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Why Europe's digital decade matters

Digitalisation is the driving force of the modern economy and a critical factor in geopolitics. That's why the EU wants more democratic governance

Last week, the European Commission presented its vision for a European 'digital decade.' With policy targets for 2030 focusing on the four cardinal issues of skills, infrastructure and capacities, public services, and the digitalisation of business, the European Union aims to be at the forefront of today's digital revolution.

To ensure that technology empowers citizens and businesses to build a more prosperous and inclusive society, we will need open and competitive markets. Enterprises of all sizes must have an equal opportunity to innovate and deliver their products and services to consumers.

More broadly, digitalisation is now the key to building economic and societal resilience and exercising global influence. Our shared future is already taking shape in the digital domain. In a world marked by geopolitical competition for technological primacy, we must ensure that the EU's vision of digitalisation – based on open societies, the rule of law, and fundamental freedoms – proves its worth over that of authoritarian systems that use digital technologies as tools for surveillance and repression.

The risks of digitalisation

By boosting its own capabilities, the EU can help shape the world's digital transformation for the better. The success of Europe's digital decade will require the EU to forge strong alliances and working relationships with likeminded countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally. After all, reaping the full benefits of technological innovation requires maintaining an open digital economy in which investments can flow freely. And whether we are deploying digital health solutions, fighting terrorism, mitigating climate change, protecting biodiversity, or using technology to predict natural disasters and future pandemics, we will need much more

international technological collaboration.

The EU is also seeking to form a global coalition around a shared vision of human-centric digitalisation.

But digitalisation carries serious risks, ranging from mass surveillance and cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure to the spread of state-sponsored disinformation designed to polarise societies and undermine democracy. This means we must strike a balance between openness and our other core interests and values.

Specifically, we should adhere to three overarching principles: a level playing field in digital markets, security in cyberspace, and freedom online (including protections for free speech and assembly, and against discrimination and violations of privacy).

A global coalition on human-centric digitalisation

In keeping with our determination to strengthen the EU's bilateral relationships, set clearer standards, and establish more resilient digital supply chains, we have already approached US President Joe Biden's administration with a proposal to create a joint Trade and Technology Council.

The EU is also seeking to form a global coalition around a shared vision of human-centric digitalisation. We must join with others who are willing to cooperate to provide effective democratic governance over technology and the digital economy. Any such coalition should be open to all who are ready to defend an open, decentralised model of the internet and the principles of fairness in digital markets, security in cyberspace, and individual freedoms online.

By working together, we can set standards for artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies on the basis of shared values, reaping the fruits of one another's innovations and building stronger protections against cyberattacks. A coalition of likeminded partners can ensure that the interdependence of our digital supply chains becomes a source of security and resilience, rather than added risk.

Closing the global digital divide

Equally important, the digital decade is our last chance to follow through on the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. We know that digital technology has the potential to facilitate inclusion and access to public

services around the world. In Africa, the share of the population with internet access has increased from 2 per cent in 2005 to 40 per cent in 2019 enabling more children to be educated, and more women to secure employment. Until we close the global digital divide, however, we will not be realising the full potential of new technologies.

In cyberspace as in the physical world, Europe will continue to stand up for core global values. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the dignity of the individual, the right to privacy and to non-discrimination, and the freedoms of speech and belief.

To that end, the EU will soon propose an initiative combining financial resources and technical assistance to help its partners develop their own digital governance frameworks, including in areas such as cybersecurity and data protection. For example, a new Digital Connectivity Fund could underpin these efforts; together with our partners, we will be exploring the feasibility of such ideas in the coming months.

Finally, preserving a safe but open internet requires that we develop a more inclusive model of multilateralism, bringing together not just governments but also representatives of civil society, the private sector, and academia. This model can then guide our actions within international organizations – from the United Nations and the World Trade Organization to the International Telecommunication Union – to ensure that international rules are fit for purpose.

Through it all, a common thread, woven from shared principles, will guide our efforts to achieve a more human-centric digital transformation that maximises the benefits of technology and minimises the risks it poses. In cyberspace as in the physical world, Europe will continue to stand up for core global values. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the dignity of the individual, the right to privacy and to non-discrimination, and the freedoms of speech and belief. It is our common duty to make sure that the digital revolution lives up to that promise.

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