

Freedom Online Coalition Program of Action 2023

Developed by the United States, Chair of the Freedom Online Coalition in 2023, following consultations with FOC and Advisory Network Members.



FOC Mission Statement

The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) is a group of 35 governments committed to the human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We also believe that the human rights enjoyed by people offline must also be protected online. We commit to working together, and with all others who share these views, to support Internet freedom and protect human rights - such as freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and privacy rights online - worldwide. The FOC aims to be a proactive coalition that ensures Internet freedom issues are on the international policy agenda to drive concrete policy changes and outcomes. For more information see the FOC's core documents [here](#).

Background

In October 2022, the U.S. government finalized its vision statement for the future of the FOC in the coming years. The Program of Action 2023 outlines the FOC's priority areas and activities for 2023 and was developed by the United States as the FOC 2023 Chair, following consultations with FOC and FOC Advisory Network Members. The activities outlined below will be carried out over the course of the United States' term as Chair from January 1 to December 31, 2023.

Context and Priority Areas

Since its creation in 2011, the FOC has successfully carved a niche for itself as the principal forum for like-minded governments to address issues related to Internet freedom. The FOC has built a strong internal network among government officials focused on human rights; created FOC networks in places where key international organizations are based, namely in New York, Geneva, Paris, and Vienna; established an independent multistakeholder mechanism via the FOC Advisory Network; developed a network of expertise on human rights online; and constructed a body of work through its joint statements shaping global norms on Internet freedom.

Yet, in the decade since FOC's founding, the promise of digital technologies has become paired with, if not overshadowed by, concerns about their growing misuse, especially in the context of growing digital authoritarianism, which poses new challenges to human rights online.

The United States and the more than 60 partners that have endorsed the Declaration for the Future of the Internet (DFI) reinforced the vision for an open and global digital future in which all technologies are used to advance, rather than undermine, human rights and democratic values, drawing heavily on the foundations of the FOC's [Tallinn Agenda](#) and the [Helsinki Declaration](#).

Strengthening the FOC

Building on these efforts to strengthen the FOC as an institution and to expand the FOC membership, the United States, in partnership with the FOC membership, will focus on deepening the Coalition's diplomatic efforts to reinforce the opportunities of digital technologies globally and address the challenges posed by the growing misuse of digital technologies and threats to human rights online.

In order to further strengthen and expand the FOC, the FOC Members will build upon previous years' work and have identified three goals that are foundational to rejuvenating the FOC:

Goal 1: Bolster existing efforts where the FOC adds unique value;

Goal 2: Increase ties between FOC multilateral policy development and country-level activities, including both diplomatic and development assistance activities; and

Goal 3: Strengthen and expand the FOC through improved operating mechanics and outreach efforts.

As part of the United States' Chairship in 2023, the FOC will prioritize the following policy topics: promoting and protecting fundamental freedoms, including through countering network disruptions; countering and building resilience to the rise of digital authoritarianism and the misuse of technologies, to include surveillance technologies; advancing norms, principles, and safeguards for artificial intelligence (AI) based on human rights; and strengthening digital inclusion and supporting ongoing initiatives to promote safe online spaces for marginalized or vulnerable groups, including for women, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized or vulnerable groups.

Promoting and Protecting Fundamental Freedoms

The Internet and digital technologies enable individuals to exercise their human rights more fully, including the freedom to hold and express opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers, as well as facilitate the monitoring of human rights and documentation of human rights violations. However, there is a growing trend of state-sponsored actions through the misuse of digital technologies to curb these freedoms and perpetrate human rights abuses. This includes partial or complete Internet shutdowns and network disruptions, and online content regulation and censorship that are inconsistent with human rights law, amongst other issues. In addition to the FOC's 2017 [Joint Statement on State Sponsored Network Disruptions](#), the FOC Task Force on Internet Shutdowns has been working to combat the increasingly pronounced pattern of shutdowns, and we expect it will continue to do so and take further action on country-specific situations as they happen.

Countering Growing Digital Authoritarianism and the Misuse of Digital Technologies

A growing number of governments around the world have been acquiring, developing and deploying a suite of tools to censor, arbitrarily surveil, and violate the rights of individuals online and offline, within their borders and beyond. Such actions include enforcing strict control over cross-border information flows, imposing Internet shutdowns, and deploying internal and cross-border malicious cyber technologies. They also include collecting and managing citizens' data for purposes of societal control, intimidation, and harassment, and cracking down on social media platforms to stifle dissent, harassing human rights defenders and journalists, intimidating members of marginalized communities, repressing political opposition—including through targeted harassment of women leaders – spreading disinformation, interfering in the internal politics and elections of other countries, and beyond. Some states have developed sophisticated mass surveillance systems that combine online monitoring tools with integrated databases to target members of religious and ethnic minority communities. In addition, some states have developed or obtained advanced spyware technologies that allow them to target and secretly surveil dissidents and human rights defenders within their country and beyond their borders. Building on the FOC's 2014 [Joint Statement on the Use and Export of Surveillance Technology](#), the FOC has provided a platform for member governments, in consultation with the FOC Advisory Network, to elaborate principles for the rights-respecting use of digital technologies, including with surveillance capabilities, that can serve as a foundation for future efforts to counter the misuse of technologies.

Advancing Norms, Principles and Safeguards for AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems offer unprecedented opportunities for human development and innovation, with the potential to generate social and economic benefits, and help protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, as with other digital technologies, AI systems can also be developed or used in ways that pose significant risks to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. For example, some governments have used AI systems for repressive purposes, including through remote biometric identification (RBI) using facial recognition technology, as well as automated content censorship. Some states use these AI systems, often by leveraging private sector tools, to facilitate and/or mandate arbitrary or unlawful surveillance, and censorship practices, that are in violation of international human rights law. The FOC has worked to address these issues via the 2020 [Joint Statement on AI and Human Rights](#), and the FOC's Task Force on AI and Human Rights (TFAIR), which has been working to raise awareness of these issues among member governments in the context of Internet freedom and discuss potential directions for government action.

Strengthening Digital Inclusion

In an increasingly digitized world, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, offer countless opportunities: facilitating the acquisition of knowledge and skills; creating financial opportunities; enhancing communication; and more. ICTs are a vital component of social, political, cultural, and economic advancement, especially in developing countries. In addition, the Internet and ICTs provide a unique platform that enables individuals to exercise their human rights more fully. However, a persistent lack of digital inclusion and access prevents people from realizing the full potential and benefits provided by the Internet and thereby creates digital divides. These discrepancies in access exist across demographics, geography, area/location, race, gender, class, disability, ethnic background, and on other grounds. Moreover, a lack of digital inclusion and access also affects those who already are connected, often preventing a full or meaningful use of the Internet, including through the disproportionate impacts of online harassment and abuse on women, girls, LGBTI persons, persons with disabilities, or other marginalized or vulnerable groups, which reflects and exacerbates offline discrimination and disparities. While the Internet and ICTs have the potential to empower marginalized or vulnerable groups, they also carry the risk of reinforcing existing social and economic inequalities for those who may lack meaningful connectivity, particularly impacting already marginalized or vulnerable groups: a tendency which appears particularly serious in times of ubiquitous digitalization. Building on the FOC's 2020 [Joint Statement on Digital Inclusion](#) and Canada's Chairship priorities from 2022, we seek to continue elevating the issue of digital inclusion within the FOC, particularly via efforts through the Task Force on Digital Equality.

The FOC remains steadfast in addressing these challenges through its key working methods and is committed to finding ways, in partnership with the FOC Advisory Network, to enhance the visibility, continuity, and effectiveness of the Coalition.



Detailed Overview of Goals

GOAL 1: Bolster existing efforts where the FOC adds unique value

Objective 1A: Better integrate the FOC's work into ongoing policy processes, including by leveraging diplomatic networks, incorporating FOC principles into development initiatives, and leveraging the Advisory Network's expertise.

- Activity 1: Develop and execute a plan of action and annual priorities for FOC diplomatic networks in New York, Geneva, Paris, and Vienna.
- Activity 2: Identify a POC at each of the diplomatic networks in order to support the plan of action for each network.
- Activity 3: Develop a concept note for potential FOC engagement with regional organizations, such as the African Union, Economic Community of West African States, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and/ or Organization of American States.
- Activity 4: Leverage the FOC to coordinate multilateral efforts to advocate for safeguards in the development, export, and use of technologies that are often misused to commit human rights violations or abuses, such as surveillance technologies, including spyware.
- Activity 5: Issue country-specific statements in response to critical situations under exceptional circumstances.
- Activity 6: Develop and promote language from FOC joint statements in relevant international forums and resolutions.
- Activity 7: Support the work of the FOC's existing multistakeholder Task Forces and Working Groups.
- Activity 8: Promote existing frameworks, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, through inter-alia collaboration with the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders.
- Activity 9: Facilitate collaboration with other like-minded international and United Nations initiatives, where appropriate, such as the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence, the Media Freedom Coalition, the Partnership on Information and Democracy, the Tech for Democracy initiative, the Christchurch Call to Action, the Global Forum on Cyber Expertise, the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, in pursuit of shared objectives.
- Activity 10: Further leverage, promote, and build upon existing FOC statements, principles, norms, WG outputs etc., as appropriate.

Objective 1B: Increase awareness of the FOC and its tools within member countries.

- Activity 1: Produce a succinct overview of the tools available for FOC Members/Observers, building on the toolkits developed under Canada's Chairship, to leverage in venues such as public statements, private engagements, joint demarches, actions by civil society actors, and other situations to raise awareness and facilitate further action by FOC Members.
- Activity 2: Encourage all FOC member states to hold quarterly update calls and/or communications with their staff at relevant embassies and missions, or leverage existing regular calls when appropriate, to discuss freedom online and potential concrete actions.
- Activity 3: Consider the creation of additional FOC tools, such as an FOC rapid response mechanism, that will pool diplomatic and donor resources to respond to fast breaking crises.
- Activity 4: Encourage and re-engage non-active FOC member countries to increase their level of participation in the FOC.

GOAL 2: Increase ties between FOC multilateral policy development and country-level development activities

Objective 2A: Strengthen the relationship between multilateral policy processes and country-level programming, including development programming.

- Activity 1: Conduct an analysis of the current development landscape and the mechanisms through which FOC could best position itself in this landscape.
- Activity 2: Work to improve communication and coordination with representatives from donor counterparts of FOC member states into the FOC policy making process to strengthen the relationship between multilateral policy processes and country-level programming, including development programming.



- Activity 3: In partnership with FOC Members, FOC Advisory Network as well as other civil society organizations and impacted communities, create a set of donor principles that could guide donor funding in the digital realm.
- Activity 4: Establish an “opt-in” dedicated donor coordination mechanism among FOC member states to maximize information sharing to better influence strategic impact of resources, avoid duplication of efforts, and align funding strategies with policy priorities, as appropriate.

GOAL 3: Strengthen and expand the FOC through improved operating mechanics and outreach efforts

Objective 3A: Facilitate continuity between chairs and FOC policy priorities over multiple years.

- Activity 1: Identify the next chair (ideally next two chairs, as appropriate), ideally by March 2023.
- Activity 2: Create a troika among Chairs (current, past, future FOC Chair) and hold regular troika calls to facilitate a smooth transition from Chair to Chair.
- Activity 3: Identify three-four thematic goals for the FOC to focus on over the next three years to facilitate continuity of policy between FOC Chairs in consultation with the Advisory Network.

Objective 3B: Strengthen internal processes, including communications, within the FOC.

- Activity 1: Seek to identify additional funding for the Support Unit, including funding for an additional Support Unit staff member to coordinate the diplomatic networks in order to provide a secretariat function to support the plan of action for each network.
- Activity 2: Share information from member states’ quarterly update calls with relevant embassies and missions in the FOC Strategy and Coordination meetings.
- Activity 3: Conduct a survey of the Support Unit’s operations to identify strengths and areas for improvement, to include questions regarding where Members feel more support is needed from the Support Unit, the format for meeting minutes and calendar invites, alternating meeting times to accommodate different time zones, and providing more opportunities for all Members to provide feedback.
- Activity 4: Review and update the Stockholm Terms of Reference, as appropriate.
- Activity 5: Further develop and support the Support Unit’s execution of a media and communications plan.

Objective 3C: Strengthen the nexus between FOC Members’ domestic and foreign policies.

- Activity 1: Involve digital, telecommunications, and ICT policymakers, as appropriate, to a greater extent in FOC processes.
- Activity 2: Invite digital, telecommunications, and ICT Ministers to select FOC meetings and events to promote closer alignment and synergies across portfolios.
- Activity 3: Encourage countries to self-report their domestic efforts to support Internet freedom through their United Nations Universal Periodic Review reports, treaty body reports, and other pre-existing mechanisms.
- Activity 4: Invite non-FOC Members and/or relevant academics and civil society representatives to participate in FOC events, workshops, seminars, and side events to facilitate information sharing and best practices with FOC Members, where appropriate.

Objective 3D: Diversify and expand the membership of the FOC.

- Activity 1: Invite additional countries, particularly outside the Global North, to join the FOC.
- Activity 2: Explore inviting supranational organizations (e.g. European Union) and/or other global and/or regional international organizations (e.g., United Nations, Organization of American States, African Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, etc.) to participate in the FOC in some capacity.
- Activity 3: Invite select non-FOC Members to participate in select FOC events, workshops, seminars, and side events, where appropriate.

