"The Future of Human Rights and Digital Technologies"

Roundtable 2, Human Rights 75 High-level Event
12 December 2023, 10:30am-12:30pm CET

Think Piece

Context and background

We are in the midst of a technological revolution, witnessing dramatic changes in our political, economic, social and cultural landscape. Many believe that advancements will only accelerate in the years to come. In this fast-moving context, it is essential to recall that human rights that apply offline also apply online. This has been repeatedly acknowledged by States in resolutions of the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council; and the UN Secretary-General has called for human rights to be 'the foundation of an open, safe and secure digital future' in his Policy Brief on the Global Digital Compact.

Digital technologies impact the enjoyment of every human right. Artificial intelligence, for example has contributed to impressive improvements in the right to health through the discovery of new medical treatments. Access to information is vastly enhanced thanks to the internet and people connect with peers across the globe. Digital technology will be essential to getting the Sustainable Development Goals back on track. However, significant human rights risks have already emerged. Billions of people still have no access to the internet. Hate speech and disinformation spread with unprecedented speed and reach on social media platforms, fuelling toxic attacks against minorities and women, while overbroad laws on the online environment are used to target human rights defenders, journalists and critics, silencing free expression. Predictive tools expose people to discrimination along with growing threats to their rights when seeking jobs or facing law enforcement and the justice system. The availability of huge amounts of personal data that can be fed into AI systems undermines privacy as does the expansion of surveillance made possible by digital means.

Growing reliance on AI will uproot business models, affecting the right to work. Even those with no access to the internet or digital devices still feel the impact of technology's advances, being subject to numerous digitized decision-making processes and effectively disadvantaged in their enjoyment of their political, cultural, economic and social rights. Digital technologies are also central to how armed conflicts unfold, with a host of urgent questions on the human rights impacts. Advances in areas such as quantum computing and neurotechnology raise unprecedented threats to privacy and human dignity. All this happens against the background of tech companies providing infrastructure for critical areas traditionally left to governments, from social security to border management and national security.

Human rights provide a guiding compass to address these new and emerging technologies. Human rights help us define goals, obligations and harms to prevent – and in a comprehensive manner given the span from civil and political to economic, social and cultural rights, and the rights to development and to a healthy environment. We must tap the full potential of the human

rights legal and institutional framework to reap the benefits of a digital future for all and prevent the worst outcomes.

This involves consideration of how human rights can underpin regulatory efforts on the development and use of technology, as well as the implications for the conduct and accountability of tech companies who are having such a profound impact on the functioning of our societies. A need for coordination across borders has emerged as a key challenge given the proliferation in recent years of initiatives on technology, often unfortunately with little attention paid to human rights considerations. The Global Digital Compact has a crucial role to play here.

Objectives

The purpose of this roundtable is to consider concrete recommendations to manage the challenges of rapidly advancing technology through the lens of human rights, and through steps to uphold human rights as a path to solutions.

This will include an opportunity to explore innovative approaches along with creative avenues for forging new partnerships between States, institutions, civil society, the private sector and other actors.

Looking ahead to the next 25 years, participants are invited to consider a number of guiding questions, along with recommendations for discussion, with a view to identifying priorities for action by governments and other stakeholders, including within the United Nations.

Guiding questions and possible recommendations
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1. **What guardrails are needed to make sure that government use of digital technology assists in realizing the rights of all?**

Possible recommendation: Ensure systematic application by governments of human rights due diligence in their procurement and use of digital technology, as well as in the development of regulation of the tech sector.

2. **Given the digital divide and constraints on investment in the development and regulation of digital technologies in developing countries, how can we better ensure that the opportunities provided by emerging technologies are available for all, while the risks posed are managed effectively in all contexts as well?**

Possible recommendation: Make investment in digital technology for the public good a priority, share good practices on establishing guardrails to protect against human rights harms, and provide support to efforts by both governments and businesses to integrate human rights in the design, development, and deployment of digital technologies.

3. Given the central role of the private sector in the design, development and deployment of digital technologies, what should be done to better ensure corporate respect for human rights?

Possible recommendation: Identify, discuss and build on good existing examples – particularly at the national and regional level – of regulatory and other initiatives on strengthening human rights due diligence by and accountability for tech companies.

4. How can we best support States and businesses to overcome the obstacles they face in applying human rights standards in the design, development and deployment of digital technologies?

Possible recommendation: Consider the establishment of a digital Human Rights Advisory Mechanism (HRAM), facilitated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as proposed by the Secretary-General in his Policy Brief on a Global Digital Compact to be agreed at the 2024 Summit of the Future.

For more information on the round table please contact Scott Campbell (scott.campbell@un.org), Yann Collier (yann.collier@un.org) and Yoo Jin Kim (yoojin.kim@un.org)

Resources

- UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief on the Global Digital Compact