

10:00AM-  
11:30AM EDT

MONDAY  
OCT 5 2020

UNGA75 HIGH-LEVEL SIDE EVENT

# Protecting Human Rights During the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond: Digital Pandemic Surveillance and the Right to Privacy

WATCH LIVE: <https://accessnow.org/unga75-side-event>

## WELCOMING REMARKS

**H.E. Silvio Gonzato**

Ambassador, Deputy Head of Delegation, Delegation of the European Union

**H.E. Ville Skinnari**

Minister for Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade, Finland

## DISCUSSION MODERATED BY

**Ms. Peggy Hicks**

Director, UN Human Rights

## SPEAKERS

**Ms. Patricia Adusei-Poku**

Commissioner and Executive Director of the Data Protection Commission, Ministry of ICT of Ghana

**Dr. Eduardo Bertoni**

Director, Agencia de Acceso a la Información Pública

**Ms. Fanny Hidvégi**

Europe Policy Manager, Access Now

**Mr. Robert Kirkpatrick**

Director, UN Global Pulse

**Ms. Alexandria Walden**

Global Policy Lead for Human Rights and Free Expression, Google

## WITH COMMENTS FROM

**H.E. Anne Marie Engtoft Larsen**

Tech Ambassador of the Kingdom of Denmark

**H.E. Sang-beom LIM**

Ambassador, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations in Geneva

**H.E. Henry Verdier**

French Ambassador for Digital Affairs

## CO-ORGANIZED BY



## CO-SPONSORED BY



Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations



MISSION PERMANENTE DE LA FRANCE AUPRÈS DES NATIONS UNIES À NEW YORK

Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité



Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations



Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea in Geneva

Digital human rights, such as the right to privacy, are a new frontier of human rights. Technological advancements have lowered the cost and difficulty of collecting and processing information on a mass scale. States look to new technologies to more efficiently reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), improve public services, and maintain peace and security. Too often, however, states and their private sector partners use technology in ways that may infringe on human rights. From mass, indiscriminate surveillance to invasive malware and biased and misused machine-learning tools and autonomous systems, the threats to digital rights are multiplying rapidly. Without transparency and accountability, measures to advance digitalization and achieve the SDGs can imperil trust in institutions and put individuals at greater risk in the digital age.

As the UN Secretary-General underlined in his Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed and crystallized these trends. In response to the pandemic, governments, with the support and encouragement of technology companies worldwide, are using data and technology in their efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Many responses to the COVID-19 crisis have made use of data and machine learning-based technologies. These have proven to be valuable in some cases, including for predictive modelling, clinical and molecular research, and efforts to counter the COVID-19 “infodemic.” While many of these tools can be used responsibly and effectively, the COVID-19 pandemic amplifies the call by the United Nations for governments and technology companies to ground their practices in human rights.

The most notable example is the global use of digital applications for contact tracing. Contact tracing is the process of identifying, assessing, and managing people who have been exposed to a disease to prevent onward transmission. As the World Health Organization cautions, in employing digital proximity tracking technologies, “surveillance can quickly traverse the blurred line between disease surveillance and population surveillance.” Such extraordinary measures quickly become normalized, and raise questions about the impact of these technologies on the right to privacy, both now and in the future. While some measures may be proportionate and necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19, others risk or undermine digital rights. In addition, there is a risk that new technologies will exacerbate existing societal inequalities, such as disparate access to technology and infrastructure.

The application of machine learning (ML) and other artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities without careful consideration and due diligence can add additional layers of obscurity, complexity, and rapid scalability that may exacerbate threats to privacy and other rights. In addition, without proper restrictions in place, sensitive data sets and AI-powered surveillance tools could be repurposed and used beyond the scope of what is necessary to respond to COVID-19.

These urgent issues raise the following questions: How can states, companies, and other stakeholders maximize the benefits of digital technologies and COVID-related data use while preventing and mitigating potential harms? How can the UN system facilitate open collaboration (e.g. data and model sharing) and other knowledge-sharing efforts that help promote the rights-protective use of technology? Which populations are the most vulnerable to these risks, and what technical and policy steps can be taken to protect them? How can we ensure gender equality, diversity and inclusion are respected in the digital crisis response? What special risks may arise from applying tools developed in the Global North in other contexts, especially the Global South? Looking ahead, what lessons have we learned about the use of digital technology to combat the pandemic and how can we do better next time? The United Nation’s 75th Anniversary and the Secretary General’s recently released Roadmap for Digital Cooperation provide a critical juncture to address such questions.

## **OBJECTIVE**

This high-level multi-stakeholder panel – composed of experts from government, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector – aims to delve into the implications of increased surveillance on human rights, during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, narrowing in on contact tracing, the use of biometric and health-related data, and other technological interventions. Drawing upon existing multi stakeholder initiatives, such as the United Nations Secretary General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation Roadmap, panelists will explore pressing questions from varying perspectives to brainstorm efforts to work towards the protection of personal data and promotion digital rights in the fight against the pandemic and beyond.