

## **“Freedom of Opinion and Expression and Sustainable Development - Why Voice Matters”**

**Purpose** To inform the Special Rapporteur’s thematic report to be presented to the HRC, 53rd sesión

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### **1. Introduction**

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is essential to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This right is protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is crucial for the realization of many other human rights. It allows individuals to hold and express their own opinions, as well as seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.

This right is important for a number of reasons. It enables people to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, hold their governments accountable, and express their views on issues of public concern. It also allows for the free exchange of ideas and the free flow of information, which is necessary for the advancement of knowledge and the development of solutions to global challenges.

The right to freedom of opinion and expression is also closely linked to other SDGs, such as those related to education, gender equality, and the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. It is an essential element of democratic societies and is necessary for the achievement of many of the other SDGs.

Finally, it is important to note that this right must be exercised responsibly. Governments have a responsibility to ensure that all citizens enjoy their rights and freedoms while also protecting the rights and safety of others. Therefore, it is essential that governments work with all stakeholders to develop policies and legislation that protect freedom of opinion and expression while taking into account the interests of all individuals. This can help ensure that everyone is able to voice their opinions and contribute to the progress of society.

### **2. Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to impact the freedom of opinion and expression in a number of ways.

On the one hand, AI can be used to facilitate the free exchange of ideas and the free flow of information by enabling the rapid dissemination of information through social media and other online platforms. This can help to promote the open and free exchange of ideas that is essential to the realization of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

On the other hand, there are also concerns that AI could be used to suppress the freedom of opinion and expression. For example, AI-powered algorithms and systems could be used to censor or filter online content, or to manipulate public opinion through targeted advertising or propaganda. There are also concerns that AI could be used to

track and monitor individuals' online activities, potentially leading to the suppression of dissent or the punishment of those who express unpopular or controversial views.

Overall, the impact of AI on the freedom of opinion and expression will depend on how it is used and the safeguards that are put in place to protect this fundamental human right. It is important to ensure that the development and use of AI is guided by ethical principles and that appropriate measures are taken to protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

### **3. Blockchain technology**

Blockchain technology has the potential to revolutionize freedom of speech. By using distributed ledger technology, it could provide a platform for people to securely store and access their data without the risk of censorship or government interference. With blockchain-based networks, users can interact and trade anonymously, allowing them to express their thoughts freely without fear of retribution or suppression. Additionally, smart contracts on blockchain networks could provide an immutable record of transactions between two parties – meaning that content is stored and cannot be altered by a third party. This provides an extra layer of security protecting individuals' rights to free expression. Furthermore, because blockchain eliminates the need for intermediaries in any transaction, users would no longer need to rely on centralized authorities like Google or Facebook when sharing their ideas or opinions.

Overall, blockchain technology could play an important role in protecting freedom of speech and providing a secure platform for people to express themselves without the risk of censorship or interference. With its distributed ledger and smart contracts, it could provide an immutable record that is unalterable by third parties, as well as eliminating the need for intermediaries which often act as gatekeepers. Ultimately, this would ensure that users' right to free expression is protected and can be enjoyed without fear of retribution or control.

### **4. Web 3.0**

Web 3.0, or the Third Generation of Internet, is set to revolutionize how people interact with the internet. It promises a more secure and decentralized access to content, enhanced user data privacy, and other features that can lead to increased freedom of opinion and expression and sustainable development.

One of the main features of Web 3.0 is its ability to offer greater anonymity to users by decentralizing the way data is stored and accessed through distributed ledger technologies such as blockchain. This ensures that no single entity can control or limit a user's access to information or interfere with their activities online, thus providing better protection for free speech in opposition-controlled countries where censorship is rampant.

Moreover, it also provides protection against companies and governments from gaining access to user data without consent. This is especially beneficial when it comes to the collection of personal data, which can be used for targeted advertisements or even surveillance, thus protecting users' freedom of opinion.

Furthermore, Web 3.0 provides opportunities for the development of distributed autonomous organizations (DAOs) that promote sustainable development by rewarding environmentally friendly activities such as carbon offsetting or renewable energy generation. These DAOs are run on algorithms instead of relying on traditional human-led management, allowing them to operate more efficiently and with increased transparency while promoting sustainability efforts.

Finally, Web 3.0 also enables a shift towards a more collaborative economy by allowing users to create economic agents in the form of decentralized applications (dapps) to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. This can help reduce environmental impacts associated with traditional economic activities, as well as create more equitable access to markets for entrepreneurs in emerging economies.

In conclusion, Web 3.0 has the potential to bring about improved freedom of opinion and expression and sustainable development by offering increased user privacy, decentralizing data storage, facilitating distributed autonomous organizations (DAOs), and enabling a shift towards a collaborative economy. The future looks bright for those who are looking to make the world a better place through technology.

## **5. Digital technology companies**

Digital technology companies have become a major player in promoting sustainable development and reducing inequality in access to information and communications. Many of these companies have implemented policies to ensure their products are as inclusive as possible, and they are working closely with governments, NGOs, and civil society groups to identify ways to reduce the digital divide.

One important way tech companies can promote sustainability is by developing products that are affordable for people at all income levels. Companies such as Microsoft offer free software to low-income students who would otherwise not be able to afford it. Similarly, many telecom providers provide discounted rates or free services for lower-income households. These initiatives help bridge the gap between those who can and cannot access technology.

Additionally, digital technology companies have implemented policies to ensure their products are accessible to people with disabilities. For example, many tech companies now make sure that their mobile applications, websites, and other digital platforms are equipped with features that can be used by those who have visual or hearing impairments.

By working with government officials, NGOs, and civil society groups to identify innovative ways of reducing inequality in access to technology, digital technology companies are playing a key role in promoting the sustainable development goals set forth by the United Nations. Through a combination of initiatives designed to reduce the digital divide and making sure their products are as inclusive as possible for all users, digital technology companies are helping make progress towards achieving these important global objectives.

In conclusion, by committing to sustainable development goals and reducing inequalities in access to technology, digital technology companies can help create a better future for everyone. They are key players in this effort and should continue their efforts to ensure

that all people, regardless of their income or disability status, have equal access to the benefits of digital technology. With the right policies and practices in place, these tech giants can be instrumental in creating a more sustainable and equitable world.

## **6. Conclusion: importance of technology and AI on sustainable development.**

Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can be important tools for addressing some of the key issues in sustainable development. For example:

1. Technology can be used to help monitor and mitigate the impacts of climate change, such as through the development of renewable energy sources and the use of sensors to monitor environmental conditions.
2. AI can be used to help identify patterns and trends that can help to predict and prevent natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes.
3. Technology can also be used to help reduce poverty and inequality by increasing access to education, healthcare, and other resources. For example, mobile phone and internet technologies can help to connect people in remote or disadvantaged communities to information and resources that were previously out of reach.
4. AI can be used to help optimize the use of natural resources, such as through the development of precision agriculture techniques that can help to reduce water and fertilizer use.
5. Technology can be used to help reduce pollution and protect the environment, such as through the development of cleaner production processes and the use of sensors to monitor air and water quality.

However, it is also important to consider the potential negative impacts of technology and AI on sustainable development. For example, the development and deployment of certain technologies may have negative environmental impacts, and the increasing reliance on technology could lead to the loss of certain jobs and the widening of income inequality. It is important to carefully consider the trade-offs involved in the use of technology and AI in the context of sustainable development.