

Diversity of Content Online

Background Information for IGF Session Proposal

Citizens' access and exposure to a diversity of content play a central role in the making of a resilient democracy. A healthy democracy requires its citizens to have access and be exposed to information and content from a wide range of views and perspectives, particularly from local and regional news. This in turn:

- promotes a healthy public discourse;
- fosters greater social inclusion;
- encourages understanding and tolerance between different cultures and communities; and
- builds citizens' resilience to disinformation.

Thanks to modern digital technologies, we have access to more content and information than ever before. Like other countries, Canada recognizes that while online platforms offer significant benefits to our society and economy, they also bring challenges, such as their impact on the presence and discoverability of diverse content, including Canadian content.

Issues, such as the phenomena of filter bubbles and disinformation, as well as the business models used by online intermediaries affecting the remuneration of content creators, including journalists, are now mainstream. In the digital age, there are growing concerns that citizens' media diets are less diverse due to content being highly personalized and reflecting fewer, and more polarized, points of view.

Multi-Stakeholder Working Group on Diversity of Content Online

Because the Internet crosses all borders, it is necessary to work with a range of stakeholders to develop solutions. That is why the Department of Canadian Heritage has established a multi-stakeholder working group with like-minded countries, civil society, and the private sector. This initiative builds on the work that was started in 2018 on [Canadian Heritage's International Engagement Strategy on Diversity of Content](#).

The working group's mandate is to develop guiding principles on diversity of content online to strengthen citizen resilience to online disinformation. Canada, and other key stakeholders, such as other governments, civil society organizations, and private sector actors, would then adopt these guiding principles as a framework for efficient cooperation in this space.

Monthly working group meetings have taken place virtually in 2020, and will continue in 2021, to develop the guiding principles. Upon their completion, the guiding principles would frame and orient concrete actions for other parties, including governments, civil society organizations, and private sector actors. Potential signatories would be invited to sign the declaration and adhere to it by 2023.

The guiding principles are being developed around four themes:

- Creation, access and discoverability of diverse content online

- Fair remuneration and economic viability of content creators
- Promotion of reliable information and building resilience against disinformation
- Transparency of the impacts of algorithmic treatments of online content

Over the past year, discussion papers from leading academics were commissioned to feed into the development of the guiding principles. The papers, covering a range of topics and issues around diversity of content online, can be viewed from the list below:

- [*Diversity of Content in the Digital Age – Towards Guiding Principles*, by Antonios Vlassis](#)
- [*Analysis of Potential Measures to Support Access and Discoverability of Local and National Content*, by Destiny Tchéhouali](#)
- [*Diversity by Design*, by Dr. Natali Helberger, Dr. Judith Moeller, and Sanne Vrijenhoek](#)
- [*Digital Content Governance and Data Trusts*, by Digital Public](#)

International Engagement Strategy on Diversity of Content Online

The Department of Canadian Heritage's International Engagement Strategy on Diversity of Content Online commenced through a series of meetings and open, transparent discussions, based on the following key principles:

- That civil society, the private sector, and governments share responsibilities for encouraging a diversity of content online; and
- That they can each adopt practices beneficial to diversity of content in the digital age.

These principles reflect existing international norms on cultural diversity, in particular:

- The [Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#) (UNESCO, 2005); and
- Its [Operational Guidelines on the Implementation of the Convention in the Digital Environment](#) (UNESCO, 2017).

International Meetings and Declarations

International meeting at Stanford University, California

A first concrete step occurred in March 2018 when an international meeting of experts was held at Stanford University, California, U.S.A. The meeting, titled [*Governance Innovation for a Connected World: Protecting Free Expression, Diversity and Civic Engagement in the Global Digital Ecosystem*](#), was co-organized by Canadian Heritage, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and Stanford University.

Held under the [Chatham House Rule](#), the meeting encouraged open exchanges between representatives from governments, private sector, and civil society on a range of topics, including disinformation and diversity of content. Participants also discussed the strengths and weaknesses of different models of governance.

The [Stanford Meeting Conference Report](#) (PDF format) summarizes participants' contributions to the discussion. It concludes that a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to deal with the complex and interrelated challenges around Internet governance in order to protect the values of free speech, diversity, and civic engagement.

Canada-France joint declaration

In April 2018, the [Joint Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the Digital Space](#), signed by Canada and France, publicly signaled Canada's intention to launch an open and multilateral dialogue on diversity of content in the digital world.

The Declaration represents a good starting point to reach a global agreement. It states that governments, the private sector, and civil society must:

- support the creation, discoverability and accessibility of diverse local, regional and national content;
- contribute towards making sure content creators are paid and benefit from financial viability;
- promote the quality and transparency of news and information; and
- ensure that creators and consumers have access to information relative to the impact of algorithms on the availability and discoverability of digital content.

International meeting in Ottawa

Another important step took place with the International Meeting on Diversity of Content in the Digital Age. Canadian Heritage co-organized this meeting with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, in Ottawa, on February 7 and 8, 2019.

The meeting's objectives were to:

- deepen the common understanding of issues;
- identify lessons learned and best practices; and
- identify measures that could be implemented by governments, digital platforms and civil society organizations.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. To support discussions, academic experts also prepared [five discussion papers](#) on issues related to diversity of content. You can also consult the meeting's [program](#).

You can view the [list of participants](#) and read the [report of the meeting](#).