2024 Summit for the Future

Written inputs for the Preparation of the Zero Draft of the Pact for the Future

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Chapeau

Reporters sans frontières (RSF) and the Forum on Information and Democracy ('the Forum') welcome the opportunity to provide inputs as part of the development of a UN Pact for the Future. While we understand that it will cover a broader range of policy areas, our contribution more particularly aims at feeding in the process of elaborating a Global Digital Compact (GDC) and a Code of Conduct on Information Integrity.

The lack of democratic regulation of the global information and communication space has led to an 'information chaos', where propaganda and disinformation are thriving at the expense of quality journalism. Yet, access to reliable information is a prerequisite for the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and for democratic processes in general, including elections, decision-making and accountability. For several years, RSF and the Forum have been striving to develop innovative solutions in response to this challenge - see below.

The Pact for the Future (and its components, such as the GDC) therefore provides a timely opportunity to secure a strong commitment from governments to support and protect people's right to reliable information on a global scale. However, in order to ensure consistency and avoid duplications, we strongly encourage the Code of Conduct on Information Integrity and the GDC to refer and build on existing initiatives and cooperation mechanisms, such as:

1/ The Partnership for Information and Democracy

Initiated by RSF and launched in 2019, the Partnership for Information and Democracy is an intergovernmental (non-binding) agreement endorsed by 52 countries representing all five continents. It builds on the principles set out in the Declaration on Information and Democracy published on November 11, 2018 to advance the development of systemic responses to mass disinformation and promote democratic principles in the digital environment.

The Forum on Information and Democracy, a civil society-led initiative supports the implementation of the Partnership principles by providing ready-for-use policy recommendations to States signatories. It was founded by 11 civil society organisations,

including RSF, and has published over 400 recommendations to date[1]. Finally, the Observatory on Information and Democracy provides for an research-based assessment of the challenges affecting the global information and communication environment.

2/ The Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI)

The JTI is a normative instrument to turn accountability and transparency of news media into a competitive advantage and thus, incentivize compliance with ethical norms in journalism. It is based on a global ISO-type standard which was developed under the aegis of the European Committee for Standardization. As of November 2023, close to 1000 media in 80 countries have signed up to engage into the JTI certification process.

The JTI contributes to reinforce information integrity because it rewards trustworthy media content in the online information environment. RSF actively promotes the JTI as an instrument for governments to use e.g. in the allocation of public subsidies, or for platforms in their algorithmic curation.

Chapter I. Sustainable development and financing for development

Technological innovations, changing consumers' behaviours, as well as the rise of digital competitors with unprecedented market power, have significantly disrupted the traditional business of news reliant on advertising and subscription revenue. As a result, many media organisations struggle to generate sufficient revenue to sustain their investment into quality journalism. Against that background, there is a responsibility for governments to create the necessary economic and social conditions that support the long-term development of media.

Recommendations:

The **New Deal for Journalism** report[2] includes a comprehensive set of key measures that governments could take to help ensure the freedom, funding and future that journalists need to do their job. The Code on Information Integrity and the GDC could build on these recommendations and provide that governments:

➜ Provide financial support to independent media and journalism in the form of subsidies, tax exemptions or tax mechanisms allowing citizens to support the independent media of their choice;

➜ Free public service media from any political pressure by securing sufficient long-term funding to deliver on their mission;

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[1] The recommendations can be found in the 4 following reports: *How to End Infodemics* (2020), *A New Deal for Journalism* (2021), *Accountability Regimes for Social Networks and their Users* (2022) and *Pluralism of information in Curation and Indexation of Algorithms* (2023).
[2] Forum on Information & Democracy. (2021). A New Deal for Journalism. https://informationdemocracy.org/working-groups/sustainability-of-journalism/

➔ Redirect a small percentage of States' Official Development Assistance (ODA) towards the financing of public interest journalism across the world;

➔ Facilitate the creation of nonprofit news organisations and creating fiscal incentives for both individuals and foundations to support nonprofit media;

All of these policies should primarily benefit reliable media that are identified as such on the basis of widely recognized norms of ethical and professional journalism, such as the JTI.

Chapter II. International peace and security

During times of conflict, journalists play an indispensable role in documenting and reporting on war crimes and other human rights violations. Where journalists are impeded to do their job, due to safety reasons or State censorship, the online information environment is only overwhelmed with more propaganda and disinformation. Ongoing conflicts across the globe demonstrate the utmost importance to guarantee people's access to reliable news reporting in order to curb the wave of manipulative content which contribute to the further polarisation of societies and are causing real and additional harm, including inciting international crimes.

Recommendations:

Whereas professional journalism stands by codes of ethics and rigorous methods, the way in which big online platforms structure the global information and communication space tends to promote content that are not produced according to such quality standards. Against this background, it is important that the Code on Information Integrity and/or the GDC:

➔ Enshrine the right to reliable information as laid down and defined in the Partnership on Information and Democracy[3] and recognise it as a prerequisite for peacebuilding during times of conflict;

➔ Provide for an obligation on online platforms to promote public interest journalistic content by giving due (algorithmic) prominence to trusted sources of information (such as those certified by the JTI);

➔ Request online platforms to take risk mitigation measures reducing the effects of dis- and misinformation relating to the conflict;

➔ Request governments to guarantee that influential individuals are held accountable for their online activity and that platform efforts are scrutinised by independent regulators and researchers[4];

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[3] The right to reliable information is defined as '*the freedom to seek, receive and access reliable information.* Information is deemed reliable '*insofar as its collection, processing, dissemination are free, independent, diverse and based on cross-checking of various sources, in a pluralistic media landscape where the facts can give rise to a diversity of interpretation and viewpoints*'.
[4] For a more detailed list of recommendations to enhance peacebuilding through information integrity see "Enable Peacebuilding through safeguarding the integrity of the information space in times of conflict"

→ Refer to the Partnership for Information and Democracy as an appropriate forum for inter-States cooperation and best practices development on these issues.

Chapter III. Science, technology innovation and digital cooperation

It has come time to reintroduce democratic safeguards into the global information and communication space to guarantee that citizens' right to information is protected from the current 'information chaos'. This should translate into a recognition that the global information environment is a common public good whose rules should be determined in accordance with the general interest, as opposed to the business and/or political interests of big tech companies.

Recommendations:

RSF and the Forum share the view that the regulation of tech companies should be adapted to the threats their systems can pose to the citizens' right to reliable information. Accordingly, the Code on Information Integrity or the GDC could:

→ Enshrine the right to reliable information as laid down and defined in the Partnership on Information and Democracy[5];

→ Establish that online platforms can be held accountable for respecting the principles of information integrity and neutrality, which should translate into a commitment to support the visibility and findability of reliable sources of information independently from any political or religious criteria (see next point);

→ Provide for an obligation on online platforms to promote public interest journalistic content by giving due (algorithmic) prominence to trusted sources of information (such as those certified by the JTI);

→ Disincentivize online platforms to prioritise engagement over human rights, including the right to information, and therefore encourage them to develop technical measures to limit the virality of some categories of harmful content;

→ Provide that users of social media platforms are subject to a comprehensive set of duties which they must comply with, or otherwise face appropriate individual sanctions enforced by the platforms under due public supervision;

→ Require AI developers to demonstrate that their systems, in particular AI generative applications, are designed to comply with safety and privacy rules; intellectual property rights; professional journalism ethics (accuracy, impartiality, pluralism of sources; 'do not harm' principle, etc.); and transparency principles.

Chapter IV. Youth and future generations

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[5] See footnote n°3

Chapter V. Transforming global governance

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, RSF and the Forum believe that the implementation of the Code of Conduct and of the GDC would best benefit from existing international cooperation mechanisms and entities, such as the Partnership/Forum on Information and Democracy.

Recommendations:

Rather than creating new international institutions, the Code of Conduct on Information Integrity and the GDC could:

➔ Enshrine the right to reliable information as laid down and defined in the Partnership on Information and Democracy[6];

➔ Acknowledge the role of the Partnership for Information and Democracy to foster dialogue among democratic states to develop and implement policies regarding the global information and communication space;

➔ Mandate the Forum on Information and Democracy, in cooperation with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, to provide practical guidance, as well as best practices, on how technologies affect people's right to information, and to explore effective regulatory or legislative responses to these challenges;

➔ Mandate the Forum on Information and Democracy to provide guidance on the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Information Integrity and the GDC;

➔ Mandate the Observatory on Information and Democracy to assess and evaluate the implementation of the Code of Conduct;

➔ Set up an international AI & Media Supervisory Board, including media representatives and journalists, to discuss the effects of AI technologies on the information environment and regulatory solutions to recommend to governments.

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[6] See footnote n°3