

Foreword (pre-print) written by Guy Berger for the book:
Disinformation in the Global South
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It's a sign of the novelty of the field that this book contains a diversity of uses of the terms "disinformation" and "misinformation." Like the novel coronavirus itself, our labeling during the "infodemic" (WHO) and "disinfodemic" (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020), along with our understanding of these issues, continues to evolve.

This foreword, for reasons outlined below, treats the term "disinformation" as an umbrella notion for a range of false or misleading content that has potential to cause harm to human rights (including socioeconomic rights such as to public health and a sustainable environment). Its vantage point is that of freedom of expression and access to information, which it pits against disinformational expression. The text also highlights relevant work by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), especially in terms of international experiences of the problems.

Beyond the significant differences in nomenclature in this book, it is nevertheless the case that the contributions in these pages show us that we are talking about a problem for humanity at large and which is at once global and locally situated. It is a challenge composed of generic elements as well as highly variegated characteristics and significances around the world.

What this book represents is distinctive, given that much other scholarship on this topical subject has been focused on specific domestic and geopolitical experiences in the US and the UK over recent years. This research has been given impetus there by voting controversy and by the pandemic, and it has allocated particular attention to the roles of Facebook and Twitter (Puddephatt 2019), with less attention to other communication channels or functionalities.

By contrast, the contributions in these pages show the value of considering experiences outside of the dominant Western cases and the English language. They show how these different experiences mirror this predominant research in some respects, but also how they preshadow it in others - and are yet also distinctive in several further dimensions.

The chapters here underline the recognition that aspects of US and UK experiences could have been predicted through attention being given to earlier, even pioneering, weaponization of internet communications for political purposes elsewhere. For instance, Ukraine was a target of geopolitical information operations long before awareness of foreign interference in the US 2016 poll. On the other hand, after 2016, a strong Western research focus on "disinformation" as originating and being fueled by external interests operating troll farms has also missed out on the lessons from other experiences worldwide.

For instance, the Philippines was an early experiment that saw significant home-grown purveyors At the highest levels using organized trolling which fused falsehoods with venom and which mobilized gang "pile-ons" against independent journalists - something that also later came to pass in the US. Similarly, the foot-dragging of the internet companies to

deal with the US's #StopTheSteal narrative until it was almost too late echoes the failure of Facebook to put resources into addressing problematic content in the Philippines, and to its corporate unpreparedness in dealing with online hateful expression against Rohingya people in Myanmar. In a similar vein, it can be remembered that Cambridge Analytica was active not just during Brexit and the US 2016 election, but was honing its data-driven manipulative approach in many other countries. And Brazil was an early case of social messaging used extensively to disseminate false content.

In short, developments that took some researchers and others by seeming surprise in some societies were thus already known elsewhere before, and the lesson of this book is the importance of examining diverse experiences around the world.

One particular insight that we can gain is that even if many social media companies function across borders, the content ecosystem still functions in different national and local contexts. Variations in internet penetration, reliance on specific apps, connectivity costs, and the character of the mainstream media have significant impact on disinformation issues. For example, sharing of falsehoods or participating in mob pile-on's may be extensive in some countries, but in places where many users struggle with one costly data-purchase to the next, it should not be surprising if such economics, at least, constrain the extent of such potentially harmful behaviors.

Another instance of cross-regional relevance, signaled by this book, is the role of mainstream media in regard to disinformation. Although the role of influential media in the US and UK came belatedly into view as regards the fostering of, or at least legitimizing of, disinformational content in those countries, this had been an ongoing affliction in many other states. Where captured media and journalists dominate the content ecosystem, as described in several chapters in this book, it is to be expected that these media (especially free-to-air broadcasting), rather than social media, can play at least a leading role as purveyors of content that has dubious truthfulness. But in such situations in developing countries, disinformation often works by omission of key truths in echoing "his master's voice," and often less by deliberate lies. There are lessons here too for Western experiences. In countries with histories of more explicitly controlled media, especially state-owned outlets, the role of media institutions as vectors for disinformation is often so well entrenched that audiences have come to not only mistrust mainstream news but also expect that it intrinsically represents the ruling group's self-interested picturing and explanations of reality.

One antidote to half-truths in all societies is a pluralism of sources of content. Disinformation studies in media-dense societies have zoomed in upon the polarized echo-chambers whereby a pluralism of choice does not preclude the existence of filter bubbles, confirmation bias, and conformity bias. Outside of Western contexts, however, there may well be a contrasting picture. There, where a degree of media pluralism exists, such as with oppositional media institutions (local or from the diaspora), the output of such outlets is also readily recognized by audiences at large as being positioned. This includes especially situations where journalists themselves are for sale, such as in the "brown envelope" practice that occurs widely in Africa. Foreign media in the form of international broadcasters may add to a pluralism of content in developing countries, but their links to countries' foreign policy and soft power do not necessarily suffice to elevate them above the fray. The result is that in many developing countries, while a diversity of communication channels extends the range of news representations, and reduces echo-chamber effects, at best a few are likely to be treated as credible sources.

What echo-chambers exist online are likely less self-contained and reproduced, than in countries where there is mass connectivity, extensive time spent online, and algorithmic shaping of what content people see and engage with.

It can be posited, from some of the insights in this book as well, that in many developing Countries, a widespread skepticism underlines perception that truthfulness lies somewhere in the mix of interested representations. Instead, of the construct of a marketplace of ideas, it may well be that many people place their “truth” loyalty to a cluster of established channels. In this context, non-traditional news sources - for example, churches - may play an outsized role as trusted communicators, without amplification of big tech determinants.

Again, such possible insights from “elsewhere” may well have some resonance in the key centers where disinformation has mainly been studied, so that the role of social media and algorithmic echo-chambers there should be checked against people’s consumption of mainstream media as well as their affiliations to social institutions (although admittedly in the US, mega churches are indeed well part of the digital communications complex¹).

A further point to consider is, even when non-media sources may fill a gap in terms of whom the public believes, how far can such belief go before reaching limits? “Gaslighting,” an activity of power that seeks to persuade people that their experience of reality of something is other than what it seems, is not infinitely sustainable. Real experiences, along with history, have often trumped the host of representations available - something that helps explain historical change despite controls over communication – not least in non-democracies where people are rightly sceptical about much content that comes their way. This observation as relevant to disinformation has an especially strong bearing on societies with low penetration of communications technology and/or low local content components. But it is not only relevant to them.

One implication of this is that any assumption of disinformation as inherently harmful content does need to be tested against *actual impact* on those exposed to such content. We need to also question how impact works even in those countries where there is deep mediation of communications by digital intermediaries. For the US, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) has astutely identified how surveillance capitalist internet companies exploit individual data for personalization and microtargeting. However, whether this phenomenon translates into stimulus-response impact and control of behaviors futures is a different question. To be sure, there may well be more cumulative impact over time, on agendas, and at the level of ideology, and on notions of happiness, consumerism, beauty, and norms for social interaction, the “other,” far-away places and people, the structure of world power, and where one is centered. But these influences are also susceptible to contradiction, challenge, and the agency of the self and social groups.

The same point goes for the effectiveness of falsehoods about health spread on all media channels. Granted that extensive repetition of falsehoods can increase their credibility (e.g. that COVID-19 is really a “plandemic” conspiracy, and Bill Gates is to blame), the gaslighting that this entails runs up against the limits of people’s actual lived realities on the ground. Fake cures for COVID-19 run out of mileage, even when touted by national leaders, when reality has a brutal way of intruding. Millions of voters

¹ See Charles Kriel and Katharina Gellein Viken’s video: People you may know. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P7Peah0xPI>

are said to believe that that 2020 US election was “stolen,” although despite massive efforts to sustain this narrative, the credulity of this view runs up against the reality of power of the new administration. The lesson is that experiences outside of the US and UK signal that these cases too may merit greater examination in terms of the harm assumed to come from particular disinformation.

Another significant insight gained from examining experiences outside the body of English-language scholarship is to understand the problem from a critical and cultural studies perspective, rather than a positivistic one. As registered in this book, a particular paradigm often underpins the issue of “disinformation” — one that elevates “facts” and thence “fact-checking” and “debunking and pre-bunking” as central to combating the problems. The difficulty here, apart from the challenge of finding reliable empirical data in many countries to be able to definitively assert verifiability, is that even in the citadels of Western “rational” thinking, there may be limits to this perspective. This is because units of meaning go way beyond titbits of truth or falsity. Instead, they are mobilized within narratives that do the semantic linking that in turn can deeply affect how, to reference Stuart Hall’s (1973) classic schema, people actually decode the texts they encounter — for instance, as hegemonic, oppositional, or a negotiated engagement.

In other words, there are limits to a Cartesian conceptualization of disinformation, and to the responses to the issue. The global lesson, though not always top of mind for an empiricist mindset, is that we face the very frequent fusion of fact, falsehood, and opinion in experiences of disinformation in multiple places. In these deployments, smatterings of science (and falsehoods) do not stand alone — they are set up to be interpreted within the logic of a wider ideology and its associated identities. While conceptually there are very significant distinctions between what can be identified as hate speech and what are clearly cases of disinformation, on the ground, as a diversity of experiences worldwide suggests, it is seldom the situation that hate makes its case without also mobilizing a narrative that reinforces the appeal to the heart, with purported back-up of selected - plus alleged - “facts” catering to the head. What this means is that while fact-checking and other strategies have their necessary place in combatting disinformation, they are, in general, not sufficient.²

A further value to extrapolate from this book is that its insights allow us to transcend the Manichean view that “disinformation” is the work of the “bad guys,” while “misinformation” is that of the duped or the simply misguided and misinformed. This perspective, rooted in a caricatured moral drama, presents a frame (often colored with nationalism) of who is good, bad (foreign interference), and innocent (dupes). This frame in turn allows different actors to position themselves as morally superior and in opposition to antagonists, no matter the actual veracity of the content they produce and/or spread — it is the motive or intention that is privileged as counting.

Such a simplistic framing allows the internet companies to present themselves as being

² While many responses to disinformation implicate responding to hatred, and vice versa, there are distinctive dimensions. Not least in this is that international human rights standards tolerate a level of false expression without restriction (unless such expression harms other human rights - such as reputation, property ownership, safety, etc.), while restrictions on hate are accepted under international human rights law as pertains to freedom of expression.

unfortunate victims of abuse, and for them to plead that the sheer scale of their operations inhibits them from instituting a solution. It is, however, quite possible to be cynical of this particular self-portrayal, just as one can also be in regard to mainstream media's protestations about being manipulated by the agendas of PR companies or that they are only giving oxygen to false content because of the need for "balance." In both cases, the autonomous agency, and duty of care, of the communications companies involved - both internet and media - is taken off the table. The framing especially underpins the convenient internet company narrative that the problems on their platforms or search services are the result of "bad actors" gaming the system and adopting "co-ordinated inauthentic behavior." Through such a focus, less attention is then given to internal corporate culpability - whether this is companies skimping on budget to ensure content moderation, especially in smaller languages; whether it is by them amplifying potential harmful content through algorithmic content prioritization and recommendations (for reasons of maximizing user "stickiness" to the platform); or whether it is by these entities making money out of permitting microtargeting advertising to their users with scant scruple about the truthfulness of paid strategic messaging. In the end, the ethics and values and intentionality of communications actors are important matters, but these are certainly insufficient when a simple binary around these is then used to define a conceptual difference between types of expression - "disinformation" and "misinformation."

Thus, reading the contributions in this book, awareness also emerges further about the problems of a moralistic position in distinguishing "disinformation" as deliberate and knowing lying, compared to "misinformation" as unaware and non-malicious intentions. As a perspective, this distinction has some resonance in terms of examining the act of creating and sharing of content, in that different remedies are implicated depending on people's motives and awareness/knowledge of veracity concerning content. *But there are also severe limitations.* First, the issue of intention is notoriously difficult to establish and even harder to judge. One actor spreading anti-vaccination information may be seeking to deceive people in order to make money out of "alternative" treatments; another may be "well intentioned" in creating and spreading exactly the same content with the mission of being helpful. Second, the bad-actor frame poses the question of how to treat the role of human-programmed algorithms that play such a big part in the problem: to what extent should corporate engineering intentions (e.g. to maximize attention-economics advantage) be morally evaluated? And do such programming motivations count toward whether we should then treat a particular curation of false content as being disinformation or as misinformation? Third, while much false and misleading content may originate deliberately, i.e. as "disinformation" in this perspective that privileges a sender's motivation and knowledge, does the exact same content then count as "misinformation" depending on who subsequently distributes it? Is the distinction then not of specific content per se, but of the functionality for the sender/distributor?

In passing, it can be noted that the classic sender-based framing of the "disinformation/misinformation" distinction by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) actually involves four possibilities: (a) awareness of falsity; (b) malicious intent; (c) unawareness; (d) benign intent. For them, disinformation is a + b; and misinformation is c + d. This begs the question of whether combinations such as a + d and b + c ought to concern us, and with what labels they might then be described.

These are not just semantic complexities. They impact on responses to the problem

of false and misleading content. If the challenge is portrayed as “misinformation” without harmful intention being implicated, then the solutions tend to point toward “education” - in order to enlighten those who are unaware of the falsity and whose motives are otherwise “pure.” If the challenge is more one of “disinformation”, then the response may call for warnings, blockings, deprioritization, deplatforming, or, in some cases, criminalization. Some states have even engaged in internet shutdowns using the justification of combating disinformation. The more restrictive responses, however, carry with them the grave risk of intruding on legitimate freedom of expression irrespective of motives.

Further, in this mix of responses that privileges the intentions behind the supply of false or misleading content, the specific obligations of the internet companies become less clear — because the perspective, as discussed above, contains a blind spot about their own autonomous role as vectors within the communications chain. Further, while the imputation is that “misinformation” is less of a problem than “disinformation,” this can be questioned when examined from the point of the reception side of such content. No matter the genesis and motivation, the potential harmful impact (e.g. of a false cure for COVID-19) can be the same, which is a point made in UNESCO’s two policy briefs on the “disinfodemic” (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020). From this vantage point, that is, that of the audience qua consumers and as distinct from content suppliers and distributors, an appropriate response is to call for media and information literacy to protect the user from “disinformation” (for example, through enhanced critical thinking), to “empower” the user in the face of “misinformation” (for example, “think before you share”). These are classic components of Media and Information Literacy, and are valuable *irrespective of the intention and awareness of the senders* (or the sharers or the vectors) of false and misleading content.

At the same time, today, the burden of dealing with this problem should never be shouldered off entirely onto the users. This is why Media and Information Literacy can also sensitize and mobilize the public to demand that the gatekeeper institutions do more to reduce the flow of falsity and to increase the volume and visibility of verified news, through the architectural design of systems, as well as through moderation and curation. In this way, Media and Information Literacy can be unpacked into many component literacies, including digital rights literacy (including privacy literacy) and understanding of broader communications ecosystems and institutional logics. This is a meaningful alternative to the common refrain that there needs to be “digital literacy,” without unpacking what this would entail or how it interlinks with “prior” literacies such as visual literacy, advertising literacy, etc.

The meaning of these endeavors in relation to disinformation, and the range of actors involved in them beyond educational systems, can be expected to evolve further since the UN General Assembly in 2021 formally proclaimed the final week of each October as “Global Media and Information Literacy Week.” The move aims to stimulate more active engagement by governments, internet companies, and civil society. In 2020, the Global Week took place under the theme of “Resisting Disinfodemic: Media and Information Literacy for Everyone and by Everyone.” In 2021, UNESCO also launched an updated version of its curriculum for Media and Information Literacy, “Media and information literate citizens: think critically, click wisely.” This broad document seeks to highlight generic elements, with due attention to the variations in context around the world. At any rate, it would increasingly seem the case that

attempts to “deal with the mess” at the receiver end, such as through media and information literacy, should not absolve action from being taken earlier in the dissemination pipeline, particularly by media and internet companies.

In the light of all this, it would seem important to take a holistic approach: that the kind of potentially problematic expression covered in this book should be assessed in terms of all its moments - of production, transmission (including the role played by the media and internet institutions that curate and disseminate it), and reception. These points have resonance with cautions by contributors to this book that the issue of *which actor defines* “disinformation” and “misinformation”, and what specific content they then give the labels to, is significant. The worldwide experience of the phrase “fake news” being used as a stick to attack legitimate news demonstrates this well, and the criminalization of “false news” - already a longstanding colonial-era penal code offence in many countries - shows further how *responses to allegedly problematic content can themselves become a problem*. Applied by governments to unfavourable press coverage, such laws too often serve to diminish the supply of verified journalism into the public domain - notwithstanding that the reportage in that space can be assessed - and contested - in terms of standards of verification and professional ethics. This is unlike most disinformational content that circulates in social messaging and closed social media groups.

The inevitable consequence of such repression done in the name of fighting disinformation is the shrinking of journalistic space - which is, however, one of the antidotes to the problem. This is compounded when states themselves provide poor access to official information, or when they themselves instrumentalize access on a selective basis. Such steps create a vacuum which some authorities concerned may believe they can credibly fill - at least in the short term. But this is to underestimate the possibility of an opened Pandora’s box that leads to a situation where all content is seen as equally lacking in authoritativeness and where provenance counts for nothing. These are points well documented in UNESCO publications on journalism, press freedom, and COVID-19, and on media independence (2020a, 2020b).

The contributors to this book also cover the perspective of ordinary members of the public as to what content they would call false. We learn that there is a wide, and contradictory, range of content concerned. This likely reflects both a plurality of beliefs and preferences and various structures of power for agenda-setting, framing, and repetition within the content ecosystem. The authoritative defining of what constitutes disinformation in this case is subject to the power of diverse influencers, as well as in the wording of regulation and law, and even in the payment and remit of fact-checkers.

However, when publics are left at the mercy of being only their individual or mass arbiters of truth, without trusted expert sources, it is hard to see how democratic or developmental progress is possible. In such situations, two scenarios may play out. In one, people insulate themselves against diverse narratives as if all were equally flawed, and thus become disempowering in regard to understanding the spectrum in which truth is at one pole, falsity at the other, and many unknowns in between. In a parallel scenario, in the face of generalized uncertainty, simple “solutions” may take hold, where, for instance, reductionist religious or traditional interpretation is fallen back upon by people to help them wrestle more easily with some kind of sense-making of a complex reality and contested representations. In this dimension, the range of

unknowns and of legitimately contested meanings can easily be ruled out of existence by reliance on a world view that reduces everything to proclaimed truths and lies. This observation signals that while leaders, experts, media, and social media channels may not wish to be or succeed as being “arbiters” of truth, there are worrying issues about veracity if it ends up only in the hands of a public compelled to find their own ways of dealing with the burden of whom and what to trust - or not. The point is that disinformation challenges power-holders and duty-bearers in the ecosystem to earn degrees of trust for the content they dispense (and how they govern third-party content).

All this highlights the importance of evolving definitions and norms about disinformation and its responses, which provides important wider context for the case studies presented in this book. At stake globally, albeit with uneven shape nationally, is a contestation to ensure that the problem of disinformation and its responses do not displace the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Normative statements are part of this power play, and scholarship could do well to take these into account in framing and evaluating disinformation on the ground. Relevant here is a cross-regional Statement on the “Infodemic” in the context of COVID-19 endorsed in 2020 by more than 130 UN member countries and official observers, which recommended that: “(counter disinformation] efforts are based, inter alia, on freedom of expression, freedom of the press and promotion of highest ethics and standards of the press, the protection of journalists and other media workers, as well as promoting information and media literacy, public trust in science, facts, independent media, state and international institutions” (Australia et al. 2020).

For its part, UNESCO has also done extensive work in the normative area, most prominently in a study for the ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development. The Commission established a Working Group on Freedom of Expression and Addressing Disinformation, co-chaired by UNESCO, which published a comprehensive 350-page report titled *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression* (2020c). This study shows that while the right to free expression is sometimes blamed as being an enabler of disinformation, it is the same right that is essential to combat disinformation. Examples are journalistic exposes of orchestrated disinformation as well as the problematic roles of internet companies as flawed gatekeepers as well as active engines through algorithmic amplification. Likewise, the Balancing Act shows that freedom of expression in the public sphere has enabled academia and civil society groups to call out disinformation and its issues. Without this point being repeatedly made, there is a danger that freedom of expression is treated as a problem, rather than as both a right and a solution. In turn, that pushes in the direction of disproportionate and illegitimate restriction of freedom of expression.

Further in the *Balancing Act* report, it is recognized that a challenge lies in the generally aggressive character of disinformation. Because disinformation needs to displace truth (as well as colonize and categorize unknowns), it frequently operates with belligerence. Its targets are truth-tellers — in particular when these are political actors, journalists, scientists, and public leaders when these stand up for verified facts and informed analysis. This observation is not to overcharacterize disinformation as “information warfare” (although it may sometimes be part of such a context), because it is important to avoid a simplistic assessment that can lend itself to militaristic-style responses. The main point to recognize is that disinformation does not exist as if it

were simply a parallel and alternative universe of content, in relation to which autonomous subjects are positioned to assess and evaluate its offerings in relation to more traditional sources of credible and reliable content. Rather, disinformation (besides often being seductively simple) would appear to have an intrinsic tendency to discredit others, and hence often to harass and intimidate. Further, it is especially when freedom of expression is used to expose disinformation that there is antagonism from the actors involved in the disinformation chain - both powerful political, state, and corporate actors, as well as even ordinary individuals who treasure falsehoods or succumb to apparent peer momentum to attack truth-tellers — often with claims that the latter are the real merchants of disinformation. In this way, disinformational expression often seeks to suppress targets' right to freedom of expression. What this means is that the disinformation phenomenon - in legitimizing potentially harmful false content - threatens not only public health, climate change mitigation, and other sustainable development dimensions, but also the right to freedom of expression itself. Of interest to readers of this book is that the *Balancing Act* study, after a literature review of disinformation studies, also provides an elaborated list of responses to disinformation, covering both generic and country-specific cases, all of which merit further research:

- Monitoring/fact-checking
- Investigative
- National and international counter-disinformation campaigns
- Electoral-specific
- Curatorial
- Technical/algorithmic
- Economic
- Ethical and normative
- Educational
- Empowerment and credibility labeling

The *Balancing Act* further underlines how research is key — because without monitoring both the problems and the attempted solutions, it is evident that interventions are operating with sub-optimal knowledge. The study shows that many responses lack a theory of change, but even more they lack the data that could enable them to make amore effective diagnosis and better evaluation and assessment of their interventions. This applies especially, but not only, to research in the Global South, reflecting both the relative newness of research into disinformation and global inequalities in knowledge generation.

While in many countries the opportunities availed by internet companies have served as an alternative communication channel to captured media, and therefore as a means to speak truth to power, the same companies have increasingly become power centers themselves. Over time, their enabling role in the dissemination of disinformation has put them in the firing line for facilitating the power of falsehoods (including in conjunction with hate speech and other potentially harmful content).

This shift requires research, even when these services are far from being ubiquitous. However, a major problem for research, in all parts of the world, is the opacity of internet companies, notwithstanding their part in acting as transmission engines

of disinformation. A change in this situation could make a particular difference to scholars in countries outside the US and UK. The problem with internet companies having illegible operations is not about knowledge for knowledge's sake. It is because efforts to increase the supply of quality information (such as public service health announcements, the UN's Verified initiative, and UNESCO's training of journalists on disinformation (2019a)), and media and information literacy at the receiver side, are relegated to working in the dark about what is happening in the "black box" of transmission. Greater transparency could better inform such interventions.

Meanwhile, however, the limited data that the companies typically release are partial and self-serving. The shortcomings are continuously revealed by journalists as well as by NGOs like Avaaz, who expose continuing problems notwithstanding corporate publicity about actions being taken. In the absence of disclosure that would allow for contextual evaluation, it is not possible to evaluate the claims by the companies about their anti-disinformation actions and the impact thereof. These observations have led UNESCO to initiate consultations about developing an international "gold standard" for transparency, which would enable greater scrutiny, accountability, and performance by the internet companies. The arguments are elaborated in the publication *Letting the sun shine In: transparency and accountability in the digital age* (2021). In turn, the lack of transparency issue is becoming key to the matter of broader digital governance, including into governance of the market shares controlled by the tech giants. Informed policy is not possible without greater insight into the companies. The transparency issue is a potentially significant "third way" between on-going laissez-faire and an increase in direct content regulation, both of which are approaches that present serious risks in terms of dealing with disinformation. In each case, freedom of expression is threatened. However, transparency - whether voluntary or regulated raises normative public accountability for gatekeepers about their role vis-a-vis disinformation. It could also enhance multi-stakeholder governance of the digital domain, which is a practice that dilutes the potential for capture of internet space by either corporate or governmental interests (van der Spuy 2017).

In this context, it is significant to mention that in 2015 UNESCO's General Conference adopted the concept of *Internet Universality* (Souter and van der Spuy 2019), which sets out four principles as universal aspirations and as international standards for assessing national internet experiences. These are human Rights, Openness, Access, and - significantly - Multi-stakeholder participation in digital governance (ROAM). The ROAM principles serve as internationally endorsed standards for a holistic framework to develop norms, regulations, and programs that govern digital technologies. Noteworthy here is that the model evokes the value of multi-stakeholder consultation on digital issues, which is vital for cooperation in the fight against disinformation and strengthening freedom of expression. In 2018, after a two-year process of consultations, the UNESCO member states agreed on a set of indicators to take stock more concretely of the ROAM principles, as well as cross-cutting issues. These indicators are relevant to all countries, whether developed or developing, even though some will be more relevant than others, depending on the national situation. Today, UNESCO's Internet Universality Indicators (2019b) stand as an internationally recognized research toolkit, being applied in more than 20 countries by mid-2021.

The extent to which these universally useful indicators help toward promoting

multi-stakeholder governance and harmonizing national experiences around international standards, while retaining full diversity as per national particularities, serves as a way to put disinformation in a wider context without losing sight of significant differences around the world. In turn, this frame can facilitate digital collaboration at regional and global levels. There is a basis for transcending borders based on common aspirations and progress for shaping the internet toward human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. This is also why UNESCO has set up in the frame of the Internet Governance Forum a mechanism for scholars and stakeholders to join the Dynamic Coalition of Internet Universality Indicators, and to collaborate for research within and between countries.

It is in this spirit that this book, with its focus on under-researched experiences of disinformation, can be warmly welcomed as part of a momentum toward enhancing knowledge and dialogue about the world's changing information and communications landscapes.

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