

2022 Annual Conference of the Geneva Human Rights Platform

ON / OFF – IMPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Tuesday 18th October 2022,

14:00 – 18:00 public event Auditorium - Campus
Biotech, Geneva and online (Zoom)

18:00 – 19:00 reception at Campus Biotech

Concept

Digitalization impacts the realization and enjoyment of human rights. It offers new ways of protection and creates new openings for violations. The mere slogan that what applies offline also applies online is surely not sufficient anymore, if it ever has been.

Over the last three years, the Annual Conferences of the Geneva Human Rights Platform (GHRP) have been looking at connectivity between human rights actors. After focusing on the connectivity among UN human rights mechanisms, connectivity with regional human rights systems, and connectivity between the UN human rights system and national human rights systems, this year's conference will focus on digital connectivity in the field of human rights. This includes a view on the digital connections by and among mechanisms within the human rights system, but also the substantive impacts of digitalization.

How has international human rights law evolved in this area? And what will be the role of the Geneva-based international human rights system to ensure the continuum of protection in a world where, for some, the dichotomy online-offline is blurring ever more, while others entirely lack access to the benefits of digitalization and any kind of online connectivity?

The conference will focus on the above questions in two panels, looking at implications of being ON and OFF the grid. Going beyond other thematic debates on these issues, we will explore in particular what contributions can be expected from the UN Human Rights mechanisms. How can Treaty Bodies expand the interpretation of treaties and conventions, drafted decades ago, into the new reality of connectivity? How can the mechanisms of the Human Rights Council, its Special Procedures, the Advisory Committee or the Council member States via resolutions and the Universal Periodic Review work towards a more comprehensive substantive evaluation and definition of digitalization's impact? What other thematic work can we expect aside from the specific approaches taken so far in some high-visibility areas such as the rights to privacy or to freedom of expression?

The public part of the conference, discussing issues ON/OFF digital connectivity, will be preceded by an expert round-table bringing together for the first time developers and administrators of all recently established digital tracking tools for the implementation of international human rights obligations and the recommendations stemming from the international accountability bodies – the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies, the Human Rights Council's Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review.

Public Conference

14:00 – 18:00 Auditorium Campus Biotech, Geneva and online

- 14:00 – 14:25 **Welcome and Introduction**
- Yves Flückiger, Rector of the University of Geneva
 - Ambassador Jürg Lauber, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the UN Office and other International Organizations in Geneva
 - Gloria Gaggioli, Director of the Geneva Academy
 - Felix Kirchmeier, Executive Director of the Geneva Human Rights Platform
- 14:25 – 14:40 **Keynote Address**
- Teki Akuetteh, Executive Director of the Africa Digital Rights' Hub
- 14:40 – 14:45 **Input from the morning expert round-table on digital human rights tracking tools**
- Lisa Reinsberg, Executive Director of the International Justice Resource Center and Board Member, HURIDOCS
- 14:45 – 16:15 **Plenary Panel 1: “ON” – Human rights implications of digital connectivity for surveillance, interception and data collection**

The development of increasingly advanced digital technologies has enhanced the capacity of States - as well as the private sector - to conduct surveillance, interception and data collection activities. As such, the role of human rights mechanisms has adapted to the digital age, with a key role in advancing legal and governance frameworks for the use of such technologies by both governments and companies. At the same time, digital tools are increasing the capacity of both national and international human rights monitoring bodies to follow-up to governments' human rights commitments and their implementation of recommendations issued by the different human rights mechanisms. What is the human rights framework applicable to the development and use of surveillance technologies? What are the human rights standards that should regulate data collection, storage and use? How can the human rights framework be made applicable to private actors such as surveillance and tech companies? What are the human rights safeguards - including but not limited to the right to privacy - that need to be strengthened? Finally, how can digital connectivity and transparency help to counter government overreach in instances of surveillance, interception and data collection?

Speakers:

- Nihat Dad, Executive Director, Digital Rights Foundation and Member of the Facebook Oversight Board
- Yuval Shany, Hersch Lauterpacht Chair in Public International Law at Hebrew University
- Peggy Hicks, Director, Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures, and Right to Development Division, OHCHR

Moderator: Felix Kirchmeier, Executive Director of the GHRP

16:15 – 16:30

Coffee Break

16:30 – 18:00

Plenary Panel 2: “OFF” – Human rights implications of the digital gap and digital disruptions

The digital age has exacerbated the necessity for digital connectivity for almost all basic needs of contemporary society. This has led to international commitments and recommendations - anchored in applicable human rights law - to ensuring universal internet access. Today however, access to digital technologies remains uneven and this gap reflects and amplifies existing social, cultural and economic inequalities. An estimate of 3.6 billion people remain offline with Africa the region with the lowest internet usage rates. In addition to the existing digital gap, intentional disruptions by governments to access information and communications systems online is a growing phenomenon. The effects of internet shutdowns run counter to the efforts to close the digital gap and have a negative impact on many human rights, including freedom of expression, access to information and the right to vote. What steps have been taken by human rights mechanisms to act upon and bridge the digital divide? What are the human rights standards that should regulate internet shutdowns? And what should be the role of international organizations, companies and civil society to ensure universal internet access?

Speakers:

- Santiago Fiorio, Head of Human Rights and International Cooperation, Poverty Spotlight and CESCR member elect
- Tim Engelhardt, Human Rights Officer - Technology and Human Rights Project, OHCHR
- Felicia Anthonio, #KeepItOn Campaign Manager, Access Now
- Florence Simbiri-Jaoko, Professor, University of Nairobi School of Law and Member of the GHRP Advisory Board

Moderator: Miloon Kothari, Member of the GHRP Advisory Board

18:00 – 18:15

Closing of the Conference

- Beatrice Ferrari, Directrice, Direction des Affaires Internationales, République et Canton de Genève
- Felix Kirchmeier, Executive Director of the Geneva Human Rights Platform

18:15 – 19:00

Reception