

**Address by Getachew Engida,
Deputy Director-General of UNESCO
UNESCO Colloquium “Improving the communications and information ecosystem
to protect the integrity of elections”
UNESCO Headquarters, 8February 2018, ROOM XI**

**Excellences,
Ladies and Gentleman,**

Since its establishment in 1945, UNESCO has promoted freedom of expression, press freedom and freedom of information. This includes work to support free, independent and pluralistic media, online and offline, including in order to strengthen electoral processes in the field of media and communication.

Today we are partnering with the Global Network Initiative, a multi-stakeholder group of information and communication technology companies, civil society organizations, and academics. Our aim is to discuss how to protect and promote freedom of expression on the Internet, and in particular on social networks, and how to do so in ways that can enhance political communication that is the lifeblood of democratic elections.

UNESCO envisages that this meeting will help participants, Member States, and our own programmes as well as various electoral assistance providers with ideas for partnerships and practical follow-up. We also have invited representatives of regional organizations, such as the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe that undertake election observation missions upon the request of Member States.

We meet here today in the framework of the world’s Sustainable Development Agenda, which includes in its wording, a key phrase that links democracy and development. I refer here to the words that enjoin all of us to secure (quote) “public access to information and fundamental freedoms” (unquote). It is incontestable that we have to make advances towards this target if we are to have both democracy and sustainable development.

Evidently, getting to “public access to information and fundamental freedoms” is easier said than done. Our recent report, the *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media*

Development identifies serious problems facing both on- and off-line media in terms of freedom, pluralism, independence and journalistic safety – and in gender equality issues throughout all these dimensions.

But at UNESCO we are not given to visions of dystopia. Instead we remain inspired by the founders of our Organization who believed that our Member States and their stakeholders have the goodwill to find agreement around common challenges and to champion solutions within our remit – including in the area of information and communications.

We in UNESCO recognize that the integrity of democracy and its related election processes must rest upon a free flow of information and thence uninterrupted communications. Today's world, including elections, increasingly cannot be imagined without ubiquitous and always-on Internet. It becomes correspondingly clear therefore that freedom of expression undergoes a grave violation when Internet and telecom network connection services are restricted or even shut down – and particularly during election times.

What this highlights is the need for communications channels around elections to be unhindered by arbitrary filtering, blockage or network disruptions. In addition, it requires that election-related communications, the platforms and networks that carry them, and the servers and devices which store relevant data, need to be resilient to breaches and unauthorized intrusions.

How to protect freedom of expression in these dimensions is the topic of our first session. It will no doubt take into account the position of the Human Rights Council, which underlines the need to apply human rights principles such as the criteria of necessity, proportionality and legitimate purpose for any limitations that are placed on connectivity during the context of elections.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our second discussion today will cover what can be done to promote the contribution of freedom of expression to elections, in the sense of promoting the quality of public information during such periods. Last year, the contested topic of (quote) “fake news” (unquote) was discussed at a colloquium here at UNESCO, so there is no need to repeat points made there. Therefore, let us leave aside in today's discussion the analysis of disinformation, misinformation and what some even now brand as mal-information. Instead, our focus should be on preventative and counter-steps that different stakeholders can take in relation to the

range of challenges to the quality of public information that voters need for decision-making during an election.

There are indeed major steps that can be taken towards promoting high quality information during elections by stakeholders such as political parties and leaders, civil society, the news media, and election regulators. Voters themselves have a massive role to play in terms of their contribution to public discussion and their sharing of content with each other. However, it would take a whole conference to deal with what each and every one of these actors can do. Hence our focus in this colloquium, given the make-up of the Global Network Initiative, is mainly on the technology companies themselves.

In our view at UNESCO, in the realm of freedom of expression, voluntary, self-regulatory or independent co-regulatory efforts are the optimum way to maintain high standards of information – both as regards the news media - and as regards social media and other Internet intermediary entities.

Where self-regulation works effectively, regulation becomes redundant. Where self-regulation fails, a vacuum is created – and which often invites by intrusive controls that lead to the capture of communications networks for narrow partisan purposes, rather than for public-interest.

In this spirit, it promises to be very interesting to hear today how the tech companies are seeking to counter election-related abuse on Internet platforms, and also about their approaches to the issues of opaque and micro-targeting of voters by political advertising. What are the companies doing to improve their work to provide users, and especially voters, with tools to more effectively engage with and interpret relevant information? How is self-regulation working out in regard to transparency about implementing terms of service? Are there adequate channels for voters who wish to appeal against company decisions to take down some content – or in some cases to leave other content online?

Ladies and gentlemen

We are barely into these uncharted waters at this stage of digital history. No doubt history will continue to throw up new challenges and new opportunities concerning communications, democratic elections and sustainable development. But we do have a lodestar to guide us – this is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which marks its 70th anniversary this year.

Founded on this internationally-agreed standard, there is also now UNESCO's elaborated approach to the Internet. This is our Member States' concept of Internet Universality, which calls for an Internet to be based on the R.O.A.M principles – that is, rights, openness, accessibility and multi-stakeholder participation. We are currently developing indicators for these principles, which will enable stakeholders in individual societies to track how they are doing in regard to governing the Internet.

Could the ROAM principles be useful in terms of framing an approach to the Internet and elections? For example, in terms of R - rights such as free expression and public participation; and in terms of O - openness of networks and open educational resources on elections? There also seems to be application of the A principle (accessibility) – the issue of ensuring full communications opportunity for every voter, as well as building what UNESCO calls the “media and information literacy” that people need to make best use of such opportunity. Lastly, as with all Internet-related questions, the importance of multistakeholder participation applies not least to decisions impacting the interface between elections and digital developments.

The issues I have touched upon will no doubt be thoroughly debated during our discussions today. Be assured that UNESCO will follow up on key outcomes during a number of global events we will be organizing in the course of 2018- 2019.

In this spirit, I have pleasure in formally opening this colloquium, which promises to leave each of us much wiser than before, and ready to act, based on our enhanced understanding of communications, democracy and sustainable development today.

Thank you for your attention.