The fast pace of technological change and the cross-border nature of internet services present opportunities, but also challenges for users. While it is the task of governments to protect human rights and the rule of law online, companies play a critical role in addressing today’s challenges of the digital age because they provide and control its infrastructure. The partnership with the Council of Europe enables them to sit side-by-side with governments when shaping internet policy.
PARTNERSHIP WITH INTERNET COMPANIES

Assessing challenges
The fast pace of technological change and the cross-border delivery of internet services provide opportunities, but also present challenges for internet 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 governments 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 internet companies play not only in providing basic services and facilitating exercise of rights online, but also in effectively addressing today’s challenges of the digital age. 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 internet.

Building partnerships
On 8 November 2017, during the World Forum for Democracy, Council of Europe Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland 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 May 2018, bringing the number of participants up to 16:

- Apple, Deutsche Telekom, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Kaspersky Lab, Orange, Telefónica and Cloudflare.
- Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA), DIGITALEUROPE, the European Digital SME Alliance, the European Telecommunications Network Operators’ Association (ETNO), GSMA, the Global Network Initiative (GNI) and EuroISPA.

Additional agreements could be signed 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 intergovernmental activities and related work of the Council of Europe and to sit side-by-side with governments when shaping internet policy. 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;
- digital literacy promotion;
- digitalisation of cultural heritage and cultural services;
- addressing abusive forms of expression online (i.e., incitement to violence) and disinformation (“fake news” phenomenon);
- 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 internet 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.
- Influence the development of Council of Europe policies for the internet. 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.

Council of Europe  www.coe.int/freedomofexpression  Facebook: Information Society Group