Recommendations on the zero draft of the Global Digital Compact

Introduction

The Forum on Information and Democracy and its partner and founding organizations Reporters sans frontières (RSF), Research ICT Africa and Derechos Digitales welcome the opportunity to present their recommendations as part of the development of a Global Digital Compact (GDC). The recommendations presented below aim to inspire the intergovernmental negotiations taking place at the United Nations and to shape a common approach of democratic States that are members of the Partnership for Information and Democracy.

Access to reliable information is a prerequisite for the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and facilitating democratic processes in general, such as elections, decision-making and accountability. The digital age has expanded opportunities for individuals to engage in their human rights. Consequently, international law recognizes that protections for human rights must be upheld both offline and online, encompassing all rights, including freedom of opinion and expression. For several years, the Forum, RSF, Research ICT Africa and Derechos Digitales have been striving to develop innovative solutions in response to this challenge.

Having in mind the mandate of the Partnership for Information and Democracy, the recommendations presented here focus on protecting and safeguarding a democratic global information and communication space which provides access to reliable information.

Key recommendations

To close the digital divide and build digital public infrastructure:

- Advance concrete commitments and **measurement indicators to bridge the persistent digital divide** involves ensuring meaningful connectivity from a human rights perspective.
- **Recognizing internet access as integral to the right to freedom of expression** and facilitating the exercise of other fundamental rights is crucial.

- **Connectivity policies should be developed and evaluated through participatory processes**, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and diverse mechanisms for infrastructure provision, including community networks.
- Stress that the respect for **indigenous groups' self-determination** in infrastructure and technological deployment is essential.
- Addressing inequality, high prices, and infrastructure challenges requires a **holistic and intercultural perspective**. Meaningful connectivity is vital for enabling the exercise of human rights and aligning with global agendas on digital transformation and sustainable development.
- Urge States to prioritize policies that **tackle global internet access disparities**, especially in marginalized regions, to promote universal internet access as a driver of various human rights. This entails developing comprehensive public policy proposals integrating interculturality, ensuring effective participation, and fostering digital literacy.
- Fostering the development of public policies aligned with guiding principles such as **equal access, pluralism, non-discrimination, privacy, net neutrality, and multisectoral governance** is indispensable.
- Reforming higher **education of IT developers to embed human rights, ethics and sustainable development** in their education programs with the objective to build digital goods that serve humanity
- Implement **certification systems grounded in human rights standards for artificial intelligence systems** to monitor the development, deployment, and operation of AI technologies[1]. This system should encompass assessments of compliance not only with international human rights law but also with labor and environmental rights. Additionally, it should facilitate the identification and labeling of potentially harmful technologies, enabling the imposition of a moratorium or even a ban on AI tools that fail to comply with these standards.
- Undertake **periodic assessments of data flows and taxation** to better understand where benefits accrue and their adherence to human rights standards, including when discussing trade agreements, and work towards **establishing a global and equitable taxation system**.

To foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space
- Impose **legal obligations** on digital technology companies and social media platforms to **protect and extend fundamental rights,** including the right to information and privacy, to provide access to effective remedies and be held accountable for violations.
- Reinforce and operationalize standards to **ensure that business enterprises, particularly technology companies, comply with their responsibilities within the UN Guiding principles on Business and Human Rights,** particularly regarding their business model. Accountability mechanisms must be established to hold these companies accountable if they fail to comply with these santards, ensuring effective enforcement of relevant international standards. These mechanisms should be transparent, impartial, and accessible to affected communities and individuals.
- Advance mechanisms to assure social media platforms **enhance the transparency and accountability of their systems**, also regarding data collection and algorithm

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[1] Such a system can be inspired by the Fair Trade certification system.

decision making. This includes abiding to data protection principles, including legality, necessity, proportionality, data minimization and purpose limitation.

- Encourage social media platforms to **offer unrestricted and free-of-charge access to data for research purposes,** ensuring compliance with data protection standards and equal access for independent researchers. The provided data should be representative and recent, with particular efforts to safeguard sensitive information through anonymization. Mechanisms of appeal should be established in case of denied access. Platforms should implement state-of-the-art detection and content authentication standards prioritizing encryption and anonymity to uphold fundamental rights to freedom of expression, privacy, and press freedom.
- Encourage social media platforms to **include engineers and researchers in their teams** from the Majority World to assist with deepening technical knowledge of advanced technology systems and **encourage technological transfer and capacity development**.
- Establish mechanisms for trust and safety teams for all regions of business operations, including **local language content moderation and dignified working conditions for data labellers**.

To strengthen access to reliable information
- Promote and support the **fundamental contribution that independent and professional journalism plays online** by establishing protection from cyber harassment, establishing measures to ensure the news media derive sufficient and sustainable resources from their digital publications and the use thereof by social media and search platforms as well as AI services through transparent, equitable and collective bargaining rights.
- Recognize that States bear a **primary obligation to safeguard freedom of expression** and recognize the indispensable role played by human rights defenders, journalists, and whistleblowers in upholding this fundamental right.
- Recognize that in **combating disinformation or violence, it is imperative to avoid resorting to criminalization** and that any strategies to counter disinformation must adhere to international human rights laws, ensuring they are lawful, justified, and proportionate.
- Support **independent public service media** and all **media certified as compliant to self-regulatory standards of independence and journalism ethics** such as those certified by through the Journalism Trust Initiative and/or recognised by credible and independent national media councils. Promote the wide adoption of such certifications including among independent niche media.
- Call on platforms to **provide users with an easy and user-friendly opportunity to choose alternative recommender systems** that do not optimize for engagement but build on ranking in support of positive individual and societal outcomes, including **mechanisms to give due prominence to reliable news sources** such as those certified by through the Journalism Trust Initiative and/or recognised by credible and independent national media councils while being transparent about algorithms' functioning and parameters.

To recognise and build upon existing initiatives and avoid duplication
- Acknowledge the role of the **International Partnership for Information and Democracy** and other multi stakeholder platforms for discussion on public policy issues related to the Internet.

- **Refrain from establishing new global governance mechanisms that duplicate the work of existing institutions**. The GDC process should not only build off of, but should also integrate with existing mechanisms in order to adequately ensure coordination and not foster duplication of efforts.

To ensure the sustained and meaningful participation of civil society, media and academia
- **Make resources available through a transparent and accountable manner for civil society, media and academics** to conduct research and actively participate in international and national internet and digital governance mechanisms such as multi-stakeholder fora, including agenda-setting moments, technical standard-setting and policy discussions.

Suggested modifications in zero draft of the Global Digital Compact

Regarding Objective 1. Closing the digital divides and accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals

15. new:
Reform higher education and continuous training of IT developers to include mandatory embedded learning on human rights, gender responsiveness, ethics and sustainable development across coursework to foster the development and deployment of digital public goods.

15. new:
Advance concrete commitments and measurement indicators to bridge the persistent digital divide involves ensuring meaningful connectivity from a human rights perspective.

15. new:
Recognizing internet access as integral to the right to freedom of expression and facilitating the exercise of other fundamental rights is crucial.

15. new:
Connectivity policies should be developed and evaluated through participatory processes, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and diverse mechanisms for infrastructure provision, including community networks.

15. new:
Stress that the respect for indigenous groups' self-determination in infrastructure and technological deployment is essential.

15. new:
Addressing inequality, high prices, and infrastructure challenges requires a holistic and intercultural perspective. Meaningful connectivity is vital for enabling the exercise of

human rights and aligning with global agendas on digital transformation and sustainable development.

      15. new:
Urge States to prioritize policies that tackle global internet access disparities, especially in marginalized regions, to promote universal internet access as a driver of various human rights. This entails developing comprehensive public policy proposals integrating interculturality, ensuring effective participation, and fostering digital literacy.

      15. new:
Fostering the development of public policies aligned with guiding principles such as equal access, pluralism, non-discrimination, privacy, net neutrality, and multisectoral governance is indispensable.

      15. new:
      Implement a certification system grounded in human rights standards for artificial intelligence systems to monitor the development, deployment, and operation of AI technologies that serve the public good.

Regarding Objective 3. Fostering an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space

      21.(b) Establish appropriate safeguards to identify, prevent and otherwise mitigate any adverse human rights impacts arising from the development, deployment and use of digital and emerging technologies (All SDGs); This includes legal obligations for digital technology companies and social media platforms to implement transparent and auditable human rights risk assessments that ensure all their users' fundamental rights are protected. Digital technology companies and social media platforms should also be required to provide access to effective remedies and be held accountable for violations. There needs to be a moratorium on tools that cannot be used in compliance with international human rights law.

      21. - new: Develop concrete mechanisms to hold technology companies accountable for human rights violations resulting from their technologies or practices. This involves robust enforcement of applicable international standards to ensure that business enterprises adhere to their obligations outlined in the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Accountability mechanisms must be put in place to address non-compliance effectively.

      21. - new:
      Provide access to effective remedy for violations arising from the development, deployment and use of digital technologies by establishing equitable appeal mechanisms in the countries they operate, in line with tech business enterprises responsibilities established in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and advancing international cooperation to ensure effective responsibility in cases of serious human rights violations and crime.

25. We recognize and commit to uphold the role of multi-stakeholder governance models in maintaining an open, global, interoperable, and secure Internet at the governance, content and technical layers. Such governance models should be institutionalized to ensure meaningful participation in setting and monitoring policies and regulations. We acknowledge the value of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and of the international Partnership for Information and Democracy, as well as other multi-stakeholder initiatives, in that regard.

26. (b) Support existing multi stakeholder platforms for discussion on public policy issues related to the Internet, such as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the international Partnership for Information and Democracy;

26. (c) Continue efforts to increase diverse participation in the Internet Governance Forum, especially by governments and the private sector and through the equitable, sustained and substantive participation of civil society, media and academia (SDG 10).

26. - new:
Make resources available for civil society, media and academics to conduct research and actively participate in international and national internet and digital governance mechanisms, such as multi-stakeholder fora, including agenda-setting moments, technical standard-setting and policy discussions.

26. - new:
Ensure meaningful and diverse engagement and representation in UN policymaking processes, with a focus on under-represented groups and regions. This includes ensuring that stakeholders from the Global Majority and other under-represented groups in global public policymaking can fully participate in decision-making processes and providing adequate notice, funding and accessible accreditation systems. The ECOSOC Consultative Status should be strengthened to facilitate civil society participation in UN decision making spaces. Hybrid modalities should always be offered in meetings, with proper procedures to assure equal participation from both in-person and online participants, as well as measures for accessibility in different levels. Any state hosting a forum should undergo human rights due diligence, and fora should strive to meet in locations accessible to a diverse set of stakeholders, in environments characterized by the rule of law and protection for the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression.

28. - new:
Advance mechanisms to encourage digital technology companies, to co-develop industry accountability frameworks, in consultation with other stakeholders that, inter alia, define responsibilities and commit to standards, codes of conduct, as well as auditable public reports (SDGs 9 & 17).

30. Access to relevant, reliable and accurate information and knowledge is essential for an inclusive, open, free, resilient, safe and secure digital space. We will work together to promote information integrity, tolerance and respect online, as well as to

protect the integrity of democratic processes. We recognize that digital and emerging technologies can facilitate the manipulation and interference of information in ways that are harmful to societies and people and create risks for international peace and security. We will counter disinformation and mitigate the risks of information manipulation in a manner consistent with human rights and freedom of expression as well as the principles from the International Partnership for Information and Democracy.

30. (a) - new:

Promote and support the fundamental contribution that independent journalism, activists and human right defenders play online by creating and maintaining an enabling digital environment that ensures the exercise of freedom of expression. Laws based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including "false news" or "non-objective information" that lead to arbitrary interpretation and criminalization are incompatible with international standards for restrictions on freedom of expression and should be avoided.

We commit to working together to provide the appropriate conditions for journalists to safely report online about matters of public interest and be protected from cyber-harassment; for media outlets to derive sufficient and sustainable resources from their digital publications; and for independent public interest media to be given due prominence by social media platforms.

31.(b) Promote and support diverse and resilient information ecosystems, including by strengthening independent public service media and all media certified as compliant to self-regulatory standards of independence and journalism ethics such as the Journalism Trust Initiative (SDGs 9 & 16).

31. (c) Promote access to reliable, independent and pluralistic information in conflict and crisis situations, to protect and empower communities in situations of vulnerability and marginalization (SDG 10).

31 - new:

Establish accountability mechanisms to hold companies accountable if they fail to comply with their responsibilities under the Principles of Business and Human Rights, ensuring effective enforcement of relevant international standards. These mechanisms should be transparent, impartial, and accessible to affected individuals and communities.

31 - new:

Impose a legal obligation on social media platforms to provide users with an easy and user-friendly opportunity to choose alternative recommender systems that do not optimize for engagement but build on ranking in support of positive individual and societal outcomes, including mechanisms to give due prominence to independent public interest media such as those certified by self-regulatory standards as the Journalism Trust Initiative and implement safeguards for public interest media in content moderation policies and decisions.

Regarding Objective 4. Advancing equitable international data governance

34. We commit to develop international and national data governance frameworks that maximize the benefits of data use while protecting privacy, preserving freedom of expression and a right to reliable information, and securing data in ways that are lawful, transparent and accountable observing widely recognized data protection principles including legality, necessity, proportionality, data minimization and purpose limitation.

35.(b)
Encourage Member States to adopt data protection law in order to guarantee the right to informational self-determination to individuals and communities and to allow their effective control over the processing of their data (SDGs 10 & 16);

Regarding Follow up and Review

53. Government-led efforts can only succeed with the active engagement of the private sector, technical and academic communities and civil society, whose innovations and contributions to digitalization are fundamental and irreplaceable. We must strengthen and direct our collaboration, and accelerate implementation of existing cooperative efforts such as the International Partnership for Information and Democracy, to achieve the objectives set out in this Compact.

57. We reaffirm the role of multi-stakeholder frameworks of cooperation, such as the Internet Governance Forum and the International Partnership for Information and Democracy, for the promotion of an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space. We encourage governments, the private sector and all stakeholders to engage actively in their work with a view to advancing Compact commitments on Internet governance. We invite the Internet Government Forum to build on its youth networks to amplify the voices and views of young people in policy deliberations on the Internet.

60. We look forward to the WSIS+20 Review in 2025 to identify how WSIS processes can support practical implementation, including by adapting WSIS action lines to reflect Compact commitments and actions. We invite WSIS+20 Review to uphold, leverage and integrate follow up of the Compact and implementation in a manner that strengthens existing mechanisms. We also invite the WSIS+20 Review to consider how youth and gender perspectives can be incorporated in this effort.

new
Uphold existing commitments in the field of Internet governance ensuring openness, inclusivity, and transparency in all facets of the Pact's implementation, particularly in stakeholder participation in alignment with WSIS+20.

new

> We welcome the creation of the Observatory on Information and Democracy, an independent evaluation body mandated to run periodic meta-analyses of the digital space and its impact on human rights and encourage support for synergies between different international initiatives engaged in research and monitoring in this area.

Annexe

1/ The Forum on Information and Democracy

Initiated by Reporters Without Borders (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 organization supports the implementation of the Partnership principles by providing ready-for-use policy recommendations to States signatories. It was founded by 11 civil society organizations, including RSF, and has published over 600 recommendations to date[2]. Finally, the Observatory on Information and Democracy provides for an research-based assessment of the challenges affecting the global information and communication environment.
https://informationdemocracy.org/principles/

2/ Reporters Without Borders

RSF is the leading global organization promoting freedom, pluralism and independence of journalism, in particular by coming to the defense of those who embody these ideals.

Headquartered in Paris, France, RSF comprises a vast international network of 13 offices around the world (incl. Berlin, Brussels, Dakar, London, Rio, Taipei, Tunis, and Washington D.C.) plus correspondents and partners in 130 countries. It has consultative status at the UN, UNESCO, Council of Europe, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, and the Organisation internationale de la francophonie.
https://rsf.org/en

3/ Research ICT Africa

Research ICT Africa (RIA) is an African think tank that has operated for over a decade to fill a strategic gap in the development of a sustainable information society and digital economy. It has done so by building the multidisciplinary research capacity needed to inform evidence-based policy and effective regulation Africa. RIA's dynamic and evolving

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[2] The recommendations can be found in the 5 following reports: *How to End Infodemics* (2020), *A New Deal for Journalism* (2021), *Accountability Regimes for Social Networks and their Users* (2022), *Pluralism of information in Curation and Indexation of Algorithms* (2023), and *AI as a Public Good: Ensuring Democratic Control of AI in the Information Space* (2024).

research agenda examines the uneven distribution of the benefits and harms of the intensifying global processes of digitalisation and datafication. https://researchictafrica.net/

4/ Derechos Digitales

Derechos Digitales (DD) is one of the leading digital rights non-profit organizations in Latin America whose mission is to defend, promote and advance human rights in digital environments and, with that, contribute to more just, inclusive and equal societies in the region. Initially focused on Chile, where the organization was founded in 2005, DD nowadays has a regional reach and staff based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay and Uruguay, constituting a truly multicultural environment. www.derechosdigitales.org

5/ 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 April 2024, close to 1500 media in 85 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. www.journalismtrustinitiative.org/