

For Algorithmic Pluralism!

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In the wake of the restitution of the États Généraux de l'information and on the occasion of the Numérique en commun(s) national event, a collective of 50 personalities, associations, French and international companies... call to open up social networks and give users back the choice.

For two decades, we have allowed the digital giants to play a role that, in many ways, has brought us services that constitute technical feats and major sources of social innovation. However, the time has come for a transition. These structures are no longer capable of innovating for the common good. On the contrary, their harmful impact on our democracies, culture, and well-being is entirely disproportionate: misinformation, foreign interference, hateful content, attention capture... We must absolutely strip these technologies of the monopoly they have imposed on our own conversations.

To achieve this, we must break out of the face-off between these mega-firms and the States that seek to regulate them. We should not aim to substitute administrative power for economic power. The solution lies in openness and decentralization, which are at the heart of the freedom to think and communicate. This is why we must reconnect with a well-known requirement: pluralism. Pluralism in algorithms, firstly by allowing users to configure their recommendation and moderation systems, thereby finding greater diversity in the content they are offered while protecting themselves from harmful content. Algorithmic pluralism, secondly by allowing third parties to offer complementary features on social networks, which would thus become a field of innovation for the benefit of users.

Many initiatives exist to offer alternative algorithmic paths. But they are blocked by the stronghold of large firms. Enabling choice requires building openness. Paradoxically, to have an open and free market, we need a push; that of techno-economic regulation. Not only must we do this, but we can and we know how to do it. What we achieved yesterday for telecom operators, we must now do for social networks and generative AIs: we must impose rules of vertical and horizontal interoperability, interconnection fee measures, non-discrimination rules, environmental thresholds, obligations of openness and information sharing, ethical and ergonomic design requirements, etc. It is under these conditions that we can reconcile technological innovation, well-being, and democracy.

If algorithms sort and order content, they are also beginning to create it with generative artificial intelligence. Rethinking regulation also means ensuring a balanced relationship between content and application providers on the one hand and providers of generative AI systems on the other. Let us anticipate a framework in which it will be possible to conduct relevant economic analyses, determine proportionate access conditions to data, or even establish a fair valuation of contributions to value creation. We think of artists, creators, businesses, and all economic initiatives that risk being plundered, as is already the case today.

The new European mandate, as well as the new French government, offer an opportunity to shape this framework, building on the first steps already taken. The European Parliament has, in fact, invited the European Commission to take action in its resolution of December 12, 2023. This change is ambitious but within our reach, and many actors in civil society are mobilized in this direction in France, Europe, and across the Atlantic. The opening of social networks is part of a broader history of the battles fought over the last two decades for the openness of the Internet and the defense of cultural rights. The opening of social networks is not just a technical or economic choice; it is a democratic imperative.

This is why we call upon the scientific community, economic forces, civil society, and public authorities to come together to build the architecture of our conversations, our access to information, culture, and ultimately, our democracies.

Signatories

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- ARTICLE 19
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