I4T Knowledge
PRESS RELEASE

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Building digital platform regulatory systems through inclusion, cooperation, and trust

Introduction: Governance in a Fragile World Order

A shifting world order is putting international law and multilateral institutions under unprecedented strain, disrupting global and multilateral processes, intensifying polarisation and threatening peace. Digital platforms, including social media platforms, continue to leverage geopolitical fragmentation, and evade accountability by treating regulatory frameworks as instruments negotiable through influence, rather than as mandatory frameworks.

The **International Conference on the Governance of Digital Platforms at the University of Pretoria** marks a unique opportunity to navigate current and future political shifts. In an action-driven, constructive, and forward-looking way, we hereby propose concrete actions to support healthy information systems and interventions in digital platform governance and regulation that are critical for the realization of democracy, protection of human rights, and social cohesion, tolerance, and peace.

The I4T Global Knowledge Network has been a trusted interface between regulators and researchers from countries around the world that are often excluded from setting the agenda of digital platforms regulation, yet remain dependent on their infrastructures. We have provided an instrumental space for knowledge and research on platform regulation tackling majority of the Global South countries.

The Network has steadily worked to promote UNESCO's I4T Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms as a common ground for state and non-state actors to reassert the importance of critical action and strategic agency. It also seeks to ensure that these actions are driven by evidence-based measures that adequately protect and address human rights and societal needs, rather than being dictated only by profit.

For independent and forward-looking regulators across the globe, the political environment may seem like a troubling momentum to pursue and engage in the process of digital platform regulation. It may feel isolated and "out of reach." However, as the UNESCO Guidelines for

the Governance of Digital Platforms,— a bedrock of the Internet for Trust Conference — remind us, regulating social media companies requires a whole-of-society approach. Today, the Guidelines have been supplemented by a Companion document applying the I4T principles to AI governance. Through the I4T Knowledge Network, we are gathering evidence and experiences that allow us to observe the impetus of this approach in many parts of the world.

A whole-of-society approach in practice

Research by the I4T Knowledge Network, a membership-based informal collaborative mechanism of experts, think tanks, and academics, indicates that the regulation of digital platforms is a collaborative effort of state authorities (regulators, human rights protection institutions, data protection bodies, electoral bodies, the executive branch, etc.) and non-state actors (from critical thinkers to civil society, the private sector, and academia to technical standardisation bodies). Regulators are not, and should not, undertake this work alone.

Digital platform regulation must be undertaken as a multistakeholder collaboration that is characterized by clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders defined in an issue-specific manner to ensure outcome legitimacy, and rooted in principles of democracy and public interest. Initiatives such as the Global Initiative for Information Integrity on Climate Change provide us with clear objectives, including improving access to reliable, evidence-based information; supporting research, investigative journalism, and strategic communications; and protecting information providers and diverse voices. This model can be essential to safeguard information integrity, maintain public trust, and ensure that individuals, as well as communities, can access accurate and actionable information when it matters most.

Collaboration must go beyond mere dialogue and address the tensions between centralized digital platform powerholders and the public´s rights to reliable information. Success depends on moving past trying to adapt the regulatory approach of traditional media to the digital realm. We must move from approaches that see platform regulation only as a content moderation issue, to implement governance measures that guarantee adequate human rights protection in digital spaces and improve our current information ecosystems. These governance frameworks must not merely 'protect' digital users, but foster an environment where diverse voices can fully participate iin the public discourse, without fear of algorithmic erasure or silencing.

There is also a need to generate strategies to mitigate harms and prevent the discriminatory outcomes of automation. Automated recommender systems can impact cultural diversity and equity, so assertive action is needed, based on informed practices, to prevent outcomes that disproportionately impact vulnerable and marginalized communities, such as indigenous peoples, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQIA+ people. Actions should empower communities in situations of vulnerability and marginalization. They should be granted the tools and knowledge to shape their digital identities, experiences and to gain greater control of digital presence. They must enjoy equal participation rights in the digital public sphere and engage in democratic deliberations in a meaningful and agentic manner.

The potential for proper supervision of digital platforms increases as regional networks of regulators and non-state actors collaborate around an agreed set of issues while recognizing their similarities and differences. Existing mechanisms of such cooperation within the Global Forum of Regulators Network present an opportunity to bolster such collaboration. The coming period should help actors create and strengthen existing local, regional, and global pathways to digital platform governance and regulation aligned with international freedom of expression standards and safeguards. The I4T Knowledge Network stands ready to support the Global Forum of Regulators Network in this process.

Emerging cross-border and global issues of platform regulation

The I4T Knowledge Network has convened regional experts from various sectors who organized and conducted knowledge-sharing and capacity-building workshops for regulators and authorities in different regions of the world.

Throughout this process, we learned that, due to the relatively nascent nature of platform regulation, state authorities and non-state actors in contextually diverse regions, face similar systemic "pathologies" and have tried similar approaches to tackle them. The challenges include varying models of direct cooperation with digital platforms, which have seen mixed results; the need to reconcile digital platform regulation with the protection of human rights, particularly freedom of expression; and a wide range of concerns regarding jurisdictional matters and the necessity of ensuring the organizational, financial, and technical independence of regulators and other relevant authorities.

Local and regional regulatory efforts, in all their diversity, also share several commonalities. Our research finds:

1) Safeguarding Children & Youth Online. Regulators in Australia, the European Union, Brazil, and other regions are offering potential regulatory pathways to address this global problem. Global cooperation on this issue should provide an opportunity to jointly develop regulatory mechanisms protecting minors while fully safeguarding their rights and ensuring an online environment contributing to their development.

2) Addressing Emerging Technical Disruptions. Legislators increasingly recognize that emerging technological disruptions, such as deepfakes, represent a significant risk to the mental and physical well-being, in particular of children, women, and vulnerable groups. Weaponized deepfakes also interfere with freedom of expression, undermining democratic institutions and processes as well as eroding the right of political participation and the work of the media.

3) Resilience of Digital Information Ecosystems in Times of Crisis. Various mechanisms have been established to detect election-related disinformation and regulate political advertising. These efforts have been led by national actors such as Electoral Management Bodies, supported by cooperation initiatives with social media companies (for example, in South Africa), and strengthened by the work of NGOs and fact-checking organizations worldwide. Similar approaches could be adapted to safeguard the integrity of climate change information and to ensure the reliable flow of accurate information during crises, such as future pandemics.

4) A Shared Benchmark of Design-Level Duties. A notable shift is visible across jurisdictions: regulators are moving upstream from case-by-case content disputes toward design-level, systemic duties. From Indonesia's child-protective defaults, and safer algorithmic recommender expectations, to U.S. state laws (such as Minnesota) requiring public transparency on ranking signals and product experiments, an emerging global pattern is clear: the architecture of digital platforms is becoming a legitimate object of regulation—especially where vulnerable groups risk harm.

A number of countries are pursuing distinct paths of platform regulation. For example, Thailand -similarly to Brazil- is exploring mechanisms under the duty of care principle. In parallel, discussions point out potential interventions to address the work of content creators and influencers. Experiences in Ukraine have demonstrated that crises require specific approaches, including time-limited responses to avoid normalization. In all their potential, these regulatory measures require close monitoring to increase the prospects of a collective and shared vision of platform regulation that is ultimately capable of holding digital platforms accountable.

Conclusion: A Call to Assertive Action

Digital platform regulation across the world is at a crossroads. Regulation of digital platforms in times of crisis should remain a priority, ensuring a multistakeholder-driven, horizontal, deliberate and evidence-based structure, while bolstering and enabling an environment for freedom of expression and human rights. To that end, we call upon the Global Forum of Regulators and UNESCO to seize the 2026 International Conference on Digital Platform Governance as an opportunity to include the following priorities in the Pretoria Declaration:

- Acknowledge that multistakeholder cooperation, solidarity, and a shared vision for a democratic and inclusive information and communication ecosystem grounded in human rights, freedom of expression, media freedom safeguards, and the rule of law for digital platform regulation constitute a global common interest;
- Reassert the role of *UNESCO´s I4T Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms, and the 2025 Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms and Generative Artificial Intelligence companion document* as the framework that articulates the I4T Knowledge Network's work and presents a united front against emerging resistance to platform regulation;
- Condemn any threats, intimidation, and/or violence to state authorities, experts, private, and non-state actors working in this space, whether originating from public or private actors;
- Empower vulnerable and marginalized communities by increasing their knowledge and tools to shape their digital experiences and develop their digital identities;
- Demand accountability from digital platforms for harmful algorithmic systems and inadequate content moderation practices that foster violence, abuse, and the silencing of vulnerable and marginalized communities;
- Pursue and establish pragmatic mechanisms for direct cooperation and data sharing among regulators and relevant stakeholders, in line with international human rights standards and principles, and demand transparency and platform accountability as essential for democratic oversight;

- Widen access to digital platform data and promote equitable access to funding for research and initiatives that protect vulnerable and marginalized groups online.