



PARTNERSHIP WITH DIGITAL COMPANIES

The digital transformation of our society presents opportunities for human progress but also challenges and risks. While the role of States is to protect human rights and the rule of law in this new environment, business plays a critical role in meeting the needs of the current era by providing and controlling its infrastructure. The partnership with the Council of Europe enables them to work alongside governments on digital policies.

Overview of the Council of Europe
co-operation framework with
internet companies and
representative associations

Thematic
Focus

Information
Society

www.coe.int/freedomofexpression

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Assessing challenges

The fast pace of technological change and the cross-border delivery of digital services, especially on the internet, provide opportunities, but also present challenges for users who are faced, among other things, with online crime and insecurity, extremism and violence, abuse and intolerance. While it is primarily the task of States to protect everyone's human rights and fundamental freedoms, its effective performance is no longer conceivable without multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The Council of Europe **Internet Governance Strategy 2016 - 2019** recognises the critical role that digital companies play, in providing basic services and facilitating exercise of rights online. The Strategy therefore calls for enhanced dialogue and cooperation with internet companies and their representative associations to create a shared commitment when addressing the challenges of the digital transformation.

Building partnerships

On 8 November 2017, during the World Forum for Democracy, Council of Europe Secretary General signed initial **partnership agreements** – in the form of an exchange of letters – with representatives of eight leading technology firms and six associations. Two more partners joined the framework in 2018 and nine others in 2020, bringing the number of participants up to twenty-five:

- Apple, AT&T, BT, Cloudflare, Deutsche Telekom, Element AI (now ServiceNow), Facebook, Google, IBM, Intel, Kaspersky Lab, Microsoft, Orange and Telefónica.
- Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA), Digital Europe, EuroISPA, the European Digital SME Alliance, the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO), the Global Network Initiative (GNI), GSMA, ICCO, IEEE, The Internet Society (ISOC) and RIPE NCC.

Additional agreements are ongoing with other partners in the future. For further information please use the 'Contact us' button on the website of the Media and Internet Division at www.coe.int/freedomofexpression.

Enhancing cooperation

This partnership enables companies to participate in an array of activities of the Council of Europe and to sit side-by-side with governments when **shaping digital policies**. Concrete areas of cooperation may include (but not limited to) the following spheres:

- bioethics
- children's protection in the online environment
- combating cybercrime and the use of the internet for terrorist purposes
- data protection, including Big Data issues
- artificial intelligence
- digital literacy promotion

- digitalisation of cultural heritage and cultural services
- addressing abusive forms of expression online (i.e., incitement to violence) and disinformation
- democratic elections and e-voting;
- combating money laundering and corruption.

Exploring new opportunities

Cooperation within the general framework of the Council of Europe's partnership with internet companies and their representative associations may assume a variety of forms, including:

- participating in the work of committees and other intergovernmental or expert organs, bodies and structures of the Council of Europe to contribute to the drafting of legally and politically binding standards
- co-organising conferences and other awareness-raising events
- providing expertise for Council of Europe studies and thematic reports (i.e., hearings with experts, brainstorming sessions)
- receiving Council of Europe expertise (i.e., training sessions, seminars)
- joint projects, targeted partnerships

Considering benefits

The value of partnerships for digital companies and their representative associations consists in the unique opportunity to:

- Boost public confidence** and users' trust in their services by publicly acknowledging their corporate social responsibility and commitment to respect and support human rights and rule of law online.
- Gain a better understanding** of the Council of Europe legal frameworks and international policy considerations, including **prevention** of cybercrime, data protection, hate speech, etc.
- Access to the network of the Council of Europe's 47 member states and 6 observer states and civil society organisations** to discuss and create a forum for dialogue to confront challenges, serving as an early warning system for the fast-moving and increasingly complex area of legal and human rights challenges surrounding the information society.
- Better understand government and societal expectations**, particularly in new entry countries, where offices may not yet be on the ground.
- Inform the development of Council of Europe digital policies**. Active participation in discussions ensures that recommendations and legal instruments are well-written, providing realistic regulation and implementable recommendations to confront existing policy challenges with flexibility to handle future issues.
- Devise and implement corporate social responsibility initiatives more effectively**. The benefits of the Council of Europe expertise and of coordination and engagement with other stakeholders help to better meet international human rights standards and optimise investment in such initiatives.