INFORMATION INTEGRITY:
GOVERNANCE OR FRAGMENTATION

The United Nations is looking to establish a governance framework to guarantee and protect information integrity in an era of falsehoods and disinformation. Several matters are it issue, however, ranging from the very concept of information integrity to its impact on the technological platforms' responsibility as amplifiers of disinformation, hate speech or even the algorithmic suppression of content and voices that challenge a certain way of exercising power.

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Technology has transformed our experience of immediacy and our relationship with the truth. Algorithmic recommendations have risen up as opaque decision makers that hierarchise and select our access to information. The Internet has plunged us into a boundless world of (dis)informative possibilities, of a myriad sources and contradictory narratives that have wrought cultural changes in the norms of communication and how we consume information. It is a systemic, rapid and global revolution traversed by the geopolitical confrontation of technological models and a gradual fragmentation of the Internet (Mueller, 2017).

And this whole process of communication transformation has been engineered with the indispensable intermediation of the big technological platforms; digital giants that create no content but make crucial decisions about its dissemination: "what they will distribute and to whom, how they will connect users and broker their interactions, and what they will refuse" (Gillespie, 2017). This realisation has raised government pressure on the platforms to hold them to account and demand greater transparency over the algorithmic architecture that orders the Web.

Infocracy, or the "information regime" in the digital world, about which Byung-Chul Han (2022) has theorised, is a form of domination in which "information and its processing by algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) have a decisive influence on social, economic and political processes". The capacity to alter information or data, decisive factors for obtaining power, has direct consequences on democratic processes. In such circumstances access to quality information, considered a public good established in international law,1 is under increasing threat.

DISINFORMATION COMPROMISES HUMAN RIGHTS AND THREATENS FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND THE RIGHT TO DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION; IT ALSO IMPACTS LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE INSTITUTIONS AND IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES.

Disinformation compromises human rights and threatens freedom of thought, the right to privacy and the right to democratic participation. It has the capacity to erode economic, social and cultural rights and has a direct impact on levels of confidence in the institutions and in democratic processes (Colomina *et al*, 2021). In a survey carried out in 2022, 75% of United Nations Blue Helmets deployed around the world said that disinformation had caused them security problems on their missions. Similarly, "information pollution" (Orman, 1984) – taken as the flow of low-value content that diminishes our capacity to access quality information, either because of its inaccuracy, its irrelevance or redundancy – was identified as a significant concern by 75% of United Nations Development Programme offices (2021).

This presents a scene of "information disorder" (Wardle, 2017) of which disinformation is only one symptom of a much larger problem that is set to be tackled at the United Nations Summit of the Future (September 2024).

A new framework of responsibility

The slow-moving multilateral governance machinery released the new Global Principles for Information Integrity on June 24th, 2024, emphasising the need to take "immediate" measures to address the harm caused by disinformation and hate speech and, at the same time, safeguard both human rights and freedom of expression.

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1.   United Nations General Assembly, 1948 Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The United Nations defines information integrity as "the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem" (UNDP, 2022). With this concept, borrowed from the field of information security in corporate systems (commonly used to refer to data and information protection systems in businesses), the United Nations aims to cover the broad spectrum of vulnerabilities that range from the social and individual impact that "information pollution" might have to the big technological platforms' responsibility as necessary intermediaries in its mass distribution.

Secretary-General António Guterres's policy brief on information integrity on digital platforms (United Nations, 2023), released in 2023 and aimed at stakeholders that include governments, tech companies, digital platforms and advertisers, calls for a concerted international response to the proliferation of hatred and lies in the digital space via a code of conduct, which he will take to the Summit of the Future. The code (which draws on the governance experiences implemented by the European Union for over five years) looks to set out principles and commitments for online platforms and the digital advertising sector, with transparency demands particularly over how their algorithmic recommendation systems work. The United Nations (2023) recognises the role the platforms play to amplify voices that previously went unheard and breathe life into global movements, but it also accuses them of having "exposed a darker side of the digital ecosystem".

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Yet the very concept of "information integrity" raises some questions. First, because of its origins in the field of information security in corporate spaces, since focusing on securitising the information system may breed distrust of government communications or traditional media among some sections of society. Second, certain academic circles consider it to be a Global North concept, although it is already beginning to form part of various government strategies, from Canada and the Netherlands to Brazil in the framework of the G20. The UN secretary-general maintains that problems in defining it should not inhibit the efforts to tackle the real challenge: lack of information integrity is considered harmful to the progress of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Erosion of rights

According to the United Nations, the erosion of the information ecosystem undermines efforts to combat climate change or eradicate poverty, and may accelerate processes of social, economic and political exclusion. Similarly, gender-based hate speech, disinformation and violence are used to systematically subjugate women by silencing them and pushing them out of the public sphere, supressing their voices and fuelling self-censorship, thus jeopardising the progress made on gender equality.

THE CODE OF CONDUCT FOR INFORMATION INTEGRITY (AIMED AT BOTH COMPANIES AND GOVERNMENTS) SHOULD GUARANTEE RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA, INCREASED TRANSPARENCY, USER EMPOWERMENT, AND STRENGTHENED RESEARCH AND DATA ACCESS, AS WELL AS STRONGER DISINCENTIVES TO SPREAD MISINFORMATION.

Both the secretary-general of the United Nations (2023) and UNESCO (2022) have repeatedly denounced gendered disinformation and hate speech directed at women and girls on digital platforms as a serious threat to information integrity, something which requires the urgent attention of governments and technology companies. For all these reasons it is considered essential to approve a code of conduct for information integrity on digital platforms that moves beyond the inadequate model of self-regulation and content moderation that the various tech giants have put in place, each with its own internal functioning and in an opaque manner.

According to Guterres, this code (aimed at both companies and governments) should guarantee respect for human rights, support for independent media, increased transparency, user empowerment, and strengthened research and data access, as well as stronger disincentives to spread misinformation. He also denounces government abuses of ordering blanket Internet shutdowns and bans on certain platforms, which may lack legal basis and infringe human rights, as well as the introduction of laws that may infringe freedom of expression. Speaking at the AI summit in Seoul, the UN secretary-general called for "universal guardrails"; rules and safety against "harmful" business models that prioritise user "engagement" on networks above human rights and privacy.

But how can information integrity be guaranteed in unstable democracies with deep inequalities and high media concentration, or with freedom of expression under threat? Or in countries without the capacity to exert

pressure on the huge digital giants or social networks that influence the shaping of their public opinion? How much compliance will a code of conduct for governments and multibillion-dollar companies that makes no provision for enforceability or the possibility of sanctions actually achieve? For all these reasons, expectations for the code are low.

Various civil and digital rights and pro-freedom of expression associations believe the text of this code goes no further than the basic principles that have already been declared repeatedly by the United Nations Charter. They criticise its ambiguity on implementation and call for a more stringent accountability and responsibility framework. Article 19, an international organisation working for freedom of expression, recalls that disinformation and hate speech are often government-led and, therefore, calls on the United Nations to be more forceful on states' obligations as regards protecting freedom of expression and other human rights.

Information is a public good in the hands of private and transnational platforms based on a business model that has had a legal, cultural and ethical impact on the public space. The challenge for the Summit of the Future will be to create spaces of common responsibility for divergent digitisation processes, fragmented media systems and authoritarian-leaning regimes that use the concepts and tactics of this information disorder to attack their critics and harass, even criminalise, civil society movements, while attempting to undermine multilateral efforts to reach a consensus on protecting the information space.

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