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UGRA MEMORANDUM

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE



Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation
17–18 June, 2021



Government
of the Khanty-Mansiysk
Autonomous Okrug – Ugra

Third International Conference

TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Final Document

- 1.1. The Third International Conference entitled “Tangible and Intangible Impact of Information and Communication in the Digital Age” was held on June 17–18, 2021 using a hybrid of face-to-face and online format. The conference was hosted within the framework of the XII International IT Forum and the UNESCO Intergovernmental Information for All Programme (IFAP). The event followed discussions from two previous international conferences on Information and Communication in the Digital Age held in Khanty-Mansiysk. The outcome of those meetings is reflected in their final documents – the Ugra Declaration (2018) and the Ugra Resolution (2019). The 2021 conference was organized by the Russian Committee of the UNESCO Information for All Programme, the Interregional Library Cooperation Centre, the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education in cooperation with the Government of Ugra, UNESCO, the Permanent Delegation of the Russian Federation to UNESCO, the Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO and the International Institute for Central Asian Studies. This international interdisciplinary forum brought together more than 150 participants from 58 countries including experts in philosophy, sociology, cultural anthropology, political studies, psychology, linguistics, management, international affairs, communication and information technology, information security, education science, librarianship, archiving, museology and creative industries.
- 1.2. The conference was focused on socio-cultural, ethical and philosophical aspects of the impact of digital and AI technologies on both humans and societies. These technologies are shaping a new sociocultural reality. This new reality is characterized by a constantly increasing complexity of infocommunication technologies, devices and platforms and an ever greater proliferation of digital applications and products leading to widespread availability of information and services and enhanced possibilities for universal connectivity of societies, communities and individuals as well as incorporation of humans in cyber-physical systems, and further blurring of boundaries between the real (physical) and virtual worlds.
- 1.3. The development of technologies based on collection and processing of big data, including use of artificial intelligence-based technologies (AI), gives, on the one hand, an enormous impetus to scientific progress and has contributed significantly to innovations that have raised the efficiency of human activities through the emergence of personalized services and other software modalities. On the other hand, these technologies usher in new radical changes in traditional structures and agreed practices and systems of functioning of human societies in general and the lives of individuals in particular. With the widespread and commonly used term “digital revolution” now accepted largely uncritically, the development of these technologies foreshadows the transition to a new world order within which principles and norms of economic development and social relationships will dominate that are completely different from traditional ones.

Transformations are taking place at the level of institutions, such as government and business, and in specific areas of life, for instance in medicine, education, and scientific endeavour. These transformations also bring such research and experimentation that can have unintended consequences, in particular those affecting and modifying the very essence of human existence.

- 1.4. Rapid technological development and the thrilling new opportunities that are provided by the exploitation of its unlimited capacities, while offering solutions to complex challenges in various domains, are also accompanied by the exacerbation of existing problems such as inequality of income distribution, rights and opportunities, prejudice, as well as the emergence of new problems in the political, economic and social spheres. Being at the very heart of the process of changes, modern citizens face certain difficulties not only in comprehending these changes but even in capturing them.

Conference participants highlighted the following issues:

- 2.1. Digital platforms that were initially created to accomplish a certain task or to solve a problem, e.g., developing a search engine or a social network, facilitating efficient exchange of information for raising the efficiency of commercial activities, have evolved into giant digital monopolies, annexing not only cyberspace, but also entire industries. Moving from digital platforms to whole digital ecosystems, these behemoths are swallowing up physical world communities, meddling in government services, reshaping public and private economic activities and disrupting traditional business models and social responsibility systems.
- 2.2. The business model promoted by digital companies is based on the permanent collection of personal data, often without informed consent. Such collection of data has become a source of extraordinary profits as well as a tool for controlling and managing the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and communities. Covert collection, retention, management and manipulation of personal data is a universal practice that is essential for all businesses operating through digital devices and platforms within a competitive environment. This business model, generated and promoted since the 2000s by such transnational corporations as Amazon, Google and Facebook, has resulted in an economic imperative known as “surveillance capitalism” that is defining the parameters and driving the direction of economic and social development. The guiding principle is to commercialise and commodify personal data that is necessary for a majority of citizens to participate in the digital space. This practice is now mandatory to access goods and social services including education, health and welfare. Personal data is collected and accumulated in a surreptitious manner with a superficial consent allowing the infinite use of an individual’s private data by these companies without any compensation: 1) to serve as the basis of direct advertising to users; 2) to collect, collate and/or sell the private data to third party commercial users; and 3) to expand the user base with incentives. This surveillance capitalism remained unperceived for a long time and the fact that it contradicts citizens’ rights and freedoms, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitutions of most countries of the world, was outside the focus of attention.

- 2.3. Accompanying the current process of historical development, there has been a manifest shift in the vision of the importance of information, communication and knowledge at the individual and societal level, particularly with reference to building a just future. Whereas knowledge and information have always been considered essential development resources allowing both individual and collective decision-making, nowadays humans themselves are becoming the resource for creating digital data arrays. Earlier limitations of access to information as well as exclusion from the means of communication have given way to a state of information and communication overload putting new constraints on the psychological and intellectual status and well-being of individuals.
- 2.4. National states and government agencies are also adopting models of governance that are based on mass collection and covert and perpetual automatic processing of big data. The efficiency of surveillance capitalism, and especially its legitimation by sovereign states within the framework of the development of digital economy, lead to the introduction of rigid algorithm-driven digital governments, to mainstreaming security as a basic value, and to the 'normalization' of universal surveillance and covert control, both on the Internet and in the physical world.
- 2.5. As a consequence of mutually beneficial reinforcement of collaborations between state systems and digital corporations, data is easily priced, exchanged, combined and compared, and thus commodified by them for a gain or profit.
- 2.6. The Internet and, in a more extensive and pervasive manner, digital platforms are transforming more and more into instruments for an illicit, massive and unlimited invasion into the minds of citizens, and thus their behaviour in a civil society, leading – in certain circumstances – to various types of discrimination, attempts to introduce changes to power structures and public policy to the benefit of certain stakeholders.
- 2.7. Governments around the world – independently of their ideology and putative values – are trying to implement systems of social credit and similar model of social influence, promoted in particular by the key digital platforms. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, new forms of control over citizens are tested and introduced, based mainly on the use of digital technologies, that might enhance political and social inequalities and discrimination of citizens, limit civic freedoms and lead to other unpredictable ominous effects.
- 2.8. The creators of the global Tech and social media corporations were given financial benefits and privileges when they were founded in the United States, and today they receive superprofits under the guise of managing information sharing and communication platforms for the benefit of society. As these corporations have expanded and become dominant global actors, they have moved away from their original ideas of being neutral in creating open and free spaces of communication, and have ultimately become powerful and influential socio-political players ('Masters of the Universe'). At the same time, they play duplicitous games maintaining that their values and principles are intact and need to be protected by gate-keeping information and communication looking to the common good.
- 2.9. Digital platforms and social media are also progressively compromising on the positive effects of free exchange of information by powerful means of re-directing the flow and access of data and information, which then encloses more and more individuals in filter bubbles and media echo chambers. Freedom of expression and information is giving way

to a progressive narrowing of the allowable discourse in digital space, as these platforms become the means not so much of communication, informing or educating, but of priming and mobilising audiences. This situation exacerbates the atomization of society and boosts new processes of isolation, social exclusion and radicalization, thus provoking discord between people, social groups and even between states. A massive decrease in the level of critical thinking is accompanied by the emergence of waves of information epidemics (infodemics) of national and global scale. Social media and the Internet have thus become the new frontline in, and often a source of various social, political, economic conflicts at the local, regional and global levels.

- 2.10. Processes of universal digitization proceed unchecked and inevitably affect the relationship between citizens and institutions. The automation of decision-making processes increases their opacity, often distorting the initial goals, with a consequence that citizens lose control over social, economic, scientific and political agendas. This implies an erosion of the legal foundations of society and its democratic structures, and the reinforcement of unrepresentative and extra-legal forms of government. When verification of decisions and appeals are rendered difficult or even impossible, the lack of public control of the authorities is exacerbated, fostering a decline of trust in institutions and increasing protest potential in society.
- 2.11. These changes are seen to be accompanied by development of a new morality. It is characterized by a simultaneous presence of seemingly opposite vectors: an increase in the value of human life (as evidenced, for example, by the extraordinary security measures in connection with the spread of COVID-19), and at the same time the subjection of citizens to public-private social engineering with technologies of total supervision and control, that can be characterized as dehumanizing. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and accelerated these processes.

Based on the foregoing and taking into account the provisions of the Ugra Declaration (2018) and the Ugra Resolution (2019) on Information and Communication in the Digital Age, the Conference calls on all stakeholders to make efforts in the following areas and to act according to the following Recommendations:

- 3.1. Develop interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research activities, according to the principles and guidelines of science-policy interaction (UN Global Sustainable Development Report, 2015). The aim is to promote a correction of the negative effects of the digital revolution on the lives of people and communities and their cultural and creative systems.
- 3.2. Pushing for a Universal Digital Code of Ethics faced with the risk of fundamental modification of human beings, that is to a) define the limits of the digital revolution, with respect to the values and principles of reference, b) promote digitization processes in a direction of real and fair political, economic, social and cultural progress of humanity, and c) operate as a fundamental tool for the development of coherent regulatory systems.
- 3.3. Disseminate study programmes in schools and universities to promote among young people critical awareness and a capacity for adequate evaluation of the multiple, complex and ambivalent aspects of the digital revolution in progress, as well as the nature and purpose of the main public and private, national and international stakeholders. In parallel,

involving the most representative civil society organizations in civic education initiatives aimed at spreading awareness and practice among citizens of the value of active participation in plans and programmes for the implementation of digital technologies in production activities and public and private services.

- 3.4. Support states in cooperation initiated and implemented at the international level for identifying inclusive, multi-level governance systems suitable for directing the ongoing processes of digital transformation towards a fair balance between the promotion of civic, public and private goals, tasks and interests.
- 3.5. Promote actions aimed at reining in and regulating “surveillance capitalism” and sweeping digitalisation:
 - 3.5.1. Limiting profitability of its business model through a) economic and tax mechanisms so that its marginality does not exceed the average for the economy; b) counteracting monopolization, including in high-tech industries; c) fostering research and/or initiatives for alternative Internet business models, that are not based on advertisements and/or the use of private data; d) increasing awareness of platform users concerning the fact that the current business model is based on (ab)using their private data; and e) supporting EU Initiatives of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), with contributions from civil society and experts to foster the evolution towards a more self-determined control of personal data by platform users.
 - 3.5.2. Auditing online platforms’ recommendation services and moderation systems in order to ensure that they do not infringe upon freedom of expression and information.
 - 3.5.3. Developing and applying rules and principles of social sustainability for digital technology solutions that affect people’s life, health and economic conditions, based on constitutional rights and freedoms and ensuring the quality and efficiency of formal and informal regulation of digitally driven transformation processes.
 - 3.5.4. Providing for the preservation or creation of analogue alternatives to digital public services and products, for the benefit of the supporters of “digital resistance” movements.
- 3.6. Ensure transparency and accountability in the collection and use of personal and behavioural data, in particular through:
 - 3.6.1. Conducting wide public discussions of government digital initiatives, attended by all stakeholders including the representatives of civil society organizations, especially in the fields of health services and medicine, social welfare systems, cultural ecosystems, education, public order and security, including dissemination of discussion materials in the public domain.
 - 3.6.2. Conducting independent, regular, fully-fledged and responsible socio-humanitarian assessment of digitalization in public administration, to balance considerations of efficiency with the aforementioned ideas of sustainable digital transformations including wide dissemination of the results of such assessment.
 - 3.6.3. Creating and using personal data management systems, thus providing the ability for each person to independently determine, open and limit the level of access

to their different kinds of private data. In order to strengthen these autonomous capacities for individuals, a system of laws and regulations should be promoted and independent supervisory authorities should be organized to limit the inequitable system of protections and privileges, enjoyed currently by digital platforms and social media and, more generally, by transnational digital corporations, via a) spreading awareness and adoption of socio-humanitarian assessment practices of the digitization process, b) incentivising appropriate media and digital literacy initiatives, and c) promoting a real, efficient human-centred approach in public policies.

