

Defying the Ice Age. A new international initiative to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in the digital space and in the field of AI

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In the social media sphere, a *new ice age* is beginning for freedom of religion or belief and other human rights—or so it seems. At the beginning of January 2025, the head of tech giant Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, announced in a video message that his social networks Facebook, Instagram and Threads would do away with independent fact-checkers and ditch some of their content moderation policies. Meta noted that it was following the example of Elon Musk, as the approach of letting users—and not independent fact-checkers—decide which posts are problematic had worked for his platform X.¹

This announcement could have grave consequences for the communication of billions of people in the digital space—through the unfettered spread of misinformation, more incitement to hatred and discrimination, and the proliferation of propagandist rhetoric and manipulation in the guise of a democratic process.

This radical change of course was motivated by straightforward business considerations: the desire to curry favor with Donald Trump right before his second inauguration as President of the United States and to benefit from this commercially, after Facebook and other social media platforms had suspended Trump's accounts following the Capitol Hill Riot in 2021, citing risks to public safety, and only reinstated them about two years later with some new guardrails. Remarkably, Zuckerberg said one motivation in his new allegiance to Trump was the desire to “push back on governments around the world that are going after American companies and pushing to censor more.”² He explicitly referred to the European Union, saying it

1 Cf. Kaplan, Joel: Meta. More Speech and Fewer Mistakes (January 7, 2025): <https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/> (April 30, 2025).

2 Zuckerberg, Mark: Meta. Video announcement (January 7, 2025), 3:54–4:00: https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/V2.Single-Take-CS25_MZ_JanAnnouncement_v09_16x9.mp4?_=1 (April 30, 2025).

had “an ever-increasing number of laws institutionalizing censorship”³ and contrasting this with the U.S., which according to him “has the strongest constitutional protections for free expression in the world.”⁴

What does all this have to do with freedom of religion or belief and artificial intelligence (AI)? Well, a lot. Zuckerberg’s statement follows a dangerous political trend which implicitly or explicitly questions the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights by giving freedom of political expression absolute priority over human rights such as human dignity, equal treatment of men and women, and freedom of religion or belief. And he is using a term with very serious origins, which Donald Trump and his ideological associates have turned into a political battle cry: censorship. According to this mindset, it is censorship when freedom of expression is weighed against other protected rights (as envisaged by law) and, upon consideration, another protected right is given higher priority. Such considerations are undertaken, for instance, with regard to incitement to hatred and mob violence on social media. If the considerations lead to the decision that free speech is less of a priority in a given instance, a post may be deleted or flagged, or an account may be closed down—which in the offline world may, very tangibly, mean saving human lives.

Zuckerberg cannot prevail everywhere with this libertarian concept of freedom of expression. That is why, right after his announcement, Meta had to admit that it would not be able to realize its plans in this form in the EU. The blanket accusation of censorship in countries or groups of countries such as the EU that have tighter regulations on handling AI than the U.S. may also be considered an attempt to forge ahead in order to divert attention from deficits in content moderation. Almost in passing, Zuckerberg mentioned that the increasingly complex systems for moderating content—which identify, for example, racist and antisemitic posts—made too many mistakes and that Meta would therefore be dialing filters back. With regard to the several million posts that are removed every day by specially programmed filters for having violated Meta policies, the company says that one to two out of every ten of these actions may have been mistakes. So it seems reasonable to assume that the call for unrestrained freedom of expression is also motivated by the technological limitations of handling AI, which cannot be expected to be overcome in the near future.

3 Ibid., 4:06–4:09.

4 Ibid., 4:01–4:05.

It will take some time before a sound assessment can be made of what these developments mean for freedom of religion or belief in the EU. However, it is unfortunately already evident that these developments are likely to have negative impacts in the very near future in countries and regions that have fewer or lower restrictions, or weaker regulatory systems, if they have them at all. If social media is increasingly going to turn a blind eye to hate, discrimination against women and minorities, and stigmatization because they generously consider all of these to be acts of free speech, this will have grave consequences in many countries of the world—especially for individuals who belong to religious and ethnic minorities. Such corporate policies may actually help authoritarian and repressive governments to fuel and encourage the exclusion of and attacks against minorities of all kinds, and to expand their surveillance systems on that basis. These new policies may also facilitate the targeted spread of disinformation as a means of *reporting on* people. There have been alarming instances of this in Pakistan, for example, where envy or petty disputes among neighbors have led to allegations of blasphemy being spread on social media, resulting in mob violence that left people dead.

We are only just beginning to build awareness and start a discussion about these interdependencies. And these are not issues that can be quickly or casually understood. Nor is it easy to develop appropriate policies to respond to these developments. That is why, together with the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ⁵), I decided to host the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Berlin in October 2024. This high-ranking international multi-stakeholder event aimed to work on a better understanding of the links between AI and freedom of religion or belief and launch an international cooperation effort to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in the digital space. We hosted the conference in cooperation with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA, also called the Article 18 Alliance), which unites 38 countries that want to foster freedom of religion or belief. The conference brought together more than 120 participants from all continents, including high-ranking government delegations from 30 countries, members of parliament, and representatives of religious communities, civil society, academia, and the private sector. The conference put a special focus on the impact which the design and use of AI has on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), the role that social media plays in this context,

⁵ Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung.

and ways in which AI is used for surveillance of religious minorities and transnational repression targeting people in exile. In organizing the conference, we were eager to bring together a new mix of different communities in order to explore and discuss the various aspects of the topic in a holistic way and lay the foundations for networking and cooperation. Participants included human rights activists who may previously have been wary of connecting with proponents of religion and freedom of religion; representatives of communities of religion or belief; bloggers; tech companies; the FoRB community with its high level of international involvement; and academics from a broad range of disciplines.

The Ministerial showed the significant role which AI plays in promoting freedom of religion or belief, but also in putting this human right in jeopardy. In order to deal with AI in an appropriate manner, it is important to realize that both AI development and AI applications exist in specific cultural, religious and societal contexts. And for the time being, AI development and applications are designed and managed by humans. This means that AI is a social tool which should be developed and designed in a people-centered way.

Based on this understanding, AI can become an instrument to promote freedom of religion or belief. We should seize the opportunity to help develop it in this direction. What is fundamentally important for working on AI for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief is a human rights-based approach—not broad alternative concepts such as ethical or responsible engagement. Only through a human rights-based approach will we be able to undertake targeted efforts to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in its interdependence with other human rights.

Social media is a good example which highlights the importance of this aspect. Social media has become an important tool for manifesting and practicing freedom of religion or belief and for connecting believers and fostering dialogue. But at the same time it is also being heavily misused for spreading hate speech, allegations of blasphemy and the incitement of mob violence.

The discussions at the Ministerial showed very clearly that there is a need for a deeper understanding

- within tech companies and among stakeholders of how religion or belief is manifested and how FoRB is impacted online;

- of how to integrate FoRB into human rights impact assessments at tech companies, taking account of the interdependence between FoRB and other human rights, like freedom of expression;
- of how to deal with regulatory environments across the world and potentially facilitate convergence; and
- of the role played by public education and training facilities for digital technology users, how to expand and leverage such facilities, and how to build strong alliances and networks for fostering them.

At the Ministerial, participants highlighted the misuse of AI for increasing surveillance and transnational repression, both as a general phenomenon and in terms of concrete examples. Examples were presented of how people living in exile in Germany are affected by transnational repression. One purpose of these presentations was to raise awareness of this phenomenon, which does not stop at the borders of democratic states.

Together with Ambassador Robert Rehak, Chair of IRFBA – The Article 18 Alliance, I proposed that the Alliance take concrete follow-up action on FoRB and AI. This means setting up a workstream with a multi-stakeholder dialogue with governments, civil society, religious actors and tech companies which focuses on

- deeper human rights impact assessments at tech companies, dealing explicitly with FoRB and its interconnection with other human rights;
- an exchange on the basic concepts underlying stakeholders' approaches to AI and FoRB; and
- a taxonomy of how behavior related to religion or belief manifests online.

Personally, I found it very encouraging that I received a lot of feedback from different quarters after the Conference which showed that the meeting had succeeded in sensitizing many stakeholders – including a large tech company, civil society actors, government representatives and religious leaders – to the issue and making them realize how important it is.

This boosted our motivation to start coordinating the follow-up process right after the conference. The process will look at ways of better harnessing the potential of AI for freedom of religion or belief and developing joint responses in order to limit negative impacts. Just a few weeks after the conference, a highly active multi-stakeholder network emerged that will identify and address intersections with existing international processes, reach out to further tech companies, develop advisory programs, policy papers and briefings for engagement with tech companies, offer capacity

development support to governmental and civil society entities, and serve as a platform for learning and networking with regard to political advocacy, regulatory issues, and other factors that are vital for making the process a success. We will also have to look more closely into the balance between regulatory requirements in different regional and country contexts and the human rights-based self-regulation of tech companies. It is evident—not least in light of Zuckerberg's statements and the imminent new ice age for freedom of religion or belief on social media—that pursuing this matter with perseverance is well worth the effort, and that the amount of work needed in this area will likely increase, and not decrease, in the future.

References

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