries. This survey was taken up by the German Press Agency (dpa) and received much attention both in the media and from politicians working on the topic.

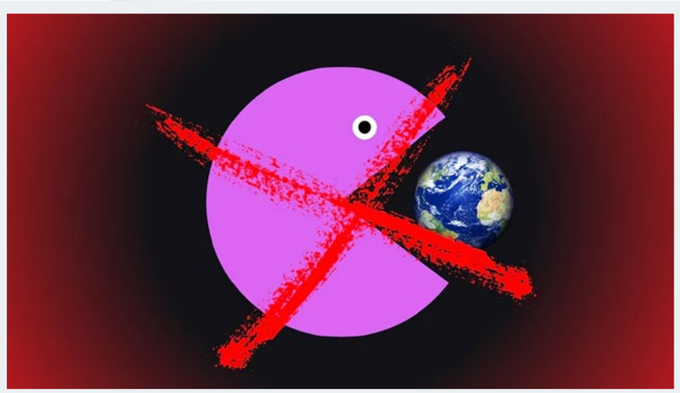


Illustration accompanying the representative survey on public concerns about the energy and water consumption of data centers in Europe.

© Beyond Fossil Fuels, adapted by AlgorithmWatch

The numbers are astonishing: In Germany, more than half of the people we interviewed are concerned that the water consumption of data centers could affect their water supply or the surrounding ecosystems. More than two in five respondents also believe that data centers will account for a large share of Germany's electricity consumption in the future. Three in ten respondents believe that this is already the case. A large majority of respondents support stricter regulation and greater transparency for data centers. Two-thirds agree with the statement that data centers should only be built if additional renewable energy capacity is created to support them.

In summary: People are concerned about the development of data centers and call for more regulation. The results of the survey confirmed the ongoing work of the policy team at AlgorithmWatch and proved to be a valuable resource for our future work. Last year, the need for political intervention on this topic was clear, as were the opportunities to act and challenge the prevailing discourse.

Some highlights

- **In February, Angela Müller and Matthias Spielkamp participated in the international AI Action Summit in Paris, hosted by the French government, where they called for AI to become truly sustainable: A truly "green AI" must respect the planetary boundaries instead of simply continuing the prevailing "bigger is better" narrative that only serves Big Tech companies while systematically wasting the Earth's resources.**

- **In September, a new position for a Policy Manager with a focus on AI and the climate crisis was created. Dr. Julian Bothe started his work with AlgorithmWatch only weeks before Germany's Digital Minister Karsten Wildberger called for input on the German government's upcoming national data center strategy. With the help of our new colleague and our partner organizations within the F5 alliance, AlgorithmWatch submitted a joint position paper on this strategy.**

- **In November, AlgorithmWatch published an explanatory video entitled "The Insatiable AI Industry and Its Costs".**

- **In December, the German government announced that it would amend the German Energy Efficiency Act with the aim of dismantling existing regulation on data centers, which led to our campaign for better regulation of data centers in Germany and shaped much of our work in 2026.**

Dr. Julian Bothe
Senior Policy Manager

Investigative journalists take part in an AI Accountability training session at DataHarvest 2025, where AlgorithmWatch collaborated in designing beginner and advanced-level workshops on AI accountability reporting.

Journalism

The journalism team continued the successful Algorithmic Accountability Fellowship, which started in 2023, with a fourth cohort. More than 100 journalists and academics applied; nine were selected for the program. With the help of AlgorithmWatch's Naiara Bellio, they received a stipend as well as coaching and training sessions from leading tech journalists and researchers from Europe.

Some of the Fellows' investigations received wide attention: Michael Bird and Nathan Schepers researched the black market for accounts on clickwork platforms used to train AI models. Their story was co-published by AlgorithmWatch and the German daily tageszeitung (taz). In addition, they presented their results at DataHarvest, Europe's leading conference for investigative journalists. Their session was well-attended and led to them developing new contacts for further projects. Their experience – as well as that of other Fellows – shows once more how AlgorithmWatch's fellowship enables ambitious journalists to become recognized experts in the field of AI accountability reporting.

Fellows Anna Toniolo, Raluca Besliu, and Aniket Narawad focused on analyzing the rapid expansion of data centers across several European countries and their impact on local communities. Their research was published in English and German, as well as in Italian via the investigative journalism platform IrpiMedia.

This research line continued with a joint project with Tech Policy Press, a media outlet focusing on digital policy news. Together, we coordinated and published two investigations on the impact of the data center boom on Germany's power grid and the lessons learned from Ireland's strained experience with hyperscalers. The project was supported by the Civic Journalism Coalition, a collaborative group created and coordinated by EDRi (European Digital Rights), ECNL (the European Center for Not-For-Profit Law) and Lighthouse Reports.

Illustration: Pieter Fannes / DataHarvest 2025

Naiara Bellio, Michael Bird, and Nathan Schepers present their investigation into black-market accounts on AI training platforms at DataHarvest 2025.

In May 2025, the False Positives podcast, first broadcast in 2024 in partnership with Agence France-Presse (AFP), was translated into and published in German. Several hundred people listened to the harrowing stories of de-banking (the unwarranted closure of bank accounts based on algorithmic decisions) and discrimination against minorities.

Together with a journalist from Lighthouse Reports, we also co-led the AI Accountability track at DataHarvest, which was divided into beginner and advanced-level training sessions for investigative journalists.

Every other week, the journalism team sent out The Automated Society newsletter in German and English to several thousand recipients. After six years, the mailing has solidly established itself as one of Europe's most trusted news sources regarding the impact of AI on society. Journalists and academics in Switzerland, Germany, and beyond rely on it to find story ideas and discover new algorithmic systems. Content from The Automated Society was regularly mentioned in specialist outlets such as netzpolitik.org or DNIP.

Original reporting from AlgorithmWatch was instrumental for other activists, too. An investigation into identity theft by an AI slop farm led to conversations with Reporters Without Borders and SHERPA, two non-governmental organizations that integrated the evidence into their advocacy strategies.

Naiara Bellio
Reporter and fellowship coordinator

Nicolas Kayser-Bril
Head of Journalism

Zukunft D: Building a Resilient Democracy in a Digitized Society

In 2025, AlgorithmWatch joined forces with four other civil society organizations in Germany to strengthen democracy in an interconnected and digitized world.

Connected by the conviction that when others only see the crisis of democracy, we see a chance for solidarity, the five civil society organizations AlgorithmWatch, aula, Liquid Democracy, Schwarzkopf Foundation Young Europe, and Wikimedia Germany jointly created the Zukunft D ("Future D") initiative.

Zukunft D is part of the federal program "Demokratie leben!" ("Live Democracy!"), funded by the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

The initiative promotes democracy in a digitized society by fostering knowledge sharing, developing policy proposals, creating nationwide networks, and empowering underrepresented groups and intersectional perspectives. The project focuses on offering spaces, but even more on the establishment of an "infrastructure" that strengthens civic participation, enhances digital literacy, and creates inclusive, secure, and accessible formats for democratic practice across the country. Working groups are active along four main themes: "democracy & media literacy", "digital systems, AI & data", "democratic values & diversity" and "formats of digital participation".

Participants exchange ideas during a workshop at Digital Democracy Day 2025.

In the first year, the five members of the consortium co-organized the necessary steps to launch the Zukunft D initiative – from the technical infrastructure, governance systems, branding and communication strategy to the final launch with a new website and an event highlight, the "Digital Democracy Day".

As one of the first joint efforts, the Zukunft D initiative responded to the Call for Evidence on the European Democracy Shield by the European Commission and published a statement in May 2025. It welcomed the Commission's initiative to launch the European Democracy Shield as an important step towards reinforcing democratic resilience across the European Union, yet urged the Commission to establish transparency, accountability, and civic empowerment as guiding principles in all related actions.

Federal Minister Karin Prien delivers the keynote address at Digital Democracy Day 2025 in Berlin.

Photos: Jason Ekvidi / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

In November 2025, the launch of the Zukunft D initiative was received in the press and among the public with the successful annual "Digital Democracy Day" conference. The event took place in Berlin and gathered 200 people with diverse backgrounds – from civil society to politics, science, administration and tech – to discuss the potential futures of democracy in an interconnected and digitized society. Karin Prien, Federal Minister of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, delivered a keynote address emphasizing the importance of guiding young people in the digital space and inspiring them to actively participate in democracy. The Minister emphasized that digital spaces must be designed with fairness and transparency, and she called for a resolute continuation of the fight against disinformation and online hate.

As part of the conference, the four working groups within Zukunft D held workshops that led to the first measures of community building. Following the conference, workshops and online events took place to ensure knowledge sharing and community building opportunities with the relevant audiences for each working group.

In December, the working group "democracy & media literacy" organized the workshop "Inside the feed" with Dr Oliver Marsh, Head of Tech Research at AlgorithmWatch, as a guest speaker. Participants between the ages of 16 and 27 had the chance to learn in person how feeds are shaped by the community, but even more by the interests of the platform providers. Thanks to an algorithm simulation exercise, they were able to grasp in a playful manner how social media algorithms work, but also had the chance to reflect on the impact of algorithms on democracy in group sessions.

During the kick-off of the working group "digital systems, AI & data" potential community members discuss insights and case studies from their everyday work.

Last but not least, the working group "digital systems, AI & data" led by Ingrid Woods, Senior Campaigns Manager at AlgorithmWatch, organized its first online networking event on 10 December. It gathered members of the working group such as technical experts from all around Germany who had the chance to learn and, within small groups, exchange views on the newly published AlgorithmWatch Generative AI guidelines, presented by Dr. Oliver Marsh.

Ingrid Woods
Senior Campaigns Manager

Kristina Hübner
Deputy Director

Finances

Income Statement in Euro*	01.01.–31.12.2025	01.01.–31.12.2024
Revenues	2.435,38	3.775,00
Grants	1.928.192,80	1.804.684,76
Donations	35.379,35	91.613,76 **
Other Operating Income	44.853,15	154.122,16
Total Revenues	**2.010.860,68**	**2.054.195,68**
Expenses from Benefit Commitments to Third Parties · Forwarding of Funds · Scholarships	 120.854,38 0,00	 168.262,96 86.419,50
Cost of Materials / Cost of Purchased Services	0,00	110.163,65
Staff costs · Wages and salaries · Social security, pensions and other benefit costs	 1.121.857,09 244.074,58	 869.418,31 177.958,75
Depreciation	12.674,78	5.083,59
Other Operating Charges	537.440,85	314.244,48
Interest Revenue	16.015,28	18.013,61
Tax	0,00	117,00
Loss/previous year benefit	**–10.025,72**	**340.658,05**
Withdrawal from retained earnings (working capital reserve)	10.025,72	215.320,30
Transfer to other retained earnings · Working capital reserve · Unrestricted reserve	 0,00 0,00	 123.831,89 432.146,46
Net income	**0,00**	**0,00**

* The layout and numbering of the complete financial statements are aligned with the audited annual financial statement 2025 by Martina Schmidt – Wirtschaftsprüfung GmbH, Certified Public Accountant, Dipl.-Kffr. (FH) Martina Schmidt, Barbarossastraße 39, 10779 Berlin. To find previous financial reports of AlgorithmWatch and more information on governance and transparency, please visit our website: https://algorithmwatch.org/en/transparency

** In the fiscal year 2023, we received approximately € 42,000 in donations. In accordance with the accounting guidelines of the Institute of Public Auditors in Germany (Institut der Wirtschaftsprüfer in Deutschland, IDW), these donations were recognized as a non-recurring item “donations not yet dispensed” (Sonderposten aus noch nicht verbrauchten Spendenmitteln). The donations received in the fiscal years 2023 and 2024 were fully expended in 2024 in accordance with their intended purpose.

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The AlgorithmWatch team during its 2025 retreat at Villa Fohrde, taking time to reflect, set priorities and strengthen collaboration.

Thank You

Your support has an impact!

Without our community and supporters, the work of AW would not be that powerful. That is why we want to say thank you to all of you for making our work possible!

You are not yet a supporter of AlgorithmWatch?

If you believe that human rights in the digital space must be constantly protected and strengthened, please join our community. With as little as 5 euros a month, you can become a “Friend of AlgorithmWatch”. This contribution supports AlgorithmWatch’s work of ensuring that algorithms and AI strengthen democracy and sustainability instead of weakening them.

Donation account

Account holder: **AW AlgorithmWatch gGmbH**
IBAN: **DE64 4306 0967 1197 6543 01**
BIC: **GENODEM1GLS**

Legal

This report refers to the activities of the non-profit organization AW AlgorithmWatch gGmbH in the year 2025.

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