BUNDESPRÄSIDIALAMT

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the conference to launch the international research
project Ethics of the Digital Transformation
at Schloss Bellevue
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A warm welcome to Schloss Bellevue! That welcome is addressed to all of you here in this room, but of course it also includes the many people who are watching online. I'm delighted that you have all joined us!

We are aware that our lives, our interaction, our communication have acquired a new, digital dimension, not only since the COVID-19 pandemic has had the world in its grip. The pandemic, however, is the reason why today only a small group of us are present here in this room, but in fact many more guests and discussion participants are with us online. But what situation could demonstrate more clearly and urgently the issue we want to focus on today? That issue is the development of digital space.

The workplace, the classroom, the theatre, the concert hall, and indeed even parliament have moved to this digital space to avoid the virus. And all of us who have moved there with them are wondering: what are the conditions like? Are digital spaces secure and reliable? Is our privacy, is our data protected from outside interference? What rules apply, and do people respect them? We recall data scandals and Cambridge Analytica, we follow the debate on digital technology and its role in foreign policy, the disputes surrounding Huawei and TikTok.

The questions concerning how to handle the spread of digital technology have not dwindled at all over the past months and years. And now the pandemic is showing us even more clearly how closely we are connected with one another through trade and technology. The algorithm revolution, the massive consequences of digital communication constitute a global challenge. No state in the world can escape it, no state could ever be in a position to cope with it single-handedly.

That is why we need to engage in dialogue, to ask ourselves what rules exist in digital space, and what rules we want to impose on ourselves. Are we a global internet community, or are we still American, Chinese, European when we are online? What problems concern us? What can we expect from one another? And where is there common ground that we can build on? We need to ask ourselves these questions if we want to enjoy peace and prosperity in a connected world.

Two years ago, in 2018, I travelled to California and to China to trace the path of the digital revolution. On the one hand, Silicon Valley – the pioneers of the liberal, globalised data economy, whose products are used by billions of people, whose innovative potential has changed our lives and whose goal is to generate economic profit with mountains of data that are increasing by the day. On the other hand, Guangzhou and Beijing – state capitalism with huge digital ambitions, with its own internet, an almost completely separate, state-controlled system that is growing at incredible speed and renews itself on an almost daily basis – and that always has to bow to the central need for control and the pressure of surveillance from the party apparatus. And when I returned to Europe after these trips, the debate was raging on the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, a set of rules for the protection of personal data in the digital world. This debate in particular showed me that even within western societies, concepts of right and wrong in the area of digital policy often diverge considerably. So let me start by making one thing clear: the usual comparison "Here's the European model, there's the American one" rarely helps us much. We need to remember that when we are talking about common ground and differences.

The internet spans the whole world. Digital companies from America, Europe and China, too, serve customers on all continents, usually with great flexibility and an enormous ability to adapt to different political systems. After the initial euphoria, many states are asking themselves more and more frequently how their localised legislation, their limited influence on digital transformation can play a role in a global network. Some use new technologies such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems and digital infrastructure as a strategic extension of foreign policy, others rely on their market influence, the purchasing power of their consumers or the indispensable nature of their products. The escalating global conflict between the United States and China in recent months should give us all cause for concern. Attempts to renationalise and divide up the internet for the purposes of state control and economic advantages – creating a splinternet, as it were – are an expression of this conflict.

I am convinced that neither isolation and national interests, nor aspirations to dominance and delusions of omnipotence should be allowed to dictate our joint path towards a digital future. We will hit a

brick wall if we try and copy our response to the digital transformation from a 19th century handbook of statesmanship. We can't afford to settle for a new era of "everyone for themselves". That's not where the solution lies.

Seventy-five years ago, the most devastating war ever, a world war unleashed by Germany, came to an end. Germany's view of the world cannot be explained without reference to those experiences. Yet the experience of this war not only changed my country, it also brought all of us, the community of states, to our senses to some extent after 1945. The International Bill of Human Rights and the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system and regional communities such as the EU, prohibition of the use of violence and collective security: 75 years ago our forebears made the decision to set the rights of the people in place of the law of the strong, transcending all geographical, cultural, ancestral and religious boundaries. They formulated regulations and built a normative framework based on common minimum ethical standards, with rules and institutions.

Of course, this framework wasn't and isn't perfect, it is often dysfunctional, it has never served everyone equally. And it is by no means guaranteed for eternity. In recent years it has been more and more frequently challenged and called into question, even by some of its founders. Yet this international order has shown us that dialogue and understanding always generate peace and prosperity more than isolation and confrontation do. We shouldn't therefore carelessly toss it aside, instead we must defend it – and improve it.

If we don't want the world to become even more fragmented, if we don't want isolated political and technological spaces to emerge with no trust, no overlap, no understanding between them, we ourselves need to take the initiative to promote dialogue. Dialogue that, all differences notwithstanding, makes a serious effort to understand, that aims to foster communication and that believes in a strategy for cooperation. For we need cooperation and interaction today more than ever before. Precisely because the digital revolution sparks similar questions in all our countries and shakes up our relationship with one another, nothing less than the question of which order should in future dominate the digital world is at stake. To create that order, we need to engage in dialogue on common minimum ethical standards which could form a normative basis transcending all borders.

It would be strange if the very varied backgrounds of our partners in Europe, America, China and elsewhere didn't produce differing responses to new challenges. It would be naive to believe that combining national rules and fundamental principles for social networks, for mass data processing, for autonomous systems up to and including weapons of war and for the technical specifications of the

internet would somehow result in a coherent whole. That's not the case! And it will never be so. And if, in the digital future, we don't want the law of the jungle to apply, we need to work to establish a functioning international order – and to encourage others to work with us in this endeavour.

International agreement on ethical digital standards will become increasingly important if we want a transparent, open, free and creative internet in future and if the spread of digital technology isn't to lead to a dystopia. In many digital fields we still lack institutions and rules that could facilitate cooperation and interaction between states and societies, a common foundation on which trust can be built, for trust is vital for maintaining collaborative business relations. They safeguard our prosperity. Yes, many things may divide us. In many areas our interests may be at odds. Today, many differences perhaps seem irreconcilable. But endeavouring to agree on fundamental minimum standards for a code of ethics for the digital transformation is certainly worth the effort! And that's precisely why we're here today.

In the next few hours, together with the Stiftung Mercator and the Network of Centers, we want to launch an international scientific project focusing on the global basis for a code of ethics for the digital transformation.

In Germany and Europe we, too, have our own ideas, of course. In this context I can say that for me, the code of ethics of the digital transformation is first and foremost the ethics of freedom.

Technology is there to serve people and to provide greater scope for self-determination. Virtual reality must not be allowed to become the only reality, we must never allow it to replace our public spaces and human interaction. Digital technology should overcome oppression and relieve poverty, facilitate debate rather than poison it, promote education and awareness, and where possible protect the environment and conserve resources. The spread of digital technology should boost our freedom and break the shackles that confine people where freedom is denied. Digital transformation needs to be in the service of humanity, not the other way round.

At the same time, the ethics of freedom is always also the ethics of responsibility. Freedom needs rules and new forms of freedom need new rules. It is about finding the right balance between freedom and regulation, and that is the task of policymakers. That applies to us in Germany, but I believe it also applies to our joint international order. Yes, it's true that all of us bring to the table our own experiences, our own view of the world. We won't make any headway if we say: "I'm right, and therefore all the others are wrong." We can't expect the others to unquestioningly understand where we are coming from, let alone accept our perspective as a given. It is therefore all the more important to seek to engage in dialogue. For only if we earnestly try to

understand one another can we discover common ground and formulate minimum standards and rules. That's what all of us should be aiming for.

Fellows, researchers, conference participants, in the coming months, in your role as technologists and social scientists, you will be striving to provide joint impulses and answers for the international debate. I can assure you that the idea is for your work not simply to be an academic exercise. On the contrary, whether in academia, business or civil society, whether in policymaking in your home countries or in the political quest for minimum global standards, we all need your advice.

Successful policymaking at both national and international level strives to achieve a balance of interests and defines rules for fruitful coexistence with the help of ethical principles. The spread of digital technology is radically transforming our society and the life of each individual. That is why it calls for an ethical framework. How much data should we reveal? What rules apply in the internet? What decisions does the algorithm take? What will happen to my job when operations are digitalised? People expect politicians to provide answers to these questions. And rightly so. That is why we need this debate on a code of ethics for the digital transformation. More than anything else, it is crucial that we don't regard a code of ethics merely as an appeal to the conscience of individuals, but as the basis for better policymaking. The standards it sets should make it possible to establish sound rules and laws, should create a common foundation for international coexistence. That is our goal, no less.

You as fellows now have the privilege of focusing on these questions. Have the courage to explore new ground in your thinking and writing! Enrich this major societal debate with your ideas! And above all, don't shy away from politics, for in no other field are experts like you so urgently needed.