

C-Fam Statement during the Informal consultations on the Global Digital Compact
May 25, 2023

Thank you co-facilitators,

This is a timely discussion. The reach and power of AI technology is astonishing. The biggest danger is that it becomes a political weapon. Those who wield the power of AI cannot be allowed to silence and repress their opponents or to cancel and re-write history. Ensuring transparency and accountability in this space is a special challenge because of the complex interplay of public-private interests.

We learned from the Twitter Files that a complex public-private social control apparatus already exists in the form of coordinated messaging and censorship across government, private industry, as well as traditional and new media. Much of it is automated. All of it is carried out under the banner of pursuing legitimate aims, including combatting “misinformation” and “hate speech.” What the Stasi did in East Germany was child’s play by comparison. AI has the potential of ratcheting this social control even further.

In the wrong hands, AI technologies run the very real danger of becoming social control tools. AI can silence entire populations and viewpoints. It can re-write history and make up facts. AI tools already spew billions of words everyday without any attribution at all. And they have already been caught mis-citing and manufacturing sources to obtain the favored results and political bias of their programmers.

Content moderation and censorship are extreme measures. Misinformation and hate speech are powerful labels. But they are difficult to define. How can we stop them from being abused to silence others through world-wide regulation such as the one we aspire to in the GDC?

Proponents of new concepts like “technology-facilitated GBV” have not been forthcoming about their intentions in this regard. How can the GDC help us distinguish between legitimate efforts to protect women and others from violence versus attempts to manipulate social debates and silence political opponents on intractable issues like abortion and LGBT issues?

I offer this as a chilling reminder to all those who want to silence others:

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Gulag Archipelago. Solzhenitsyn famously remarked that those who silenced, imprisoned, and murdered their opponents during the Soviet reign did so convinced that they were justified to do so because of the righteousness of their effort to build a better world. All of society was made a part of a system of repression through fear and anxiety. By the end of it all 25 million people were killed or imprisoned.

I would ask those who want to use AI to silence those they disagree with today: Are you ready to create virtual gulags to make your political opponents disappear? Let us make sure the GDC is a tool to help liberate all, and not one that is used to silence and repress others.