

## Protected by the Anonymous Mass? Reflecting Anonymity and Informed Consent in a Citizen Science Project on Social Media Platforms<sup>1</sup>

### Research Questions

How diverse are Facebook (FB) discussions in terms of solidarity concepts? (bubbles, filters, etc.)

### Research aim

Analyzing similarity and differences between concepts of solidarity and their negotiation in discussions on Facebook. In this Poster we describe critical issues in regard to ethics, anonymization, data protection, and analysis of data.

### Research strategy

Nine citizen scientists of diverse age, local, social and political backgrounds initiated, moderated and documented two different Facebook-discussions about political issues.

**Ethical Considerations:** Because of a reviewer's comment and funders skepticism that anonymity in 'natural' FB discussions is not possible, we worked with closed discussion groups with explicit informed consent about participating in a research project and explained that CS will anonymize all participants before archiving the discussion. Nevertheless, only a very limited number of citizen scientists' FB friends took part in these closed discussion groups (5-10%), and only about 12-50% of these participants wrote comments. Due to the CS the discussions were rather homogenous in terms of political standpoints.

**Paradox:** Analysis revealed that the limited participation was not primarily an effect of filter bubbles, but of the chosen framework: ***Closed discussion groups were not perceived as more secure by the participants, but on the contrary as less secure.*** They felt that their comments were not anonymous within the FB group, as the other participants could see their FB names, and – in contrast to regular timelines – their comments did not fade quickly into a cloudy past, but stayed there for a longer time. Especially those with controversial standpoints refused to raise their voice, because they felt exposed.

### Conclusion

***Ethical considerations and questions of anonymity were defined too narrowly, they were considered too similar to 'traditional' research:*** The participants were anonymous for the professional researchers and most of the citizens scientists, who received only pseudonymized protocols, but not within the closed discussion group: The importance of the peers was underestimated. ***Further citizen science research on social media platforms should take into account that anonymity has different meanings here than in traditional groups discussions*** (as the comments are written and can be seen more publicly) ***and, than in traditional research concepts were anonymity is considered towards researchers only.***

<sup>1</sup>The findings are based on the research project *Worlds apart? Solidarity concepts and political orientations in social media (SOPO)*, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Project Number TCS 49