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UNESCO GLOBAL  
CONFERENCE  
21-23 February 2023

# Internet for democracy:

Regulating digital  
platforms for  
information as a  
public good



## Introduction

In just two decades, the Internet and social media have completely upended the ways in which we communicate, express ourselves, and access and share information. It is, with no doubt, the biggest revolution for freedom of expression since Gutenberg. This has brought about vast new opportunities, but also enormous new challenges that current regulatory systems have yet to catch up with.

In the face of widespread disinformation, hate speech and conspiracy theories, people are increasingly speaking about a reality where objective truth no longer exists, and groups live in self-reinforcing informational echo chambers with entirely different sets of facts. These dynamics undermine processes critical for vibrant democracies – such as free, periodical and plural elections – and the protection and promotion of all human rights.

Significant areas of global communications are now under the strong influence of a handful of digital giants whose business models are one of the most important variables in the equation to maximize opportunities, mitigate risks and regulate processes that might lead to concrete off-line harms.

As UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay stated at the 2022 World Press Freedom Conference in Uruguay, “we cannot leave it to private companies to resolve this existential issue themselves, as their business models will continue to favour engagement and clicks, sometimes at any cost, prioritizing sensational content over verified information.”

In the words of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, “the business models of social media companies profit from algorithms that prioritize addiction, outrage and anxiety at the cost of public safety. We need strong regulatory frameworks to change this business model.”

UNESCO is the United Nations agency with a global mandate to ensure freedom of expression and access to information and serves as a clearinghouse and standard-setter for the world’s regulators within its fields of competence. UNESCO is therefore stepping up to lead this critical global debate and propose smart, globally-consistent regulation of platforms to ensure that information can continue to be a public good in the digital age, while guaranteeing a human rights-based, open, free, global, interoperable, reliable and secure internet.



## 1. Objectives:

The overarching objective of the conference and its lead & follow-up processes:

**To develop, through multistakeholder consultations, a model regulatory framework for the digital platforms to secure information as a public good, while protecting freedom of expression and other human rights.**

Other objectives:

- Take forward the Windhoek+30 Declaration on **Information as a Public Good**.
- Create a multistakeholder **global shared space for the regulation debate**, through an inclusive consultative process and informed policy papers ahead of the conference.
- To empower a network of independent regulators, creating an international community of practices, capable of exchanging good practices on how to regulate a global public good, such as the internet and its digital platforms.
- Help promote **"Our Common Agenda"**, including the **Global Digital Compact** and the UN Summit of the Future to be held in September 2023.
- Feed into discussions about the upcoming 20-year **review** in 2025 of the World Summit of the Information Society (**WSIS**) and the review of the **Internet Governance Forum (IGF)**.

## 2. Overall thematic: the regulation debate

Three decades after the creation of the World Wide Web, UNESCO's mandate to protect information as a public good is at the very centre of the global agenda. How to do that while respecting international standards for freedom of expression and ensuring that the universal architecture of the internet will not be disrupted is a challenge that requires urgent and innovative regulatory responses. These responses must be anchored in the core principles developed since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, but capable of addressing the clear problems generated by the digital revolution.

In some areas such as online child sex abuse there is clear international consensus about what constitutes illegal images and a shared concern across states and cultures. In relation to terrorism, to mention another example, the situation is more complex – while direct incitement to violence is clearly unacceptable, there is no agreement about what constitutes incitement, or even an internationally-agreed definition of hate speech.



With misinformation and disinformation there is the challenge of separating information which is wrong but sincerely held and that which is deliberately distorting. It is clear that both issues should be addressed, nevertheless it is also clear that they demand a different set of policies and regulations to be tackled. And with hate speech, many people have great difficulties distinguishing between speech which incites hate and that which is merely offensive.

At the same time the benefits of online communication are considerable: it allows much greater potential for freedom of expression, access to information and knowledge, and enhanced possibilities of organising and communicating, thus supporting the human rights goals of freedom of expression, access to information and other democratic rights.

The challenge is to find an approach to regulation that protects the benefits while neutralises (or at least minimises) the harms. Many existing approaches to regulation have (inadvertently or deliberately) led to suppressing freedom of expression or have simply proved ineffective in dealing with harms. Many states have a limited regulatory capacity while others are driven by approaches that are not human-rights centric. The lack of technical capacity in most state administrations hampers the regulators' ability to understand the technological aspects that underpin digital platforms and, therefore, have difficulty developing effective regulation that does not have inadvertent negative consequences.

This presents a great opportunity for UNESCO to set out a positive vision for regulation of digital platforms – one that protects human rights and minimises harms – and to offer overarching guidance for independent regulators.

UNESCO's constitutional mandate to promote "the free flow of ideas by word and image" – and we could add by bytes – is more relevant than ever. Since its founding, the Organization has been a multilateral powerhouse generating ideas, principles, policies and concrete regulatory frameworks which were (and are) a source of guidance to policymakers, regulators, decisionmakers and other relevant stakeholders aiming to promote and protect freedom of expression through "any media" and "regardless of frontiers".

This 2023 UNESCO conference will tackle the debate on regulation of digital platforms head-on, informed by the Member States' endorsement in 2021 of the principles of the Windhoek+30 Declaration on "Information as a Public Good". The process aims to produce a model regulatory framework for digital platforms focused on addressing the different structures and processes that interfere with the availability of accurate and reliable information in the public sphere including, for example, content moderation and curation.



The document “International Regulatory Framework for Digital Platforms: A human rights-based approach for a complex problem, emerging of the debates held during the conference, will therefore spell out (in the areas of UNESCO’s mandate in communication and information) guidance for regulation to achieve information as a public good regarding:

- **what** issues (e.g., content moderation and curation, transparency, accountability, etc.),
- by **whom** and **how** (regulators, co-regulation mechanisms, company self-regulation, multistakeholder regulation),
- for **what purpose** - (e.g., to ensure human rights’ accountability, advance multilingualism online, build digital empowerment<sup>1</sup> ).

The draft version of the framework will be developed by UNESCO’s Secretariat taking into consideration a global mapping of existing regulatory responses to the problems faced by the global digital ecosystem, as well as a series of in-depth dialogues with relevant stakeholders.

The conference will serve as a global multistakeholder space to debate and improve an advanced draft version of the framework, which will be finalized and launched on World Press Freedom Day 2023.

Following the model of the multi-stakeholder approach of UNESCO’s 2015 [CONNECTing-the-dots](#) conference, UNESCO will again seek to involve the widest range of interests and regions in the discussions.

This initiative resonates with the work of UNESCO to promote the digital commons and information as a public good, and to advance the Member States’ agreed Internet Universality principles of human rights, openness, accessibility and multistakeholder governance (ROAM). In helping to shape the digital future for all, the conference also dovetails further with UNESCO’s mandated work on the WSIS+20 roadmap, as well as digital innovation and transformation. The regulatory framework will also need to face the challenge of including issues such as Web 3.0 and the “metaverse”, therefore suggesting a regulatory structure that can also accommodate on-going technological developments

<sup>1</sup> The “Why” of the conference should also address the key aspirations of “Our Common Agenda”: 1) leave no one behind; 2) promote peace and prevent conflicts; 3) abide by international law and ensure justice; 4) build trust 5;) improve digital cooperation; 6) boost partnerships.

### 3. Multistakeholder engagement and catalyzers:

The conference will bring together:

- Ministries of Information / ICT / Communications / Digital Transformation / Education
- Communications / Media / Data/ Privacy and electoral Regulators
- Parliamentarians
- Judicial Operators
- Private sector, namely social media companies
- UN family, including Office of the Tech Envoy
- Regional international organizations
- Civil society
- Academia
- Technical community (engineers and other technical professionals responsible for building the Internet architecture).

UNESCO encourages these different stakeholders to:

- Act as a champion for the initiative, involving others
- Contribute to the conference outputs
- Mobilize funds to organize the conference and ensure the conditions to implement the framework developed
- Use national and international networks to contribute to the drafting process of the framework
- Promote the envisioned outputs, including the outcome document.

### 4. Deliverables:

- An advanced draft of a model regulatory framework for digital platforms to secure information as a public good, while protecting freedom of expression and other human rights, to be discussed during the conference.
- Kicking-off an international community of practices of independent regulators engaged in sharing good practices on how to effectively regulate digital platforms while observing human rights' international law.

The draft regulatory framework will cover forms of regulation (statutory, self-regulation, co-regulation, multi-stakeholder regulation) related to the following six topics:

- i. Human rights' impact assessments and due diligence – especially freedom of expression including journalists' online safety
- ii. Access to relevant information/data generated by the platforms and transparency

- iii. Combatting hate speech, misinformation and disinformation
- iv. Necessary commitments to educate users through Media and Information Literacy as well as digital competencies
- v. Key processes that must be ensured by independent regulators (content moderation and curation, multilingualism in content moderation, algorithms' approach to prioritizing potentially harmful content, etc.)
- vi. Institutional structure of an independent regulation system.

These topics link to UNESCO's medium-term strategy and program, which spell out objectives for freedom of expression and the right to information, inclusion, and combat discrimination, hate speech and stereotypes, amongst others.

The inputs generated during the conference will be essential for producing a final version of the International Regulatory framework, which will be launched on World Press Freedom Day 2023 and will contribute to the development of the Global Digital Compact and other multilateral processes within the UN system.

