Discussion Group on Values and Principles

Summary note

Co-chairs

- Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard, Panel Member
- Fadi Chehadé, Panel Member

Moderator

- Amandeep Singh Gill, Executive Director & Co-Lead of the Secretariat

Guiding Questions

The meeting sought to address the following questions:

1) Which values should we prioritize and elevate to the international level, enabling all stakeholders to better cooperate in order to solve the challenges and share in the benefits of the digital age?
2) How can we reflect these values in policy, regulation, business practices, and global cooperation mechanisms?

Non-Paper on Values & Principles

Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard shared ahead of the meeting a non-paper proposing the following values: human-centeredness; the predominance of international law; the preponderance of human rights both offline and online; respect for diverse cultures, institutions and national conditions worldwide; inclusiveness; sustainability; and building trust and confidence, with transparency, openness and access to information as key elements.

The paper proposes the following potential shared principles for structuring and optimizing global digital cooperation:

- Consensus-oriented decision-making for shared solutions, where all stakeholders (public, private, civic) are involved and consulted, and their views taken into account seriously and diligently.
- Federated and subsidiarity-based approach, acknowledging that generally there is no “one size fits all” solution, and solutions need to be crafted and implemented closer to where the problems are experienced.
• Fostering a sense of ownership that strengthens self-responsibility, the resilience and efficiency of adopted solutions, and facilitates their effective implementation.
• Innovation at the grass-roots level and giving space to flexible bottom-up cooperation networks closer to the grass-roots.

Meeting Summary

Build upon previous work

There was consensus that the Panel should continue to draw and build on the vast body of work on values and principles that has already been developed, including by conducting a thorough analysis of such work. Participants referenced the continued relevance of the 2003 WSIS Principles as a guiding framework and the IGF as a space for discussion and relationship building.

Inclusivity and accessibility

Many participants stressed inclusivity as one of the most important values for digital cooperation, but several asked how to ensure meaningful inclusivity. Suggestions included ensuring that mechanisms are created and embraced from the bottom up, not just by the digital elite; and paying particular attention to the voices of women, people in developing and the least developed countries, the youth, representatives from the global south, and civil society. One participant approached these themes through the lens of “digital poverty.” With only 50 percent of the world online, how can we ensure the inclusion of those who do not have access to the Internet?

Human rights

Participants agreed that human rights should be placed at the center of any discussion on technology and especially of the Panel’s work on values and principles. One participant suggested that fundamental rights also be framed in terms of sectoral considerations (e.g. consumer rights, privacy rights, social and economic rights, etc.)

Human agency and choice

In any discussion of human rights, we must acknowledge systems of power. In this vein, many participants recommended that the Panel examine issues of human agency and choice. One participant provided a useful illustration: an organization may promise money to someone in exchange for their biometric data, but if that person is struggling or hungry and needs the money for survival, they do not have true agency or choice. Digital technologies also open the door to manipulation of behaviour, stripping people of their agency. Participants raised education as one possible solution but urged the Panel to consider others.
Measurability

Can we find new ways of measuring and keeping track of our values? One participant suggested that there is, in fact, a strong business case for creating this kind of KPI or measurement system, and noted that businesses have been asking for an appropriate framework to help guide their work. Providing such metrics would help ensure that technologies like AI are developed and deployed in ethical ways.

Privacy

As one participant suggested, privacy concerns seem to arise everywhere: around the world, across all disciplines, and at all levels of society. We may sometimes speak about privacy in different ways or have different approaches to protecting it, but individuals everywhere want to have control over their own information, understand what is happening with it, who is sharing it, how it is being stored, etc.

Diversity and respect for cultural differences

Participants acknowledged the inherent challenge of reconciling a global, multi-stakeholder approach to values with a respect for cultural difference. In this regard, they called on the Panel to strive for a common set of principles while demonstrating an appreciation for diverse understandings, applications, and approaches by different cultures or local/national contexts.

Equality, non-discrimination, and fairness

Digital systems have the potential to exacerbate inequalities, which is why many participants stressed the need to prioritize values designed to mitigate all forms of inequality. One approach is to try to determine who will suffer and how we can mitigate the harm.

Some participants problematized the concept of fairness, pointing out subtle differences in how it can be interpreted, measured, and implemented. One example provided was fairness in search results. If we take fairness to mean that all results should be equally visible, it would be physically impossible to ensure that all 10 million results show up on the first page. How can we ensure that our understandings of fairness are nuanced enough to be able to scale?

Common language and meaning

Many participants pointed out the challenge of aligning our vocabularies and understandings. For example, different people may interpret “fairness” differently. For some, it may refer to equality of opportunity; to others, it can be equality of access to resources. It’s important to chart the nuances of our vocabularies in order to effectively normalize our values. Taxonomies of technologies should be broadly understood in the same way across the globe and we should work to minimize the scope of contradictory interpretations.

Equally important, these common definitions should not draw solely on Western institutions and interpretations.
Responsibility

Digital systems, especially those that are becoming increasingly autonomous, tend to undermine the principle of an agent that can be held liable for system failure. For this reason, some participants pointed to the need for a meaningful understanding of responsibility in the digital age. One participant suggested that industry could be held accountable by submitting to ethical review boards.

Digital Global Commons

Many participants discussed the need for principles and mechanisms that could help spread the benefits of digital technologies more widely while addressing risks of social harm. In this regard, one participant proposed the concept of “Global Digital Commons” to promote digital inclusion and help achieve the SDGs.

This Global Digital Commons could consist of a data commons, a CPU Commons, a storage/cloud Commons, connectivity programs, specific tools (including algorithms, OS SW, etc.), digital literacy programs, and a mechanism to communicate "use cases" and challenges requiring solutions. The Global Digital Commons would need to be supported by a legal framework establishing operational terms of reference, requirements for IP, and conditions for inclusive input and output; as well as funding mechanisms for governance, a small secretariat, maintenance, and availability of tools and platforms. It would also require an umbrella of organizations to serve as guardians to ensure that it remains a long-term global public good.

Architecture

Some participants suggested the need to aggregate prerequisites in technology design and architecture, such as “security by design,” “privacy by design,” “accountability by design,” and “digital cooperation by design.”

Other values and principles

Other values and principles mentioned included trust, people-centrism, transparency, accountability, open standards (that enable interoperability), congruency (or “practice what you preach”), universality, and technology neutrality.

Reviewing and protecting our values

As one participant pointed out, changes in society will have a major impact on our values and principles. This begs the question: How stable are they? Will the values and principles we set today be those that people will want tomorrow?

One participant noted a societal shift from “command and control” to “connect and collaborate”, enabled by ICT technologies. This should help shift away from a focus on “unique selling points” and differentiation to how best to complement each-other and collaborate.
Current social and political developments like populism are leading to the abuse and misuse of these values, however. For example, freedom of expression has been used to justify hate speech and fake news. We need to examine our values regularly, paying attention to how they might be manipulated or co-opted. We also need to have better instruments to ensure accountability as traditional instruments like legislation are lagging behind.
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Background Note

The rapid pace of technological change, particularly around developments in social media, the Internet of Things and Artificial Intelligence (AI), has raised some difficult ethical questions and quandaries: How do we share the wealth and benefits gained through automation and digital transformation? To what extent should we allow machines to influence human behavior? And how should we manage the risks and unintended consequences?

To tackle these knotty political and ethical questions, we may first need to reconcile technology with our human values: the practices and standards of behavior that we judge to be important in life. What are the values we want to define the digital age, and which principles should lie at the heart of how we design, distribute, and use digital technologies?

Companies, governments and coalitions have confronted these questions by codifying some of the values and principles governing their work. Google, for example, has outlined 7 principles guiding its technology development, while the Web Foundation recently released a set of principles specifically for the Web. The United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons recently agreed on a set of guiding principles for technologies related to lethal autonomous weapons systems. Similarly, the EU Commission is working on ethical guidelines for AI to be released later this year.

The High-level Panel aims to draw on the existing body of work on values and principles—whether enshrined in governmental documents and mission statements, or performed in our lived experiences and norms—to collate and co-create a short list of values for the digital age. A common grounding in human values can help us identify shared goals; foster greater cooperation across fields and disciplines; and empower us to effectively address potential risks and unintended consequences.

Questions for discussion:

- What are some of the human values we want to prioritize in the digital age? Are they universally applicable, or could/should there be differences across regions?
- Which standards of behavior should we elevate to the international level, enabling all stakeholders to come together to solve challenges and share in the benefits of the digital age?
- What principles can we follow in order to help us cooperate around digital policy challenges and opportunities?
- How can we reflect and enshrine these values and principles in policy, regulation, and business practices?