

Excavating “Information integrity” (Guy Berger, 1 June 2024)

There are objective facts. But it’s also a fact that who confirms facts and with what “proof” is also often permeated with subjectivity.

Me, I *believe* in the fact of global warming. Not because I’ve personally got the proof. But because I trust certain news media to apply standards against not making things up and to have professional systems of vetting sources and verifying what they publish. The media reports tell me about scientific bodies who they say have reached conclusions through validated and aggregated facts. Then, there’s my own proclivity: I definitely don’t want the dire effects that are correlated with, to use a non-factual metaphor, “a burning planet”.

This example points me to the concept “information integrity” that’s increasingly used in international discourse. The phrase comes from the field of information security, where “integrity” has been used to basically designate accuracy. To simplify, consistency of the data at hand is intact – i.e. there hasn’t been hacking or system corruption.

In the societal information ecosystem, the question of what’s accurate (factual) is a lot more complex. Not just because many disinformation actors can and do very easily hack this wider system. (They do so mainly by injecting misleading or distractive content that overshadows the factual - in computer terms, a paralysing overload like a DDos attack).

It’s also more complex at societal level because much can’t be reduced to the status of factoids taken in isolation of opinion, attitude, narrative and ideology. There’s entertainment, hate speech, persuasion and incitement (to join actions and groups online and offline).

So, to use “information integrity” at the level of society, there needs to be a wider sense of integrity than just factual accuracy/consistency/reliability. If it’s wider, how then do we assess what constitutes a plus for “information integrity”, and what a minus?

Here’s a suggestion: we pin down “information integrity” to designate that wide set of information which contributes to the integrity of human rights. The means content that protects and promotes human rights. And to this, could be added that kind of information which fosters the Sustainable Development Goals.

The reference point of human rights means that that determining accuracy or who is a “bad actor” spreading hatred can’t be done at the whim of whoever has the power to do so. There are parameters. Take freedom of expression and access to information. Neither should be limited on the basis, alone, of statements being erroneous or angry.

Legitimate curtailment of free expression, in terms of UN standards, can only be done for reasons such as protection of other rights. Since you have a right to security, threats against your person can be justifiably criminalised. Your right to property should protect you from information that defrauds you. Other accepted reasons for restrictions include national security, public health and public morals, which are more open to interpretation. But, still, it’s clear that outside of these defined

reasons for acceptably curbing some expression, people are free to question facts, and to tell lies or unintentionally spread falsehoods.

The point is that steps to support “information integrity” should be assessed in terms of whether they support or harm human rights (including harm by disproportionate penalties or zero-sum balances between rights). There’s a big risk that when people speak about “online safety” as part of “information integrity”, that this notion— instead of being about securing people against harm to their rights – cloaks exactly the perpetration of such harm.

Going further, action to promote societal “information integrity” in an expanded sense shouldn’t only about applying genuine limits to content that harms human rights and sustainable development. And also, not only about efforts to “inoculate” the public against this kind of messaging through media and information literacy.

Instead, “information integrity” also has to be about advancing content that supports these causes. That’s where another concept comes in. It is “information as public good”. And as elaborated in UNESCO’s Windhoek+30 Declaration, it means support for journalism and media, and enhancing the public’s right of access to information and data. It’s about elevating reputable content about climate change and what can be done about it, not only limiting the vested interests (and advertising) using disinformation to deny and delay.

This interpretation of “information integrity” puts onus on both governments and internet companies to contribute to both fronts: protection and promotion.

Why? This view of information integrity is about enabling individuals to dodge manipulation. And more than that: to be champions of their own destinies, shapers of their own autonomy. And, finally, to be fully-fledged participants in the flurries of content that come their way and to make a valuable contribution to information integrity for others. Count me in.