



6-10 July 2026
Geneva, Switzerland

The Politics of Knowledge in the AI Age: Empowering Human Agency through Standards, Human Rights, and the Role of Corporations

Thursday, 9 July 2026 | 10:00-10:45 CEST | Room E, Palexpo, WSIS Forum 2026

<https://www.itu.int/net4/wsis/forum/2026/Agenda/Session/395>

Organized by:

- International Telecommunication Union (ITU);
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR);
- Harvard Kennedy School Carr-Ryan Center.

Moderator:

- Olivier Alais (ITU)

Panellists:

- João Brant (Secretary for Digital Policies, Presidency of the Republic of Brazil);
- Isabel Ebert (Adviser and Co-Lead, B-Tech Project, OHCHR);
- Joël Christoph (Technology and Human Rights Fellow, Harvard Kennedy School Carr-Ryan Center);
- Jenna Omassi (Public Policy Manager, Global Institution Engagement, TikTok);
- Jacobo Castellanos (Coordinator, Technology, Threats, and Opportunities team, WITNESS).

Key Issues Discussed

- AI is reshaping how knowledge is produced, distributed and trusted. Technical standards, though often perceived as neutral, function as governance infrastructures that shape data flows, identity systems, content moderation, and algorithmic parameters, with direct consequences for human agency and rights, such as freedom of expression, access to information, privacy, and freedom of thought.
- Economics of knowledge and liability (Brazil): the case for fair remuneration of the informational, cultural and journalistic inputs to generative AI; the risks of "engagement maximization" as the dominant platform performance metric; and Brazil's move toward a shared responsibility, due diligence-based liability framework rather than blanket platform non-liability.
- Human rights anchoring of standards (OHCHR/B-Tech): human agency and control as the anchor of AI governance; standards as governance infrastructure that can entrench power asymmetries if under-represented voices are excluded from standard setting bodies; the duties of states (as regulators, setter of incentive-systems and as AI procurers) and the responsibility of companies to conduct human rights due diligence under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD



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Guidelines; OHCHR's newly launched work stream on AI product design and human rights due diligence.

- "Politics of knowledge" as a concept (Harvard Carr-Ryan Center): knowledge is contested along three axes: what gets recorded, what gets trusted, and what gets found, and AI risks concentrating all three inside opaque, privately built systems. Standards matter more than law in some respects because they are durable, encode the interests of whoever is "in the room," and operate beneath normal democratic scrutiny. Under-resourced languages and communities risk becoming invisible to AI systems, not for lack of value but for lack of machine-readable standards.
- Platform practice (TikTok): how a human rights-based governance structure (a cross-functional human rights working group, community guidelines grounded in international human rights law, transparency reporting, AI content labelling since 2023, and a \$2 million AI literacy fund) translates into product and policy choices, and TikTok's growing engagement in technical standard setting (e.g., C2PA).
- Content provenance and civil society (WITNESS): the value and limits of provenance/watermarking standards (C2PA) for authenticating content and protecting journalists, activists and human rights defenders; the risk that the same metadata can expose vulnerable individuals to surveillance or retaliation, particularly under authoritarian governments; the need for stronger governance of standards bodies themselves, including civil society oversight, as provenance standards get written into regulation (EU, US) and thus become de facto compliance mechanisms.
- Floor discussion: how to incorporate the knowledge and lived experience of AI harm victims and civil society into governance frameworks; how standards address oral knowledge traditions and non-written languages; copyright and remuneration tensions between rights holders, platforms, and AI training pipelines; and support for digital public goods such as Wikipedia/Wikimedia as counterweights to concentrated private control of information infrastructure.

Tangible Outcomes of the Session

- Reaffirmation from OHCHR/B-Tech and Harvard Carr-Ryan Center of active, ongoing collaboration with ITU on embedding human rights review into standards development processes.
- Announcement of a new OHCHR/B-Tech work stream on AI product design and human rights due diligence, including a civil society validation component to test whether private sector risk mitigation claims hold up in practice.
- WITNESS's public release (the day before the session) of a report on surveillance risks associated with the C2PA content provenance standard, and its call for stronger multi-stakeholder governance of the C2PA coalition as provenance standards are increasingly referenced in EU and US legislation.
- TikTok's articulation of concrete platform practices, including AI content labelling (in use since 2023, tens of millions of uses), a \$2 million AI literacy fund, and active



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participation in C2PA, as a model for translating human rights commitments into product design.

- Brazil's articulation of a shared responsibility/due diligence liability model (following its Supreme Court ruling) as a reference point for other jurisdictions rethinking platform liability frameworks.
- Renewed calls, echoed across panellists and the floor, for public and philanthropic support to digital public goods (Wikipedia/Wikimedia) as a counterweight to privately controlled knowledge infrastructure.

Key Recommendations and Forward-Looking Action Points

- Bring rights holders and affected communities, including AI harm victims, civil society, and Global South and Global Majority actors, into the design stage of standard setting, not merely as consultees after the fact.
- Build contestability, explainability, and rights of appeal into standards themselves, so that the rights-respecting design choice is also the easiest and cheapest path for implementers to follow.
- Strengthen governance of standards bodies (such as the C2PA), including civil society oversight and red lines against misuse (e.g., surveillance through provenance/watermarking metadata), especially as such standards are incorporated by reference into binding regulation.
- Advance shared vocabulary and structured dialogue between human rights and technical/standardization communities, building on OHCHR B-Tech's work bridging standards of conduct (UNGPs, OECD Guidelines) with technical standards.
- Address the economics of knowledge: explore mechanisms for fair remuneration of journalistic, cultural, and creative inputs to generative AI, and re-examine platform liability frameworks to strike a balance between innovation and accountability for content distribution choices.
- Extend standardization efforts to underserved languages and oral knowledge traditions to prevent whole bodies of knowledge from becoming functionally invisible to AI systems.
- Support digital public goods (e.g., Wikimedia) through public/multilateral funding mechanisms (e.g., UNESCO-administered information integrity funds) as an alternative to sole reliance on privately governed information infrastructure.
- Continue and deepen the ITU-OHCHR joint work plan on standards and human rights as a concrete vehicle for operationalizing these recommendations in the follow-up to the WSIS+20 Review.