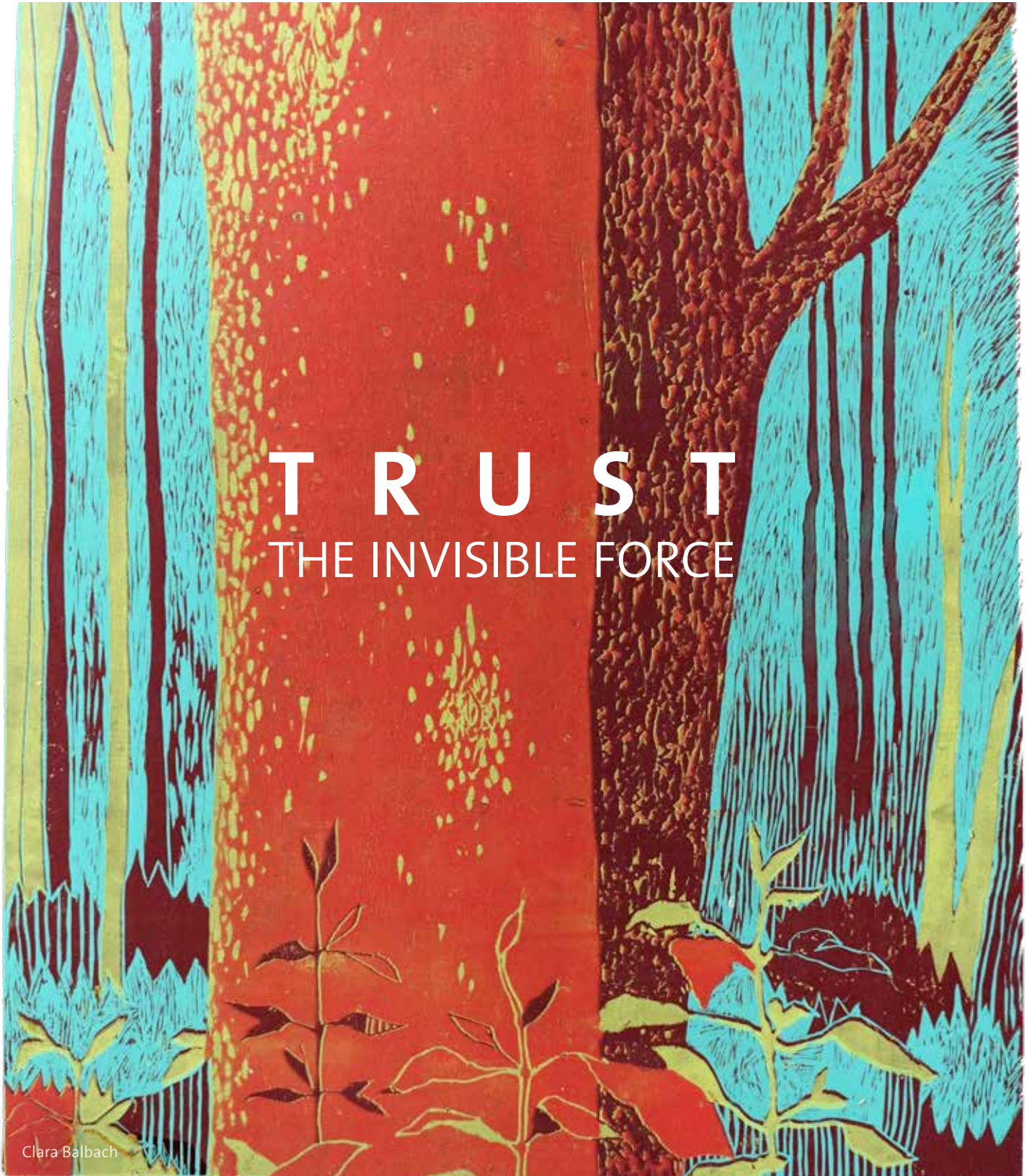


the university magazine 1 | 2025



campus passau



TRUST THE INVISIBLE FORCE

Clara Balbach



Dear reader,

When one begins to reflect on the topic of trust, it quickly becomes clear that one is touching the core of virtually every challenge and question we face. We invite you to open yourself to this experience. Let the dimensions of trust explored in this magazine inspire you. Surely, you will discover even more connections between trust and our personal and public lives – our scientific and artistic endeavours, our political and cultural coexistence.

Clearly, we depend on both giving and receiving trust. Trust allows us to act with a sense of security. Often, we do not – indeed, cannot – know for certain whether the conditions under which we act sufficiently justify our actions. It's as if we're walking across a swaying suspension bridge, relying on the skill of its builders. In our world, shaped by science and technology, this is the foundation we move on every day: assuming that someone has checked the things we rely on. We place our trust in this scrutiny precisely because it does not rely on trust, but on control.

"Trust is good; control is better" goes the well-known saying. But a system of complete control does not – and cannot – exist, not in private life and not in the public sphere. Balancing necessary control, appropriate scepticism and natural trust is part of our everyday reality. Trust is a precious good: it must be painstakingly built, honestly earned and reliably proven. Once lost, trust is difficult to regain. Disappointed trust breeds uncertainty – and even fear.

It may come as a surprise that science – this deeply rational, evidence-based and critical enterprise – is largely built on trust. At the foundation of scientific work lies an ethos that binds all scholarly activity to reliability, honesty and truth. The verifiability of all scientific results and claims is a basic requirement. This verification does not exist primarily to uncover intentional fraud; it is meant to identify errors or methodological flaws in scientific research. Fraud is never tolerated. We, as the scientific community, rely on this shared ethos, and it is our responsibility to pass it on to our students through example, through learning, and through joint research.

Together, we must stand up for a world that makes trusting possible – and that deserves our trust.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ulrich Bartosch". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Professor Ulrich Bartosch
President of the University of Passau

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400 YEARS OF UNIVERSITY TRADITION

The University of Passau may be relatively young, having only been founded in 1978, but Passau can look back on 400 years of university tradition. The recently published volume "400 Jahre Akademisches Leben in Passau" (400 Years of Academic Life in Passau), edited by Britta Kägler, Professor of Bavarian and European Regional History, and Christian Handschuh, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Christian Identities, traces the development from a Jesuit college to a modern university and shows up the connections between everyday urban life in Passau and general Bavarian history. The essays range from the Jesuit beginnings to forward-looking innovation and sustainability projects of today's university.

(ISBN 978-3-7917-3476-7; 248 pages, € (D) 29.95).



BAVARIA'S MOST POPULAR UNIVERSITY



Passau's students have given the University of Passau top marks and voted it into first place in Bavaria in the latest ranking of the StudyCheck.de evaluation portal. With a rating of 3.93 out of 5 stars and a recommendation rate of 97 percent, Passau received the "Top University 2025" award, relegating the University of Bayreuth and the Technical University of Munich to second and third place. In a nationwide comparison of all German universities, Passau takes 6th place. A total of 357 reviews of the University's degree programmes were published on studycheck.de last year.

View the ranking results at www.studycheck.de/hochschulranking/beliebteste-universitaeten



ADVISER TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT



© Linda Köhler-Sandring

The EFI Commission submits the 2025 annual report to Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz. From left to right: Friederike Welter, Christoph M. Schmidt, Carolin Häussler, Uwe Cantner, Olaf Scholz, Irene Bertschek and Guido Bünstorf.

The Commission of Experts for Research and Innovation (EFI), of which Passau's business professor Carolin Häussler is a member, submitted its report on research, innovation and Germany's technological competitiveness to the German government at the end of February.

The commission provides scientific policy advice and presents an annual report, which this time focuses on digitalisation and decarbonisation as driving forces of structural change, as well as quantum technologies and innovations in water management. "One of the EFI's key recommendations to the Federal Government is that it needs a clear vision and strategy in research and innovation policy, clear strategic guidelines and more assertiveness. All ministries need to pull together", said Professor Häussler. "We have a great opportunity here to take a leading global position in a key technology of the future and raise Germany and Europe to the top as a centre of technology."

BEST BUSINESS PROFESSOR UNDER 40

WirtschaftsWoche magazine has named Passau's business professor Marc Goerigk (Chair of Business Decisions and Data Science) the most prolific researcher among business administration professors under the age of 40 in the German-speaking world.

This ranking uses a methodology that awards points for the quality and quantity of scientific publications. More than 3,000 researchers were tested in the ranking.

Goerigk's research focuses on uncertainties in the decision-making process: he develops mathematical models to find the optimum decision.

"Traditional business planning methods try to find the optimum decisions when all problem parameters are fully known", said Goerigk. "But that's rarely the case in the real world. This is about how good decisions can be made, even if things turn out differently than anticipated."



Professor Marc Goerigk

NEWS ABOUT OUR DEGREE PROGRAMMES

Starting in winter semester 2025–26, the University of Passau will launch its first fully English-taught bachelor's programme: the Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence. In the foundational modules, students will learn programming, data structures and algorithmic complexity, among other topics. Additional AI-specific core lectures include machine learning, deep learning and multi-agent systems. The mathematical foundations will be covered in courses on linear algebra, analysis and stochastics. During the first two years of study, courses will be offered in both German and English, and subject-specific language courses will be available. The final two semesters will be taught entirely in English.

Also starting in the winter semester is a new double master's degree in computer science, awarded jointly by the University of Passau and Charles University in Prague. The English-taught "Joint Study Programme Computer Science – Software and

Data Engineering" is unique in that students receive two degree certificates, each referencing the other. The programme imparts in-depth expertise in the analysis, design and development of complex software solutions and systems, whilst putting a focus on Big Data processing. Each partner university offers five study places per year. Students will spend the first two semesters at their home university and the final two at the partner university. From the 2025–26 winter semester, the M.A. Governance and Public Policy, too, will be offered entirely in English.

Another new development is the option to pursue degree programmes on a part-time basis. The master's programmes M.A. Charity Studies and Values-based Management, LL.M. Legal Informatics and M.A. Pastoral Work will be the first at the University of Passau to be offered part-time to make them available to those already in employment.



The winning team presenting their app. From left to right: Luca Schackmann, Vincent Helmers and Lukas Laschinger.

© Erich Malter

"GALLERY SORT" WINS 5-EURO-BUSINESS COMPETITION

Six young start-up teams presented their innovative ideas and creative business concepts at the final of the 5-Euro-Business start-up competition on 21 January in Passau and competed for prizes worth a total of 2,250 euros.

First place went to the "Gallery Sort" team (Lukas Laschinger, Luca Schackmann and Vincent Helmers), whose photo organiser app makes for rapid and effective sorting and deleting of photos. Second place and the Sustainability Award went to Lukas Holzmann, Leon Ged-Gaston, Nick Friemer and Felix Oberland for "myCoach", a platform designed to match up people who are interested in new hobbies with suitable coaches.

The "GoGenius" team with Maximilian Thiele and Daniel Garbas came third with their concept for healthy and caffeinated drinks.

The 5-Euro-Business is a project of Bildungswerk der Bayerischen Wirtschaft e. V. (bbw e. V.) and is organised annually at Bavarian universities with the aim to get students interested in entrepreneurship. The starting capital is only five euros.

STRONG IN BUSINESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The School of Business, Economics and Information Systems has climbed 50 places in the latest Times Higher Education (THE) Subject Ranking – despite the significant increase in competitors in the ranking compared to last year. "This ranking proves once again that our faculty employs internationally excellent academics who conduct research on exciting, highly topical subjects. And our students also benefit from this", said Professor Stefan Bauernschuster, Dean of the School of Business,

Economics and Information Systems. Passau has also held its own in the other THE Subject Rankings (Social Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science).

In another ranking, having entered the GreenMetric Ranking in 2021 as the best worldwide newcomer, the University continued to perform excellently in 2024 and has defended its position among the leading 15 percent of international higher education institutions for the third time in succession.

PHOTOVOLTAICS FOR THE CAMPUS

The University is significantly expanding the photovoltaic systems on its campus rooftops. By August 2025, nearly all university buildings – including the crèche, the Computer Science and Mathematics, Business and Economics and Technical Services Buildings, the refectory, the Sports Centre, the Juridicum Building, the Central Library, the Audimax Building, the Philosophicum and the Centre for Media and Communication (ZMK) – will be equipped with solar panels. In addition to the existing photovoltaic systems generating around 100 kWp on six external university buildings, the project will add 2.3 MWp of solar capacity across twelve buildings. The expansion also includes a new electricity storage system with a capacity of nearly 700 kWh. With this project, the University is intensifying its commitment to sustainability. The Technical Services team is planning and implementing the initiative in cooperation with the engineering firm ELMA. "This is a crucial stepping stone on the university's path to becoming a climate-neutral institution. The planning process was particularly complex and time-consuming due to the scale of the project", said Professor Werner Gamerith, Vice President for Transfer and Sustainability. The Free State of Bavaria is supporting the project with dedicated special funds.



PRESIDENT OF THE STATE PARLIAMENT VISITS PASSAU TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE MEDICAL CAMPUS



President of the State Parliament Ilse Aigner during her visit. On the right: University President Professor Ulrich Bartosch, on the left: Professor Tomas Sauer.


At the beginning of April, Bavarian State Parliament president Ilse Aigner and members of her leadership team visited various institutions in Lower Bavaria. Two stops were at Passau's main hospital (Klinikum Passau) and the university campus, where the delegation were brought up to date concerning the Lower-Bavarian Medical Campus (MCN) project, its history, organisational and contractual structure as well as the clinical and profile professorships to be established at the University of Passau. The University presented the Centre for Digital Medical Education (ZeDiMA) as the central hub for digital teaching at the MCN, as well as the newly formed Institute of Health Sciences. During a presentation of the concept for a multimedia lecture hall designed for innovative teaching methods – such as virtual anatomy – the members of the delegation explored the inside of the human brain. Selected research projects of the University in the health sciences field were also presented.



Esther Koch

Tree Art

This large-format colour print draws viewers into the dense, organic world of tree structures. Created through the relief printing technique known as the "reduction method", a single woodblock is carved and printed in a carefully planned sequence of colour layers. With each stage, more of the block is cut away – typically over five to ten steps – gradually erasing the original surface until the block is nearly destroyed. Each carving reveals a new colour, building depth and complexity. This tree by art student Esther Koch was featured in the exhibition "Who wants to live without the comfort of trees!" by art education/visual literacy students under the supervision of Brigitte Schira.



Sub-Saharan Africa

From 2022 to 2024, the MitraWA: Migration and Translocality in West Africa project researched migration movements in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria. Researchers from Passau and Dortmund collaborated extensively with their fellow researchers in the region. To conclude the project, the Passau team of geographers led by Dr Stefanie Wehner and Dr Christian Ungruhe visited the region in November 2024 to discuss the results and data with the locals, such as here in the village of Limo in northern Ghana. The topics: Migration, education and the effects of climate change on agriculture. Detailed information on the project can be found at: www.uni-passau.de/en/mitrawa



Cool Cat

He is the undisputed Instagram star on Passau's campus: Kadu the cat. The orange tabby is often seen on campus and even attends the occasional lecture! Kadu, short for "Kater an der Uni" (cat at the uni – although his real name is Winston), now has well over 10,000 followers. He owes his ongoing social media success to students Johannes Ebner and Diana Brayer, who regularly share videos and photos of his adventures on Instagram. His owner, Franziska Meyer, who is also a student, lives nearby – and to the delight of all Kadu fans, she will probably do so for the next three years. However, she does have one request: please don't feed Kadu!
www.instagram.com/unikatze_passau

Kindergarten Caravan

A place to retreat to on cold winter days and find shelter from the weather or a shady hideaway in summer – the caravan of the Caritas forest kindergarten at the University of Passau has been ready to move into on the gravel car park in Ingling since mid-March. The wooden, heated construction caravan complements the existing tipi as an additional place for the children, who will spend most of their kindergarten day outdoors.

Managed by childcare worker Karin Eibl, the kindergarten will open in September 2025, welcoming children into an environment where respect for nature and for one another are at the heart of everyday learning. Places are still available.

Find out more at: www.uni-passau.de/en/family/studying-and-working-as-a-parent/caritas-forest-kindergarten-at-the-university-of-passau





DARE TO BE MORE TRUSTING

Trusting others runs the risk of disappointment and getting hurt. Why we should nevertheless focus more on building trusting relationships.

We all want people to trust us and consider us trustworthy. This is no different in the university field. A professor participating in a third-party funding application wants the coordinator's confidence that her part of the application will be submitted on time. A presidential candidate running for office seeks the University Council members' trust. A doctoral student who conducts interviews as part of her research and ensures that personal data is anonymised, relies on the trust of her interviewees. The list of examples where trust plays an integral role is endless.

Why do we want others to trust us and consider us trustworthy? Martin Hartmann, a philosophy professor at the University of Lucerne, has been working on this question for many years. After his habilitation thesis on trust in 2009, he published the award-winning non-fiction book "Vertrauen. Die unsichtbare Macht" (Trust – the Invisible Force). What makes trust so desirable for us, according to Hartmann, is the freedom and room for manoeuvre it gives us: "The person I trust gains room for manoeuvre through my trust that they would not have otherwise."

To revisit the example of the professor who is involved in a third-party funding application: The trust that the coordinator of the application places in her enables her to decide freely when to write her part of the application. Because she is more productive when she can take time out from her other duties and concentrate on working on a text for several days, she only sits down to work on the proposal during the lecture-free period and delivers her part shortly before the deadline.

If the coordinator didn't trust her, she wouldn't have this freedom. He would make follow-up calls in between and ask her to submit initial text blocks well ahead of the deadline.

Freedom and recognition make trust so valuable

There is another important aspect, in addition to the freedom and room for manoeuvre, that makes trust so valuable: "Trust is recognition", says Hartmann. "It gives you courage and sends a signal: You can do it."

The presidential candidate who is unanimously elected by the University Council, feels recognised as a result. This is because the members of this body obviously have faith in his ability to discharge the duties and responsibilities inherent in this office. Their trust in him boosts his self-confidence.

Accordingly, we all want to be trusted in order to have certain freedoms and feel recognised. But why do many of us find it difficult to place our trust in others? Hartmann believes it is the lack of guarantees in a relationship built on trust that gives us pause. "In trusting, we grant others freedoms, but we don't know exactly how they will use them."

The coordinator in the third-party funding application scenario trusts his colleague to send her text on time, but he has no way of knowing for certain. The sociologist Georg Simmel said at the beginning of the 20th century that trust exists somewhere between knowing and not knowing.

By placing our trust in another person, we give up control and more or less consciously run the risk of being disappointed and hurt. For Martin Schweer, psychologist and head of the Centre for Trust Research at the University of Vechta, this risk is inextricably linked to genuine trust: "The higher the risk I take, the more it shows how much I trust the other person", he said in a Deutschlandfunk radio programme.

In the doctoral student scenario above, the interviewees relate intimate information in the interviews. In doing so, they run the risk of their personal data being published unintentionally if it is not sufficiently anonymised. However, they still trust the doctoral student owing to her apparent expertise and reliability.

Trust develops slowly and is quickly squandered

Along with honesty, reliability and professional expertise, Schweer believes that time is often a decisive factor in whether we are willing to trust others. "Building trust is something that takes time", says Schweer. Losing trust, on the other hand, is a very swift process.

There is a Dutch proverb that describes just this phenomenon: "Vertrouwen komt te voet en gaat te paard." – trust comes on foot and goes on horseback.

In other words, the coordinator of the third-party funding application trusts the professor because he has known her for years and knows her to be reliable. Had she missed deadlines for previous submissions, he would be more cautious.

It is also clear that disappointed trust often has a negative impact on one's willingness to take this risk again – at least with the person or institution who had disappointed one's trust. Conversely, the more positive experiences of trust one has in the course of one's life, the more willing they are to invest in relationships of trust. However, as Schweer emphasised in an interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung magazine, it is not just about your own experiences, "but also about how people in your immediate social environment view the world." Family in particular, but also friends and social media, often have a strong influence.

Should we all dare to be more trusting? Both trust researchers quoted in this article are unanimous: yes, we should. Hartmann believes that this is particularly true for those who say they want to be more trusting of others, but don't because they feel that people in general aren't trustworthy nowadays. "They don't want to trust others because they don't want to be hurt. They're confusing trust with the promise of security." But trust can never be certain, otherwise it wouldn't be what it is.

Schweer also considers that a greater level of trust would benefit us all: "In a climate of trust, people get along better, are more motivated and committed and have stronger connections with each other." Of course, such a climate of trust is not a safeguard against hurt and disappointment. But the probability of experiencing positive relationships increases enormously. Those who go out into the world with a positive image of humanity and rely on the trustworthiness of others are much more likely to experience good things. (BK)

Professor Martin Hartmann, *Vertrauen – Die unsichtbare Macht* (non-fiction)
www.fischerverlage.de/buch/martin-hartmann-vertrauen-die-unsichtbare-macht-9783100000682



"Über Vertrauen – auch in die Politik."
 (About Trust – Even in Politicians)
 Interview with Professor Martin Schweer,
 Deutschlandfunk
www.deutschlandfunk.de/ueber-vertrauen-auch-in-die-politik-interview-mit-prof-dr-martin-schweer-dlf-5046d86b-100.html



The Power of Trees

Trees embody strength and energy, rootedness and steadfastness – they stand for reliability and thus symbolise trust.

On page 10, we presented the works of art student Esther Koch, which were created in an art education/visual literacy seminar at the University of Passau. In the exhibition "Who wants to live without the comfort of trees!", she and fellow students showed their extraordinary works on the theme of trees. They now form the visual framework for this magazine.

We would like to thank the seminar supervisor, Brigitte Schira, and especially the students for making their pictures available to us: Clara Balbach (cover picture), Esther Koch (p.10), Sophia Matschilles (p. 14), Marie Schleuter (p. 17), Kerstin Deuerling (p. 30), Sophia Platonow (p. 33) and Lea Wagner (p. 43).



Giving
TRUST
Earning
TRUST

In April 2026, Professor Jan H. Schumann will take over from Professor Ulrich Bartosch as university president. Campus Magazine talked with both of them about mutual trust and the transitional phase.

President Bartosch, the long transitional phase from one presidency to the next is, as you said, a "time of opportunity". What opportunities does it bring?

Bartosch: The big opportunity is continuity. Every change is a break and as such is associated with upheavals, but at the same time it is also a bridge, a connection. Through continuity, this transitional phase can also be a time of joint acceleration. The classic image of passing the baton fits very well here. We're currently in a parallel turn that commits us to our current areas of responsibility, while also giving us the opportunity to prepare for the handover and the presidency from 2026.

Schumann: I definitely see the opportunity in aligning the long-term roadmap at this stage. It also gives me the opportunity to soak up knowledge and gain experience that will be important for my future presidential role. Through my involvement in many decision-making processes and everything else that is being brought to my attention from outside, such as invitations to certain events or committee meetings, I can grow into the presidential office and hit the ground running come 2026.

How important is mutual trust in this phase?

Bartosch: In my opinion, personal trust is more important than anything else in the phase we're currently in. It's the pillar of the kind of handover we're envisaging. As vice president and president, we're already working hand-in-glove and can now continue to do so on a different level. I see this as a great privilege, especially in these challenging times for universities.

Mr Schumann, a social media post on your election as future president read: "Trust is the most important resource for your office and you have had this impressively confirmed!". How important is trust in steering a large organisation such as a university?

Schumann: Trust plays a crucial role for all the people who work at the university day after day. Even in my current role as chairholder, it has always been important to me that there is a basis of trust between me and my staff. It's not about checking up on everything they do but about giving and fostering trust. In my experience, this gets people working at their best performance, generates enthusiasm and gives them freedom for their personal development.



Professor Ulrich Bartosch

Ulrich Bartosch took office as president of the University of Passau in April 2020. In 2000, Bartosch, who holds a doctorate in education and political science, took up the position of Professor of Educational Sciences at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU). Other positions he held were chairman of both the Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit (FBTS) and the Vereinigung Deutscher Wissenschaftler (VDW); he has also served as a consulting expert on the Bologna Process for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). In November 2023, Bartosch was appointed vice president of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), where he holds the portfolio "Teaching, Studies and Teacher Training".

How do you gain trust and what conditions are necessary for it to develop?

Schumann: I always approach any collaboration with a positive view of people and first take a leap of faith. It may be necessary to make adjustments or set rules later on, and of course there's always a risk of disappointment. Still, I wouldn't want to be in a world where I can't trust anyone. As the president-elect, that is the mindset with which I'm approaching the office. I'd like to see good and honest communication from all sides, where disagreements are discussed and resolved in a constructive manner.

Bartosch: During the coronavirus period, I found that building trust through digital meetings alone is practically impossible. In my opinion, this can only be achieved through genuine encounters and by giving these encounters time to prove themselves. Trust is given, but it also has to be earned, by both sides. It's a process that involves common ground and many good moments, but also disappointments and misunderstandings. What's important is that they're worked out to establish a foundation for trust to grow. In an executive position, such as that of university president, there are situations where one can't act on the basis of mutual agreement but has to navigate a cautiously suspicious environment. To gain trust, open communication and giving the opportunity for direct feedback are essential.

Schumann: Another aspect of trust is self-confidence. Feeling trusted, like I did when the University Council unanimously voted for me as future president, has boosted my self-confidence, and makes me feel like I can handle the challenges that lie ahead.

Success in science and research is critical for a university's reputation. The University of Passau has a number of exciting projects in the pipeline.

How will this affect the University?

Schumann: Scientific successes give the university organisational self-confidence: If concepts are cleverly built on each other and well-developed from a strategic point of view, it's possible to go beyond what has been achieved previously.

We're fairly optimistic that we'll soon be able to launch new, larger collaborative projects funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), such as a DFG Research Unit or a Collaborative Research Centre (SFB/Transregio).

These projects and the scholars and scientists leading them now need our consistent support in order to achieve these very important milestones for the university.

President Bartosch, for some people, facts based in science no longer seem to play a major role in forming an opinion. What is the current state of trust in science?

Bartosch: It's true that expert knowledge is no longer accepted unquestioningly. A sceptical attitude towards scientific findings is generally not a bad thing. But what is happening now is that people seem to have lost their sceptical mindset when it comes to information in general. In today's world, anyone can disseminate information, and that is problematic. While we used to have formats that we associated with verified truthfulness, a lot of the information out there today is being disseminated without any form of quality control.

In conclusion: Mr Schumann, what are your hopes for your time as president from April 2026?

I hope that I'll be able to maintain, nurture and cultivate the trust placed in me. This is a very important basis for good cooperation in the University's governing bodies, in the University Executive and with the faculties, but also with the university administration and the students.

Nicola Jacobi conducted the interview.




Professor Jan H. Schumann

Jan H. Schumann became Vice President for Research at the University of Passau in April 2023. He holds the Chair of Marketing and Innovation. Before joining the University in 2012, he was an assistant professor at the TUM School of Management of the Technical University of Munich, where he earned his doctorate in 2009. In February 2025, the University Council unanimously elected Schumann as the next president of the University of Passau.

TOGETHER AGAINST

Fake. **News.**





"Disinformation is currently one of the biggest challenges facing democracy and open societies", says Professor Ralf Hohlfeld, Chair of Communication Studies at the University of Passau.

The information ecosystem is gradually losing its balance and people's media literacy is not keeping pace with developments in the area of "fake news" and propaganda. Youngsters are particularly strongly affected because of their heavy use of social media.

That is the starting point for the project "Fake News – Aufklärung macht Schule", which focuses on education at schools about media literacy and how to spot fake news. It is led by Professor Hohlfeld, whose research deals extensively with disinformation, and carried out together with Dr Sabrina Kufner from the Teacher Education Centre (ZLF). At a symposium held at the University in late 2024, pupils, parents, teachers and representatives from academia and politics came together to work out what needs exist and what knowledge and skills are required. The idea behind it: to kick-start closer cooperation across institutional boundaries and find new collaboration formats.

"It's very important to me that academia is close to people, especially young people. Schools are the best place to talk directly to youngsters and integrate this important topic into the educational process there", says Professor Hohlfeld. He has held talks and workshops at various schools in Passau and throughout Lower Bavaria for pupils from eighth to eleventh year on how to recognise and deal with conspiracy myths and fake news.





Christian Müller, a member of the ZLF's Didactic Innovation Labs (DiLabs) management team, also regularly visits schools to give talks on this topic. Recently, he organised workshops for two secondary schools in Passau entitled "No Likes for Lies" to help pupils recognise fake news and deepfakes online.

The next event is already being planned: Hohlfeld's team will also be involved in developing teaching modules at an open event as part of the third-party-funded moreBNE project, which the ZLF will host for school teachers and other educationalists in autumn 2025. The aim of the long-term project is to create an opportunity for interested schools to submit thematically targeted enquiries, which can then be answered by participating academics through lectures or workshops in order to make an additional contribution to democracy education. (NJ)

Parents

As fake news continues to spread and increasingly shapes the way pupils access information, it can lead to a growing sense of scepticism towards all sources of knowledge. In the long term, even traditional media and trusted educational resources could be called into question. That's why teaching media literacy in schools isn't just important – it's essential to safeguarding the very foundations of education and democracy.

Dr Jörg Scheffer, Chairperson of the Parent Council of Adalbert-Stifter-Gymnasium Passau



School administrations

False news reports are not a new phenomenon. However, to prevent fake news and social bots from becoming a threat to our democracy, pupils need to learn how to use media discerningly. Not only is media education part of the Realschule secondary school curriculum, we are also creating an even greater awareness of it through the training of our media coaches. Projects such as this one at the University of Passau offer teachers additional support.

Marion Katzbichler, Principal, Dreiflüsse-Realschule Passau



Lies. Lies. Lies.

Secondary school pupils

Fake news is becoming increasingly widespread, especially among young people, who often rely on social media for their information. With the rise of artificial intelligence, it's becoming ever harder to tell the difference between trustworthy news and targeted disinformation. While the topic does come up in school, it's not yet a strong focus in everyday lessons. That's why it's fantastic that this project is exploring how we, as pupils, can be better equipped to deal with it.

Gerda Hahne, Student Representative of Gymnasium Leopoldinum Passau secondary school
Benjamin Köck, Student Representative of Adalbert-Stifter-Gymnasium Passau secondary school



School authority

It is particularly important to train young people in media literacy so as to enable them to detect and recognise false information. This, of course, also presents a challenge for our teachers, who need to be properly trained and supported. Engagement with experts in the field is key to supporting this effort.

Klaus Sterner, Director of the Education Authority, State Education Offices in the City and District of Passau

Researchers

By promoting media literacy, with critical thinking at the forefront, we not only strengthen individual judgement but also the democratic values essential for an informed and responsible community. I feel that supporting our schools in this enormous task is the logical response of a university that trains teachers.

Dr Sabrina Kufner, Project Leader at the Teacher Education Centre, University of Passau

Teachers

In my classes, I convey how important it is for pupils to understand the role of social media and the "frightful five" in the dissemination of information. My pupils learn to think about the source of a given piece of information and develop a more critical approach to information in general. These skills not only promote their historical understanding but also their media literacy in the digital age.

Timo Schiering, Teacher at Leopoldinum Passau



Bavarian State Ministry of Education and Culture

The support from the university on how to deal with fake news is very welcome, even though our Gymnasium secondary schools are already well-prepared, since this topic is already included multiple times in the curriculum and is one of the compulsory contents of the Medienführerschein (media literacy certificate), for example in the sections "Fact or Fake?" or "In the Information Jungle". Since it offers up-to-date cases and guidance, this project of the University of Passau is perfectly suited to support the newly introduced Verfassungsviertelstunde (a weekly quarter hour devoted to democracy education) at schools.

Peter Brendel, Ministerial Commissioner for Gymnasium secondary schools in Lower Bavaria



SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT LEVEL OF TRUST IN AI

In a bidt research focus, an interdisciplinary team of researchers led by Professor Hannah Schmid-Petri is working on questions of trust in artificial intelligence. Her team is investigating AI-generated journalism, while another is working on trustworthy AI co-pilots.



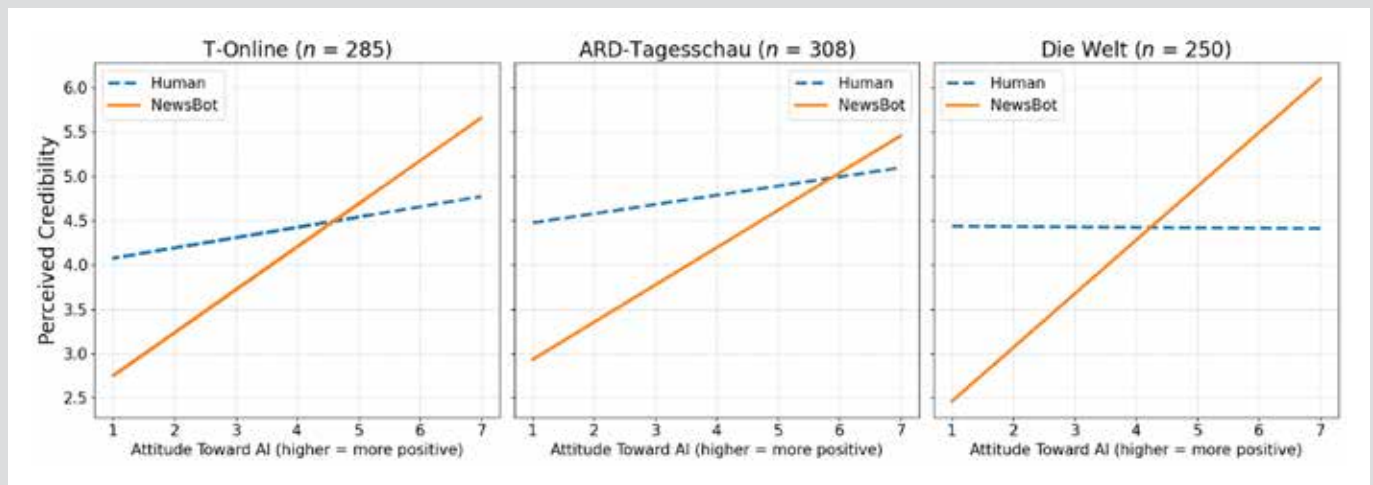
At the Süddeutsche Zeitung's digital summit, the deputy editor-in-chief deftly abolished his own job: Asked by the presenter what part of his work could be done by artificial intelligence (AI), his answer was "All of it!". But then, in an interview with Hannah Schmid-Petri, Chair of Science Communication at the University of Passau, he was noticeably relieved that the research findings painted a more differentiated picture.

Schmid-Petri, who is also a member of the board of directors of the Bavarian Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt) at the Academy of Sciences and Humanities, is investigating the state of trust in AI-generated journalism in a project funded by the

academy. At the digital summit in Munich, she presented the journalists with initial findings from a representative study she conducted together with her team member Daria Kravets-Meinke.

"The majority of respondents still consider news from human journalists to be more credible than AI-generated text", said Schmid-Petri. This is consistent with other studies. But the study also showed that, under certain conditions, AI is leading the race, especially among people who have more positive attitudes towards technology.

For the study, the researchers created lead texts on the introduction of a speed limit on German motorways and labelled them with a reference to who wrote the article: journalist, AI newsbot or journalist using AI tools. In addition, they embedded the headline in German mainstream news outlets, namely tagesschau.de, Die Welt and t-online. These versions were presented by the market research institute IPSOS to more than 3,000 participants, who completed an online questionnaire.



The charts show the relationship between attitudes towards AI and the perceived credibility of AI-generated content and articles written by people.

© Schmid-Petri/Kravets-Meinke

Human authors will be somewhat disappointed to learn that many participants didn't even notice who penned the article. However, they did remember the respective news outlet and it was shown that a high level of trust in a particular media organisation also leads to more positive credibility judgements. "This trust is the media companies' most important currency and it's important not to gamble it away", said Professor Schmid-Petri. The study is part of the bidt research focus on "Humans and Generative AI: Trust in Co-Creation", which the professor heads as

bidt director. It comprises ten projects by researchers from a variety of academic disciplines and universities that focus on both sides of the collaboration: people and technology. "We are investigating the conditions under which appropriate and meaningful trust in AI products arises in various application scenarios", said Schmid-Petri, explaining the overarching objective.

Designing trustworthy AI co-pilots

Business information scientist Ana-Maria Sirbu speaks of a calibration of trust that could be supported by a "mental match" between humans and machines. Sirbu works with Professor Ulrich Gnewuch, who holds the Chair of Explainable AI-based Business Information Systems. The University of Passau is also represented through his involvement in the bidt focus area. He heads the GenAICopilot project, which investigates how AI co-pilots need to be designed so that employees have the right level of trust in them.

Such co-pilots are already in use at many companies, where they typically assist employees with non-technical backgrounds in data analysis and data-driven decision-making. However, says Professor Gnewuch, this doesn't always lead to good decision-making processes, for example when employees blindly trust the AI's answers or, conversely, when they are overly sceptical. In both cases, forms of explainable AI can help, i.e. approaches that make it possible for people to retrace the reasoning of artificial intelligence systems.

Sirbu's doctorate builds on her master's thesis, which she completed as part of her double degree programme in Information Systems at the University of Passau and the University of Turku, Finland. In it, she programmed a data assistant based on generative language models. In one variant, users can use a button to call up an explanation in which the prototype describes the steps that led it to its answer. Surprisingly, the participants in the experiment tended to press the button only once, but not again for later queries. This seems to indicate that people felt that if the AI had got one answer right, it would also find correct answers later on. Sirbu would have liked to see more interaction with the button to allow her to determine different patterns in user behaviour.

The business information researcher initially came to Passau from her home town of Craiova, Romania, as an Erasmus student. She liked it so much here that she took up the challenge of studying a degree programme in German, which to her was a foreign language. She later applied for the double master's programme with the University of Turku, Finland, and it was around the same time that the door to academia opened for her, when the programme convenor, Professor Jan Krämer, offered her a student assistant job at the Chair of Internet and Telecommunications Business. Sirbu enthusiastically took him up on that offer: "I'd always wanted to gain an insight into scientific work", she says. She assisted doctoral candidates with their experiments – and the experience she gathered in that job comes in handy in her current research.

At the moment, she is summarising the findings of her master's thesis for a presentation at the European Conference on Information Systems taking place in Jordan in June. This is the next step in her academic career. She hopes to make important contacts with fellow researchers and gain new insights for her project – for example, how to get people to engage more with the AI's explanations. This could be a step towards achieving the right level of trust. (KH)

More about the bidt-supported Passau projects: www.digital.uni-passau.de/en/beitraege/2025/research-focus-on-trust-and-ai

In addition to the research focus, bidt is funding a number of consortium projects, including one based at the University of Passau: A team led by communication expert Professor Florian Töpfl is researching how large language models are being adapted to Russia's propaganda (see report on p. 45).

OF KNOWLEDGE, TRUST AND BELIEF

Guest writer Professor Sandra Huebenthal explores everyday language from a biblical perspective

[Translator's note: This article examines the use of theological terms in German everyday language.]

It is an interesting feature of theology that its technical terms are sometimes words also used in everyday language, but with a different meaning. One example is the German word "Glauben". In everyday parlance, it means believing – stating that someone believes something to be likely or true: "I believe it will rain tomorrow."

In this sense, "believing in God" expresses a belief in God's existence, placing it in opposition to knowledge of God's existence: "I don't know, but I believe." However, the opposite of knowledge is not belief but ignorance, and the antonym to belief is not knowledge but unbelief. Glauben also means faith; translating it as belief does not capture the meaning of Christian faith, because – unlike belief – the word faith describes a relationship.

Where German translations of the bible use the word "Glauben", the Greek New Testament generally has the Greek word "pistis" or a verb derived from it. Pistis (and its Latin equivalent fides) is a relationship word that denotes trust, loyalty and reliability within relationships; it also has a secondary meaning: conviction.

From the perspective of German everyday language, where Glauben has predominantly taken on the meaning of belief, and Vertrauen means trust, it may surprise that Glauben and Vertrauen are actually synonyms – both can be translated as faith. It is precisely this realisation that can open up a new understanding: When Paul writes in Galatians (2:16, cf. Romans 3:28) that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ, he expresses that he is concerned with trust in the act of salvation and a close relationship with Jesus Christ. If you add the secondary meaning of conviction, it also means that this trust must be realised and translated into action – and this is shown in life and in deeds, not in words.

This idea can be transferred to other areas of life. In the world of work, an extensive system of rules and controls rarely leads to relationships of trust. University didactics builds on the principle that teaching must first and foremost be based on mutual trust. Learning groups need to take a leap of faith – giving their teacher an advance in trust, so to say – but this advance will quickly dissipate if promises remain unfulfilled and learning groups are not seen and treated as partners in the learning process.

Faith as a relational event is not about salvation at the end of time, and only if one believed in Jesus firmly enough. Salvation is not a distant, difficult-to-reach goal, but a starting point. One of the great misunderstandings about faith is the idea that it refers to something in the distant future. Redemption is not God's response to human endeavour, but human faith is a response to divine action and salvation preceding it. This is demonstrated by the Ten Commandments, which begin with a reference to the divine salvation of the people of Israel in Exodus, not with "Thou shalt".

Faith in Christ is the human response to divine salvation, which has fundamentally changed human life. Here, too, it is the deed that is central, not the word. In biblical diction: "by their fruit you will recognise them" (Mt 7:16) – and this applies to many areas of life. Trust is earned through prior performance, attitude and action, not through mission statements, glossy brochures or political manifestos.

When Peter gets out of the boat and tries to follow Jesus, he sinks after two steps. The reaction of Jesus, who saves him, is "Oligopistos, why did you doubt?". Often translated as "little faith", the word oligopistos refers to someone who has little trust and finds it difficult to translate faith in Jesus into deeds. In the New Testament, Peter needs further experiences but ultimately becomes a key figure for the Christian community. As with all relationships of trust, it took time, patience and practice.



© Jan Schmitzke/Portraits Frankfurt

About the author

Professor Sandra Huebenthal holds the Chair of Exegesis and Biblical Theology at the Department of Catholic Theology, University of Passau. She is also a visiting professor at the Hussite Faculty of Theology at Charles University in Prague. In addition to academic theology with a strong international focus, her research interests include university didactics. Her current projects include the network conference "Religiöse Erinnerungskulturen in (Mittel- und Ost-)Europa – Religious Memory Cultures in (Central and Eastern) Europe" at the University of Passau and the establishment of a doctoral programme on Christian Identities and Origins.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF UNIVERSITY LIFE

Studying at university doesn't just mean acquiring new knowledge – it also involves living independently, staying organised and dealing with all sorts of challenges. This takes courage and self-confidence. To help students with all these new aspects in their life, the University of Passau offers various support services, including a psychological-psychotherapeutic counselling centre.

In psychology, self-confidence is defined as the belief or assurance in one's ability to organise and carry out specific actions. People with a high level of self-confidence generally feel capable of meeting challenges, even in the absence of objectively verifiable qualifications. They are more willing to take risks and form new relationships, and they pursue their goals with optimism and courage. Often, they also believe they have social support for their endeavours, or that they can find it when needed.

A Key Skill for Academic Success

Students are faced with a range of challenges. Many have had to move to a new town, where they need to make social connections. They must also learn to study and live independently, while making sure they get through stressful exam periods. In this process, strong self-confidence is important.

To help them cultivate it and quickly find their bearings in everyday university life, students at the University of Passau have access to an array of support services: the Academic Advice Service, departmental academic advisers, the International Office and International Support Services (e.g. iStudi Coach), the Executive Support Unit for Diversity and Gender Equality, university chaplaincy, and the psychological counselling and social welfare offices of the Student Services Association for Lower Bavaria/Upper Palatinate. Student-led initiatives such as the student societies "Kopfsache", "Studimental" and "Nightline Passau" also offer a listening ear. The Future: Careers & Competencies Section also provides a range of relevant workshops and seminars.

Support for Psychological Challenges

Despite all the available support, the demands of university life – particularly for those with low self-confidence – can lead to significant psychological strain. For these young people, the University's Psychological-Psychotherapeutic Counselling Centre is an important point of contact. Students can turn to this service to get help for a wide range of issues – including exam anxiety, concentration and learning difficulties or procrastination. Other issues that are often dealt with are the separation from their parental home, loneliness, a lack of direction, self-doubt, anxiety or social awkwardness, lack of motivation or drive, and low moods. "Additionally, students report experiencing sexual harassment, discrimination and stress outside of university life", says Dr Lisa Huber-Flammersfeld, who runs the counselling service together with her colleague Tanja Obermüller. The most common clinical symptoms encountered in counselling are anxiety disorders and depression. "This is consistent with prevalence rates – that is, how often these mental health conditions appear at a given time within the general population in Germany", she explains.

The counselling centre offers a broad range of support. "It is used extensively by students – we're often the first professional point of contact for mental health concerns", say the two psychologists. "In one-to-one sessions, students can build trust and talk about their worries, concerns and problems. However, when clinically relevant symptoms are present, we often strongly recommend that they seek further treatment from psychotherapists or medical specialists." (TB)

Making an appointment

To make an appointment, you can get in touch:

- **by e-mail:**
psychologische.beratung@uni-passau.de
(For reasons of data security, please use your university e-mail address.)
- **by phone:** +49 851 509 1153
(Monday to Friday from 9:00 to 12:00)
- **in person:** Room 104
in the Administration Building

For details visit
www.uni-passau.de/en/psychological-counselling

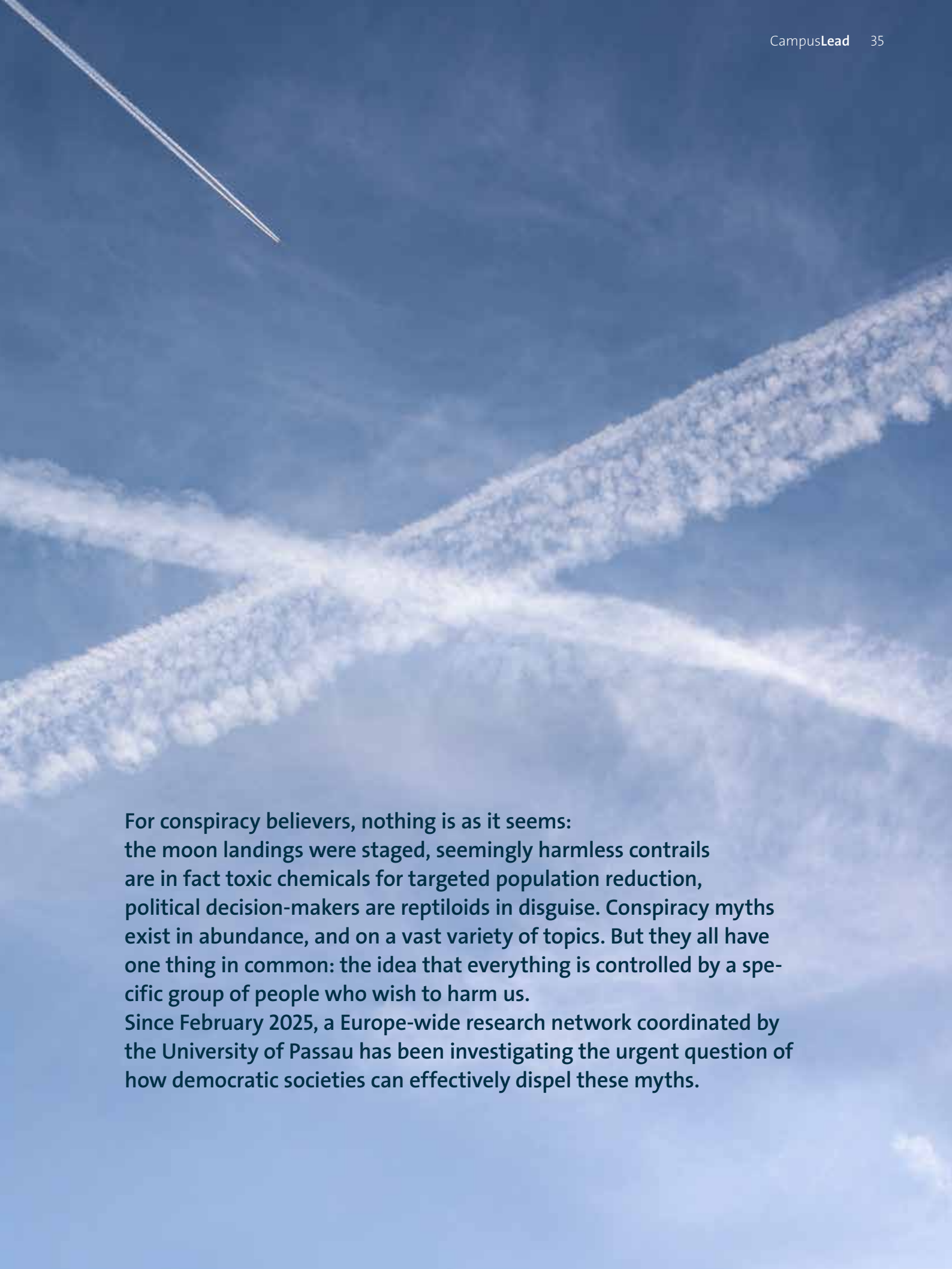


Lisa Huber-Flammersfeld



Tanja Obermüller

"FOR
CONSPIRACY
BELIEVERS,
DEMOCRACY
IS MERELY A
FACADE"



For conspiracy believers, nothing is as it seems: the moon landings were staged, seemingly harmless contrails are in fact toxic chemicals for targeted population reduction, political decision-makers are reptiloids in disguise. Conspiracy myths exist in abundance, and on a vast variety of topics. But they all have one thing in common: the idea that everything is controlled by a specific group of people who wish to harm us. Since February 2025, a Europe-wide research network coordinated by the University of Passau has been investigating the urgent question of how democratic societies can effectively dispel these myths.



One could be forgiven for believing that conspiracy narratives or myths are a 21st-century phenomenon; they are not. As a matter of fact, this phenomenon has been around for a long time, but what has changed in the recent past was the invention and mass-adoption of the internet, which offers ideal conditions for the proliferation of conspiracy myths and fake news. It has never been easier to spread these nearly instantaneously to large numbers of people – through social networks, messenger services and YouTube – which makes them more visible than ever before. The internet gives users the ability to network with like-minded people all over the world. It also seemingly confirms a basic assumption of conspiracy believers: that everything is connected.

Coordinated by a team from the University of Passau, researchers across Europe have joined forces to get to the bottom of manifest conspiracy myths. They hope to gain new insights into how democracies can be made more resilient towards them. "Conspiracy myths undermine democratic processes and citizen engagement by exploiting the inherent weaknesses of democracies: their openness and the ambiguity of decision-making processes",

says Professor Oliver Hidalgo, who holds the Chair of Political Theory at the University of Passau. Together with educationalist Dr Hannes Birnkammerer, a research assistant at the University's Teacher Education Centre (ZLF), he has acquired the EU Horizon project TaCT-FoRSED – Tackling Conspiracy Theories by Fostering Resilience and Political Self-Efficacy in Democracies.

Who Believes in Conspiracy Myths?

Conspiracy narratives are particularly successful in times of crisis, when there is widespread uncertainty, such as in the aftermath of a catastrophe or disaster. "When people look for simple explanations, framing the world in terms of good and evil, conspiracy theories seem to hold all the answers", explains Professor Hidalgo. In addition, there is a deeply rooted mistrust of those in power. Hidalgo makes it clear that this is not a healthy scepticism, but a conviction that the ruling elite manipulates, schemes and cheats: "We are currently facing a multitude of unresolved challenges and problems.



Further reading:
 "Strengthening the self-healing powers of democracy against conspiracy myths" – interview with Professor Hidalgo and Dr Birnkammerer in the Digital Research Magazine of the University of Passau



Whether it's about strengthening our welfare systems or dealing with climate change, wars and mass migration – there are no easy answers to any of these issues. Many don't trust the relevant democratic processes to find a solution, and end up losing confidence. At the same time, the belief that higher powers are at work, or hidden connections, becomes entrenched. For conspiracy believers, democracy is merely a facade."

However, their otherwise omnipresent mistrust seems to be suspended when it comes to conspiracy myths: "Believers in these myths are immune to any counter-argument: the conspiracy is always so powerful that it causes or prevents everything that supports my argument, and at the same time so weak that I can always see through it", says Hidalgo. Nevertheless, he advocates not simply turning away from conspiracy believers, but remaining open to dialogue – not with the aim of convincing them of the falsity of their assumptions, but to recognise the psychological strain they experience. "Often, these are people who have lost their trust not only in democratic institutions but in humanity in general. To a certain extent, they are socially isolated

because, more often than not, they have become estranged from their families, friends and acquaintances, work colleagues and wider social group, which leads them to become radicalised and closed off to any ideas that aren't considered true by their inner circle, their filter bubble", explains Professor Hidalgo. It is a cliché that conspiracy believers are uneducated; in reality, they are often subjectively well-informed, avid readers who spend a great deal of time surfing the web.

Aims of the research network

The Passau researchers have joined forces with 15 organisations across Europe and are pursuing ambitious goals through their research alliance. Firstly, drawing from the expertise of numerous academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology and political science, they explore the common traits that characterise the conspiracy mentality of ardent conspiracy believers. To this end, the network conducts studies with dropouts from society, among other things. Comparative studies are also planned in eight European countries.

Based on the findings, the research team intends to design measures to develop a democratic counter-identity. "We are convinced that while democracy is particularly susceptible to conspiracy myths, it also provides ways and means to heal itself", says Professor Hidalgo. "Schools are a good place to practise this – especially when it comes to developing democratic attitudes and learning to be accepting of others' perspectives", adds Dr Birnkammerer, who is developing freely accessible, open educational resources and games based on the project findings in collaboration with school teachers.

The three-year project is funded by the European Union under the Horizon Europe programme, with a total amount exceeding three million euros. About 986,000 euros will go to the University of Passau. (KH/BW)

Democracy Needs a Strong Civil Society

Social cohesion and trust in democratic systems do not appear to be in good shape at the moment.

Campus Magazine spoke to Professor Lars Rensmann, Chair of Political Science with a focus on Comparative Government, about the lack of trust in democracy, the explosive power of social inequalities and "authentic liars".

The AfD, a political party with obvious anti-constitutional tendencies, received around 21 percent of the second votes in the last Bundestag parliamentary election. Does this signify a loss of confidence in our representative democracy?

We are currently seeing a loss of trust in democratic systems of government all over the world. In the international comparison, democracy in Germany still looks relatively robust, despite the rise of the AfD: Identification with democratic processes and institutions is comparatively high among the majority of the population. The party system is also quite stable despite increasing polarisation, fragmentation and party scepticism. In other countries, the crisis of democracy is taking a much more dramatic turn. However, processes of endangerment and erosion can also be observed in this country with regard to democratic coexistence, both from within our society and from outside through targeted influence.

What do you attribute these erosion processes to?

In recent years, we have been confronted with numerous crises and challenges: the financial crisis, the coronavirus pandemic, the migration issue and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine – to name just a few. Some democratic systems of government have coped well with these challenges and "polycrises", others less so. But in my view, the underlying reasons for the erosion processes

are different. The loss of trust in parts of society is partly due to long-standing political and cultural conflicts, and in particular to the long-simmering resistance to globalisation and changes in cultural values, which have now come to the fore. In this, authoritarian parties act like loudspeakers, as it were. However, the biggest driver in the erosion of trust is the digital structural change in the public sphere and the digital revolution. Social media play a central role in this. Scepticism towards established facts and algorithmically promoted disinformation that is being spread are also linked to the current pronounced scepticism towards science, expertise, journalistic media and democratic institutions.

Are you not making it too easy for yourself when you attribute this loss of trust primarily to the increasing influence of social media?

No, I don't think so. The crises mentioned are of course real – and democracies must find appropriate and sustainable answers. But this crisis of confidence doesn't actually need any real crises, because in our post-factual age, crises can simply be invented. One thing that all authoritarian actors and populist parties have in common, regardless of whether they are left-wing or right-wing, is that they constantly talk about crises – especially on social media. Either there is an actual crisis that they are reinforcing in their communication, or they are creating one themselves when there isn't one. Trump won the presidential election partly

because he convinced a large number of voters that the USA was in a deep economic crisis in 2024 – when in fact, the figures showed the opposite to be true. Ultimately, in our post-factual world, you can say almost anything, and anything that lines up with certain interests can be caught by algorithmically supported echo chambers. It's mostly about "perceived truths" rather than the many real crises and challenges of the present that democratic systems of government are confronted with.

You mentioned Trump's counterfactual representations: How do you explain in this context that a large part of the population in the USA trusts a president who spreads obvious lies day after day?

I think that many people in the USA are aware that Trump is lying, but he is lying "authentically", which means that many people appreciate that he supposedly says what he thinks and doesn't mince his words. He speaks unfiltered, talks like the "man in the street", doesn't reflect on his choice of words and isn't afraid to contradict himself. Essentially, he breaks all the rules and norms of democratic discourse – all of which goes down very well with his supporters. They already have the underlying feeling that they have been curtailed in their freedom of speech for far too long.

Going back to Germany: The AfD was the strongest party in almost all eastern states in the last Bundestag election. To what extent are real social and economic inequalities between East and West at play here?

To put it bluntly, you could say that the Wall [which historically separated East and West Germany] is, from a political and cultural standpoint, more solid today than it was in the early 1990s. In terms of electoral behaviour and party system, all western and eastern German states have been more closely aligned with each other for decades than any western German state is with an eastern German state. To answer your question: As I said at the beginning, there are of course real problems of social inequality: To this day, there are hardly any eastern German elites in university leadership positions, hardly any eastern-German CEOs of DAX corporations, and so on. And we still see a wage discrepancy between East and West. At the same time, however, it has to be said that people in the East are relatively better off today than they were in the 1990s, especially in relation to the West. A cer-

tain division between East and West still exists, but it has been reduced further and further. Instead, this is driven by cultural identity constructs and perceived truths.

So, it is not so much real inequalities between East and West that are undermining confidence in democracy, but rather growing social inequalities in the German population as a whole?

Yes, that's right. Material insecurity and the fear of social decline are another factor contributing to the crisis in democracy. We also see this in western Germany. Just think of housing, a key social issue. If a middle-class civil servant in the centre of Munich can no longer afford a flat today, then something is going wrong. In Germany, we have a large proportion of people who live in rented accommodation. This crisis was foreseeable after social housing construction was discontinued, the law on the non-profit status of residential property was abolished on 1 January 1990 and, finally, when major cities such as Berlin and Dresden sold off municipal residential property to international companies in order to restructure their budgets. And yet, for decades, nothing was done about it politically. Fortunately, the Bundestag and Bundesrat [the lower and upper chambers of parliament] have now at least decided on the long-overdue reintroduction of public housing in autumn 2024, and social housing will be built again.

To what extent is the current popularity of this type of authoritarian figure driven by a desire for less complexity?

The desire to reduce complexity certainly always plays a role. Authoritarian movements often mobilise a form of nostalgic nationalism along the lines of "Things were better in the past". Of course that is pure fiction. To a certain extent, rosy retrospection is completely normal human behaviour, even when it comes to our own biography: Even if things weren't good in the past, we tend to focus on the good things in our memories. To some extent, this plays a role for citizens of the former German Democratic Republic: Sure, the dictatorship was bad and many things didn't work. But they also had places to socialise and were "among themselves". This has created a strong sense of belonging. And today, individual positive memories and occasional moments of happiness are sometimes woven into idealised narratives of the past.



What's your take on greater and more direct citizen participation in political processes?

I see more citizen participation as fundamentally positive. However, I would take a critical view of the introduction of referendums, as is advocated by the AfD. Many core decisions of the liberal constitutional state cannot and must not be made by simple majority vote, as that can lead to a tyranny of the majority. But it is clear that democracies must continue to develop institutionally and as a form of society. There are many innovative ideas for deliberative citizens' forums that harbour great potential. In these forums, people from a wide variety of backgrounds come together to discuss lottery procedures, debate with experts over specific topics for several days and make recommendations on this basis. Our REGROUP research consortium has come up with some very encouraging findings. I think the introduction of such forms of participation makes a lot of sense.

In March 2023, you drafted a statement on the Demokratiefördergesetz (democracy promotion act). The draft has not yet been signed into law. Why is such a law needed from your perspective?

Recent research into democratic crises shows that democracies are not primarily threatened by authoritarian actors, but by the weakness of democratic institutions, actors and parties – and above all by the weakness of civil society. That is why we absolutely must strengthen them. The state needs people, associations, initiatives and NGOs to support it in the fight against anti-Semitism, racism, right-wing extremism and all other forms of group-focused enmity. This requires trust in the competences of civil society on the one hand, and appropriate, resource-backed government support on the other.

Last question: Is there a future for liberal democracy?

I am cautiously optimistic. While there are authoritarian movements and tendencies worldwide, there are also strong democratic movements. Liberal, pluralistic democracy isn't doomed or outdated as a form of government. But democratic governments must find better answers to the polycrises of our time – this also applies to the economic and ecological transformation in the era of the climate crisis and to coexistence in a society shaped by migration. The social divisions, the enormous oligarchic accumulation of wealth and power – think of the economic, media and political power of Elon Musk – the emergence of a new inheritance aristocracy and the housing crisis: All these are consequences of neoliberal economic policy and pose a huge problem that undermines democratic cohesion. We also urgently need to find an answer to structural change driven by the digital transformation. I'm talking primarily about a new social contract. Media platforms must ultimately be held liable for the content they disseminate, especially if it's deliberate and profitable disinformation, in the same way that mainstream journalism is subject to press and media law and self-regulatory procedures. The fact that the two are held to different standards is unsustainable. This is not about freedom of opinion, which is, quite rightly, protected by comprehensive safeguards in the German constitution. But when the media promote a general relativism towards factual truths, that is not a characteristic of a democracy, but one of dictatorships. To say it in the words of Hannah Arendt: No liberal democracy can survive without a factual reality that is, in the broadest sense, shared.

Dr Benedikt Kuhnen and Barbara Weinert conducted the interview.





A NETWORK FOR ILL CHILDREN

To ensure the best possible care for children and adolescents suffering from Long Covid (LC) and similar conditions, the PEDNET-LC project brings together clinical and academic institutions across Germany in a nationwide network. The FORWISS Institute at the University of Passau is also participating in this initiative. The aim is to improve the care of young patients affected by LC, to promote research and health literacy, and to identify those affected at an early stage. To this end, 20 care centres are to be established in 15 federal states. Each will coordinate care in their respective state whilst cooperating closely with the others. Together, they will develop a shared infrastructure for communication and research, conduct studies tailored to specific target groups, analyse linked registry and health insurance data, and devise standard operating procedures and care guidelines.

As part of the project, a team from the University of Passau is developing a cross-sector telemedicine communication platform with sustainable and multifunctional communication structures (e.g. for remote consultations with medical experts using the German telematics infrastructure) for the treatment of chronically and complexly ill children. "Data-protection-compliant, efficient telemedical communication across all participating institutions is essential for both the quality and cost-effectiveness of medical care", says FORWISS managing director Dr Michael Niedermeier. "This is the only way we can close information gaps, avoid redundant treatment processes and establish optimal synergies in care."

Professor Tomas Sauer, director of FORWISS, adds: "This project also fits perfectly within the university's efforts as part of the Lower-Bavarian Medical Campus and enables us to further expand our expertise in telemedicine."

PEDNET-LC is coordinated by the MRI Chronic Fatigue Centre for Young People (MCFC) of the TUM University Hospital in Munich in cooperation with an interdisciplinary steering committee and is advised by an international scientific board of experts. The project is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Health. (NJ)



Professor Tomas Sauer and Dr Michael Niedermeier



HOW AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES INFLUENCE LANGUAGE MODELS

The Pope in a Gucci jacket, Taylor Swift as a supposed Trump supporter, a fake video of Friedrich Merz – generative artificial intelligence systems are now capable of producing alarmingly realistic content. Authoritarian regimes have long recognised the power of AI-generated images and narratives. Since April, an interdisciplinary team of researchers from the Universities of Passau and Bamberg has been investigating how Russia and other autocracies regulate and control the development of large language models (LLMs) – and how, under tight state supervision, they create their own generative AI systems. The project, AI-PROP, also examines the impact of authoritarian data on AI models used within democratic societies.

"In autocracies such as China and Russia, generative AI is now often developed under the auspices of state-controlled companies", says project leader Professor Florian Töpfl, Chair of Political Communication with a focus on Eastern Europe and the Post-Soviet Region. "Through regulation and censorship, authoritarian governments ensure that the outputs of AI models align with the political narratives and ideologies of the ruling elites."

Joining Professor Töpfl on the project are computer scientist Professor Florian Lemmerich from the University of Passau and political scientist Professor Andreas Jungherr from the University of Bamberg. Against the backdrop of current developments, the team is addressing two overarching questions: How – and with what consequences – are authoritarian AI systems embedded in today's Russian society? And what happens when "authoritarian data" – data shaped by censorship and political interference – increasingly finds its way into Western AI systems?

"Our project, 'Authoritarian AI', ultimately aims to strengthen democracies' resilience against authoritarian manipulation through artificial intelligence", Töpfl explains. The project is funded by the Bavarian Research Institute for Digital Transformation (bidt) at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, with a grant of 930,000 euros over a three-year period. (KH)

HISTORIC WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS MADE DIGITALLY ACCESSIBLE

With the help of artificial intelligence, a collaborative project involving the University's Chair of Computational Humanities, the General Directorate of the Bavarian State Archives (GDA), the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) and the NFDI4Biodiversity consortium has transformed over 500 handwritten pages into 5,467 individual records documenting historical species diversity in Bavaria. These historical wildlife observation records have been prepared for use in modern biodiversity research and converted into digital, geo-referenced datasets.

Thanks to the collaboration between multiple disciplines, the project succeeded in making accessible a 180-year-old treasure trove of data. The original records stem from a comprehensive wildlife survey conducted in all 119 Bavarian forestry offices in 1845, commissioned by the then Bavarian Crown Prince Maximilian. The resulting datasets describe the time, location and habitat of historical animal populations in a format that enables detailed, computer-assisted scientific analysis. The data have been published via the Information Facility (GBIF), an international data hub that provides open access to biodiversity data for the global research community. In addition, the records have been integrated into LAND (Living Atlas of Nature in Germany), the national biodiversity portal curated by the NFDI4Biodiversity consortium. This now makes it possible to conduct comparative research into species diversity in Bavaria and to trace changes in animal populations over time, thereby supporting efforts to protect endangered species.

Professor Malte Rehbein, Chair of Computational Humanities at the University of Passau, and his team emphasise the immense value of these datasets, which offer rare insights into species diversity in the mid-19th century. "What is particularly remarkable is that the sources often provide clues about historical perceptions of the natural world and the impact of human landscape changes on the distribution of certain species", says Rehbein. For example, the local disappearance of the Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*) near Vohenstrauß on the Upper Palatinate–Bohemian border can be directly linked to the draining of the Pfrentschweiher lake.

The dataset is available online as open data:
<https://zenodo.org/records/13899541>



Professor Michael Granitzer

AN INDEPENDENT EU SEARCH ENGINE

A Europe-wide consortium led by the University of Passau is working towards an ambitious goal: to lay the foundation for a European Open Web Index (OWI) as the basis for a new internet search infrastructure made in Europe. Under the coordination of Professor Michael Granitzer, Chair of Data Science at Passau and scientific lead of the EU project, a team of 14 partners has been collaborating for two years within the framework of the OpenWebSearch.EU initiative. Together, they have developed a prototype of the Open Web Index, currently hosted across four high-performance computing centres in Europe. The index is designed with a future-proof architecture, enabling it to integrate emerging technologies such as AI-based applications. The possibilities this index opens up are far-reaching: from vertical search engines that specialise in specific topics to innovative formats like an "argument search" that can identify and analyse reasoning on various issues. To date, the prototype has crawled 2.7 billion URLs in 185 languages, amassing around 400 terabytes of data – roughly equivalent to 191,000 high-resolution photos.

The project is scheduled to run until February 2026. During this time, the team aims to establish ethical guidelines for curating the index, build a sustainable hosting infrastructure and explore long-term funding models. A key focus is also the preparation of high-quality datasets for use in AI-driven web search. "Our mission is to contribute to a fair, open, diverse and free web. We're making Europe's economy and society less dependent on the digital global players by enabling transparent and open access to web data – for independent search engines as well as for analysing web data and using AI", says Professor Granitzer.

The importance of the project has not gone unnoticed. The National Contact Point for Digital and Industrial Technologies at Germany's Federal Ministry of Research recognised OpenWebSearch.EU as one of twelve outstanding EU projects in its 2024 yearbook. The European Union is supporting the initiative with over 8.5 million euros in funding through its Horizon Europe research and innovation programme.

Website: <https://openwebsearch.eu>

INTEGRATING ELECTRIC MOBILITY INTO THE ENERGY SYSTEM

For more than three and a half years, over 30 partners from the automotive and energy sectors, IT, charging infrastructure and academia – including the University of Passau – collaborated in the unit-e² project to examine how electric mobility can be effectively integrated into the energy system. In real-world trials, over 12,000 charging sessions were carried out, accompanied by scientific analyses in the context of connected e-mobility. As the project concluded, the consortium developed a set of concrete proposals and recommendations aimed at policymakers, standardisation bodies and the relevant industries. The key takeaway: there is clear potential to reduce both costs and emissions associated with electric vehicle charging, without noticeable compromises for end users. However, people interested in and using electric mobility need easy access to comprehensive, manufacturer-independent information. For the successful integration of electric vehicles into the power grid, a fundamental overhaul of the network tariff system is required, along with adjustments to the corresponding European regulatory framework. "Our results show that integrating e-mobility into other user-facing systems, as well as intelligent charging scenarios, can be of real interest to consumers", said Professor Jan Hendrik Schumann, Chair of Marketing and Innovation. "At the same time, there is still a great deal of educational work to be done. Users need to be informed in a way that feels intuitive." Professor Schumann's team contributed to the project alongside the market research institute Centouris, led by Dr Stefan Mang, through two subprojects within the Harmon-E and sun-E clusters. Their work included a range of studies – online surveys, interviews and panel research – aimed at capturing the user perspective during the field trials.



The unit-e² research project was coordinated by the Forschungsinstitut für Energiewirtschaft e. V. (FfE). Key participants included leading automotive manufacturers such as BMW Group, Mercedes-Benz, Ford and Volkswagen, as well as grid operators including Bayernwerk Netz, EWE NETZ and TenneT, along with other industrial and academic partners. The project received more than 30 million euros in funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action.

For details visit <https://unit-e2.de>.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN INDEPENDENT NEWS PLATFORM

A few large American tech companies – such as Alphabet, Meta and X – dominate the digital news market in Germany as well. They control which news is presented to users and can therefore influence democratic opinion formation. Unlike established media outlets, these platforms are not subject to rigorous quality controls or editorial standards, and they often fail to adequately protect users' privacy.

The Demokratie-X project, in which a team from the University of Passau led by legal scholar Professor Kai von Lewinski is involved, aims to develop a new decentralised and independent non-profit news platform. The researchers are pursuing an interdisciplinary approach that brings together expertise from economics, computer science, sociology and law. "In the legal subproject, our focus is on privacy protection and the orientation towards the common good", explains Professor von Lewinski, Chair of Public Law, Media Law and Information Law. This presents a particular challenge, he notes, since privacy and the common good can often have conflicting implications. Research assistant Benedikt Leven is first examining existing legal frameworks. "I explore the extent to which such a platform would already be possible under current law, and how it would need to be structured." Also working on the project is research assistant Lukas Köllnberger. "Our aim is to develop a legally sound foundation to serve as the basis for practical work on a privacy-preserving, public-interest-oriented and fair news platform", he says. By the end of the Demokratie-X project, the team plans to present a viable concept for a news platform that guarantees informational self-determination, democratic values and a diverse information landscape. The project will conclude with design and policy recommendations for its implementation.

The project is coordinated by Thomas Hess, Professor of Information Systems and Management and director of the Institute for Digital Management and New Media at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. Along with the Passau team, the project also involves researchers from the University of Kassel. The project is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. (KH)



Artefact with geometric symbols

DECODING ANCIENT SYMBOL SYSTEMS

Using the latest computer science methods, linguist Dr Christian Bentz is exploring Palaeolithic symbols that predate the invention of writing. In the project The Evolution of Visual Information Encoding (EVINE), he is working in collaboration with archaeologist Dr Ewa Dutkiewicz from the Museum of Prehistory and Early History, part of the National Museums in Berlin. The project is based on the hypothesis that a key component of human language ability – symbolic combinatorics – may have emerged as early as in the Palaeolithic era.

The ability to store and transmit information outside the human mind marks a major milestone in human evolution. It is reflected in the use of symbols and written language and underpins modern artificial computing systems. The earliest indications of this kind of "externalisation" of information can be traced back to between roughly 400,000 and 11,000 years ago. Some artefacts from this period bear geometric symbols, a sign of visual information encoding. Current analyses in the field of experimental archaeology strongly suggest that these may represent early forms of mnemonic techniques, or visual memory aids.

A systematic concentration of such artefacts first appears in Europe with the arrival of anatomically modern humans. "The archaeological literature indicates that these symbolic systems became increasingly complex during the Upper Palaeolithic", says Bentz. "However, exactly how to measure that increase in complexity remains an open research question." To tackle this, the researchers are applying new computational methods and building a database of archaeological finds. "We draw on metrics from information theory and quantitative linguistics, as well as classification algorithms, and apply them to Palaeolithic symbols, early cuneiform texts and modern writing systems", Bentz explains. "This approach will shed new light on how visual information encoding evolved – from the earliest markings to fully developed writing systems."

CURRENT ISSUES IN FOCUS

The Neuburger Gesprächskreis für Wissenschaft und Praxis (NBG) continues to grow as an important platform for companies, friends and alumni of the University of Passau. More than 240 decision-makers from business, politics, academia and international organisations are now actively involved in the NBG.

The formats of Neuburger Gesprächskreis are well received: The highlight thus far in 2025 was the annual symposium in May, where more than 30 experts gathered to discuss "The New World Order – Diplomacy and Defence Capability".

Renowned speakers not only analysed the dynamics of this new order but also presented perspectives on how diplomacy and defence capabilities can be effectively applied in a changed global context. Among the guests were former Swiss State Secretary and diplomat Yves Rossier, Dr Rupert Hofmann, founder of the Foresight Academy, retired four-star general Erhard Bühler and German diplomat Deike Potzel, head of the Department for Crisis Prevention, Stabilisation, Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Assistance and Special Envoy for Humanitarian Aid in the Near and Middle East, who gave a moving dinner speech.

"It is particularly important to us as a network to focus on the current challenges of our time, to shed light on topics from different perspectives and to develop solutions", said Dr Fritz Audebert, chairman of Neuburger Gesprächskreis.

In the event series "The New Normal", two experts give an in-depth insight into a highly topical subject at each of nine events per year. "Female Power in and out of the University of Passau", another event organised directly at the University, was held for the third consecutive time, with great success. In February 2025, five successful alumnae spoke about their career paths and professional lives, moderated by Ursula Unger. What were the patterns of success? What mentoring helped them? And what did the participants take from their studies in Passau into their careers? These were questions that fascinated students and NBG members alike.



Diplomat Deike Potzel delivers a dinner speech at the symposium of the Neuburger Gesprächskreis at Neuburg Castle, which was dedicated to the topic "The New World Order".



Female Power in and out of the University of Passau. Pictured (from left to right): Ursula Unger (moderator), Martina Gutschick (Siemens Mobility GmbH), Siska Thiele (S&K Solutions GmbH), Dr Anke Allenhöfer (Helsing), Sonja Pierer (Intel Germany Services GmbH), Dr Franziska Hagedorn (Federal Foreign Office), Professor Bettina Noltenius (University of Passau), Dr Fritz Audebert (Neuburger Gesprächskreis).

NETWORKING IN PASSAU, BUDAPEST AND LONDON

The AlumniClub of the University of Passau offers many networking opportunities for international students and alumni in different countries and cities. For example, the cooperation with our partner university Corvinus in Budapest creates numerous exciting opportunities for students. Particularly noteworthy is the German-language DSG Corvinus-Passau degree programme, which has existed since 1993 and has been supervised by the Chair of Business Administration since 2012 under the direction of Professor Niklas Wagner. This year's symposium of the degree programme took place on 2 April 2025 as part of the Corvinus Career and Business Festival in Budapest.

Partner companies and organisations from various sectors presented their offerings, and the programme also included lectures and discussion formats with renowned experts. The AlumniClub was also present as an exhibitor.



Students from Corvinus University in Budapest are already planning their stay in Passau in October 2025. © Doreen Müller-Murr, AlumniClub



AlumniClubbing feat. 4process AG. © Patrizia Fenzl

The next highlight of the AlumniClub will be the 8th alumni trip to London from 2 to 5 October 2025, which will include the University of London as a partner university. The University of Passau is the only German university to offer the Certificate of Higher Education in Common Law and a Bachelor of Laws from the University of London. During the trip, alumni and students have the opportunity to network with Passau alumni and gain new impressions.

"We're delighted to utilise these valuable collaborations for networking opportunities, be it through events, regulars' tables or the second AlumniClubbing above the rooftops of Passau," said Doreen Müller-Murr, managing director of the international AlumniClub network. The next AlumniClubbing will take place on 10 July at 18:00 in the Oberhaus Castle restaurant.

30 YEARS OF KUWI NETWORK: A TREASURE TROVE OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

Happy birthday, kuwi network! The kuwi network is celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2025. It was ceremoniously founded on 8 December 1995 in the town hall of the City of Passau. For three decades, the association has been bringing together graduates and students of International Cultural and Business Studies, European Studies and other cultural degree programmes of the University of Passau. The association has become a link between the current and former generations of students. Tailored services, such as mentoring programmes, regulars' tables and webinars, strengthen members' ties to their alma mater.

"We have of course thought of a special highlight for our festive year", said Martina Brossmann, managing director of the kuwi office, "and are delighted to welcome ICBS alumna, author and journalist Stefanie von Wietersheim to the KulturCafete in the

Nikolakloster for a reading on 20 November 2025 at 19:00. She will read from her new book "Irans Töchter – über Mut, Heimat und die Schönheit des Lebens" ("Iran's Daughters – about courage, home and the beauty of life").



Stefanie von Wietersheim.
© Callwey Verlag

Further information and contact details at www.kuwi.de

Kuwi webinar programme for the first half of 2025

(To register, send an e-mail to seminare@team.kuwi.de.

Please note that all webinars are held in German unless indicated otherwise.)

- **Herzensmeditation – Innere Balance in schwierigen Zeiten: Wie wir Zugang zur Kraft und Weisheit unseres Herzens bekommen**
30 September 2025 (19:00-20:15)
Kuwi alumna Wiebke Lohmann-Käsberg
Herzwegbegleiterin (herzweg.de)
- **Lernen leicht gemacht: Weniger Stress, mehr Erfolg!**
7 October 2025 (19:00-20:00)
Kuwi alumna Kirsten Wunderle
Expert for mental peak performance, memory trainer, speaker, author and coach for trainees and learning (wunderlernen.de)
- **Was ist eigentlich die Rentenlücke? Und was können wir dagegen tun?**
28 October 2025 (18:00-19:00)
Andreas Rehberg
Senior Financial Consultant
- **Kenne Deinen Wert! Gut vorbereitet für die Gehaltsverhandlung**
11 November 2025 (18:30-20:00):
Susan J. Moldenhauer
Author, Business & Executive & Personal Coach, Financial Coach

BETWEEN LECTURE THEATRE AND CONCERT HALL



Sara Maria Schlömp and Patricia Bachmann are not only members of the Passau University Orchestra, but also student directors of the ensemble. They are responsible for the entire organisation and coordination of the orchestra, a role that requires a strong sense of responsibility and independent thinking, as it involves everything from choosing the right conductor to the preparation of press releases and organising ticket sales.

The lights dim, the hall falls silent and for a moment it seems that everyone is holding their breath. Then the conductor lifts his baton and the orchestra comes alive. As the music suffuses the room and envelops the audience, the orchestra turns into something more than just a group of musicians: it becomes a sonorous and harmonious, living organism.

And when the magic rings out with the last note of the concert, it's time for Sara Maria Schlömp and Patricia Bachmann to get back to work – planning for the next semester's concert season. "Before the concert is after the concert. During the semester break, the conductor and the section leaders plan the programme for the next semester. Then we organise the rehearsal rooms and the hostel for the rehearsal weekend", says Patricia Bachmann. "We've had a lot of new members, who benefitted not only from all the rehearsing, but because everyone had a chance to get to know each other better. That kind of thing creates a strong bond between people – and you can really hear it in the music, too, because an orchestra where everyone feels connected and can play off of each other will also form a beautiful body of sound", says Sara Maria Schlömp.

At the start of the semester, the two student directors plan the dates for the auditions, coordinate communication with the orchestra members and take care of all the preparations for the concerts – be it designing the advertising posters and programme booklets or coordinating the venue.

"The orchestra is a wonderful place to get involved and realise your musical potential. But it all stands and falls with the people who get behind it and keep the show running, so to speak", explains Patricia Bachmann. The feeling that they're making a valuable contribution to the orchestra is what motivates them. "It just feels good to get involved in something that you enjoy. And when everything comes together in the end and we have a great concert, that's just a beautiful thing", says Sara Maria Schlömp.

Schlömp, who hails from North Rhine-Westphalia, moved to Passau to study political science after secondary school, and is currently in the 5th semester of her bachelor's degree programme in Governance and Public Policy. "I was very excited when I learnt that the University of Passau had an orchestra, and signed up straight away in the first semester. Having just arrived in a new place, I was immediately surrounded by an environment that felt very familiar", recalls Sara Maria Schlömp, who has played the viola for twelve years now.

Patricia Bachmann comes from Deggendorf and is currently working on her doctorate at the Chair of Theoretical Computer Science, having studied both the bachelor's and master's degree programmes in computer science at the University of Passau. As a pupil, she, too, played in her school's orchestra. During her studies, she lost sight of music and only started taking lessons again towards the end of her master's degree. "After a year of violin lessons, I missed playing in an ensemble. I wasn't really sure whether I was good enough to play in an orchestra again. But then I gave myself a push – and quickly found out that the university orchestra is not just about performance, but about the joy of making music together and having fun. Now I feel completely at home and am proud to be a part of it", she says.

The university orchestra is organised as a non-profit association and has existed for over 40 years. It is a permanent fixture at the University and in Passau, whose musicians come from a wide range of study programmes or have already graduated and are working; some are even retired. "It brings people together who might not have met otherwise. The fact that we are a hobby and amateur orchestra creates a particularly nice atmosphere: There is less pressure and everyone in the orchestra plays for the love of music, for fun and simply because it's part of who they are. The fact that we all come together week after week to create music despite our other commitments, such as study, work and family, gives the whole thing its very own personality and a very human touch", says Patricia Bachmann. "And when you're a part of it yourself and can inspire an audience at the end, it's very reward-



ing", adds Sara Maria Schlömp.

Summer concert dates: 5 and 6 July 2025 (Innsteg Auditorium). The orchestra will be performing Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's Violin Concerto in E minor and Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 8. (SvS)

DR GRISCHA VERCAMER RECEIVES HEISENBERG PROFESSORSHIP IN PASSAU



Historian Professor Grischa Vercamer is the new Heisenberg Professor and holder of the Chair of the History of Eastern and Central European Cultures in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period at the University of Passau. Professor Vercamer explores the depiction of princely rule in Eastern and Central Europe in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. He has previously conducted research in Berlin, Edinburgh, Prague and Warsaw, among other places. Now he has returned to Passau, where he previously held the Chair of Medieval History from 2018 to 2020. Passau, which in the Middle Ages was an important bishop's see between Habsburg and Wittelsbach rule, is the ideal place for Vercamer's research. He sees the Middle Ages as an era that shaped our present day – for instance in the areas of local self-governance, municipal law and architecture, which is evident today in places such as Passau's castle (Veste Oberhaus) or the Höllgasse. Through his research, he seeks to provide a deeper understanding of pre-modern power structures and demonstrate the topicality of historical developments.

GOOD TEACHING AWARD FOR DR TILL VALENTIN MEICKMANN



Science Minister Markus Blume hands the Good Teaching Award to Dr Till Valentin Meickmann. © StMWK/Rudi Merkl

Every year, the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts honours the best teachers at Bavarian state universities for their work with the Good Teaching Award. This year's winner at the University of Passau is the legal scholar Dr Till Valentin Meickmann, who joined the Chair of Constitutional, Administrative, Public Finance and Tax Law, held by Professor Rainer Wernsmann, in September 2020. "In teaching, it's particularly important to me to get my students excited about the subject, give them guidance and encourage them in their learning process", says Meickmann. "Especially in constitutional and administrative law, which is often considered dry and difficult, I try to generate interest through passion and practical examples." He also attaches great importance to a comprehensible, well-structured presentation of the material and a trusting learning atmosphere in which questions are welcomed and mistakes are expressly part of the learning process. The award was given by Bavaria's Science Minister Markus Blume during the award ceremony held in Würzburg on 31 March. "Imparting knowledge, inspiring people with your academic discipline: good teaching today creates the excellence of tomorrow. Science thrives on good communication", said Blume.

NEW PROFESSORIAL APPOINTMENTS

- Professor Grischa Vercamer
Chair of the History of Eastern and Central European Cultures in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period
appointed on 1 January 2025
- Professor Jens Späth
Chair of Modern and Contemporary History
appointed on 1 April 2025
- Professor Gerhard Rainer
Chair of Human Geography
appointed on 1 April 2025

PROFESSORS WHO HAVE ENTERED RETIREMENT

- Professor Hermann de Meer
Chair of Computer Networks and Computer Communications
retired on 31 March 2025
- Professor Hans-Christof Kraus
Chair of Modern and Contemporary History
retired on 31 March 2025

IN MEMORIAM: PROFESSOR JÖRG TREMPER

The University mourns the loss of Professor Jörg Trempler.

Born in Dülmen in 1970, the art historian and visual studies scholar had held the Chair of Art History and Visual Culture Studies since 2015. Through his cross-epochal studies and exhibition projects, he established a strong reputation in German and international art history. He was renowned as an expert on Karl Friedrich Schinkel and for his cultural-historical and visually informed analyses of the phenomenon of catastrophe. Jörg Trempler also supported the University's "International Centre for Scholarship and Science" building project at the Spitzberg site with tremendous expertise and passion. This resulted in a remarkable exhibition on the evolution of Passau's university campus, which tied together research, teaching and the promotion of early career researchers.

Trempler's academic career took him to Berlin, Florence, Greifswald, Jena, Munich, New York, Washington State and Yale – and always brought him back to Passau, where he had started his academic journey. Until the last weeks of his life, he was committed to the expansion of visual studies research and teaching at the University of Passau. Jörg Trempler passed away on 8 November 2024 in Berlin.



Professor Jörg Trempler (pictured right) with university president Professor Ulrich Bartosch.

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