



COFACE DIGITALISATION PRINCIPLES

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The following declaration aims at referencing the core values and principles underlining the organisation's actions and activities in the field of digitalisation. While the concrete topics covered by COFACE Families Europe are very wide and diverse, including child online safety, artificial intelligence, big data, online business models, decentralised technologies or blockchain technology, the recommendations

and policy proposals formulated always rely on core principles and values, which are applied to any new development in the field of digitalisation.

COFACE Families Europe's aim is to ensure that digitalisation and new technological developments serve the general interest of all European citizens, support families and respect the rights of children.

PRINCIPLES

- 1** Digital services: Non-discrimination, inclusion and accessibility
- 2** Infrastructure: Access to the Internet
- 3** Competences and skills
- 4** (Digital) Parenting
- 5** Respecting human rights and children's rights
- 6** Transparency
- 7** Privacy and data protection
- 8** (Cyber)security and safety
- 9** User control
- 10** Keeping the Internet open
- 11** Democratic participation
- 12** Health and well-being
- 13** Democratic Internet Governance
- 14** Sustainability

COFACE DIGITALISATION PRINCIPLES

These principles, taken together, paint a picture of an Internet and a web managed and maintained by reconciling and balancing the roles and responsibilities on the end-user and private/public actors, creating a better Internet and web for all. They also aim to support bridge-building between social, consumer and digitalisation stakeholders.

Finally, these principles are by no means an attempt at reinventing the wheel, but rather a combination of existing principles developed by COFACE and a variety of stakeholders, but relevant especially to families as end-users, consumers and creators. Among the resources consulted, we find the Council of Europe, the Internet Governance Forum, the United Nations, the OECD, the World Economic Forum, and many others. These principles are based on key

human rights conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), including General Comment No.25, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Over the past decade, the EU has launched a significant number of EU initiatives to safeguard families and to ensure that digital platforms and products are safe for children, such as the Better Internet for Kids Strategy, the Digital Services Act, the proposal for a Child Sexual Abuse Regulation and the Artificial Intelligence Act. COFACE Families Europe published a [policy brief](#) analysing these different frameworks with the following principles in mind.

PRINCIPLE 1

Digital services: Non-discrimination, inclusion and accessibility

[Research](#) shows that there are still digitally deprived families in Europe. As digitalisation is an integral part of our societies, families should be provided with access to digital skills and competences as well as having access to digital services as they become pre-requisites for living a decent life and remain an integral part of a “digital” and analog society. Digital services and digital content providers also need to take into consideration the needs of various user groups to ensure that they are accessible for everybody, and especially users with disabilities, children and older people.

PRINCIPLE 2

Infrastructure: Access to the Internet

While digitalisation is more and more focused on the software and content side, it nevertheless relies on a distributed, functional and well-maintained infrastructure (on the public side, the cables below ground) and accessible, quality and affordable hardware/devices (on the user-end). Net neutrality is also

a cornerstone of a fair Internet access for all. Even though everyone should have access to High-Speed Internet and the web, there should be a provision of offline services for families which are not connected or do not want to be connected.

PRINCIPLE 3

Competences and skills

Access, and competences and skills, are two sides of the same coin. Even if every user lives in a country with digital infrastructure and access to devices with Internet connectivity, this does not guarantee that they will successfully integrate within the digital space. Digital citizenship skills are essential for enjoying a positive online experience and cover both technical skills directly linked to digital services/products and transversal competences such as critical thinking, problem-solving, digital culture, and responsible behaviour, alongside technical skills allowing to understand how to use the “hardware” or device side appropriately. These skills and competences should be learned from an early age and developed progressively. As both technologies and people evolve, young people, adults and older people should continue to be supported, for example through lifelong learning opportunities and especially during key transitions such as the transition to adulthood.

PRINCIPLE 4

(Digital) Parenting

The key role of parents and educators should be recognized and supported. Children, especially at a young age, spend most of their time at home, and the (digital) environment will greatly influence the habits and experiences that children will go through online. Parents and carers act as mediators between their children and the online world, accompanying them in their first experiences, and helping them make sense of positive but also negative experiences online. Ensuring a balanced use of technology and addressing issues like addiction, cyberbullying, online child sexual abuse, and online harassment and violence requires a strong regulatory framework. This should be complemented by continued dialogue and sharing of experiences between parents, carers, children, and other relevant stakeholders, along with awareness-raising and evidence-based support and prevention measures for families. Furthermore, parental control tools can support parents and carers in keeping their children safe online. These tools need to be age-appropriate, proportionate and privacy-preserving, and should be accompanied with other tools and rules for tech companies.

PRINCIPLE 5

Respecting human rights and children's rights

Human rights in general, and children's rights and the rights of people with disabilities in particular, have been developed over time and applied to the offline world with great success, allowing our societies to thrive and coexist peacefully in diversity. Those rights need to be applied to the online world, but their "transposition" is by no means easy. New compromises will need to be struck between apparent contradictions such as "freedom of expression, freedom of speech" and "hate speech" or restricting freedom of expression. The overarching strategy for successfully transposing those rights is to make sure that the rule of law and due legal process is always respected, to avoid arbitrary concentration of power in the hands of the executive branch of government or the moderators of private companies providing online services. Most rights are not absolute and need to be balanced against one another, both offline and online. Human rights impact assessments, including child rights impact assessments, are crucial to keep up with the pace of innovation and to ensure that artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies, such as extended reality, boost opportunities for families, while protecting them against the risks.

PRINCIPLE 6

Transparency

Transparency is a principle which permeates through many key challenges in digitalisation, making sure that users are properly informed about the services/products they use, but also what the implications of their consent and use of those services/products are. Users would greatly benefit from transparency about the use of algorithms (or artificial intelligence) and how they make decisions, about data that is collected about them and how it is used, about the various online business models and their trade-offs, and about their rights as consumers of connected devices or online services.

PRINCIPLE 7

Privacy and data protection

The “digital trail” or “digital footprint” users leave behind is getting larger and larger, and so is the potential for exploiting that data for both positive and negative purposes, in relation to the interest of the user and society as a whole. This is why it is important that users are directly in control of their privacy and their data to make sure that it is not abused or used without their consent. At the same time, high “default” standards for privacy and data protection should be erected to compensate for the “network effect” and the imbalance of power between the user and a service provider (for instance, the pressure to join a network where all of your contacts are).

PRINCIPLE 8

(Cyber)security and safety

News about yet another data breach and theft of millions of credit card information, user account details, surface more and more often. Cybersecurity, in order to be successful in the future, will have to be considered as a public good and will have to be discussed openly between all stakeholders. Developing best practices in cyber-security and making them accessible to every stakeholder, especially private companies supplying online services or connected devices, is key to reach an optimal level of security online and offline. Digital products and services should be by design safe, secure and privacy protective.

PRINCIPLE 9

User control

Much of digitalisation is controlled by a few powerful players, be it private or public, which leads to an online environment and digital ecosystem where users do not have a voice. Allowing users to have more control over the services and devices they use is in line with democratic culture and participation, respecting user choices. These provisions include the choice to manage what a user wishes to see or read online, the choice to restrict or broaden the target audience of their messages etc.

PRINCIPLE 10

Keeping the Internet open

Open standards are what made the Internet so successful, allowing users to communicate and share information with anyone else, regardless of their Internet Service Provider, country or hardware. Supporting open source software, open standards and open collaborative spaces is also key to ensure diversity and access. Many families around the world do not necessarily have the means to access costly digital tools and information. Supporting open source and open standards is the embodiment of the principle of solidarity whereby those that have more can contribute more, and in the end, everyone can equally benefit.

PRINCIPLE 11

Democratic participation

Traditional, offline democratic participation has also been greatly impacted by the Internet and the web. Online tools allowing citizens to participate in "offline" politics and democratic decision making more generally, have proliferated over the years. These include official websites of local/regional/national/supranational public authorities allowing to seek information and/or participate (sending an email, posting a comment...), citizen-

led initiatives like online petitions, chat forums, blogs or organisations, and many other digital tools helping to bridge the gap between government and citizens.

PRINCIPLE 12

Health and well-being

As technology progresses, society will need to constantly find a healthy balance between online and offline, either via a separation of both or a combination of both to achieve both biological (physical) and emotional/cognitive well-being. Regardless of innovation in the digital realm, we remain and will remain for the foreseeable future, biological beings with needs that can only be fulfilled by physical activity. So far, the digital realm has been an obstacle to physical exercise, but this may change with the advent of extended reality and connected devices, bridging/blending the online and the offline world. Cognitive overload and stress are also one of the dangers posed by the online world, and a "right to disconnect" will clearly need to be adopted in order to keep our minds healthy. Users should be able to choose how and for how long they interact with digital services and products. Addictive design features can be detrimental to the mental health of children and young people, as well as adults. Providers of online services or connected products will have to take into account the well-being of both the mind and body in accordance with the considerations above.

PRINCIPLE 13

Democratic Internet Governance

As the saying goes: “no taxation without representation”! Families and people from all over Europe, and the World more broadly, are active online users, yet their ability to weigh in on the governance of the Internet and the web as a “public good” is small. Internet Governance bodies should provide more space for civil society to voice its recommendations on the future of the Internet, the web and also developments in artificial intelligence and algorithms to ensure their use is subject to democratically agreed ethical and moral principles.

PRINCIPLE 14

Sustainability

Digitalisation and sustainability should go hand in hand. On the one hand, digital tools can support the achievement of environmental goals. On the other hand, digital products and services themselves have a significant impact on the climate and the environment. The development and use of technologies should be sustainable by design. With electronic waste (e-waste) being one of the fastest growing solid waste streams in the world, it is important that manufacturers design products that can be easily and affordably repaired to extend the lifespan of digital devices.



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