Governing the Global Commons

Guest contributor | October 18, 2019

The European Union has the chance to shape the digital market for the better for the next generation. As digital citizens, it's our responsibility to keep track of the issues that matter – writes Nayef Al-Rodhan.

When the newly appointed European Commissioners officially take up their posts on 1st November, some very important technology policy questions will once again come into view. These are decisions that could fundamentally reshape the business models of Big Tech firms, redraw the landscape of competition and affirm Europe as the dominant global rule maker when it comes powerful tech companies and the effects they have on our politics and culture.

It is indispensable that we keep checks on technological progress. Human innovation is advancing at breakneck speeds. Things we never dreamed of are becoming reality, such as synthetic biology, bioinformatics, cognitive enhancement, genetic engineering, 3D and 4D printing, Artificial intelligence, automated weapon systems, invisibility cloaks, quantum computing and even neuromorphic computing. Along with their obvious massive potential, these advancements also pose significant risks to social stability, equality, human dignity, free will, national and global security, and even to the very survival of our species.

How can we make sure that these constantly evolving technological innovations don't destroy humanity or exacerbate inequalities and privacy intrusions? Emerging technologies offer states more instruments and means for control and surveillance, often infringing on civil liberties. The balance between States' need to know in the name of security and the respect for privacy must be pursued more fervently. Also non-state actors like large multi-national corporate entities that collect massive amounts of personal data, need to be better regulated.

We must balance the dizzying potentials of technological advancements with security and ethical concerns, and move from risks to regulations. This must also include mechanisms for overseeing the

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overseers – or 'regulating the regulators', so it is equally important that we are aware of the powers that be when it comes to regulating the global landscape.

Their ambition must be to promote my previously published governance-based [9 dignity needs](#) – which include*: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, and inclusiveness*, and balance them with the 3 human nature attributes : *emotionality, amorality and egoism* – without stifling innovation.

In the race to regulate Big Tech, it has in recent years become overwhelmingly clear that the first mover becomes the primary global rule maker. The group of policymakers first able to put forward a vision of regulation at global level has an evident advantage – enabling them to pressure other regulatory bodies into embracing their rules, even when contrary to their domestic agendas.

With a large market of 500 million citizens, the majority of whom are comparatively wealthy on a global scale, and equipped with the ability to coordinate action on controversial issues such as privacy, competition, and digital tax, the EU has established itself as the world's regulatory pacesetter.

In these spheres, the EU has projected itself onto the global stage with particular force in the last year and a half, by advancing its regulatory prerogatives within the agendas of international forums such as the G7 and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Crucially, Brussels is emerging as the most important formulator of antitrust regulation. Earlier this year, European officials published a report which pushed for regulators to more heavily scrutinize proposed takeovers based on how companies used data.

Margrethe Vestager, the EU's highly interventionist competition commissioner, who has launched several high profile cases against Google, Amazon and Apple, has been reappointed to her role for an unprecedented second term. So the trend that has been set in motion on these issues is looking likely to continue, if not grow stronger. She has already recently warned Silicon Valley that she will move beyond fines during her second term and look at other measures to ensure a fair playing field.

Ursula von der Leyen, the incoming head of the EU's executive arm, has hinted at new laws on artificial intelligence and the use of big data within 100 days of taking office next month. She and her team are also reportedly considering creating a dedicated multibillion-euro fund to support and promote the European technology sector.

As digital consumers around the globe continue to pay closer attention to their relationships with companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple — whose users number in the billions worldwide — it seems inevitable that one region needs to begin taking the lead in debating and implementing appropriate forms of regulation.

Effective decision-making by the next Commission, undertaken with the aim of defending basic rights while energising digital markets through the principles of fairness and competition could have the potential to revolutionise the digital economy – bringing about a world in which there are many more winners, rather than a small number of companies whose established advantages skew the market in favour of monopolies. What remains to be seen is whether these difficult but necessary questions will be tackled head on, or conveniently avoided.