

Remarks at the Freedom Online Coalition consultation on the Ottawa agenda “Digital Inclusion: Human Rights in the Digital Age”

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It’s an honor to address this convening, and for CDT to have assisted in organizing this event today. This group comes together at an incredibly important time for digital rights and democracy around the world.

It is particularly meaningful to collaborate on this first consultation for the Ottawa Agenda. CDT was present at the launch of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) in 2011 and was proud to contribute to the development of the Tallinn Agenda in 2014. We have served on the FOC’s Advisory Network since its launch and appreciate the opportunity for continued multi-stakeholder engagement that meetings like this represent.

We view the Ottawa Agenda as a valuable opportunity to reaffirm the FOC’s commitment to a free, open, interoperable, secure and reliable internet, and to do so with renewed focus in light of ongoing threats to that vision. At a time of growing digital authoritarianism, increasing fragmentation of the internet, threats to online civic space, and the persistent inequalities of the digital divide, the FOC can play an essential role in articulating, and defending, a democratic and inclusive vision of the global internet.

The recent events of the Russian war in Ukraine demonstrate the importance of these issues. On the one hand we have seen, yet again, the connective power of the internet – how social media has helped people around the world understand and bear witness to the suffering in Ukraine. But we have also seen the corrosive effects of disinformation, and the ways in which online civic participation can be curtailed. As Russia pulls its people ever deeper behind a digital Iron Curtain, it is one of a growing number of regimes using internet shutdowns, blocking and filtering to limit their citizens’ access to independent information. An increasing number of government actors are stifling their opponents’ speech as “disinformation” or pressuring social media companies to moderate content for political ends - often leveraging in-country personnel requirements to pressure companies to follow their requests. These practices have increased dramatically since the time of the Tallin Agenda. In 2021, [Access Now’s Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project \(STOP\)](#), in collaboration with the #KeepItOn coalition, recorded at least 182 internet shutdowns in 34 countries worldwide, including the longest internet shutdowns on record. Freedom House observed in 2021 that global internet freedom has declined for the 11th consecutive year.

In the face of growing authoritarianism, we are reminded of the importance of a free, open, and connected global internet, and of supporting technologies that preserve avenues for free expression. This includes, critically, end-to-end encrypted messaging – an essential tool to protect the privacy and security of dissidents trying to organize, journalists seeking to communicate, and ordinary citizens going about their lives.

We are also reminded of the grave risks of surveillance technologies, and of commercial data practices which can be misused by governments or cause other social harms. These, too, have grown in sophistication and scale since the time of the Tallin Agenda. The revelations about the NSO Group's spyware-for-hire were one recent wake-up call about the threat such surveillance technologies can represent.

Against this backdrop, the Freedom Online Coalition has a vital role to play in articulating an affirmative vision for democratic, rights-respecting internet governance. The Coalition also has before it an important opportunity to broaden its tent: to increase the number of countries participating in the FOC and ascribing to its values. During last week's successful launch of the Declaration for the Future of the Internet, it was heartening to see many FOC governments endorse the declaration. There are also many governments who endorsed the Declaration who are not yet FOC members. We hope the FOC will work with these countries on pathways for them to join the Coalition, with a particular focus on expanding the FOC's membership in the Asia Pacific, Middle East, African, and Latin American regions.

The Coalition also has an important role to play as its existing members grapple with their own hard questions – for example, about ways to respond to online mis- and disinformation, or other unlawful or undesirable online activity, while respecting human rights and the rule of law. In the years since the Tallin Agenda we have seen foreign actors manipulate social media to interfere in elections; the Cambridge Analytica scandal; and more instances of online extremism and hate causing tragic real-world consequences. Governments around the world are asking what to do about this, and the experts in this room know how hard it is to find thoughtful answers – answers that do not improperly stifle public dialogue, punish lawful speech, or subject marginalized populations to unwarranted surveillance. The FOC has an opportunity to share information and lead robust dialogue about effective strategies that protect users' rights, increase company and government transparency, and are grounded in a commitment to human rights and the rule of law. This includes the important points on digital literacy and inclusion that Canada is seeking to underscore in its leadership year, among other ideas that I know CDT and others hope to raise today.

More broadly, the Ottawa Agenda creates a renewed opportunity for members to affirm their compliance with the principles articulated by the FOC. From its inception, the power of the FOC has resided not just in the goals the Coalition articulates, but in how member governments *demonstrate* what it means to implement internet policy with human rights first in mind. We hope the work that follows includes robust discussions about how countries can report on their progress in implementing the Agenda.

Before I close, I'd like to make a final point on process. To its credit, the FOC has long recognized that difficult questions of policy and internet governance require the expertise of civil society, academia, the technical community, and industry, working together with governments to set the agenda and identify rights-respecting answers to complex challenges. This multi-stakeholder approach is tremendously important, and should continue to be prioritized within the FOC, and lifted up as a model for other processes impacting internet governance. Again, we're grateful to see that spirit driving today's roundtable, and look forward to the discussion today.