

REFLECTIONS ON: 'HOW TO BE 'CIVILISATIONAL': PROMOTING "TRUSTED EUROPEAN PLATFORMS"

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Trusted platforms will not be

by Žiga Turk

Jim Cloos' call to consider "Trusted European Platforms," inspired by Christophe Leclercq, is written in good faith. It is motivated by a concern many of us share: Europe's lag in the digital domain, its reliance on non-European platforms, and the real or imagined implications of this dependence for democracy and sovereignty. These are not easy matters and deserve serious debate. But the proposed remedies, however well-intentioned, point us toward a path on which Europe has already travelled, and one that led exactly to where we are.

We must remember the cautionary tales. In the 1980s, France's Minitel was hailed as a bold European alternative to the American Internet. For a while, it was indeed a success story. Yet it failed, and failed decisively, because it was closed, controlled, and limited. The Internet - open, messy, unregulated - unleashed a wave of creativity and entrepreneurship that Minitel never could. The contrast is similar to that between Pravda and The New York Times. One sought to control the message, the other to open the debate. It is the latter, with all its flaws, that fostered trust and competitiveness.

The idea of creating "trusted" platforms by certification, regulation, or top-down political leadership will deliver neither trust nor innovation. It may deliver bureaucracy, subsidies, and white elephants, but not services that people genuinely want to use. State-sponsored services are never competitive with private ones unless they enjoy a monopoly or regulatory privilege. The history of European industrial policy is littered with examples.

Airbus and Galileo succeeded not because they were platforms of opinion or exchange, but because they were infrastructural projects, responding to security and industrial needs. Media and communications, by contrast, thrive in competitive, pluralistic ecosystems where no authority dictates what counts as "trustworthy."

Moreover, the very notion of a "shield" for democracy is misleading. A shield can deflect, but it cannot create. Shields may buy time, but they cannot make media economically viable in the face of technological change. As Mario Draghi recently underlined in his report on EU competitiveness, Europe's problem is not a lack of regulation, but a lack of openness to entrepreneurship, risk, and flexibility. Competitiveness requires liberty. The same liberties that would allow European entrepreneurs to compete with Silicon Valley are those that would allow journalists and media businesses to find their own models in a digital world. Shields may shelter privileged platforms for a while, but they cannot prevent the relative decline of traditional media jobs and structures.

Democracy, not media, is the crux of the matter. A democracy thrives not when it is protected from disinformation by committees and filters, but when citizens are trusted to weigh arguments, make choices, and learn from their mistakes. Democracy is also democracy when the so-called 'non-democratic side' wins. To imagine that Europe can sustain democratic vitality by controlling the information environment is to forget the lessons of the 20th century. I have lived under a system where

'trusted' information was defined by the state and the party, where voters were instructed and indoctrinated rather than persuaded. Those systems did not collapse because they lacked shields - they had plenty - but they lacked legitimacy.

What Europe truly needs is not civilisational platforms, but civilisational confidence. Confidence that its citizens can handle the open Internet, that its entrepreneurs can build services without being restrained by this or that 'Act', that democracy can renew itself without supervision. The open, free, and sometimes chaotic Internet is not a threat to Europe - it is

its opportunity. If we want European platforms to thrive, then let us remove barriers, reduce fragmentation, unleash venture capital, and trust in our talent; rather than think about how to regulate everything into the ground. Innovation cannot be commanded into existence. It emerges when people are free.

If Europe insists on pursuing "trusted platforms," it risks repeating the logic of the walls that once divided our continent. But the true legacy of 1989 was not the building of new shields – it was their removal. Let us not forget that lesson as we seek to shape Europe's digital future.

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No protectionism or censorship: More competition and choice for Europe

by Christophe Leclercq

The discussion on "[Trusted European Platforms](#)" is not about turning back the clock. It is about moving from defensive regulation to entrepreneurial action, from shielding democracy to building the infrastructure that allows it to thrive in the digital age.

Scepticism about state-led solutions is understandable, given past experiences of closed systems, and also about EU initiatives.[1] But "Trusted European Platforms" are designed precisely to avoid those pitfalls. They do not aim to control content or centralise speech. Their objective is to open markets currently dominated by a handful of global gatekeepers, offering citizens, media, and advertisers genuine alternatives.

The logic is straightforward: trust indicators can promote quality content over disinformation; profile portability and interoperability can give users real freedom of choice; and a European anchoring of ownership, governance, and data handling can strengthen sovereignty without resorting to isolationism. This is not censorship; it is a strategy to restore balance in the digital public sphere.

The political context has shifted decisively. As President Emmanuel Macron [said](#) on 3 October, "We were incredibly naive to entrust our democratic space to social networks that are controlled either by large American entrepreneurs or large Chinese companies, whose interests are not at all the survival or proper functioning of our democracies." Chancellor Friedrich Merz also underlined the geopolitical stakes. This growing awareness is now matched by European momentum: the [Franco-German Summit on Digital Sovereignty](#)

on 18 November in Berlin and the stakeholders' conference the following day will be important steps after the publication of the Democracy Shield on 12 November.

"Trusted European Platforms" are conceived as a soft regulatory framework, building on existing legislation such as the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and European Media Freedom Act. They would set standards rapidly, through independent assessment, without waiting for long inter-institutional processes. They would trigger support from media, tech, advertising, civil society, and venture capital: an ecosystem, not a white elephant.

The "Trusted European Platforms" framework aims to be a catalyst for innovation, pluralism, and democratic resilience.

This is no longer a niche debate. Stakeholders are mobilising, national initiatives are multiplying, and citizens are increasingly aware that regulation alone will not guarantee trust online. Europe must now create, not just defend.

[1] Like Žiga Turk, I recall the beginning of fighting 'fake news', with the High-Level Expert Group on disinformation. A vast majority supported the approval of self-regulation, leading to co-regulation. Has it been enough? Clearly not. For example, platforms "committed" to reflecting "Trustworthiness Indicators" in their algorithms, but never did. My own summary of our report was often quoted by the Commissioner in charge:

“Avoid censorship, dilute fake news, promote quality content.” We succeeded only on the first

point, worth continuing for the rest, we need to allow European competitors.

Christophe Leclercq is a French media entrepreneur, first founding of [EURACTIV Media Network](#), now chairing the think-do-tank [Europe MédiaLab](#). Mr Leclercq was on the EU's High-Level Expert Group on disinformation, and is now on the Advisory Council of [EDMO \(European Digital Media Observatory\)](#). Before his media career, he was a strategy consultant with McKinsey and then EU competition official. Also a commentator on media policy and strategy, Mr Leclercq wrote [several opinion articles in French and English](#), often co-signed with European stakeholders and policy leaders, and addressed high-level events.



The ideals of the internet as foundation for "Trusted European Platforms"

by Mathijs Borchardt

The recent TEPESA Editorial rightly stresses that Europe must go beyond a defensive Democracy Shield and actively build its own "Trusted European Platforms". Regulation, media literacy initiatives, and support for independent journalism are necessary, but they alone cannot guarantee that freedom, trust, and informed debate will flourish. True digital sovereignty requires shaping the infrastructure through which citizens access information, engage in debate, and participate in democracy.

As Lawrence Lessig already noted in 1999, in the digital sphere code is law, computer code determines what is possible and what is not. Platform architecture and recommender algorithms determine what information is shared and seen, which voices are amplified, and which narratives dominate. Consider the first round of the Romanian elections of 2024, where [tens of thousands of coordinated fake TikTok accounts and influencers gamed recommendation algorithms](#), amplifying populist politicians. This example illustrates how platforms' design potentially shapes public discourse and democratic processes.

In the past years, the EU has tried to deal with this issue by flexing its regulatory muscles through the likes of the Digital Services Act and European Media Freedom Act. However, the effectiveness of these recent regulations remains to be seen and heavily relies on its enforcement.[1] Europe has the opportunity to do better before it is too late. Not through isolation and fear, but by attracting talent and visionaries that share its values and by developing its own infrastructure. The early United States-based architects of the internet imagined it as a public library for humanity,

designed to preserve knowledge, enable access to it, and foster collaboration. Today, those ideals of democracy, knowledge, and civic minded innovation face headwinds in the United States. Europe can offer a home for innovators committed to these principles, regardless of nationality, creating platforms that promote informed debate, transparency, and pluralism.

Justice Louis Brandeis observed nearly a century ago the essential role of debate and freedom of speech in a democracy, also recognised by the European interpretation of that fundamental right. Yet, this function of free speech is meaningful only when citizens have access to sufficient knowledge. If democracies start slipping towards populism because of the exploitation of legitimate frustrations and fears, more informed debate is necessary. A remedy against this democratic backsliding could be accessible knowledge, combined with democratic values integrated into the systems through which people engage with information. By promoting accessible knowledge, value-based informational architecture and well-informed debate, regulation could steer clear from potentially encroaching on freedom of speech while trying to safeguard democracy.

"Trusted European Platforms" could and should be the embodiment of the democratic function of freedom of speech, building on the founding ideas of the internet. This must start with accessible knowledge. In doing so, Europe would empower citizens to make decisions based on knowledge, not short-term spectacle, cultivating resilience against authoritarianism, populism, and manipulation.

In this context, it is worth noting the initiative by the Stichting Internet Archive, an independent organisation whose mission is aligned to the better known Internet Archive. Established in Europe they are focused on continuing the mission of making knowledge freely accessible and preserving digital culture for the public good, with a particular focus on Europe.

Many will know the Internet Archive for its 'Wayback Machine', the tool that allows anyone to view past versions of web pages. More than a historical curiosity, it has become an instrument for transparency. Citizens, journalists, and researchers can access information that might be altered or disappear. In the United States, for instance, it has enabled access to information on government websites from pre-partisan censorship or review.

Yet the organisation's mission extends beyond archiving: researchers within its European network have developed large language models tailored to climate research, already used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, showing how digital technologies can be mobilised proactively for the public good.

These innovators increasingly view Europe as a possible home for such work, drawn by its commitment to rights, transparency, and democratic accountability. Their frustration with overregulation and institutional caution should not be dismissed but seen as constructive critique from those who built the early internet and still strive to align it with its founding ideals.

Europe might have a chance in becoming a haven for these value driven innovators, no matter where they hail from. Together we could build an alternative, trustworthy civilisational digital infrastructure.

[1] Both from public authorities and through private enforcement like in [a recent Dutch case](#) where the collective interest advocate Bits Of Freedom started a procedure against Meta on the basis of Digital Services Act compliance in the context of the upcoming elections.

Mathijs Borchardt recently graduated from the LL.M. in Information Law at the University of Amsterdam. His focus was the intersection of digitalisation and the public good, including the use of the Digital Services Act to counter foreign influence operations on EU democratic processes, the copyright directive's text and data mining exception for research purposes, and the implications of automatisisation in public administration. He also contributed to a project on privacy and data protection for a civil rights alliance active in that field and is currently interning at an IT/IP law firm in Amsterdam.



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