

# Under fire tech sector gathers in Portugal

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Web Summit's Irish chief executive Paddy Cosgrave says technology is going through 'a funk'

Europe's largest tech event, the Web Summit, gets underway in Lisbon on Monday amid a backlash over internet firms' role in spreading "fake news" and how they use consumer data.

Some 70,000 people are expected to take part in the four-day gathering, dubbed "the Davos for geeks", including speakers from leading global tech companies, politicians and start-ups hoping to attract attention from the over 1,500 investors who are scheduled to attend.

But this time around tech firms find themselves on the defensive, with critics accusing them of not doing enough to curb the spread of "[fake news](#)" which has helped polarise elections campaigns around the world, and of maximising profits by harvesting data on consumers' browsing habits.

Employees of Google, Facebook and other tech giants have in recent months gone public with their regrets, calling the products they helped build harmful to society and overly addictive.

"I think technology is going through a funk... it's a period of reflexion," Web Summit founder and CEO Paddy Cosgrave told AFP ahead of the official opening of the event.

"With every new technology you go through these cycles. The initial excitement of the printed press was replaced in time by a great fear that it was actually a bad thing. Over time it has actually worked out OK."

## **Engine of division**

The British computer scientist who in 1989 invented the worldwide web as a way to exchange information, Tim Berners-Lee, is expected to call for a new "contract" for the internet during his opening address to the gathering later on Monday.

He has just launched Inrupt, a start-up which is building an [open source platform](#) called "Solid" which will decentralise the web and allow users to choose where their data is kept, along with who can see and access it.

"For all the good we've achieved, the web has evolved into an engine of inequity and division; swayed by powerful forces who use it for their own agendas," he wrote in a blog post describing the project.

Solid intends to allow users to bypass tech giants such as Google and Facebook. The two tech giants now have direct influence over nearly three quarters of all internet traffic thanks to the vast amounts of apps and services they own such as YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram.

Tech giants are also under fire having built up virtual monopolies in their areas.

Amazon for example accounts for 93 percent of all e-book sales while Google swallows up 92 percent of all European internet-search ad spending.

## **Violent voices magnified**

Among those expected to speak at the event is Christopher Wylie, a whistleblower who earlier this year said users' data from Facebook was used by British political consultancy Cambridge Analytica to help elect US President Donald Trump—a claim denied by the company.

Another [tech](#) veteran who has become critical of the sector, Twitter co-founder Ev Williams, will on Thursday give the closing address of the event.

He left Twitter in 2011 and went on to co-found online publishing platform Mash, which is subscription based and unlike Twitter favours in-depth writing about issues.

"We got used to everything being free and we underestimated the cost of that," he told the New York Times in May, adding "there's clearly an

appetite now for content platforms to be regulated".

The problem with the current model is that negative stories get more attention online, and thus gain more advertisers, according to Mitchell Baker, the president of the Mozilla Foundation, a non-profit organisation which promotes Internet innovation.

"Today everyone has a voice but the problem is... the loudest and often most violent voices get magnified because the most negative, scariest things attract our attention," she told AFP in a recent interview.

The Web Summit was launched in Dublin in 2010 and moved to Lisbon six years later. The Portuguese government estimates the event will generate 300 million euros (\$347 million) for Lisbon in hotel and other revenues.

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