

Global Political Action To Protect An Information Space In Peril

An interview with Beatrice White, Christophe Deloire

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Today the media finds itself embattled across the globe. Caught between multiple threats – such as political control, the growth of unregulated platforms online, capture by private or corporate interests, and rampant disinformation online – producing and sustaining the level of quality journalism crucial to underpinning a democratic society seems a greater challenge than ever.

In response, an independent Information and Democracy Commission, initiated by the organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF), drafted an International Declaration on Information and Democracy, which was presented to world leaders at the Paris Peace Forum on November 11, 2018. During the conference, leaders of 12 countries including Canada, France and Denmark, pledged their commitment to the principles outlined in the Declaration.

The Independent Commission brings together Nobel and Sakharov Prize laureates, new technology specialists, former leaders of international organisations, lawyers and journalists. In this interview, Christophe Deloire, secretary-general of RSF, who chairs the commission alongside Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, discusses the vision underpinning the Declaration and where the process will go from here.

Beatrice White: The International Declaration on Information and Democracy asserts that Global communication and information space is a common good of humankind and as such requires protection. Can you explain exactly what this means?

Christophe Deloire: The global communication and information space refers to the set of means, norms and structures of communication, that is to say the exchange of information between human beings. It's the equivalent of what the ground is to the person walking. It's the base upon which the exchange of ideas and information takes place, and this base is formed of both technical means and legal norms.

This is in fact the same space that we would previously have described as the 'public space'. However, today we can clearly see how the boundaries between the public space and private space are being eradicated. This is of course due to new forms of technology, such as online platforms but also all the applications that allow us to correspond through private channels, such as electronic messenger services, but with the capacity for mass communication. When a targeted message is sent to 5 million people, can we really claim that this is still private correspondence?

Therefore, the Commission's aim in establishing this principle is precisely to convey that this space, which is the medium for our collective discussion, the discussions between human beings, even beyond national borders, is the location where freedom of expression and of opinion is exercised. Since this freedom is a fundamental right, there need to be guarantees over this space. This is the responsibility of each and every one of us. It cannot be appropriated either by a State, or by particular platforms or private entities. There need to be guarantees over information and freedom of opinion.

Why is this space so fundamental for a well-functioning democracy, and are we really witnessing a break with the past?

In the history of democracies, there have always been rules, in terms of regulation or self-regulation, in order for this public space to remain politically neutral, for example. Actors in the media may have political leanings, which

is their right, but the rules that govern the space cannot favour one camp over another. The principle of democracy is that all ideas and information can exist but without there being any structural direction that would give preferential treatment to a particular political vision. That's the condition of political liberalism – in fact it's practically the definition of it.

Today, the laws governing this space are largely made by platforms that escape any counterbalancing power and are not at all transparent. They do not provide any minimum guarantees. The history of democracies also intersects with the history of creating procedures aiming to privilege reliable information, while at the same time respecting freedom of expression. And this construction has taken place through regulation of the audio-visual and written press, which enable freedoms to be protected. Today, that is being swept away.

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In the past, these democratic guarantees were founded on five types of distinctions: first, the distinction between the private space and the public space, which as we saw is collapsing. Second, between national public spaces and their internal legal equilibria, since laws are becoming largely inapplicable. Third, the distinction between different types of media or sources of information (TV, radio, written press). Fourth, between types of content – journalism, propaganda, sponsored content, advertising – unfortunately today all of these are in direct competition. And lastly the final distinction which we see disappearing is that between human beings and machines.

You have said that “open democracies are bearing the brunt of this turmoil while despotic regimes are exploiting it.” Can you elaborate on this point?

These transformations are not neutral from a political point of view. They favour despotic regimes over democratic models. Despotic regimes can use technology to secure their systems, through closure, control and surveillance. And they can export their controlled content while refusing to import content produced under freer conditions. This creates unfair competition on behalf of despotic regimes. Another very nefarious consequence of these transformations is that they place content that is dishonest and emotive at an advantage over content established through more rational methods, which can be fatal for democracies. This is why we felt an initiative was needed that aims, 70 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to establish these guarantees in a context of the globalisation and digitalisation of the public space.

At the Paris Peace Forum, 12 countries committed to the principles set out in the Declaration – described by RSF as “a historic step” to launch “a political process aimed at providing democratic guarantees for news and information and freedom of opinion.” How will these principles now be converted into concrete actions?

We had called for a political process to be launched, and this is what eventually happened on November 11 when 12 heads of States and governments pledged to support the Declaration we had drafted. We're very satisfied because this commitment has political weight, which was a necessary starting point. The aim is for more States to commit, but that's not the primary objective. The main goal now is to embark on the practical work, in terms of applying the concrete guarantees.

We are currently working on the road map that will guide the process. So it is crucial for States to now make a start on the work entailed by their commitment, and we'll feed into by setting out proposals. Within a year, we want to reach a 'Pact on Information and Democracy' which should be multi-stakeholder, between States, platforms as well as other actors, notably civil society, in order to agree on the guarantees necessary and work towards implementing them together. The enacted Declaration isn't an end in itself. Although it is a significant achievement, it's just a starting point and we can't content ourselves with that alone. Some will say these are just words, that it's simply yet another declaration, but that would be to overlook the fact that these States have engaged to move forward on

this basis and in line with the vision set out by our Commission.

But how can you hope to transform this global space without involving actors such as the USA, Russia or China?

The crucial thing for us was to set out a strong position and to rally the support of States who can defend it. This is what we achieved. We targeted the leaders of democratic States and governments, countries that are well-ranked in terms of press freedom, and whose commitment to democracy is clear. It would not have made any sense to try to recruit China, Russia, or the United States of Trump precisely in order defend ideals and a vision of reliable and free information. And since we didn't ask, of course they didn't sign up to the process. If they had it would either have been the sign of a turnaround on their part, or simply a display of hypocrisy. The idea is that the signatory States should possess a sufficient weight to work towards democratic guarantees over this shared space that can be implemented and will have to be respected by platforms.

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We must as of now invent original systems for implementation. What we proposed as the end of the Declaration was to establish a kind of IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] for information, a bit like the one for the climate negotiations. To our minds, this is an example of an effective system to allow the principles to be put into practice while taking into account the reality of power today. Because in fact, when it comes to information and journalism, just as with the climate, there are human factors, effects of the system, and we can change things as long as we can build the will to do so.

An IPCC for information is an interesting idea – but in practical terms how could such a panel or group of experts tackle the challenge of regulating and increasing responsibility in an information space that is so complex and now exists on a global scale? We've often observed how the IPCC has been held back by its intergovernmental nature when it comes to the climate.

The IPCC indeed has an intergovernmental status, but it is also an independent group of experts. If we want to see democratic guarantees over the information and communication space, we need to reach an international or supranational solution, that excludes actors seeking to control this space or saturate it with propaganda. This is why a group of democratic States, with the aim of growing ever larger, can launch together an initiative aiming to put into practise the principles set out by the Declaration. To this end, there needs to be a form of access and transparency for inspection on behalf of these platforms. It's also important to have the means to verify the conformity between the principles and the organisation of this space by all those who play a role in structuring it. Rather than content, what platforms provide us with, first and foremost, is a certain organisation of the information and communication space, with a structure, norms, means, and an architecture of choices. So their rights and responsibilities must necessarily be completely different from those of editors, bloggers or internet users.

In parallel to this process, there is also the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI), a media self-regulatory initiative, aiming to combat disinformation online, that has been launched by RSF along with partners such as Agence France-Presse (AFP), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Global Editors Network (GEN). What is the role of self-regulation of the media industry and to what extent can it contribute to resolving the problem of the lack of public confidence in media today?

The self-regulation mechanism that we would like to put in place does not seek to defend particular interests, but rather seeks to create concrete mechanisms to favour information that comes with certain guarantees of reliability over that which does not. These guarantees relate to editorial independence, following ethical journalistic practices and methods, and respect for ethical standards and transparency.

How do we go about this? First, by creating a frame of reference for the basic guarantees which should lead to procuring an advantage, through a process of normalisation and standardisation. This allows for independent forms of certification or ‘white-listing’, without having to resort to any kind of censorship. We’re currently in discussion with platforms over the types of advantages that could work, such as through indexation – that is to say in terms of visibility, as well as with advertisers, and regulatory bodies. There is a whole range of actors who can contribute to re-establishing competitive advantages for reliable and quality information.

We are in the process of creating a third-party mechanism of trust whereby decisions are not left to the discretion of either States, platforms, or other third-party bodies who could seek to act unilaterally. It should be a virtuous system. To sum it up, the pledge process on information and democracy is, in economic terms, a kind of ‘macro’ initiative, while the Journalism Trust Initiative is more ‘micro’. They are complimentary approaches and allow first for the setting out of a framework and then to show how some of these guarantees can be concretely protected within the information space.

So in other words these two approaches are intended to work in parallel and reinforce one another – first to establish a framework and secondly to provide incentives to encourage media actors to put in place practices that enhance reliability – and to reward those that do. Would you say that today trust has acquired a kind of market or commercial value in and of itself, in the sense that producing more reliable information leads to advantages such as access to public funds, greater visibility and reach, or even higher sales?

The question of trust is fundamental but let’s be clear: in democracies it should not be the law of the jungle that prevails in the information space. Democracy is about rights and safeguards. We need to be able to adapt these to the global level today, as well as to find the concrete means of applying them.

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