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ARTICLE 19

THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL AT 20

Interpretation and Guidance in the Digital Age

Concept Note

Date: Thursday, 18 June 2026

Venue: Palais des Nations, Concordia 4 (hybrid)

Duration: 9:00 – 12:00

Convened by: Geneva Human Rights Hub, CNAM, OHCHR, HURIDOCs, Diplo Foundation, UPR Info, FNF, ISHR, Article 19, with Permanent Missions of Estonia and Mexico.

Background and rationale

The twentieth anniversary of the United Nations Human Rights Council offers an opportunity not only to reflect on the Council's institutional achievements, but also to consider how it can continue to provide authoritative guidance in rapidly changing contexts. Over the past two decades, the Council has become the central forum for human rights dialogue, standard-setting, scrutiny, prevention, implementation and follow-up. It has also played an important role in interpreting how existing human rights norms apply to new and emerging challenges.

Digitalisation and artificial intelligence are now among the most significant human rights challenges of our time. Digital technologies are reshaping the ways in which rights are exercised, monitored, restricted, protected and implemented. They affect the full range of human rights, including civic space, privacy, equality and non-discrimination, freedom of expression, access to information, public participation, access to services, accountability, and the work of human rights defenders. At the same time, digital technologies also create new possibilities for the exercise of individual and collective rights by opening up new avenues for individuals to express themselves, to access information, to education, to mobilize and participate in public debate, as well as for human rights monitoring, knowledge management, implementation tracking, early warning, capacity-building and more effective follow-up to recommendations.

Against this background, the roundtable will address both sides of this transformation: first, the role of the Human Rights Council in interpreting and applying human rights standards in the context of new and emerging technologies; and second, how the Council and the wider human rights system can responsibly leverage digital technologies and AI to strengthen their own work in promoting, protecting and implementing human rights.

The Human Rights Council has already begun to engage with this agenda, both with respect to interpreting and applying human rights standards in the context of the emergence of new technologies as well as to the possibilities of leveraging new technologies to advance and promote human rights protection. In 2019, through resolution 41/11, it requested the Advisory Committee to prepare a report on the impacts, opportunities and challenges of new and emerging digital technologies for the promotion and protection of human rights, including recommendations on how the Council, its special procedures and subsidiary bodies could address these issues in a holistic, inclusive and pragmatic manner.

The Advisory Committee's final report was submitted to the Council in 2021. The Council further consolidated this agenda through resolution 53/29 on new and emerging digital technologies and human rights, adopted in July 2023, which calls for a human rights-based approach to digital technologies, including AI, and emphasizes safeguards, human oversight, due diligence, accountability, transparency and effective remedies. Importantly, the resolution frames digital technologies not as a separate or purely technical field, but as an area in which existing human rights standards must continue to guide regulation, governance and institutional practice. More recently, in resolution 58/23, adopted in April 2025, the Council addressed the protection of human rights defenders in the digital age, including the risks created by new and emerging technologies and possible good practices and recommendations for improved responses.

This evolving agenda is particularly relevant to the regulation of online platforms and the protection of users' rights in the digital sphere. Across different legal and policy contexts, States and other actors are considering different models for digital governance, which are increasingly imposing obligations relating to transparency, content moderation, risk assessment, due diligence, access to remedy and accountability. This area offers a useful example of how the Council's resolutions, debates, special procedure reports and other outputs can help inform human rights-based approaches to the regulation of new technologies. It also provides a natural link with the lunchtime HRC side event on [Models of Platform Regulation and the Impact of HRC Output on National Regulation \(18 June, 14:00 – 15:00, Room VII\)](#).

This evolution points to a broader institutional question: how can the Council continue to fulfil its interpretive and guiding role in a digital environment that is changing faster than traditional human rights processes can often respond? The issue is not only whether the Council should address digital technologies as a thematic human rights concern. It is also how the Council can help clarify the application of existing human rights law to digital systems, strengthen responsible and rights-based uses of data and AI and ensure that digital transformation supports rather than weakens the Council's mandate.

This question has both an external and an internal dimension. Externally, the Council is increasingly called upon to provide guidance to States, companies, civil society, NHRIs and other actors on human rights in digital contexts, including in relation to AI governance, human rights data systems, online civic space, digital

public infrastructure, platform governance, climate change, platform economy, and the protection of human rights defenders. Internally, the broader human rights ecosystem is itself undergoing digital transformation. OHCHR-developed tools such as the Human Rights Data Exchange (HRDx), the [HRC Mapper](#), the [National Recommendations Tracking Database \(NRTD\)](#), and the [UN Human Rights Knowledge Gateway](#) illustrate different dimensions of the digital transformation of the human rights system. These innovations should also be considered in the broader ecosystem of digital human rights tracking tools and databases developed by other key stakeholders in the field, including HURIDOCs' [Global Human Rights Repository](#) and [UPR Info's Database](#). They show how data systems, recommendation-tracking tools and knowledge platforms can support analysis, implementation, learning and follow-up. At the same time, they raise important concerns around accuracy, bias, transparency, data protection and over-reliance on automated analysis, especially where sensitive human rights information is involved. This makes questions of governance, human oversight and institutional responsibility central to any future use of AI in human rights monitoring and implementation.

The roundtable will therefore examine digitalisation and AI both as subject matters for future Council resolutions, reports and debates, but also as factors that may reshape the Council's own working ecosystem. It will critically examine and reflect upon the future role of the Council as a standard-setter for the regulation of digital technologies as well as ask how human rights data systems, knowledge platforms, AI-supported tools and interoperable digital infrastructures can strengthen the Council's ability to provide guidance, support implementation and connect Geneva-based deliberations with national follow-up processes.

Scope and objectives

The event forms part of the Annual Conference of the Geneva Human Rights Hub and the broader HRC@20 anniversary week, which includes reflections on standard-setting, interpretation and guidance, prevention, implementation and stakeholder engagement.

The discussion will be structured around two complementary questions.

First, how has the Human Rights Council interpreted and guided the application of human rights law in digital contexts, and what further guidance is needed in relation to digitalisation, AI and emerging technologies? This includes considering

how the Council's existing outputs can support human rights-based approaches to digital governance, including in areas where regulatory models are still developing.

Second, how can digital tools, human rights data systems and AI-supported approaches strengthen the Council's future work on monitoring, implementation, follow-up and prevention, while remaining anchored in human rights safeguards? This includes reflecting on how OHCHR initiatives and the wider ecosystem of digital human rights tracking tools and databases can support more accessible, interoperable and evidence-based implementation, while also raising questions of governance, accountability and human oversight.

The event will aim to:

1. reflect on the Council's evolving role in providing interpretation and guidance on digital technologies and human rights;
2. examine how existing human rights norms apply to AI, data systems, online platforms, digital public infrastructure and emerging technologies;
3. discuss how OHCHR and partners are developing digital tools, knowledge systems and recommendation-tracking approaches to support human rights monitoring, implementation and follow-up and the potential of greater interoperability between them;
4. consider how AI-supported tools may assist human rights monitoring and implementation, while identifying the safeguards needed to address risks such as bias, opacity, inaccuracy, data protection and over-reliance on automated analysis;
5. consider how the Council can remain responsive, principled and institutionally relevant in the next twenty years

Format

The event will be organized as a three-hour, invitation-only expert roundtable combining short framing interventions with moderated discussion.

It will be divided into two substantive segments. The first segment will focus on the Council's interpretive and guiding role in the digital age: how human rights law is being applied to digital technologies, what gaps remain, and how the Council can provide clearer guidance to States and other actors. The second segment will

focus on the future of the Council's working ecosystem: how digital tools, data systems, knowledge platforms and AI-supported approaches can strengthen monitoring, implementation, follow-up and prevention.

The discussion will bring together representatives of States, UN Secretariat and agencies, independent experts, civil society, academia, technical experts and organizations working on human rights data, digital tools and AI governance.
