

The Council of Europe and the Internet

The Internet is one of the greatest liberating forces of our age: information and global communication have never been as accessible as today. The Internet has created new opportunities for strengthening democracy. Unfortunately it is also a space or a tool that can be used to restrict democratic freedoms or to perpetrate crimes.

The Council of Europe is working with its 47 member states to make sure that the Internet provides a safe and open environment where freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, democracy, diversity, education and knowledge can flourish.

We promote an Internet with a maximum of rights and services subject to a minimum of restrictions and a level of security which users are entitled to expect. Our ultimate aim is to enhance the protection of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the online environment.

The use of the Internet raises issues related to the protection of rights and freedoms enshrined in the most important Council of Europe treaty, the European Convention on Human Rights, notably the rights to privacy and freedom of expression. The European Court of Human Rights, which rules on applications alleging violations of the Convention, has already delivered judgments in cases involving the Internet.

In March 2012 the Organisation adopted its first Internet Governance strategy, which contains more than 40 lines of action, including the creation of a compendium of rights of Internet users.

Internet access: a means for enhancing human rights

People rely on the Internet to obtain information, communicate and associate with each other, and for many of their other everyday activities. They have a legitimate expectation that the Internet will be up and running. Improving access to the Internet is the only way more people will benefit from the opportunities provided by the Web. So there needs to be both affordable and safe access to the net.

The Council of Europe recognises and promotes the public service value of the Internet. Creating access opportunities for all will help develop true democracy where every citizen can express himself or herself freely without discrimination.

Therefore, the Council of Europe is encouraging its member states to ensure equal Internet access for everyone.

Making the Internet more accessible can help people with disabilities, and underprivileged or elderly people to connect more easily with the world – from voting in elections to buying goods and filling in tax returns.

The Council of Europe's disability action plan (2006-15) includes a set of actions for member states, ranging from improving participation in public life to increasing educational opportunities and involving users with disabilities in the development of new technologies.

Freedom of expression: new challenges

The Internet acts as a catalyst for freedom of expression and information. Blogs, search engines, content aggregators and social networks have dramatically transformed the media landscape, allowing people to participate in content creation and interact on a massive scale in unprecedented ways.

Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that everyone should have the right to freedom of expression and access to information, and this applies equally to offline and online environments. This right is increasingly challenged by the blocking, filtering and censoring of Internet content.

The stability and openness of the Internet are pre-conditions for the full enjoyment of freedom of expression and access to information online. The Council of Europe is working on standards to protect free cross-border Internet traffic and the resources critical for the functioning of the Internet. In 2011 the Organisation adopted 10 Internet governance principles from the perspective of human rights, rule of law and democracy, and recommended states to protect and promote the universality, integrity and openness of the Internet.

Personal data: how can we protect privacy online?

The Internet has changed how we handle our personal data and share personal information with others – for example through social networks or in our business transactions. This is creating new opportunities but also risks.

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that everyone has the right to respect for his or her private and family life.

The Council of Europe is currently modernising its 1981 data protection convention ('Convention 108') – the first international treaty in this field - by ensuring that its principles are still in line with today's needs. Internet knows no borders, and Convention 108, which is open to any other country throughout the world, has the potential to become a global standard.

The Council of Europe recently adopted the first international text recommending states to establish minimum privacy standards for profiling, a practice which allows observing, collecting and matching people's personal data online.

Millions of people use search engines and social networks every day to access and share information. Many of them are concerned about the protection of their privacy or the right to access information. In reply to this challenge, the Council of Europe has asked its members states to work with operators to safeguard human rights, for example by empowering users to protect their privacy, and by increasing the transparency of how search engines select and rank information.

Stopping crime on the web

The Internet provides a huge potential for learning and communication – but also a huge potential for criminal acts. The Council of Europe is working in some very specific areas to combat cybercrime. In 2001 it adopted the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime, which lays out a framework for guiding state policies in this area. It also describes the minimum legal standards necessary for states to successfully prosecute cybercriminals and tackle child pornography. An additional protocol criminalises racist and xenophobic acts committed through computer systems.

The Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (2005) also covers the online world, asking states to establish criminal offences for public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, recruitment and training of terrorists.

Protecting and empowering children

The Internet is also being used to harm and exploit people, in particular children and other vulnerable groups. The Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse criminalises certain types of conduct, for example the use of new technologies to sexually harm children, in particular "grooming", which is the online sexual solicitation of a child by an adult in order to meet offline.

However, children's well-being when using the Internet is not only about the need to protect them, it is also about empowering them to use it safely for learning, communicating and playing.

Gender equality

Gender stereotypes are the root of inequality between men and women and of gender violence, and they are also present in the online world. The Council of Europe is committed to promoting gender equality on the Internet and to combating gender stereotypes in the media.

A convention adopted in 2011 which combats violence against women, highlights the role of the communication technologies sector and the media in contributing to prevent violence and to enhance respect for the dignity of women.

Counterfeit medicines: protecting health online

Medicines and health care products may be marketed via the net in a legitimate way, but also illegally. In the latter case, they can be counterfeit or of poor quality and be dangerous.

The Council of Europe has adopted the first international treaty on counterfeiting of medical products and similar crimes involving threats to public health, the MEDICRIME Convention, which aims to stop counterfeit medicines being sold offline but also over the net.

Working with Internet actors

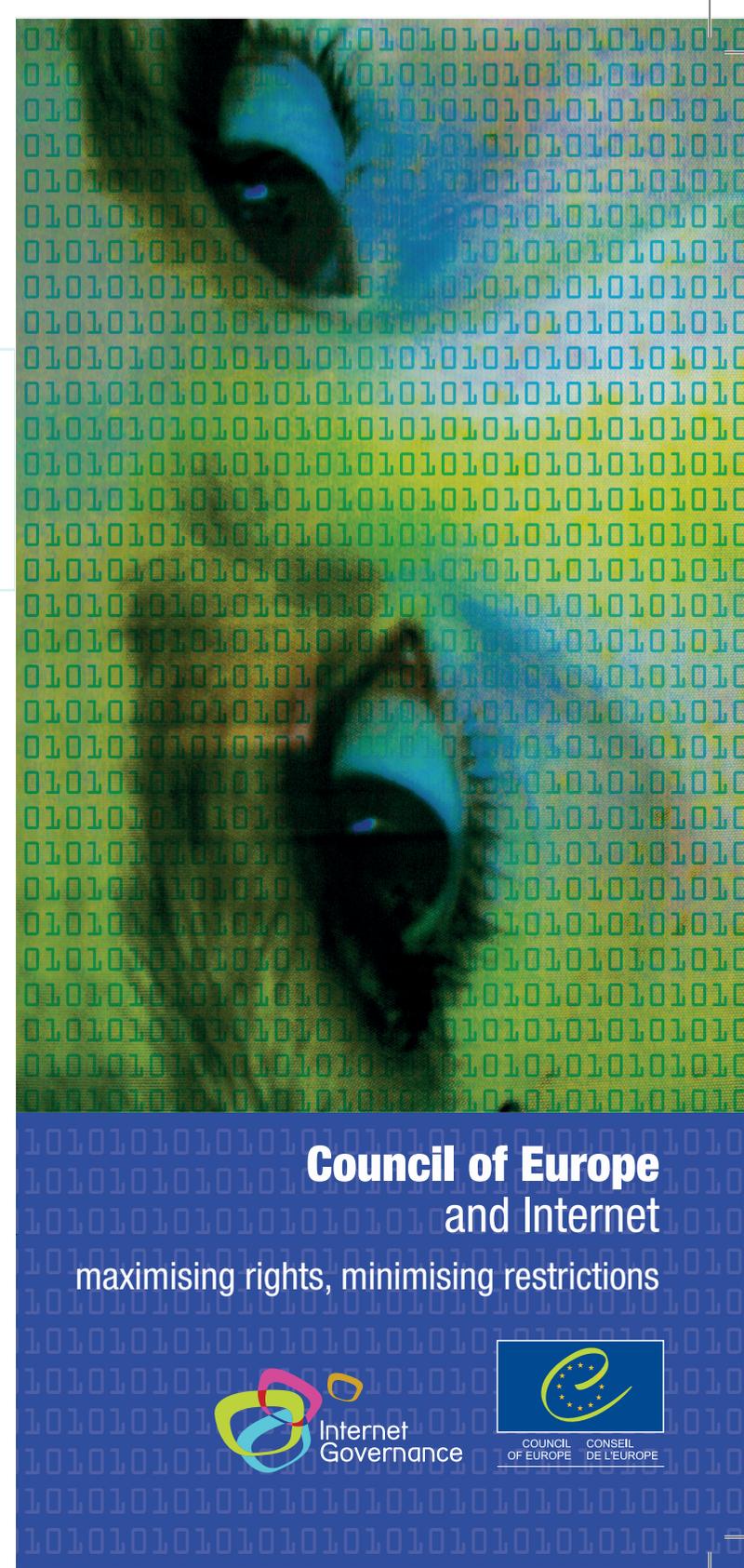
The Council of Europe cooperates closely with governments, the private sector and other organisations involved in the Internet. In recent years it has launched human rights guidelines for the European Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and for the providers of online games. It has also prepared guidelines to strengthen co-operation between the police and criminal justice authorities and ISPs in the investigation of cybercrime.

The Organisation promotes and supports the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF), the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG), and is an observer to the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation that brings together 47 states, covering almost the whole European continent, for promoting human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Its headquarters are in Strasbourg (France).

Member states: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Republic of Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

Discover what the Council of Europe
is doing on Internet governance at
www.coe.int/informationociety
www.coe.int/internet



**Council of Europe
and Internet**
maximising rights, minimising restrictions

