

## Securing information as a public good: A path forward to regulate platforms, with help from UNESCO and civil society

Digital platforms are used by more than three billion people throughout the world. These platforms structure our daily interactions, channel our attention, and determine our access to information, as well as influencing our information consumption.

In particular, they have a tremendous impact on public space. The most deleterious dimensions of this impact have been brought to light in recent years: such as the fragmentation of public space through data-driven, hyper-personalised curation, the exacerbation of behaviors and dynamics leading to division and polarization, the amplification of harms at unprecedented speed and scale, and constantly evolving capacities for disinformation.

Clearly, shaping and promoting appropriate regulation is of the utmost importance.

Alas, so far, neither countries nor platforms have managed to shape and enforce truly satisfactory solutions which achieve the protection of freedom of expression and access to reliable information while also tackling these harms. The digital platforms which relied on self-regulation have mostly failed to tackle the dangers that arise on their services, or have ended up enforcing unjustified censorship. Regulatory initiatives taken by governments either proved poorly effective or led to restricting fundamental rights, especially freedom of expression. While we have witnessed some innovative regulatory initiatives that balance freedom of expression, to date these have been content-based approaches, often focusing on a specific harm. For the internet to become a safe public good, a more systematic approach is needed, requiring proactive identification and mitigation of risks.

How, then, should we proceed? The “*Internet for Trust: Towards Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms for Information as a Public Good*” global conference which UNESCO just organized in Paris provides interesting insights on a potential path forward.

Following intensive multi stakeholder discussions, UNESCO is working towards a set of [guidelines for regulating platforms](#), at the disposal of all countries and platforms. These guidelines notably promote 5 kinds of levers: (1) content moderation and curation policies granting full respect of human rights, (2) transparency of platform processes and redress rights, (3) empowerment of users to use platform services in a self-determined manner, (4) platform accountability towards proclaimed policies and (5) the setting up of an independent regulatory body. In particular, the emphasis put on “*user governance*” could turn out to be a game changer.

Yet for these guidelines to bear full impact, much remains to be done.

Three concrete steps, at least, are required. For each of them, an international, multi-stakeholder approach, fueled by active engagement from civil society organizations, can play a significant, if not decisive, role.

First, it is up to each country to adapt, adopt and implement these guidelines. Research centers, think tanks and other civil society players can make a positive contribution here. Upstream, by

helping to decipher how to best adapt the guidelines to the specific situation and needs of each country, and sharing learning from instances where some forms of digital regulation have already been implemented. Downstream, by helping to monitor the regulation implementation and assess platforms' compliance with it.

Second, it is crucial to identify the concrete ways and means to organize collective action among users to effectively influence digital platform governance, locally and globally. This means for instance that efficient tools and processes need to be designed (1) to grant users access to clear information about platforms' practices, (2) to enable them to get involved in the moderation process and to act on content curation, (3) to provide them with a real capacity to audit practices and analyze risks and, last but not least, (4) to empower them to act collectively to defend their collective interest.

Third, UNESCO guidelines, and local regulations alike, will need to be regularly updated and upgraded. As platforms evolve so fast, and so dramatically, regulation itself has to keep up the pace to avoid the tragic fate of irrelevance. Here again, civil society organizations, building on monitoring and assessment reports, can offer insightful propositions.

It is clear then that, at each step, it could prove tremendously helpful to foster the involvement of civil society organizations from all over the world and help organize their action locally, regionally and globally. This is why we urge UNESCO, together with the UN system, to take certain actions in this regard.

First, UNESCO could set up and operate an online network gathering stakeholders who commit to promote and push further the UNESCO guidance on "Information as a public good". These stakeholders would be able to develop and share resources, replicable best practices and tools to unite with others for transnational action.

Second, UNESCO could organize a series of local and regional multi stakeholder conferences on "Information as Public Good", dealing with regulation of platforms as well as with other thematics needed to ensure information as a public good. These conferences would help countries and platforms adapt, implement and update regulations. Additionally, UNESCO could play a greater role in the "Digital Commons as a global Public Good" pillar of the Global Digital Compact.

Third, following the example of COP conferences, organized every year, UNESCO could extend its global conference on "Regulating Digital Platforms for Information as Public Good" by making it yearly or bi-yearly, in order to enable continuous updating and improvement of its regulation guidelines. These conferences would of course build upon the local and regional conferences as well as on the contributions made by the multistakeholder network, and would be organized in collaboration with the [Forum on Information & Democracy](#).

As research centers and think tanks from all over the world, with a strong commitment to securing information as a public good and a longstanding experience of civil empowerment, we pledge to play our full role in this process. There is, at last, a path forward. Now is the time to act.

## To sign the tribune



## List of first signatories

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