

Her Excellency
Ms. Audrey Azoulay
UNESCO Director-General,

Your Excellency, Ms. Director-General,

I would like to thank you for the invitation to attend this Global Conference by UNESCO held in Paris between the 22nd and 23rd of February 2003.

Digital platforms, in their different modalities, are a fundamental part of our day to day lives. They define the way we communicate, how we relate to other people and consume products and services. The development of the Internet has brought extraordinary accomplishments to the global economy and to our societies. Digital platforms have helped to promote and disseminate knowledge. They facilitate trade. They increase productivity. They broaden the offer of services and the flow of information.

These benefits, nevertheless, are distributed in an unequal manner between people of different levels of income, broadening social inequality. The digital environment caused the concentration of market and power in the hands of few companies and countries. It has also caused risks to democracy. Risks to the civilized interaction between people. Risks to public health. The dissemination of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to thousands of deaths. Hate speech makes victims every day. And the victimized are the most vulnerable sectors of our societies.

The world has witnessed the attack by extremists to the seats of the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches of Power in Brazil on January 8th. Brazilian democracy won that battle and it is now stronger. But we will always be indignant with the barbaric scenes of that Sunday.

What happened that day was the culmination of a campaign, initiated much before, and that used, as ammunition, lies and disinformation. This campaign had, as targets, democracy, and the credibility of Brazilian institutions. To a large extent, this campaign was nurtured, organized, and disseminated through several digital platforms and messaging apps. It used the same method used to generate acts of violence elsewhere in the world.

This must stop.

The international community needs, from now on, to work to give effective answers to this challenging question of our times. We need balance. On the one hand, it is necessary to guarantee the exercise of individual freedom of expression, a fundamental human right. On the other hand, we need to ensure a collective right: the right of society to have access to trustworthy information, and not lies and disinformation.

We also cannot allow the integrity of our democracies to be affected by decisions taken by some few actors that currently control the digital platforms. Regulation should guarantee the exercise of individual and collective rights. It should correct distortions of a business model that generate profits exploiting the personal data of users. To be more efficient, digital platforms regulation should be designed with transparency and social participation. In the international field, this matter should be coordinated in a multilateral manner. The debating process spearheaded by UNESCO, I am sure, will be useful in the construction of a plural and transparent dialogue. A process that will involve governments, experts, and the civil society.

Concurrently, we should work to reduce digital gaps and promote the autonomy of developing countries in the digital realm. We need to guarantee access to the Internet for all, stimulate education and the necessary skills for an active and conscious participation of our citizens in the digital world. Developing countries should be capable of acting in a sovereign manner in the data economy, as agents and not only as data exporters or passive content consumers.

This UNESCO conference is the beginning of this debate, and not its final stop. I am sure that Brazil will be able to contribute in a significant manner to the construction of a fairer and more balanced digital environment, based in transparent and democratic governance structures.

I take this opportunity to renew my assurances of our highest esteem and consideration.

Signed by LUIZ INÁCIO LULA DA SILVA – President of the Federative Republic of Brazil

