CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY: OVERCOMING DIVISION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

delivered by the

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Excellency Duarte Pacheco, President of the IPU,

Honourable Colleagues,

Distinguished parliamentarians,

Good afternoon,

I am honoured to join so many fellow parliamentarians from across the globe to this Assembly in the beautiful city of Madrid.

The contemporary challenge I would like to address today is modern technology. Social media platforms are locked in a competitive pursuit to grab our undivided attention, and this race is tearing apart our social fabric.

As most of you are all aware, we are facing a social dilemma.

Social media is not simply being used by its users. Social media has its own autonomous goals that take the form of complex algorithms, aimed to hold our attention, keep us engaged and most of all to feed our addiction to remain in the loop. While users might believe that social media platforms exist just for our entertainment, the business models of these companies are based to keep us engaged on our screens. Allowing our self-worth to become predicated on the social media validation loop is not only irresponsible, but also dangerous, especially to the most vulnerable people in our societies.

The urge to connect with people is human nature. It is what makes us human in the first place. Social media platforms operationalised this urge for human connection to increase profits.

The climate change issue is a case in point because this important issue is being overshadowed by the online division that is being fomented by social media platforms. Autocompleting algorithms are confining users into echo chambers, which validate their opinions, shaping the climate conversations in the process. Opposing sides gravitate towards other like-minded individuals, cementing more extremist viewpoints. This process keeps users engaged in social media.

Parliamentarians need to rethink social media before it is too late. Faustian bargains are not the answer. In this respect, parliamentary oversight on governments to monitor the COP26 climate change targets is not enough without tackling the larger social dilemma.

The point of all this is not to ban or censor social media. The social impact of technology cannot be ignored.

On the contrary, I call on my fellow parliamentarians to rise to the challenge of mainstreaming digital and social media literacy into our political landscape. This will not be easy, given the competing rights regarding free speech, hate speech, fake speech, and privacy. It will require a perspicacious vision. Expecting these platforms to moderate their billions of users is not feasible. Parliamentarians cannot dismiss this regulation responsibility to the private sector.

I call on my fellow parliamentarians to consider establishing legal international law mechanisms to efficiently address fake news and hate speech, and social media in general.

It is possible to regulate fake news in a lawful and legitimate manner, without targeting a specific political or geopolitical leanings. Any legal standard concerning fake news must therefore be formal and potentially universal one. We must refrain

from creating a precedent where authoritarian regimes can clamp down on legitimate news networks in the name of combatting fake news. Fighting fake news with equally distortive counterpropaganda only creates more confusion and feeds the narrative of fake news.

Trust and distrust are both used to deal with the complexity of the information available to us. We should make it easier for audiences to verify the trust vested in media. Transparency in the media's source of capital and funds would strengthen existing safeguards for the independent press. For such transparency to be of use, media and digital literacy must be promoted and the information must be easily accessible.

In conclusion, to promote the values of peace and tolerance across borders, a collective and systemic change is required in the promise of a more humanely oriented technology.