

Report

Contribution to the Global Digital Compact: “Digital commons as a global public good. Internet as a free space, and methods for combating the spread of disinformation and misinformation.”

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[15 April 2023]

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ZVR 524808900

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The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from IIASA and the National Member Organizations that support the institute (The Austrian Academy of Sciences; The Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (CAPES); The National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC); The Academy of Scientific Research and Technology (ASRT), Egypt; The Finnish Committee for IIASA; The Association for the Advancement of IIASA, Germany; The Technology Information, Forecasting and Assessment Council (TIFAC), India; The Indonesian National Committee for IIASA; The Iran National Science Foundation (INSF); The Israel Committee for IIASA; The Japan Committee for IIASA; The National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF); The Mexican National Committee for IIASA; The Research Council of Norway (RCN); The Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS); Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, Slovakia; The National Research Foundation (NRF), South Africa; The Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning (FORMAS); The Ukrainian Academy of Sciences; The Research Councils of the UK; The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), USA; The Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST).

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program for the research project 'Science&human factOr for Resilient sociEty' (CORE, 101021746).



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Abstract

The Internet as a common good implies the absence of any restrictions, closures, and blockages with censorship being unacceptable in democratic societies. However, it can lead to the uncontrolled growth and spread of disinformation and misinformation, which can have negative effects on democratic processes, on emergency management, and on human rights. While part of society sees the Internet as the last free space and considers the restriction of the Internet an infringement of citizens' rights to freedom of communication and information, another part of society advocates at least reasonable censorship of the Internet. Parallel to this is the question of who will be behind the censorship – will it be the government, private companies, platforms, or search engines, and what will be the rules and algorithms of censorship.

As part of its participation in the CORE project (sCience&human factOr for Resilient sociEty), IIASA held an online consultation with project participants to discuss the topic of "Internet as a free space and methods for combating the spread of disinformation and misinformation" and to prepare key principles and commitments as a contribution to the Global Digital Compact.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the key points raised by the participants in the consultation process.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 101021746, CORE (sCience&human factOr for Resilient sociEty) for supporting the online consultation and the resulting report.

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following individuals for their valuable contributions to this report:

- Irina Dallo, Postdoc, Swiss Seismological Service, ETH Zürich, Switzerland
- Laure Fallou, Research Officer, Euro-Mediterranean Seismological Centre, France
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Their input and expertise were essential in shaping the objectives and requirements of this work, and we are grateful for their valuable contributions.

Topics, core principles, and key commitments

During the online consultation, the following topics were discussed and served as the basis for formulating the core principles and key commitments outlined in this report.

Relationship and balance between Internet freedom and spread of misinformation/disinformation

While digital rights, freedom of information, freedom of speech, privacy, and the right to access the internet are crucial for democracy, the open nature of the internet can also facilitate the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This is due to the incentive of the attention economy, which rewards people for attracting attention rather than providing high-quality information, as well as the ease of posting and sharing content without verifying its accuracy or context and the anonymity that allows anyone to participate in any conversation.

To ensure that internet freedom facilitates the common good, it is important to promote accurate and verifiable information from trusted sources, as well as to combat hate speech and other forms of online harm. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that freedom of expression should not come at the expense of other fundamental human rights, such as the right to form independent opinions and make informed choices without being subjected to manipulation or interference (Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

In some cases, governments may have a legitimate role in regulating information sharing to protect public health and safety, while also upholding international human rights norms. Striking a balance between internet freedom and other values and rights is therefore an ongoing challenge that requires careful deliberation and cooperation among stakeholders.

The following key recommendations were proposed to promote responsible and informed use of the internet, media, and information sources:

- Governments should prioritize education in critical and systems thinking, information searching, and fact validation, as well as promote media independence, diversity of sources, and fact-based reporting. This will equip individuals with the necessary skills for media and information literacy to distinguish between reliable and false information and navigate information sources effectively.
- Governments should facilitate safe communication spaces that enable individuals to exercise their right to change opinions and encourage the correction of false beliefs to foster a culture of learning.
- Governments should hold social media platforms and websites accountable for the content they host by requiring them to mark and/or delete suspicious content or content clearly identified as misinformation or disinformation. Allowing such content to spread freely undermines efforts to combat misinformation and disinformation, which is why social media platforms and websites should take proactive measures such as fact-checking to prevent its spread.
- Governments should communicate transparently about the reasons for blocking certain information to ensure accountability and prevent arbitrary censorship.

These commitments reflect a dedication to upholding the principles of free expression, access to information, democratic participation, and the responsible use of information in the digital age.

Classifying information as misinformation/disinformation and censorship decisions

The information monitoring system should be multi-layered, involving individuals, independent national institutions, and international collaborations to address the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation.

Given the decentralized and free nature of the internet, individuals should take responsibility for their own consumption of information. At the national level, an independent institution, established based on state laws and regulations, should be responsible for ensuring that any decision of censorship is based on the rule of law and international human rights principles. This institution should include civil society, media, scientists, experts, social media platforms, websites, and tech companies' representatives in its decision-making processes.

At the international level, joint efforts should be made by all affected nations to combat misinformation and disinformation. A multi-stakeholder approach involving governments, civil society, media, scientists, and tech companies should be adopted to identify and address misinformation and disinformation.

It is also important to differentiate between misinformation and disinformation, as the latter involves deliberate attempts to harm others or manipulate public opinion. More efforts may be needed to address disinformation, including stronger legal and regulatory frameworks and greater collaboration among stakeholders.

The following key commitments were discussed to address the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation:

- Governments should prioritize providing education on critical thinking, information searching, fact validation, and distinguishing between relevant information and 'noise'.
- Governments should prioritize public correction of misinformation instead of censorship.
- An international point of contact should be established, which could involve a series of special institutions with independent experts, where institutions and nations can seek an external and objective evaluation of situations. At least two independent entities should be involved in verifying the accuracy of information.
- A program should be developed to train experts in different fields to design guidelines for identifying and addressing misinformation and disinformation in their respective fields of expertise.
- Governments should explore the use of AI to trace the origin and spread of information, which can help identify the sources of misinformation and disinformation and prevent its further spread.

Control of misinformation/disinformation identification and potential censorship

Rather than a general control over information, each relevant entity such as media and tech companies, social media platforms, websites, and providers of online algorithms should be responsible for controlling the

information related to their scope. Each entity should be in charge of controlling their own information assets in accordance with national laws. Ultimately, justice should be the final authority.

The following key commitments were discussed:

- A board of experts in various domains should be established to publish scientific and evidence-based information so that internet users can refer to these and compare in case of special interest. However, it is equally important to promote a diversity of sources that provide different perspectives and interpretations of information. This can enable internet users to compare and evaluate different sources of information, develop their own critical thinking skills, and make informed decisions.
- International guidelines on content regulation should be developed in the near future to ensure compliance with human rights law. National laws should also regulate business models of media and tech companies, as well as the algorithmic systems of tech companies to ensure compliance with human rights.
- Citizens should be educated on potential misinformation since it is often spread un-intentionally.
- A program should be developed to train internet experts in specific sectors or organizations, such as government agencies, media companies, academic institutions, and technology firms, to identify misinformation/disinformation in their respective fields. These data scientists should have a strong understanding of the data sources and methods used in their sectors, as well as an ability to analyze and interpret data. The program should also provide training on critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as tools and techniques for evaluating the reliability of sources and detecting patterns of misinformation and disinformation.
- Scientific misinformation/disinformation identification should be done in collaboration with independent scientific institutions to have an objective evaluation of what is scientifically correct and what is not. The scientific institutions should monitor the comments/discussions on their websites, social media pages, or other digital platforms and counteract them (e.g., state that the statement is incorrect/remove it if it is harmful).

Rules for misinformation/disinformation identification and potential censorship

From the perspective of preserving freedom of information, it is important to have access to a diversity of sources and opinions, but with verified and trusted means for validation. However, rules around identifying misinformation/disinformation and potential censorship need to be balanced carefully in order to promote accuracy without impinging on free speech or access to information. In addition, any policies and practices around content regulation should be transparent and comply with human rights standards.

The following key commitments were discussed:

- States should ensure that restrictions are transparent, specific, based on a law that is sufficiently precise, necessary, and proportionate to the purpose of protecting international human rights.
- Internet users that are censored should be accurately informed about the reasons of censorship.
- There should be an international institution (to prevent government influence) in case censored people want to contest.

- Information providers need to develop guidelines and policies for identifying and addressing misinformation/disinformation. This may involve the use of fact-checking tools, algorithms, or experts to identify potentially problematic content.

Algorithms of misinformation/disinformation identification and potential censorship

To effectively combat misinformation and disinformation, it is essential to develop algorithms based on text and image analysis that can identify and prioritize the most impactful instances of false information. These algorithms should examine which topics are receiving attention and when this attention occurs, and compare it to other trusted sources. However, it is important to emphasize that attention should also be paid to false information that has not received widespread attention, as even a single instance of false information can have serious consequences. Additionally, these algorithms should be public, accessible, transparent, and subject to scrutiny by third parties as part of a global strategy that also addresses digital literacy and risks related to algorithms.

However, algorithms alone are not sufficient. It is also necessary to rely on internet individual users who should be able to select reliable information. Digital literacy plays a pivotal role in this process. Equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the vast sea of information on the internet empowers them to make informed decisions and distinguish reliable sources from misinformation. Censorship algorithms should only be used as a last resort when it is clear that misinformation or disinformation is causing harm and cannot be addressed through other means, such as providing correct information or argumentation.

The following key commitments were discussed:

- States and tech companies should ensure transparency, support media, and information and digital literacy, and should design social media user interfaces that support critical thinking.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) can help by identifying misinformation suspicion and by labelling suspicious content. Such labels would suggest to individual users to check if the information is trustworthy.
- Grants for academic research to develop such algorithms should be made available.

Other related topics

The participants of the online consultation also acknowledged the complexity and multifaceted nature of the topic, which spans national, cross-national, and international levels, and may involve differing procedures across these levels. They reiterated the importance of information and media literacy in addressing these challenges.