

Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies 2012-2014



Understanding/Context

A healthy democracy requires an informed citizenry, or so the theory goes. This argument assumes that citizens receive impartial and objective information, delivered via a free and diverse media, leading to a robust exchange of opinions. Members of society are thus able to participate fully in community decisions and democracy can flourish. In practice, however, it is acknowledged that the media has not served this purpose. Concentrations of ownership, the assimilation of mass media, concerns over private interests – in everything ranging from advertising to sourcing – have forced a rethink of the respected notions of free speech, impartiality and objectivity.

The rise in communication technologies has exacerbated this problem and made it more pertinent than ever. Although these tools give users greater control over their information diet, the speed at which news is disseminated has increased, the channels through which information is sourced have changed and the platforms have multiplied, challenging the ability of media organizations to ensure accurate and unbiased reports. There have been a number of cases where false information has rapidly spread online and fooled traditional media outlets. Large media groups have a near-monopoly on news coverage, resulting in issues and groups being under-represented. At the same time, Edward Snowden's revelations of surveillance by government agencies have created additional risks to informed societies, notably threats of greater regulatory oversight and reduced whistle-blower protection, which will hinder free speech.

Given the disconnect between theory and reality, what must be done to foster the development of an informed society? The fundamental problems surrounding media are persistent and likely to endure. Nonetheless, issues of transparency and accountability, media literacy and privacy must be addressed.

Questions on how to best integrate new communication channels into “old” media remain. Fundamentally, the priority is to develop a model for a society in which all citizens have access to reliable and pertinent information, allowing them to make better-informed decisions.

Shaping the Agenda

In 2013, the Council launched a Blueprint for Informed Societies. The document is designed to serve as a model and guide for how societies can improve their level of “informedness”, to benefit their societies and the world as a whole.

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Over the next 12 months, the Council intends to work further on an Index of Informed Societies by continuing research and statistical analysis, with the long-term aim of developing a complete ranking of the world's nations and their level of informedness. The Council has developed a university seminar series to promote the messages of this Index. Finally, there are plans to create a public space for online debate about what an informed society means for the world.

Contact Information

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