

Between convenience and concern

25 citizens on their experiences with generative AI

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Generative AI has quickly become deeply embedded in everyday life. ChatGPT helps write emails, explains difficult texts, summarizes documents, creates images, and comes up with slogans. The technology sometimes feels like a second brain: smart, fast, and always available. To understand what these everyday applications trigger, [Charge](#) used the SenseMaker tool to delve into the personal experiences of 25 people.

While the use of AI is becoming increasingly commonplace, the rules surrounding it remain unclear. Moreover, citizens have little influence on how those rules are established—and that is problematic. AI is not just about smart technology or efficiency, but touches on deeper questions about what we as a society consider fair and how we use AI systems. If this technology increasingly determines how we work, learn, communicate, and live together, then the question must also be central: what kind of digital society do we want? And who decides that?

Until now, AI policy has largely been developed within ministries, with input from advisory councils and (direct or indirect) influence from the private sector. In practice, large technology companies largely determine the course: they build the systems, set the technical standards, and influence policy-making through lobbying and strategic partnerships. Governments respond with guidelines and frameworks, such as policy letters on digital sovereignty, transparency requirements, or the European AI Regulation. But these types of policies are often technical and abstract. Moreover, citizens are rarely seriously involved in this process – at most through an online consultation that only reaches a limited group. In this context, they are mainly seen as users or consumers, not as co-determiners of the rules surrounding AI.

It is precisely a technology such as AI, which penetrates deeply into the public domain, that calls for a fundamental broadening of who is allowed to have a say in the direction and design of policy. This requires different forms of participation, in which experience and values from society form the starting point, not the end point.

Stories as a starting point

In a small-scale exploration, Charge collected the personal experiences of 25 participants with generative AI. Not through interviews or surveys, but with the help of SenseMaker: a participatory method in which people articulate their own experiences and give them meaning. So not just telling stories, but also interpreting them themselves. What affects them? What values are at stake? And who do they think should hear this?

The stories vary greatly. Some participants talk about how AI stimulates creativity, makes knowledge accessible, and enables new forms of expression. Others express their concerns: about the disappearance of professional knowledge, about the authenticity of their work, about the loss of autonomy. Many people use AI because it is convenient, but at the same time they experience discomfort. Its use is quickly becoming self-evident, “just because it’s

there,” yet it prompts reflection on what that means for their work or their own responsibility. That hesitation is also reflected in concerns about creativity: AI speeds up brainstorming and text production, but raises questions about authorship. “Do we still have a purpose?” someone wonders. There is a fear that independent thinking and writing will slowly fade into the background – a creeping loss of autonomy and ownership.

Trust appears to be a recurring theme. AI is impressive, but it also makes mistakes, reasons circularly, or invents sources. Some users experience AI as ‘too smooth’, as something that adapts effortlessly but at the same time alienates. Especially when it comes to sensitive topics – healthcare, education, therapy – this leads to doubt and reluctance: can I trust this technology? What happens to my input? And who is responsible if something goes wrong?

Clear frameworks

The stories show that generative AI is no longer a thing of the future, but an everyday reality. People use it at work, in their studies, in creative processes and are confronted with discomfort and friction. Not as users who lack a manual, but as citizens seeking to get a grip on a changing playing field.

Yet many participants feel they are not being heard. They feel that their concerns and insights hardly reach the places where decisions are made. The government is seen as absent, politicians as distant. More than half of the participants believe that it is now up to politicians to take control: not to stop AI, but to provide direction and protect the public space. With clear frameworks and a vision that does justice to what is happening in society.

This call requires more than simply adjusting policy. It is a democratic task: ensuring that people can truly influence the technology that changes their lives. This starts with taking their experiences seriously. Not with non-committal public consultation evenings or consultation forms, but with new, meaningful forms of participation.

Context

This article is an English translation of the article [“Tussen gemak en ongemak”](#) which was written for the website of [Charge](#). As the research platform for Volt, Charge conducts and facilitates independent research on European integration and democratic renewal. We bridge the gap between science and politics by applying innovative research methods, emerging technologies, and a transdisciplinary approach. Central to our work is the question of what the European Union and democracy mean to citizens – and how we can communicate that meaning clearly and accessibly. In doing so, we build a research-based foundation for long-term thinking on the future of Europe and democracy. Charge also contributed to the kickstart of EuroSense, underlining our commitment to a stronger and more participatory democratic culture across Europe.

