

The cost of digital peace

Reflections for 2019

By Daniel Stauffacher, President, ICT4Peace Foundation

2018 served to acutely remind us of the essential fragility of that initial idea the pioneers of the Internet had around bringing humanity together by connecting them. From the start of the year to its end, global and local news updates increasingly focussed on and framed struggles with freedom, rights and emancipation on the one hand, in contest with the growing risk and rise of illiberal, authoritarian, populist fiat on the other. Both narratives are aided and abetted by the same apps, technologies and platforms. Technologies, originally intended to further or deepen the cause of freedom and human potential, were instead used to produce, project and promote hate. The distinction between the democracy and demagoguery thinned, in so far as features of both morphed and merged in the Global West, mirroring and accelerating trends countenanced in the Global South, for much longer. This reductionism to and reflection of the worst we can be, instead of our better angels was facilitated by technologies that are pervasive and inextricably entwined into our social, political and cultural fabric. As calls throughout the year to delete the apps of major social media companies grew and resonated, the Foundation as it has in the past, took a more considered, critical approach to these changing, contesting and complementary frames, guided by our mission in supporting the best use of technology while guarding against its abuse.

Throughout the year, the primary foci of the Foundation were anchored to two pillars, loosely defined and with significant overlap. We supported high-level negotiations, conversations and collaborations around cyber security, working with governments around the world, the UN, multilateral agencies as well as the private sector including leading technology companies. On the other hand, we also worked on issues that define existential realities closer to the ground, especially in regions of protracted violence, instability and institutional retreat. Artificial Intelligence (AI), misinformation, information operations, algorithmic agents shaping public discourse, the tension between encryption and privacy set against the need for states to recognise and respond to terrorism characterized the landscape we traversed over the year, working with local, regional and international civil society. We remain uniquely positioned as a bridge between the local and regional, and the international and global. As an interlocutor in rich, complex debates, the Foundation's ability to bring to the table those with experience at both inter-governmental and diplomatic negotiations as well as nearly two decades of working with and championing technology at the grassroots level helped move the needle towards a more nuanced understanding of key problems. Our work and output were often a counterpoint to more simplistic frames employed by others, including the mainstream media. Over the

course of the year, far more than we have had in the recent past, the Foundation also came to realise how important evidence-based and data-driven policy making is in response to events that can result in emotional, knee jerk reactions that often, unintentionally, contribute towards populist abuse.

From the start of the year to the end, news around the abuse of privacy dominated the headlines. This ranged from what leading social media companies did or clearly didn't do, to active measures by states and non-state actors to infiltrate and disrupt network and communications infrastructure of entire countries or regions. The resulting global context is one where breaches, abuse and disruption are the order of the day - the new norm. Attendant challenges in this regard for governments, institutions, the international system, domestic and foreign relations as well as ordinary citizens are multi-faceted and growing in complexity. This is further exacerbated amongst those who are internally displaced and refugees. Global media has focused a great deal on these challenges. From the role, reach and relevance of social media in genocide to the coverage of testimony at the US Congress, we have been informed of countermeasures taken by key actors to counter or address growing abuse, unintended uses and unplanned consequences of technology. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Expression explicitly drew the connection between ethics - a white-hot topic over the course of the year - and human rights. Forgotten by many is the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which turned 70 in 2018, undergirds interactions between *demos* - or more accurately, users and consumers - and contemporary *archon* - or those who command and control the technologies billions use today.

The emphasis on human rights isn't new to the Foundation, but evident over 2018 was the fact that it is still, sadly, rare in and marginal to innovation, entrepreneurship discourses and corporate social and ethical responsibilities. As we noted in a note penned on the occasion of Human Rights Day, "Technology for us is an enabler, and not an end in itself. Equitable access, conversational spaces that are non-violent, the gendered adaptation of technology, the fullest inclusion of voices from the Global South, the emphasis on open sharing of research, advocating for cybersecurity not just at the level of nation-states, but also at the level of activists and journalists, working in and going to regions of violent conflict to help teach those on the ground to keep safe and bear witness to inconvenient truths – these and so much more the Foundation does is ultimately linked to deepening and strengthening the UDHR's adoption".

That the virtual, or what starts of as digital, has very quickly a direct, lasting bearing on the kinetic, physical, lived experience of so many is now a given. This is true of efforts to promote peace as much as it is about processes intended to further violence. Technology is therefore a tool, but not entirely neutral. Algorithmic bias, corporate policies adopted by Silicon Valley, a clear need for regulation and greater oversight, the adoption of AI for automated oversight of

platform content at scale and close to real-time, developments in machine learning in this regard, staffing policies embracing persons of all colours, genders and identities and decisions to enter markets governed by a lack of democratic safeguards and human rights norms invariably and distinctly shape the technologies we use, along with the content we are presented with or consume. Put another way, over 2018, Silicon Valley companies very clearly became active participants in conversations on truth and facts, instead of passive actors, a role they had assumed in the past. The pros and cons of this will continue to be debated, alongside developments and investments by these companies to more tightly regulate the tone and timbre of content on their respective platforms, which for billions, constitute the web writ large.

In this new context, old hierarchies, distinctions and definitions - North, South, developed, third world, democratic, illiberal, West, East - simply and quickly break down, or are risible in their inability to capture complex political, social, cultural, media and information ecologies. The Foundation sits at the intersection of these changes - studying, observing, commenting, convening, critiquing and strategically directing. We see a connection between cyber security and human security. We see how what happens at the intergovernmental level directly impacts the lives of those on the ground, often beyond national borders. We observe the birth of new acronyms, platforms, agreements and negotiations at multiple levels to create norms and standards for behaviour, engagement, responses, oversight, regulation, curation, redress and proactive action as necessary, yet at the same time since 2004, propose the enduring validity and importance of rights as integral to these discussions. There can be no digital peace, or peace in whatever domain, without the protection of human rights, ultimately anchored to the sanctity of life.

At the same time, the Foundation - through its work across many continents - saw the establishment and growth of technologies in the service of democratic advancement. This community led innovation, often in austere, violent contexts, born out of necessity and often without any external support, adopts or adapts technologies lambasted in the West, in ways companies that created and own them can scarcely recognise or believe. This then is the complexity of our world today, where the worst, most violent, invasive, destructive and disturbing gets more coverage and attention than the same tools, apps, platforms and technologies used in the service of rights, democracy and peace. The Foundation fights hard to combat this imbalance as best we can, through output and work that reflects and calls for greater reflection, and the study of more evidence, than just what is the most convenient, accessible or shared.

Our work beyond 2018 will be anchored to these developments and more. As a trusted partner of governments, the UN as well as actors on the ground in countries ranging as far afield as the Maldives to Afghanistan, we will continue our applied research on, and expert input to

processes that will go on to define the texture of technologies we all use. Prima facie, the world is growing more illiberal, dangerous and violent. While all this is true, the Foundation also believes that smaller, more local, meaningful investments that bear fruit in the long-term are also important to focus on. These range from, for example, artificial intelligence to more old-fashioned investment in more diverse staffing at institutions and corporations. We believe in the indivisible of human and national security, and their equal importance. One cannot exist without the other, and one cannot be given primacy over another. What the headlines and high-level negotiations mean for individuals, their families, their identity groups, communities, society and polity must be a central focus of our study, seeing as it how these domains are inextricably entwined in physical and digital networks.

The Foundation, over 2019 and beyond, will continue its work in a domain that today sees many more actors than in the past working on shared challenges. We welcome new voices and encourage greater collaboration, guarding against what for the best of intent may without coordination and concert, contribute to greater confusion. Our updates through 2018 covered almost every key aspect of governance, rights, ethics and other frameworks of technology in the service of peacebuilding, peacekeeping and conflict transformation. This is work and output we will continue in 2019, for which we ask for your support. Our work is entirely supported by the funding and donations by governments, institutions and individuals who believe in our mission and mandate. May I take this opportunity to wish our followers and supporters a very Happy New Year. Our work and journey onward, continues.

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