

First edition "Humanism in the digital age: the urban contribution"

## Experts in digital humanism call for a step forward to tackle the challenges caused by the digital transformation

- Forty distinguished international speakers call for concrete actions to fight the digital emergency.
- Barcelona establishes as the world's capital of digital humanism.

Barcelona, 18 November 2021.- World experts in digital processing and the socio-economic impact of major technological changes call for urgent progress and concrete actions to ensure, protect and promote people's rights in the digital sphere and not just provide well-intended speeches. This shared concept starred during the event "[Humanism in the digital age: the urban contribution](#)", organised by the [Digital Future Society](#) and the City Council of Barcelona on Monday, to provide a large space of debate and reflection that counted with the presence of 150 entities and over 40 top-level speakers. The highly positive feedback received during the event strengthens Barcelona as a leading technological human-centred perspective on a global scale.

During the event eleven sessions were held focusing on different aspects related to digital rights and ethics in Artificial Intelligence (AI), with contributions from public administration agents, politicians, experts, researchers, and activists. The role of cities and urban areas, where digital transformation is even more accelerated, was the main thread of the event.

### Digital rights: keeping data usage and digital divides under control

The writer and philosopher of the Institute of Ethics in Artificial Intelligence at Oxford University, **Carissa Véliz**, opened the session with a reflection about human rights in the digital age. Véliz stressed the importance of awareness revolving around the data we share and warned about the right to protect and control personal data "there is a lot at stake, our democracy is at stake". In addition, she noted in positive terms the regulatory steps being taken by Europe, although reiterated that "it is necessary to continue working".

Continuously, it was then the turn of cities and their role to build an inclusive, secure, and responsible digital transformation that joined representatives of the municipalities of **Bordeaux**, **Rotterdam** and **Paris** to reflect on their role as key actors. In the case of the Dutch municipality, **Roos Vermeij**, highlighted its two main priorities: fairness and digital inclusion. "Our main mission is to work on these priorities and prepare people for the jobs of the future, not only in school, but locally," he noted. By his side, the French capital, **Arnaud Ngatcha**, detailed that "Cities are at the centre of digital transformation, because they are the ones that give daily attention to citizens". Likewise, the Bordeaux's

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representative, **Delphine Jamet**, pointed out the need for "digital services to respect citizens' rights and freedom" and emphasised that "it is necessary for these services to include everyone, they cannot be exclusively for a few". On the other hand, the moderator, and Deputy Mayor of Barcelona, **Laia Bonet** noted that "to avoid the growth of inequalities, we need a bold policy to fight digital inclusion and must work in the context of humanism at a local, national and international scale."

In turn, technological leaders from large cities such as New York (**John Paul Farmer**) and Barcelona (**Michael Donaldson**), along with the UNU-EGOV advisor, **Morten Meyerhoff**, and Director of the National Observatory Director of Technology and Society, **Lucía Velasco**, spoke about public policies to fight digital divides. Meyerhoff focused on the quality of the data available from administrations: "We see that the richer cities are, the larger the number of data we have at our disposal, but they will always be limited, we can see some segments of the user, but the context will always be lacking." On the other hand, Donaldson recalled that "the digital divide is not new, but innovative solutions need to be sought to mitigate it". In addition, he stressed the firm commitment of the city of Barcelona to collect qualitative data and stated that "1 percent of the population could not access the Internet for economic reasons", a figure that he assures can be addressed on a short-term notice. Similarly, Farmer emphasised that in order to fight digital divides, we must implement a strategy for new technologies that consider access, connectivity, infrastructure and affordability, as the pandemic "proved that technology is not a luxury, but a necessity and connectivity must be universal". Finally, Velasco focused on the growing digital frustration and insisted that "We ask citizens to interact with digital administrations, regardless of usability, their experience or access". As a result, population is moving away from technology and increasing its frustration, a reaction that is "contrary to what digitization seeks to achieve".

One of the most notable keynote sessions was held by the Executive Director of the Alliance for an Affordable Internet, **Sonia Jorge**, who urged the need to understand the consequences of the digital divide, especially focused on geographical and gender divides. Jorge noted that "the gender divide in rural areas is brutal: we are talking about 52 percent". And, according to her calculations, "the world has missed an opportunity of a billion dollars by not including girls in digital societies" and recalled that when we exclude, we are fuelling inequalities. Likewise, **Núria Oliver**, Director of Data Science of the Alianza Data-Pop, highlighted the lack of women in the development of emerging technologies. Oliver expressed her concern on the lack of women in STEM and stated that "any field where diversity is lacking will not unlock its full potential and solutions will never be fully inclusive".

### Artificial intelligence: From interpretation to regulation

Facial recognition technologies and their responsible use in urban environments was a major point of debate introduced by the interventions of international voices such as the senior policy adviser of the European Digital Rights Initiative, **Sarah Chander**, the

rapporteur and AI Act, **Brando Benifei** and senior researcher of Human Rights Watch, **Amos Toh**. They all agreed on the need for new regulations which preserve and guarantee fundamental rights for citizenship. Chander raised awareness about the impact of technology and noted "We need to understand human risk, who will be impacted, how and why". In turn, Benifei stated that the European Parliament is the strongest voice in favour of fundamental rights, for that reason "it is important for them to apply firm measures to ban such technologies or declare a clear position". **Benifei** noted that its use is currently restricted with a legal text but remains "with many interpretations". A statement that coincides with **Amos Toh's** reflection, where he expressed that we must aspire to "empower citizens to understand how technology is designed and its limits". Toh concluded that technology is sometimes necessary for the provision of basic services, but also "a platform to promote political debate and decision making".

Regarding, operational ethics in Artificial Intelligence and its regulatory standards we can highlight the debate by top-notch speakers like the Vice-President Margrethe Vestager's cabinet member of the European Commission, **Werner Stengg**, who assured the institution's commitment to create an effective legal framework and recalled that "regulations are not necessarily the enemy of technological innovation". Thus, the UOC professor, **Agustí Cerrillo**, focused on the complexity of algorithms, and affirmed they "change over time when they retrieve new data". There is also a lack of privacy, a risk that, as stated by the CEO of the Open Knowledge Foundation's, **Renata Ávila**, should "be default, but it's not enough, we need other values like open innovation", which she reminds have a great impact.

Another approach to Artificial Intelligence was the aspect of discrimination and its use from the point of view of bias, gender, race, and poverty. According to the founder and research director of OptIA, **Ricardo Baeza-Yates**, we cannot consider the data collected as something negative, but more as a neutral element and stated that "the loop of interaction between the system and the user may affect us all". In turn, the digital transformation manager at Tech Sovereignty, **Judith Membrives**, claimed that "technology can help solve social problems", but we must include citizenship to "give a voice to those affected by the results of algorithm biases". On the other hand, the researcher and teacher at the Södertorn University, **Anne Kaun**, considered that "citizens are more aware of the bias present in technology" and reflected on the fact that we are testing technology in very vulnerable groups. Finally, the UPC professor, **Cecilio Angulo**, exposed the definition of an algorithm and said that "it will always be discriminatory. His job is to discriminate and not all discriminate in a bad sense".

Similarly, algorithmic democracy was another session organized under ActivosTech, which explored solutions to understand the role of Artificial Intelligence technologies and their integration with human rights. The delegated and founding adviser of ETICAS, **Gemma Galdón**, initiated the debate with a reflection on the concentration of power and called for them "to cease being in the hands of a few and to reconsider if an updated infrastructure is needed to redesign the digital environment". In turn, the policy analyst

of Real Instituto Elcano, **Raquel Jorge Ricart**, stated that "Algorhythmic governance is being limited to a number of countries, since are we considering countries of Latin America, or those of sub-Saharan Africa, and even some of the European Union?". In response, the Lead researcher of the Centre for International Affairs, **Andrea G. Rodríguez**, concluded that "there is no shared scheme by relevant actors about what to do and what not to do with the code" and demands transparency and accountability from companies. On the other hand, the AI Lead at Singular, **Nerea Luis**, focused on users and asked citizens to raise awareness, reiterating that "data is a business, but we must realize how unprotected we are".

Finally, the risks associated with the collection of these data were addressed, which have also increased substantially in recent years, as digitalization became a reality. This phenomenon has had new consequences, as exposed by the expert of data governance at the UIA and guest lecturer at SciencesPo, **Simon Chignard**, who pondered the role of cities to "fight against digital resignation, which seems to be a growing concern". Faced with this, the team leader and expert at InTouchAI.eu, **Gianluca Misuraca**, responded that we must "use technology for the benefit of citizens", and in this regard, he said, "we must ask ourselves what can be done to ensure that our digital resilience is safeguarded, and how can Artificial Intelligence be guided". On the other hand, the advisor of the Secretary of State for Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence, **Belén Santa Cruz**, focused on the new regulations and stated that "we need to study the impact on digital rights, as we do in other aspects" and illustrated the Spanish case with the presentation of the Charter in Digital Rights from the Government of Spain.

The act concluded with the institutional closure in charge of the commissioner of Digital Innovation from the City Council of Barcelona, **Michael Donaldson** and the CEO of Mobile World Capital Barcelona, **Carlos Grau**, who highlighted the firm commitment to move forward with concrete actions and ensured that "further alliances and collaborations will be promoted to advance on all challenges discussed during the day". He also recalled that the most effective response to confront the complexity of these challenges was "to work together and foster cooperation and collaboration between all key actors and stakeholders".

If you wish to follow the event "Humanism in the digital era: the urban contribution" once again, check the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIy7U5iKUMpJqwBYaJO1P-FElHfGvbLpd>