



Preserving the Transatlantic Digital Alliance in a Time of Distrust, Disruption, and Disarray

By Daniel Sepulveda

WASHINGTON — The United States and Europe have worked together since the creation of the Internet to preserve it as an open global platform and force for the democratization of discourse, commerce, and opportunity. We have jointly fought Russian and Chinese proposals intent on enabling government-sponsored censorship or centrally imposed mandates, control, and regulation of the Internet at the global level.

We have refused to put any stamp of international approval on Great Firewalls that impede the exchange of ideas and the free flow of data. We jointly reject the imposition of domestic rules and regulation in violation of internationally agreed human rights. And we have worked together to protect intellectual property and innovation. At the multilateral table, we have sat on the same side.

But our bilateral relationship and dialogue on these issues has always been more complicated and nuanced. We are not twins. We are more like very close cousins, still in the same family, holding similar values, but not identical in our approach to challenges. Our differences are not wide, but they are growing and they threaten

the health of the transnational digital economy and the future of the Internet as a platform for the expression and exercise of our shared values.

Bridging our differences through dialogue, mutual respect and reflection, and consensus based resolution will largely drive our ability to continue to successfully promote open, global communications as a force for good in the world.

That will not happen by itself. Policymakers on both sides of the pond are asking how law and regulation needs to adjust to the changes the Internet has brought without damaging the dramatic good, innovation, and wealth it has delivered. We are trying to figure out whether we should treat the Internet and the digital economy differently from other forms of commerce and communications, and how we can ensure its development does not define our values but that our values, transatlantic values, guide and govern its development.

The threat to the sensible governance of the digital economy lie in distrust of large institutions — private and public alike, disruption of our traditional forms

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of media and curation of news and information, and disarray in international cooperation on global challenges. Restoring trust and faith in institutions and systems of cooperation that have created stability in the past will require reexamination and reform of how stakeholders across sectors interact and engage each other. It will also likely require a thoughtful new body of private best practices and changes to law and regulation.

Think tanks and civil society organizations can and will play a role in helping bridge the transatlantic divide of opinion on policy in the space, bringing us together to better understand each other, try to construct interoperable rules of the road for our digital markets, and to enable us to present unified views to the world. We can and will bring people together, debate and deliberate our differences while celebrating our shared values.

The digital economy issues that divide us on the margins are important and require dialogue. They center around a difference of opinion on the role of government in markets and the degree to which our policymakers and regulators feel that the digital economy is fair and serving to protect citizens, consumers, competition, and civil discourse. Digital privacy, security, competition, intellectual property, taxation, and issues around technology and work are growing in their complexity and prominence in our bilateral economic relationship and it is in our mutual interest to find joint solutions.

We hope you will join us on this journey.

About the Author

Daniel Sepulveda is a non-resident fellow with the Technology and Innovation program at GMF based in Washington, DC. He focuses on domestic and international commerce, technology, and telecommunications policy, particularly in regards to internet governance, competition, privacy, and the digital economy. As a former U.S. ambassador, deputy assistant secretary of state, and U.S. coordinator for international communications and information policy, he has two decades of experience in the highest levels of government, including as a senior legislative aide to three United States senators, including then Senators Barack Obama and John Kerry, and worked extensively in civil society.

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