

Main Topic 4

Platforms' Accountability to Strengthen the Digital Public Sphere

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1. We consider platforms as a social digital infrastructure of democracy. Yet platforms were not designed to fulfil a civic function. Instead, they optimize engagement, e.g., through the deployment of dark patterns like infinite scrolling. They are not neutral communication and information channels: they distort the public debate by enabling the spread of disinformation. In this context, civil society acting within platform ecosystems, such as fact-checking collectives and other actors, should be supported as key partners in the digital public sphere.
2. We view the loss of cognitive sovereignty is an emerging risk linked to the embedding of AI into platforms. Algorithmic management, from recommendation systems to automated moderation, need to take into account democratic principles from the design stage and not as an afterthought. Provenance and verification mechanisms are crucial as AI-driven synthetic content and identities become more prominent in the digital public sphere, faster than regulations can be deployed. In this context, the deployment of AI tools themselves can go through preliminary steps of testing and sandboxing before reaching the market.
3. Rules do not necessarily hamper innovation. In fact, existing regulation acts as a powerful deterrent for platforms' worst outcomes in democracies. Participants called for stronger DSA compliance, and here civil society can play a key role as partners for public authorities to make platform operators accountable with regards to the law. At the same time, CoE frameworks provide foundations to expand users' agency, and international human rights provide an universal basis for users seeking to make platforms take action where no regulation exists.
4. The discussion invites us to move from consumer perspectives towards an understanding of digital citizenship as embedded in platforms. Platform design is a fluid outcome of choices. New business and engagement models should be incentivised, such as community-driven platforms that already exist and perform a civic function. At the same time, alternative forms of democratic engagement should be supported, outside of platforms, including deliberative and multistakeholder formats.

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