



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the opening of the panel discussion on  
“Confidence in the future in the digital age”  
at the 37<sup>th</sup> German Protestant Kirchentag  
Dortmund, 20 June 2019**

Large exhibition halls, thousands of uncomfortable cardboard stools – all occupied by friendly, dedicated and positive people. A hectic big city inundated by diverse floods of visitors, with people singing in the trams and helpful scout groups on every corner. The old hands are well acquainted with it, the newcomers have been getting to know it since yesterday: it’s Kirchentag again! Welcome to Dortmund!

I am always happy to be part of this with you, brothers and sisters. Whenever I attend a Kirchentag, whether as Frank-Walter Steinmeier, as a Christian or in my role as Federal President, I come into a hall like this, see you all and am immediately reminded why – despite all the sweeping changes we are experiencing – I can look to the future with great optimism!

Thank you very much for the warm welcome!

What confidence is this, dear sisters and brothers!

What confidence is this – those are the words found in the Second Book of Kings. That is our motto for this Kirchentag.

What confidence is this – where tens of thousands of people gather peacefully to sing, pray, celebrate and engage in heated discussion about the way we live together.

What confidence is this – that is not just a motto for Kirchentage, it also shapes day-to-day life in our country:

What confidence is this – that is perhaps what the young Syrian thinks when, having escaped the civil war, he walks through Germany’s streets calmly and safely, when he meets police officers who do not give him reason to fear arbitrary treatment.

What confidence is this – is perhaps what the doctor on her way to an emergency thinks. For whoever is waiting for her, whether rich or poor, in work or unemployed – that person in need can be sure that help is coming.

What confidence is this – the confidence of millions of parents who bring their children to kindergartens each day, who send them to school every morning, and to clubs and churches in the afternoon.

As Federal President I know that our country is built on confidence and trust.

This confidence in one another and in ourselves is precious. It enables us to live together in peace, to seek contact and interaction, to assume responsibility instead of withdrawing behind closed doors or into echo chambers.

It is precious, and it should not be taken for granted. Elsewhere, millions of people are longing for this kind of confidence. They toil away, often at great personal risk, to build it where it is lacking – and they suffer when it is destroyed, when hatred, brutality and despotism poison entire societies.

In Germany, however, we are in a position to have confidence: in justice and in the rule of law, which protects us, in democracy and our constitution, whose birthday we have just celebrated and which has been the foundation of our country for the past 70 years. Let us be grateful for the confidence we have – and let us handle it carefully!

We will also need this confidence in future. And we will also need to place our confidence in the future.

Just a few weeks ago I spoke in another exhibition hall, also in front of thousands of predominantly young and very dedicated people. That was at the re:publica, the large digital conference in Berlin.

The following day, a prominent newspaper wrote: "This is the high mass of the digital world. [...] It almost has something of Kirchentag about it!" Well, they had cardboard stools there, too, but no green scarves.

In Berlin, too, I talked about confidence – and about the role of social media. For confidence is eroded when the boundaries between what can and cannot be said become increasingly blurred, when all hell breaks loose over trivialities and people take great delight in pouring scorn on the misfortunes of others, when the hatemongers are so loud and the voices of reason too quiet, when the clamour of a minority drowns out the decency of the majority. There can only be one response to this: don't let us ever take a back seat! We mustn't leave political discourse on the internet to angry and raging illusionary giants! They may have the loudest voices, but I am quite sure that they do not speak for the majority of people in our country.

Nonetheless, we are in the throes of great upheavals. Democracy is changing – not least as a result of the new opportunities for communication. And it is a good thing if more people join in. But isn't our perception totally skewed if our view of society and democracy becomes entirely fixated on technology? For years, the digital pioneers kept telling us that technology was light years ahead of the dusty sphere of politics and that digital transformation was needed to bring democracy up to date. I fear that is an upside-down view of the actual problem. I believe that it is not the digital transformation of democracy that we primarily need to concern ourselves with, but the democratisation of the digital world! Winning back political space in the face of the brutalisation and oversimplification of language and debate, but also in the face of the huge concentration of power among the Big Five, a handful of data giants from Silicon Valley – that is the most urgent task!

For let's be frank: these days, confidence in the future is being severely tested, even among chronic optimists, of which I am one.

And that encompasses much more than the tone of the debate in social media. It centres on a fundamental sense of insecurity – and on the question of whether we are still capable of asserting our liberal and democratic identity, our standards derived from centuries of enlightenment, in the modern digital age.

At the end of last year I was in China again, visiting Guangzhou, a megacity in the south of the country, situated on the Pearl River upstream from Hong Kong. Glass and steel skyscrapers as far as the eye can see, with 70 or 80 floors, with high-tech companies and digital start-ups on every floor. One of these companies produces robots in a factory designed to be as error-free as possible and independent of the "disruptive human factor". The young manager said something, almost in passing, that has remained with me: "And if all that works," he said, "then we won't need people here any more."

"Then we won't need people any more." That statement has stayed with me, long after the end of my trip. It showed me one thing very clearly: When we think about digital transformation and technical advances, we are thinking above all about ourselves. About how we perceive ourselves as humans: Who are we? And where are we heading?

We humans have been pondering these questions for thousands of years. For us Protestant Christians, but by no means just for us, these questions lay at the heart of all humanity – and in the past our answer was freedom. We are neither gods nor puppets, but God's creatures, with all our failings and weaknesses and the finite nature of our existence. Our very identity as Christians makes us free to take responsibility for our own lives. Lives in which we take decisions and assume responsibility for ourselves and others.

The freedom at the heart of humanity – this conviction also forms the basis of the constitutions of our modern democracies, our international law, and extends far beyond Christianity. More than 70 years ago, shocked and marked by the experience of the terrible crimes perpetrated in the name of our country, the nations of the world laid for themselves a common foundation: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights protect the freedom and the dignity of all people, regardless of their gender, background and beliefs. Our Basic Law sums this up beautifully in describing human dignity as “inviolable”.

Today we have to ask ourselves: what remains of this perception of our identity in the modern digital age? What remains of humanity when new technologies encroach deeper and deeper on our decisions, steer our thinking, shape our desires? And how can society function when every fibre of individuality – no longer just every deviation from the norm – is recorded as a data point and processed in new contexts – in some cases by the state, in others by private data giants?

Those are the questions I want to discuss with you today.

Yes, discussion, research and writing on the far-reaching impact of digital transformation is taking place, but I find that not everyone affected by the issue is participating in the debate by any means.

This debate concerns the heart of what constitutes our humanity – and for this reason it belongs at the heart of society and at the heart of the discussion!

Of course, we shouldn't make it too easy for ourselves. It's not simply about euphoria or dystopia, glorification or condemnation, a mere “yes” or “no” to digitalisation.

It is happening. Nine out of ten Germans are online, and as many believe that technological advancement cannot be stopped. It may boost the economy and prosperity. But many – and I am sure many of you here, too – view its impact on society with concern.

And not without reason: with Cambridge Analytica and the constant new revelations about Facebook, the almost unchecked surveillance by government agencies in other parts of the world, whether in America or Europe, or particularly in China, the day-to-day manipulation by supposedly free, colourful, flashing, attractive services that spy on us behind our backs and siphon off our data – in the short history of the digital transformation, many hopes have been dashed and the confidence of some shaken.

It is not least up to us to decide whether new confidence can grow. Are we going to withdraw to digital Morrowland, put our feet up and turn on Netflix? Or are we going to start talking about the kind of digital transformation we actually want and how we can succeed in

enshrining our freedom, our ideas, our rules, in short, the essence of humanity in the digital future?

I have experienced one thing time and again in the course of my political career: resignation is not an option, and if it is, it is always the worst option. The future is impatient. It wants to be shaped, because it will come whether we like it or not. And if we do not shape the future ourselves, we will not only jeopardise the foundation of our prosperity but will also continue to have to play by rules set down by others. That is not what we are here for!

Perhaps we can take encouragement by looking to the past. Our country was always at its strongest when we didn't simply tolerate the future and complain about crises, but took it in hand: structural change and industrial revolutions, the harsh wind of global competition, and of course the major challenge of German reunification!

In short, in our country, future has a history. And wherever we have been successful in shaping the future, many people were involved: scientists and engineers, skilled workers and entrepreneurs. But it was never just the work of individuals. It requires the whole of this vibrant and networked society. Germans are not opposed to technology, on the contrary: this society believes in progress, because it is in a position to shape it – because it provides it with an ethical and social framework and doesn't just blindly implement everything that is technically possible. For this form of progress we need civil society, we need the churches and trade unions, business and welfare associations, countless voluntary organisations and yes, the political parties, too. All of these have in the past been instrumental in ensuring that we became and remained a peaceful and prosperous country and – by international standards – a country with a high level of social security.

That reminds me of a moment that on the surface has virtually nothing to do with today's topic of digital transformation, but on second glance a great deal. Precisely six months ago, the miners of Prosper-Haniel pit in Bottrop, not so far from here, finished their final shift and presented me with the last piece of German black coal.

That evening, shortly before Christmas, marked the end of an era. It was characterised by grief and sadness, but also by optimism and great pride: We will not give way to discouragement, because we will stick together! For me, that summed up the essence of this moving evening: We will survive this change, because we will do it together – with the solidarity of an entire society.

These miners, who had learned under the harshest of conditions underground what solidarity really means, stood opposite me that evening with tears in their eyes and said: "For two hundred years, we

have moved mountains here. Literally. Why shouldn't we succeed in doing so in the future? We are and remain miners and mates."

I see that last piece of black coal every day now, opposite my desk in Schloss Bellevue, and it reminds me of the motto that was the theme of that evening of farewell and that is unique to the Ruhr region: "Glückauf Zukunft!" Good luck to the future! I will never forget that historic moment and the people who shaped it as long as I live.

That spirit of "Good luck to the future", in the face of apparent impotence confronted with relentless change, is for me a deeply impressive manifestation of hope for the future, of confidence in the formability of the future.

And that brings me back to the digital transformation. Of course we will not succeed in shaping the future without change, without daring, without risk. But we should never view technological advancement as a monstrous force of nature that we are powerless to resist. We need to want to understand what it is that endangers our humanity and our cohesion. Our in part self-inflicted digital naivety needs to make way for enlightenment and individual responsibility. Until now, the digital world has mainly been shaped around us and without our involvement. The digital world of today still serves the interests of those who set up our devices, program our applications and want to control our behaviour.

That's why we need to have the courage to interrupt the game and revise the rules. What has been shaped once can be redesigned. What has been programmed can be reprogrammed. So let's be bold and change the program!

Let's talk about changing the program: our new program can be a good program!

Just consider: a young schoolgirl today will be raising her own children in 20 or 30 years from now, in 2040 or 2050. And these children, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren, could grow up in a world that we find as difficult to imagine as the generations before us did our lives today.

These children, with good teachers but also with the help of digital tools, could learn more independently and more closely aligned to their own interests than is currently possible in everyday school life. Their mother could be sure that she would not be treated differently due to her appearance or background when looking for a place to live or applying for a loan. And the young family could overcome terrible illnesses such as skin cancer or rare inherited diseases because technology enables them to be identified and treated earlier and more precisely.

All that may sound utopian, but this kind of world is a possibility, and we can already lay the groundwork for its success.

Let's raise our expectations. We can already make algorithms more transparent and regularly examine the way they work and the results they produce. We can already program learning computers so that they work without discriminating or imposing certain values. We can already put enterprises under the obligation to ensure that any default settings comply with data protection regulations. We can already create institutions that protect our privacy from major corporations where we cannot afford to do so on our own. We can already provide police forces and public prosecution offices with what they need to be able to deprive the promoters of hate speech and loathing on the internet of their supposed anonymity and be rigorous in prosecuting them. We can already design and renew the labour market and social systems in such a way that the promise of social security also applies to new forms of work and career paths, to people in the click and platform economy. And we can already agree that important decisions concerning life and death, concerning family and love, concerning pain and responsibility, in short, decisions concerning the essence of our humanity, must, despite all technological assistance, ultimately always be taken by people.

Let's raise our expectations! All this we can do, and I believe we should do it today.

I'm speaking here because I believe that we need to establish something like a code of ethics for the digital transformation. Basic rules for the digital future, compliance with which we insist on even in times of dramatic upheaval.

In my view, we don't need any new philosophies or dogmas for this. We need to apply to this issue the qualities that have made us strong in the past.

For me, the code of ethics of the digital transformation is and remains first and foremost the ethics of freedom. It begins with the question: how can technology serve us as individuals? How can it provide greater scope for self-determination – rather than impose on us a new form of external control? How can we use technological opportunities to overcome oppression and poverty, to promote education and enlightenment, to protect the environment and natural resources?

To loosely paraphrase Kant, I would say that technological progress should make it easier for humankind to emerge from its self-imposed immaturity and not immerse itself in a new form of immaturity.

I think that the idea of the ethics of freedom is appropriate for the Protestant Kirchentag.

Luther's work "On the freedom of a Christian", and its double-edged paradox: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all,

and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one" was never easy to apply to politics. But that dual message remains hugely relevant: There can be no freedom without responsibility. There can be no freedom without rules. This tense relationship needs to be renegotiated in the modern digital age.

Every promise of freedom, including that offered by the digital world, looks towards a new order: freedom needs rules and new forms of freedom need new rules.

In a democracy, who makes the rules? Ultimately, we do! Wolfgang Huber calls that communicative freedom, the freedom to get involved, participate, shape things.

And that is why a code of ethics for the digital transformation is more than merely a private appeal to the conscience of individuals. No citizen, no consumer acting single-handedly can restore control and individual responsibility in the internet; that is only possible through joint efforts, through civil-society organisations and alliances of solidarity, with legal regulations and international agreements.

Yet the catalyst for it, the ignition spark is a deeply emancipatory one and that is why it should also be part of a Kirchentag. Our code of ethics for the digital transformation starts with a political declaration of independence – against digital heteronomy and in favour of reason, individual responsibility and democracy. That is our goal, and that should be our joint message!

Emancipation has many levels, starting with ourselves – how do we interact with digital media? How much do we reveal about ourselves? It needs government action and government regulations – the German legislative process is groping its way forward on a precarious footing – but of course it goes beyond national borders. I think our declaration of independence should be a European one.

Europe has a voice that needs to be heard and Europe has something to offer in this world. Let's not perceive the route to the digital future as a zero-sum game or as a form of defence against the digital giants from the United States and China. Of course, we in Germany and Europe need to remain competitive, and in many digital fields we first need to become competitive.

If we manage to do that, then I am convinced that "Made in Europe" can become a standard in the digital world – and there are enough examples of this – a standard which places the focus on the dignity and freedom of the individual. Europe could provide an alternative to a world that increasingly believes that its only options are either unlimited digital capitalism based on the American model on the one hand, or Orwellian state surveillance in China on the other.

And despite all the differences that separate us from these players in the areas of freedom, privacy and security, we ought to try



and formulate and maybe agree on some minimum ethical standards with the United States and even with China. That will be difficult, but not impossible. We have taken our first successful steps in medical ethics together – introducing ethical standards which to date still also apply in China. That is why on these ethical issues we also need to engage in dialogue with difficult partners. Ms Schavan will no doubt talk about that shortly in the panel discussion.

Now, at the end, I'm back to the theme of confidence. As Christians we know only too well that confidence is not the same as certainty. Confidence and faith go hand in hand. Because we are secure in God's love, we believe in a good future. Our faith is, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews, "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Let's have confidence in our ability to plan the future!

And let's start right here, at this Kirchentag.

Get involved, very specifically! Formulate and discuss your wishes, questions and ideas for the future. I'm looking forward to our discussion afterwards. And I'm also pleased that work will be done on a resolution on the digital transformation at this Kirchentag. This will provide key impetus, also beyond the Kirchentag. I call on you to take this debate to congregations, companies and clubs; on to the internet and social media, to blogs and online petitions.

We are free to make plans, to shape the future, and we can have confidence.

That's why I want to say to you, not so much in my role as Federal President but as a person, as a Christian, as Frank-Walter Steinmeier: I am now 63 years old. I have white hair. And I'm really looking forward to the future!