

WORLD FORUM FOR DEMOCRACY 2019

CONCLUSIONS

“IS DEMOCRACY IN DANGER IN THE
INFORMATION AGE?”

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2019 CONCLUSIONS

The 2019 edition of the World Forum for Democracy tackled the question “Is democracy in danger in the information age?”. It gathered over 2000 participants from over 80 countries, including 400 graduates from the Schools of Political Studies of the Council of Europe. Preliminary conclusions were shared and debated at the Paris Peace Forum 2019. The present conclusions and recommendations will be transmitted to all Council of Europe relevant partners and be distilled to be used in its own work programme.

There was widespread consensus at the Forum that the technological progress entailed challenging transformative impacts on our democratic societies, so it is essential that democracies cooperate to safeguard their values and to face up to the new challenges.

The Forum addressed a few key questions in this regard, notably *tech regulation, confronting disinformation and supporting quality journalism*.

IS THERE NEED FOR MORE REGULATION OF TECH INDUSTRY?

Information Technology has remarkable potential to serve as a tool for democracy, but it cannot do so without clear, transparent and predictable rules. At present, most national regulatory authorities are not fit to face enormously influential strategies from tech companies that control data and are often global.

The power of GAFAs to influence individuals’ economic and political behaviours, based on the data they possess, is astonishing. This power should not be allowed to be weaponised. Democratic values must influence the design and evolution of information technology. Ethical and human rights concerns must be inbuilt from the very start in order to be effective.

Social media platforms have the potential to strengthen citizens’ participation by allowing them to contribute their ideas. Governments could use such technology to make their policy more responsive to their citizen’s needs.



HOW TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION?

The fight against disinformation involves a range of actors: citizens, governments, private sector, media and social media, as well as international platforms.

- **Media literacy** is crucial in this fight.

A new social culture surrounding internet must be created in order to promote social responsibility, establish clear rules on what is appropriate online behaviour, and raise awareness about the risks.

There has been a lively debate over the role governments should play in regulating disinformation given the susceptibility to abuse of such controls.

- There were many who called for **independent mechanisms** to be set up at the national or international levels to regulate disinformation that would not be at risk of government capture.

However, such a mechanism would need to employ robust sanctions or instruments in order to be effective.



- **Regulatory authorities need to have clear mandates and adequate mechanisms to hold tech companies accountable.**

If there is a risk of political capture of regulatory institutions they will be weak and ultimately ineffective.

National and international institutions will also need to address the dichotomy between the vast amount of information available and the relatively few platforms through which it is accessed. Such a situation gives an unprecedented amount of control to the companies who operate these platforms.

- **The question of bias in AI algorithms** must be tackled as well.

Companies using such technology should be required by national legislation and/or international treaties that the data they use does not discriminate.

HOW TO SUPPORT QUALITY JOURNALISM AND PROTECT JOURNALISTS?

Pluralistic, independent and trustworthy media are pillars of democracy. However, journalism is facing many challenges today. The model it relied on is faltering, with dramatic effects for small and local media companies. On top of this, journalists are facing increasing harassment, intimidation, and violence as a result of their work.

The crisis in funding of traditional media stems from their content, often costly to produce, being distributed through social networks for free. Revenues for digital media have now surpassed revenues for print, television and radio. This has led to a situation in which digital platforms gain from the content they are hosting, while those who produce this content see their revenues drop.



- **Governments need to put in place new structures to support quality media**, especially the Public Service Broadcasters, which are vitally important to a healthy media landscape and have been able to maintain relatively high levels of trust. At the same time, the traditional media, need to reach beyond their usual mediums in order to connect with broader sections of society.

- **Local media**, which has come under immense financial pressure in recent years, must also be actively supported financially by central authorities as it is essential for holding local governments and institutions to account.
- One of the general solutions offered was to **raise awareness** among the broader population of the role that **the traditional media plays**, as well as to facilitate better public debate through democratic systems of participation.



SHOULD WE REVISE THE NOTIONS OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH TO ACCOUNT FOR THE NEW DIGITAL REALITY?



Social media has changed our perspective on information by imposing new speeds, expanding the scale of communications in the digital space. However, social media's role in the circulation of online content has become increasingly controversial.

The fight against disinformation has confronted us with the question what is acceptable when it comes to regulating freedom of speech.

- **An open and regular dialogue between tech companies, governments, international institutions and civil society is instrumental in balancing rights and harm in the content moderation process.**

HOW CAN WE DEFEND OURSELVES FROM THE ATTACKS OF THOSE WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO UNDERMINE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS?

In the information age social media can be used as a weapon. The fostering of an inclusive, safe, and informative digital space cannot only be brought about through top-down legislative approaches.

- **Civil society should put in place new norms of use and responsibility for the internet.** Grassroots initiatives focusing on education and transparency are key.

Such approaches can also play a role in encouraging accountability within government institutions, allowing for the rebuilding of trust in institutions.



ARE WE TRYING TO FIND TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS TO A POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEM?

One of the questions that arose during the Forum was if we are spending too much time blaming Facebook, Cambridge Analytica, and foreign government sponsored bots when threats to elections and democracy predate this technology?

To some extent many of the problems faced by democracies today originate before the advent of the digital era. Disinformation has existed for hundreds of years, but technology has amplified the phenomenon.

- Technology is here to stay and so it needs to be addressed, but this cannot be done in isolation. Governments must **combine technical and legal solutions with policies to address the economic and political problems that exist in democracies today.**

