

Note on the methodology

A partnership between [Data4Change](#), [RIWI](#) and [The Syria Campaign](#), [The Silencing Effect](#) report is based on a survey of 4,138 social media users in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, who completed 28 to 35 questions depending on the respondent's path, as part of an opt-in survey through their browser. It is supported by qualitative data from a series of listening sessions, a survey, and in-depth interviews with human rights defenders.

Introduction

Human rights organisations, The Syria Campaign and Data4Change both work with frontline human rights defenders and European publics to respond to global challenges. Every day, we see the real world impact of mis/disinformation and online hate.

We wanted to understand how people are responding to the threats they face online and what can be done to protect the space for citizen action and solidarity.

We decided to start by speaking to human rights defenders from Ukraine, Syria and Palestine. As three of the most socially mediated conflicts in history to date, we chose to focus on social media use in relation to these three conflict contexts, taking into account resource constraints and notwithstanding our wish to expand our research.

In order to find out if social media users in other countries, who are not directly affected by conflict, experience some of the same online harms, we set out to survey users in three European countries. Our choice of France, Germany and the UK took into account the significant interest in digital policy shown by the governments of these countries and the fact that they are all affected by new legislation meant to protect people from online harms including the Digital Services Act and Online Safety Act 2023.

Listening sessions

We connected with human rights defenders (whom we also refer to as activists in the report) through our own networks and those of peer organisations working with individuals advocating for their rights on digital platforms. We defined human rights defenders as those working in their own countries and across the diaspora, both content creators with a large online following and others who are active in pushing for the protection of human rights on social media, either as artists, writers or citizen journalists. We spoke to individuals who are documenting crimes, reporting from the ground, survivors, advocates, or campaigners in their own capacity, rather than on behalf of an organisation.

We engaged with a total of 15 human rights defenders through [online workshops](#) ("listening sessions") and in-depth interviews. The listening sessions included 12 defenders from Syria, Ukraine and Palestine based in 8 different host countries. Prior to the sessions, these defenders completed a six-question survey on self-censorship. The survey results informed the development of conversation starters for small group discussions, which spanned a total of 310 minutes. Following the listening sessions, we conducted seven in-depth interviews: three with listening session participants and four with defenders who could not attend the sessions. Among the defenders we engaged with, there were eight Syrians, five Palestinians, and three Ukrainians. These conversations with people with lived experience of online attacks informed the questions we asked the wider public.

Survey

Our survey targeted social media users in France, Germany and the UK. The criteria for inclusion in the results was for a user to have shared or reposted news on social media.

Survey respondents voluntarily took part in the anonymous, quantitative web survey, which was available in French, German, Arabic and English, between 7 and 22 November 2024.

Of the initial 9,487 people who started the survey and said they share news online, 7,611 respondents decided to continue with the survey but a further 360 respondents did not continue because they reported not being aware of any current global conflicts. Only those who completed the full survey were included in the results.

The questions were designed collaboratively, with Data4Change, RIWI and The Syria Campaign all inputting into the design and formation of the questions. We also sought input from human rights and digital rights research experts and based the thematic focus on insights gathered from conversations with human rights defenders from Syria, Ukraine and Palestine.

The survey methodology also sought to identify random, non-incented users. RIWI's state-of-the-art technology has the ability to reach diverse and generally under-reported voices, as well as a more representative and broad-based sample of the Web-using public than traditional online panels or phone panels. They reach those who were previously silent in opinion and perception research. RIWI technology casts the widest net in any geography to reach the most inclusive sample of internet users in any country. More on their methodology [here](#).

RIWI's technology has been approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Boards at several leading research Universities, including Harvard University, the University of Toronto, and Australian National University.

Get in contact for more information.