

<Annual Human
Rights Campaign>

elsa

The European Law Students' Association

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

HUMAN RIGHTS IN DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 2026



FOREWORD

Dear Network,
Dear AHRC Organisers,

We warmly welcome you to the new term and the new topic of “*Human Rights in Digital Democracy*”!

Today, we are thrilled to share the first edition of the AHRC Supporting Materials for September to December 2026.

These resources are designed to inspire and support National and Local Groups in their efforts to highlight the importance of human rights protection. We hope you find them useful and engaging, and we look forward to seeing the creative ways you bring these materials to life.

Wishing you an inspiring start to the term,

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I. From Ballots to Bytes: Safeguarding Democracy in the Digital Age

International Day of Democracy, 15th of September

1. A short Introduction

The International Day of Democracy is observed every year on 15 September. It was established by the United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 62/7, adopted on 8 November 2007, which invited all Member States and organisations to commemorate the day in a manner that contributes to raising public awareness about democracy. The date was chosen to mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Democracy, adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on 15 September 1997, which set out the fundamental principles and elements of democratic governance, including participation, representation, transparency, and accountability. The Day was first observed in 2008 and has since become an annual opportunity to review the state of democracy worldwide.¹

Democracy is recognised by the United Nations as a universal value rather than a model “owned” by any single country or region, and it is closely tied to the enjoyment of human rights. This link is captured in Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government,” to be expressed through periodic, genuine elections and universal suffrage. Democratic governance provides the institutional environment through which civil and political rights, freedom of expression, and public participation can be effectively realised.²

The connection to the AHRC theme of Human Rights in Digital Democracy is direct: elections, deliberation, and civic participation increasingly take place online, through social media campaigning, e-voting systems, digital public consultations, and AI-assisted governance tools. These same digital spaces are also where democracy faces some of its newest threats – disinformation, algorithmic manipulation, internet shutdowns, and the erosion of trust in institutions through synthetic media. Protecting democracy today therefore requires protecting the digital environment in which it increasingly lives.

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/democracy-day>

² <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n07/467/83/pdf/n0746783.pdf>

2. Legal Framework

2.1. International Frameworks

2.1.1. United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) & Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Beginning with Resolution A/HRC/RES/20/8 (July 2012), the Human Rights Council has repeatedly affirmed that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression” – a principle reaffirmed by consensus in 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2021, and central to how digital participation in democratic life is protected in law.³

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects freedom of opinion and expression, while Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects every citizen’s right to take part in the conduct of public affairs and to vote in genuine periodic elections. The OHCHR treats both rights as fully applicable to digital and online participation.⁴

Human Rights Council Resolution 47/16 (2021), on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, recognises the importance of encryption and anonymity for the exercise of human rights online. It also calls on States to refrain from measures that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online, including internet shutdowns.⁵

2.1.2. Council of Europe and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)

Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) guarantees the right to free elections “under conditions which will ensure the free expression of the opinion of the people in the choice of the legislature.” The ECtHR has interpreted this provision as requiring safeguards capable of preserving the integrity and fairness of the electoral process.

Article 10 ECHR protects online political speech and campaigning. In *Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom* (Grand Chamber, 25 May 2021), the ECtHR found that bulk-surveillance regimes may violate Articles 8 and 10 where adequate safeguards and independent oversight are lacking. Although the case was not concerned directly with elections, it is relevant to digital

³ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g12/153/25/pdf/g1215325.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

⁵ <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/177/26/pdf/g2117726.pdf>

democracy because intrusive surveillance may deter political expression, association and participation online.⁶

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has also issued guidance on the impact of digital technologies, including AI systems and micro-targeted political advertising, on electoral processes and democratic debate.

2.1.3. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) observes elections across the OSCE region and has increasingly assessed the use of digital campaigning, online disinformation, and AI-generated content as part of its election observation methodology.⁷

OSCE commitments (notably the 1990 Copenhagen Document) require participating States to hold elections that guarantee the free expression of the will of the people; ODIHR reporting has extended this standard to the online information environment in which contemporary campaigns are conducted.⁸

2.1.4. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Through its Reinforcing Democracy Initiative (launched 2022), the OECD tracks progress across five pillars, including combating mis- and disinformation and strengthening digital democracy, and promotes forms of civic participation such as citizens' assemblies and digital consultation platforms.⁹

The 2026 OECD report Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Citizen Participation, declassified by the OECD Public Governance Committee on 22 June 2026, examines how governments are using AI tools to expand public participation and calls for guardrails – transparency, compliance with democratic values, protection of civic space, and low-tech alternatives for citizens with limited digital access.

The OECD's Digital Government Outlook 2026 notes that public trust remains fragile: only around half of citizens across surveyed OECD countries express confidence that governments will use their personal data appropriately, underlining the governance gap that must accompany digital participation tools.¹⁰

⁶ https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

⁷ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/artificial-intelligence-and-elections>

⁸ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/14304>

⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/governance/reinforcing-democracy/>

¹⁰ <https://www.oecd.org/governance/reinforcing-democracy/>

2.2. Regional & National Frameworks

2.2.1. National framework – Ireland

Article 40.6.1° of the Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) guarantees the right of citizens to express freely their convictions and opinions, subject to public order and morality, and is the constitutional basis for political speech and campaigning, including online.¹¹

Ireland's Electoral Reform Act 2022 established an independent Electoral Commission (*An Coimisiún Toghcháin*), with responsibilities that include providing electoral information, conducting research and promoting public awareness of electoral matters. The resilience of Irish elections in the online environment also depends on the EU Digital Services Act and on the roles of national regulatory bodies, including *Coimisiún na Meán*.¹²

This vulnerability became visible in October 2025, when a deepfake mimicking an RTÉ News broadcast falsely claimed that presidential candidate Catherine Connolly had withdrawn and that the election would be cancelled. The video circulated on social media before the impersonating account was removed, illustrating how synthetic media can undermine reliable electoral information and public trust.

3. Current Trends & Challenges

Global democratic performance continues to decline. According to International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2025 report, 2024 marked the ninth consecutive year in which more countries recorded a net decline than an improvement in democratic performance: of 173 countries assessed, 94 (54%) declined in at least one democratic factor over the previous five years, against only 55 (32%) that improved. Amid an unprecedented 74 national elections held in 2024, Representation – usually democracy's strongest-performing dimension – fell to its worst level in over two decades.¹³

Digital threats to democratic participation are intensifying. Generative AI has made deepfakes cheaper and more convincing to produce. A 2024 study by Recorded Future documented AI-generated impersonations of public figures across multiple countries, including content connected to electoral campaigns and political influence operations.

¹¹ <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html>

¹² <https://www.cnam.ie>

¹³ <https://www.idea.int/gsod>

Regulatory responses remain fragmented. In the United States, state-level approaches to AI-generated electoral deception remain fragmented. Several states have adopted measures addressing deceptive synthetic media in election contexts, while constitutional challenges based on freedom of expression have exposed the legal limits of overly broad restrictions. This fragmented approach leaves electoral protections uneven across jurisdictions.¹⁴

At the same time, digital tools are also being used to strengthen democratic participation: OECD research on AI-assisted citizen participation (2026) documents dozens of use cases across member and partner countries in which digital and AI tools have expanded consultation and deliberation, provided such tools are paired with transparency, oversight, and safeguards against excluding citizens with limited digital access.

4. Recommended Focus Areas for Events & Advocacy

- Protecting the integrity of digital campaigning: raise awareness of AI-generated disinformation, deepfakes and micro-targeted political advertising.
- Digital access as a democratic prerequisite: highlight the digital divide as a barrier to equal participation in online civic and electoral processes.
- Algorithmic transparency and AI in governance: discuss safeguards for the use of AI tools in citizen participation and public consultation.
- Internet shutdowns and election periods: advocate against restrictions on connectivity and access to information around elections.
- Media and digital literacy: promote citizens' ability to identify synthetic media and disinformation before it reaches the ballot box.
- Local action & advocacy: encourage participants to monitor national electoral-integrity bodies and support independent, transparent digital campaigning rules.

5. Suggested Readings & Resources

- International Day of Democracy – United Nations –
<https://www.un.org/en/observances/democracy-day>
- The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move – International IDEA –

¹⁴ <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/technology/artificial-intelligence>

<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/global-state-democracy-2025-democracy-move>

- Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Citizen Participation – OECD – https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-citizen-participation_a1ee2e0a-en.html
- Digital Government Outlook 2026 – OECD – https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2026/06/digital-government-outlook_4585678e.html
- Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom (2021) – case analysis – Verfassungsblog – <https://verfassungsblog.de/big-b-v-uk/>
- How Political Misinformation and Deepfakes Threaten 2026 Elections – AI CERTs – <https://www.aicerts.ai/news/how-political-misinformation-deepfakes-threaten-2026-elections/>

II. The Impact of the United Nations in Digital Democracy

United Nations Day, 24th of October

1. A short introduction

On 24th October every year, we celebrate United Nations Day to mark the day in 1945 that the UN Charter took effect and created the United Nations. The first official United Nations Day was celebrated in 1948 to raise awareness about the goals and achievements of the UN, and in 1971 the General Assembly asked the States to turn it into a public holiday to mark the importance of celebrating this international organisation with people across the world.¹⁵

Considering the AHRC topic on ‘Human Rights in Digital Democracy’, the United Nations has actively contributed to the creation of legal frameworks capable of protecting individuals from future threats through multilateralism and advocacy. The governance of the digital public square is one of the central priorities for the UN, and it requires involving States, civil society, businesses and the technical community. Only through cooperation between all relevant actors can the UN further protect individuals.

In 2024, the United Nations presented the Global Principles for Information Integrity to protect freedom of expression from power imbalances that can monopolise control over global information flows. These are – (i) societal trust and resilience, (ii) healthy incentives, (iii) public empowerment, (iv) independent, free and pluralistic media and (v) transparency and research. The main purpose of these principles is to ensure people gain control over the information they consume and ensure that their online data is protected against threats.¹⁶

2. Legal Framework

2.1. Charter of the United Nations (1945) and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

In 2013, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 68/167 on the right to privacy in the digital age, building on the report presented by the Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression submitted to the Human Rights

¹⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/un-day>

¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/en/information-integrity/global-principles>

Council. This report had a special focus on the protection of human rights in the context of surveillance of communications and freedom of opinion and expression in the online world.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes freedom of opinion and expression, and this includes the freedom to receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.¹⁷

2.2. United Nations Human Rights Council

In 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council presented Resolution 20/8 on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet. This resolution established that the rights people enjoy offline must also be protected online. This is one of the fundamental principles governing digital governance.¹⁸

2.3. Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and fake news

The Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and fake news, disinformation and propaganda was adopted in March 2017 by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression of the United Nations (UN), the Organisations for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). This was one of the first international commitments on the protection of human rights in the context of disinformation that affects how people participate in democracy.

2.4. Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and elections in the digital age

The Joint Declaration on freedom of expression and elections in the digital age was adopted in April 2020 by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression of the United Nations (UN), the Organisations for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Organisation of American States (OAS). This document expressed concerns over future legislation implemented by States that restricts freedom of expression and expands State control over social media.¹⁹

2.5. Global Digital Compact (Annex to the Pact for the Future)

The Global Digital Compact was adopted in September 2024 during the Summit for the Future. Its main purpose was to create an international framework capable of creating an open, safe and

¹⁷ <https://docs.un.org/A/RES/68/167>

¹⁸ <https://searchlibrary.ohchr.org/record/26464>

¹⁹ <https://rfom.osce.org/fom/302796>

secure digital future for all. More specifically, it provides a comprehensive global framework for digital cooperation and governance of artificial intelligence.²⁰

3. Current Trends & Challenges

The 2020 Joint Declaration (UN, OSCE and OAS) on freedom of expression and elections in the digital age identified the misuse of social media by States, organisations and private actors as one of the main threats. This misuse can lead to the spread of misinformation and manipulation of elections because many electors are now consuming political information mainly through social media. One of the recommendations was to ensure that online platforms implement the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.²¹

Regarding the importance of sharing information, the International IDEA, an intergovernmental organisation focused on the protection of a sustainable democracy worldwide, developed the UN and Democracy Hub with the objective of raising awareness about the work of the United Nations in democracy. The main purpose of the Hub is to facilitate access to knowledge resources, statistics, data and analysis on the topics of development, democracy, political participation and their connection with human rights. This tool ensures the strengthening of multilateralism through the sharing of information and involvement of multiple stakeholders, States, policymakers, researchers and journalists. Most importantly, having a digital library also ensures that people are involved and informed in topics affecting their daily life.²²

4. Recommended Focus Areas for Events & Advocacy

- The protection of digital democracy under the UN
- Comparative analysis of digital governance in the UN, EU and ECHR
- The contribution of multilateralism to protect free and fair elections
- Impact of Artificial Intelligence in political propaganda and election interference
- Importance of empowering with data about the sources of political information
- Debate on the current added value of the UN in the context of digital democracy

²⁰ <https://www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2024/09/The-Pact-for-the-Future-final.pdf>

²¹ https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Opinion/JointDeclarationDigitalAge_30April2020_EN.pdf

²² <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/un-and-democracy-hub>

5. Suggested Readings & Resources

United Nations Day – United Nations – (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/un-day>)

United Nations and Democracy Hub – International IDEA – (<https://www.idea.int/un-and-democracy/>)

United Nations Global Principles for Information Integrity – United Nations – (<https://www.un.org/en/information-integrity/global-principles>)

“Setting a Democratic Ambition for the UN Global Digital Compact” – Forum on Information and Democracy – (<https://informationdemocracy.org/2024/04/26/setting-a-democratic-ambition-for-the-un-global-digital-compact/>)

“Elections at risk in the digital age” – United Nations Human Rights Office for the High Commissioner – (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2025/07/elections-risk-digital-age>)

“Freedom of expression and elections in the digital age: a report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Irene Khan” – United Nations – (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4087410?v=pdf>)

“Freedom of expression, artificial intelligence and elections” – UNESCO and United Nations Development Programme – (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000393473>)

III. Defend the Voice Behind the News.

International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, 2nd of November

1. A short introduction

The International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists calls for accountability for violence, threats and killings of journalists and for perpetrators to be brought to justice. It was introduced by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) through a resolution on 18 December 2013. November 2nd was chosen as a date, since it commemorates the assassination of Ghislaine Dupont and Claude Verlon, two French journalists who were killed in Mali on 2 November 2013 while working there as journalists. The resolution was co-sponsored by Greece, Argentina, Austria, Costa Rica, France, Tunisia and 72 other countries, demonstrating broad international support.²³

“Impunity” refers to situations where crimes against journalists such as killings, disappearances, imprisonment, intimidation or violence are not properly investigated or prosecuted, allowing perpetrators to escape accountability.

According to UNESCO, more than 1,800 journalists were killed between 2006 and 2025, and almost 9 out of 10 of these killings remain judicially unresolved.²⁴

Why is it relevant to human rights? Protecting journalists safeguards freedom of expression, freedom of information and the right to participate in public life, fundamental human rights under international law. Impunity for attacks on journalists also undermines the rule of law and enables further human rights abuses.

In digital democracies, journalists increasingly work and face threats online, including online harassment, surveillance, cyberattacks, doxxing and AI-generated abuse. Protecting them ensures that digital spaces remain open for independent information, public debate and democratic participation.

2. Legal Framework

2.1. International Frameworks

2.1.1. United Nations – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

The ICCPR provides key international legal protections relevant to the safety and work of journalists, particularly through the rights to life, liberty and security, freedom of expression and an effective remedy. UNESCO also monitors the situation through mechanisms such as the

²³ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-impunity-crimes-against-journalists>

²⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists>

Observatory of Killed Journalists and supports national safety mechanisms and legal protections.

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- Article 19 ICCPR – Freedom of expression: Everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, which provides the fundamental international legal protection for journalism and access to information.
- Article 2(3) ICCPR - Effective remedy: States must provide an effective remedy when rights under the Covenant are violated. This is relevant to combating impunity for crimes against journalists.
- Article 6 ICCPR – Right to life: States must protect the right to life, which is directly relevant to the investigation and prevention of killings of journalists.
- Article 9 ICCPR – Liberty and security of person: Protects journalists against arbitrary arrest and detention.
- Digital democracy connection: Article 19 applies regardless of the medium used. Its protection therefore extends to digital journalism, online reporting and the dissemination and receipt of information online.
- Important distinction: The ICCPR is a legally binding international treaty for its States Parties, unlike a UN declaration or recommendation.

The framework increasingly addresses online harassment, digital threats and the role of internet platforms, recognising that journalists' safety and freedom of expression must also be protected in digital spaces.

2.1.2. Council of Europe European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) + Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4:

European Convention on Human Rights – Article 10 ²⁶

- Article 10 ECHR protects the freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas.
- It is particularly important for journalists because the European Court of Human Rights has interpreted Article 10 as providing strong protection for journalistic activities, the protection of sources and the dissemination of information.
- Unlike a recommendation, the ECHR is a legally binding human-rights treaty, and compliance is supervised by the European Court of Human Rights. The Council of Europe identifies Article 10 as the fundamental legal basis for journalists' freedom of expression.

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<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

²⁶ https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_eng

Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 ²⁷

- Adopted by the Committee of Ministers in 2016, this is the Council of Europe's most specific framework concerning the safety of journalists and the fight against impunity.
- It is structured around four pillars:
 - Prevention – States should create a legal framework protecting media independence and pluralism.
 - Protection – journalists should be protected from threats and attacks.
 - Prosecution – attacks against journalists must be effectively investigated and perpetrators brought to justice.
 - Information, education and awareness-raising.
- Particularly relevant to digital democracy, the Recommendation calls for protection of privacy and data protection, confidentiality and security of communications, journalistic sources and whistle-blowers. It also addresses safeguards against misuse of surveillance and interception of communications.
- The Recommendation explicitly recognises that journalists' freedom of expression must be effective both offline and online.

2.2. Regional & National Frameworks

National framework – Germany

German Constitution (Grundgesetz), Article 5(1) – Freedom of expression and press freedom ²⁸

- Guarantees the right to freely express and disseminate opinions and to obtain information from generally accessible sources.
- It expressly guarantees freedom of the press and freedom of broadcasting and prohibits censorship.
- This is the central constitutional basis for the protection of journalists and media freedom in Germany.
- Connection to digital democracy: The protection of receiving and disseminating information also provides a constitutional foundation for online journalism, digital media and public debate on the internet.
- Journalists also have rights concerning the protection of confidential sources and the refusal to testify, which are important for independent journalism.

²⁷

https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/freedom-of-expression-in-times-of-conflict/-/asset_publisher/msmZEN7tMGqp/content/-recommendation-cm-rec-2016-4-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-on-the-protection-of-journalism-and-safety-of-journalists-and-other-media

²⁸ https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.pdf

3. Current Trends & Challenges

Impunity remains a major global problem: Attacks on journalists continue, particularly in conflict zones. UNESCO recorded 162 killings of journalists, media workers and social media producers during 2022 and 2023, equivalent to approximately one killing every four days.²⁹

Most killings still go unpunished: According to UNESCO, around 9 out of 10 journalist killings between 2006 and 2025 remain judicially unresolved. This persistent impunity can encourage further attacks and weaken the rule of law.

Digital threats are increasingly important: Journalists are not only exposed to physical violence but also to online harassment, threats, doxxing, surveillance and AI-generated abuse. Women journalists are particularly affected; a 2026 UNESCO report highlights the growing use of deepfakes and manipulated images as tools of online abuse.³⁰

Self-censorship threatens digital democracy: Online harassment and threats can cause journalists to avoid certain topics or withdraw from public debate. This creates a “chilling effect” on freedom of expression: even without formal censorship, fear can limit what information reaches the public.³¹

Overall challenge: The protection of journalists has therefore become both an offline and digital human-rights issue. Protecting journalists from physical attacks is essential, but digital safety, protection from online abuse and AI-enabled harassment, and access to reliable information are increasingly necessary for a free and informed digital democracy.

4. Recommended Focus Areas for Events & Advocacy

- **Safety of journalists:** Raise awareness of physical violence, threats, arbitrary detention and killings of journalists.
- **Ending impunity:** Advocate for effective investigations, prosecutions and accountability for crimes against journalists.
- **Digital safety:** Address online harassment, doxxing, cyberattacks, surveillance and other digital threats targeting journalists.
- **Freedom of expression online:** Promote the protection of journalists’ and citizens’ right to seek, receive and share information in digital spaces.
- **AI and journalism:** Discuss risks from deepfakes, AI-generated harassment, misinformation and manipulation of journalistic content.
- **Disinformation and media literacy:** Promote media literacy and access to reliable information while avoiding restrictions that undermine legitimate freedom of expression.

²⁹

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_116cacf2-ad6f-4595-acb0-9a310ecb0b19?_=391550eng.pdf

³⁰ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/safety-of-journalists>

³¹ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/implementation-guide>

- **Youth & digital democracy:** Engage young people in discussions about press freedom, responsible digital participation and the importance of independent journalism.
- **Access to information:** Advocate for transparent institutions and equal access to information as prerequisites for meaningful democratic participation.
- **Local action & advocacy:** Encourage participants to monitor threats against journalists, support independent media and advocate for stronger national protections.

5. Suggested Readings & Resources

- Observatory of Killed Journalists – **UNESCO** –
<https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory>
- UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity – **United Nations / UNESCO** –
<https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/un-plan-action?hub=66507>
- World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Journalism – Shaping a World at Peace (2025) – **UNESCO** –
<https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends?hub=67808>
- Recommendation CM/Rec(2016)4 and Implementation Guide on the Protection and Safety of Journalists – **Council of Europe** –
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/background-documents>
- Iranian photojournalist faces 15 years in prison over images, reporting – **Reuters** –
<https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/iranian-photojournalist-faces-15-years-prison-over-images-reporting-2026-08-12/>
- There is a war on journalists raging around the world: let their voices be heard – **The Guardian** –
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/may/03/world-press-freedom-day-war-on-journalists-dangers>

IV. From Access to Agency: Human Rights in the Digital Age

International Digital Rights Days, 10th/11th December 2026

1. A short introduction

The **International Digital Rights Days (IDRD)** were introduced in **2024** by the **Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (CC4DR)** as an annual international initiative dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights in the digital age. The initiative takes place around **10 and 11 December**, deliberately coinciding with **Human Rights Day on 10 December**, which commemorates the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The IDRD are not established through a UN resolution or international treaty, but were launched as a **city-led awareness and advocacy initiative** bringing together municipalities, institutions, civil society organisations and other stakeholders.³²

The initiative is closely connected to **human rights** because digital technologies increasingly affect the exercise and protection of fundamental rights. Rights such as **freedom of expression, privacy, access to information, equality and non-discrimination** must therefore be protected online as well as offline. The CC4DR's five principles specifically address universal and equal access to the internet, privacy and data protection, transparency and accountability, participatory democracy, and open and ethical digital services.

The International Digital Rights Days are particularly relevant to **Human Rights in Digital Democracy** because digital technologies increasingly shape how people participate in public life and democratic decision-making. Digital platforms can expand access to information, facilitate civic participation and enable citizens to engage directly with public institutions. At the same time, issues such as **online censorship, surveillance, algorithmic discrimination, disinformation and unequal access to digital technologies** can undermine democratic participation and fundamental rights. Protecting digital rights is therefore an essential part of ensuring that democracy remains **inclusive, participatory and rights-based in the digital age**.³³

2. Legal Framework

The right to access and use digital technologies is not a standalone treaty right. Instead, it is derived from long-standing human rights instruments, above all freedom of expression and the right to privacy, which have been progressively interpreted and reaffirmed to apply to the online environment.

³² <https://internationaldigitalrightsdays.com/>

³³ <https://citiesfordigitalrights.org/sites/default/files/Final%20Strategy%202020%20-%20CC4DR.pdf>

2.1 International Frameworks

2.1.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and ICCPR (1966)

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantee the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Article 17 ICCPR further protects individuals against arbitrary interference with their privacy and correspondence. These two provisions form the textual basis on which digital rights such as access to information, free expression online and data privacy have been built.³⁴

2.1.2 UN Human Rights Council Resolutions on the Internet (2012–2021)

Beginning with resolution A/HRC/RES/20/8 in July 2012, the HRC has adopted a series of resolutions on “the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.”

The 2012 resolution affirms that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression,” a formula reaffirmed by consensus in 2014 and 2016.³⁵

The 2021 resolution, adopted with the theme of bridging digital divides, recognises that “technical solutions to secure and protect the confidentiality of digital communications, including measures for encryption and anonymity, are important to ensure the enjoyment of all human rights offline and online,” and calls on states to refrain from internet shutdowns and to address the digital divide through digital literacy and connectivity.³⁶

2.1.3 The Global Digital Compact (2024)

Adopted by consensus of all UN member states on 22 September 2024 at the Summit of the Future, as an annex to the Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact (GDC) is the first comprehensive, intergovernmentally negotiated framework for global digital cooperation.³⁷

It commits states to closing digital divides, fostering an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights, advancing responsible data governance, and strengthening international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity.³⁸

2.1.4 UNESCO Internet Universality (ROAM-X) Principles

Endorsed by UNESCO's General Conference in 2015, the Internet Universality concept calls for an internet that is human Rights-based, Open, Accessible to all, and governed through

³⁴<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

³⁵<https://www.right-docs.org/doc/a-hrc-res-20-8/>

³⁶<https://www.article19.org/resources/un-human-rights-council-adopts-resolution-on-human-rights-on-the-internet/>

³⁷<https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/global-digital-compact>

³⁸<https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/en>

Multi-stakeholder participation (ROAM), together with cross-cutting (X) considerations such as gender equality and children's rights. UNESCO's related ROAM-X Indicators framework, comprising 303 indicators, helps states and stakeholders assess and improve their national digital rights environment.³⁹

2.2 Regional & National Frameworks

2.2.1 European Union: Charter of Fundamental Rights, GDPR and the AI Act

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights protects freedom of expression and information (Article 11) and, distinctly from most other regional instruments, enshrines a self-standing right to the protection of personal data (Article 8).⁴⁰

This is given detailed effect through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation (EU) 2016/679), which sets binding rules on the lawful processing of personal data, consent, data subject rights and cross-border data transfers, and has become a global reference point for data protection law.⁴¹

More recently, the EU Artificial Intelligence Act, which entered into force on 1 August 2024, introduces a risk-based framework for AI systems, banning certain uses (such as social scoring) and imposing transparency and human-oversight obligations on “high-risk” AI applications.⁴²

2.2.2 Council of Europe: Convention 108+ and the European Court of Human Rights

The Council of Europe's Convention 108 (1981), modernised as “Convention 108+”, is the first binding international treaty on data protection and remains open to non-European states.¹²

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has interpreted Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to respect for private life) to cover digital surveillance. In its Grand Chamber judgment in *Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom* (25 May 2021), the Court found that the UK's bulk interception regime violated Articles 8 and 10 of the Convention due to insufficient independent oversight and safeguards, while confirming that bulk interception is not in itself incompatible with the Convention.¹³

3. Current Trends & Challenges

According to the International Telecommunication Union's Facts and Figures 2025 report, an estimated 6 billion people (thus about three-quarters of the world's population) were using the

³⁹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-universality-indicators>

⁴⁰ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

⁴¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>

⁴² <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/regulatory-framework-ai>

internet in 2025, up from 5.8 billion in 2024, yet 2.2 billion people remained offline, most of them in low- and middle-income countries.⁴³

The report highlights persistent divides: 94% of people in high-income countries use the internet compared with only 23% in low-income countries; 85% of urban residents are online against 58% in rural areas; and a gender gap remains, with 77% of men online compared with 71% of women.⁴⁴

Beyond access, digital rights advocates increasingly focus on the quality and safety of connectivity. Growing use of AI in decision-making, from content moderation to welfare eligibility and predictive policing, raises concerns about algorithmic bias, opacity and lack of redress for affected individuals. Disinformation and coordinated online manipulation continue to threaten free and fair elections and public discourse, while gendered and politically motivated online harassment silences women, journalists and human rights defenders.

Internet shutdowns imposed by governments, often during elections or periods of unrest, continue to be documented and condemned by UN human rights bodies as disproportionate restrictions on the rights to expression, information and assembly.⁴⁵

At the international level, negotiations on a UN Convention against Cybercrime and the early implementation of the Global Digital Compact illustrate both the growing consensus that digital governance must be grounded in human rights, and the continuing disagreement among states over surveillance powers, content regulation and the balance between security and civil liberties.

4. Recommended Focus Areas for Events & Advocacy

- The right to access and impart information online as part of freedom of expression
- Closing the digital divide: connectivity, affordability and digital literacy
- Data protection and privacy in an AI-driven society
- Legal safeguards against unlawful surveillance and internet shutdowns
- Algorithmic accountability and human oversight of AI systems
- Online gender-based violence and protection of journalists and human rights defenders
- Digital inclusion for persons with disabilities, older persons and rural communities
- Children's and young people's rights in digital environments

⁴³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/data-protection/convention108-and-protocol>

⁴⁴ <https://verfassungsblog.de/big-b-v-uk/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR-2025-11-17-Facts-and-Figures.aspx>

5. Suggested Readings & Resources

- International Day for Universal Access to Information – UNESCO – <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/universal-access-information>
- HRC Resolution 20/8 (2012), The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet – <https://www.right-docs.org/doc/a-hrc-res-20-8/>
- ARTICLE 19: UN Human Rights Council adopts 2021 resolution on human rights on the Internet – <https://www.article19.org/resources/un-human-rights-council-adopts-resolution-on-human-rights-on-the-internet/>
- Global Digital Compact – United Nations – <https://www.un.org/global-digital-compact/en>
- UNESCO Internet Universality – ROAM-X Indicators – <https://www.unesco.org/en/internet-universality-indicators>
- ITU, Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2025 – <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/PR-2025-11-17-Facts-and-Figures.aspx>
- Council of Europe, Convention 108+ on data protection – <https://www.coe.int/en/web/data-protection/convention108-and-protocol>
- ECtHR Grand Chamber, Big Brother Watch and Others v. the United Kingdom (2021) – case analysis – <https://verfassungsblog.de/big-b-v-uk/>
- European Commission, Regulatory Framework for Artificial Intelligence (AI Act) – <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/regulatory-framework-ai>
- EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (consolidated text) – https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf
- International Digital Rights Days (civil society initiative) – <https://internationaldigitalrightsdays.com/>

Your Feedback Matters

We welcome your input. We hope these resources serve as a valuable guide in planning meaningful and productive sessions for your group. Should you have any suggestions for improving these materials, or if there are specific topics or international days you would like included in future editions, please do not hesitate to share your ideas.

Please send any feedback, ideas, or suggestions to director.ahrc@elsa.org