UGRA COMMUNIQUE

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

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Final Document
of the IV International Conference
"Tangible and Intangible Impact of Information
and Communication in the Digital Age"

(8–10 June 2022, Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation)

Preamble

1. The IV International Conference on Tangible and Intangible Impact of Information and Communication in the Digital Age took place in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russian Federation, within the XIII International IT Forum with BRICS and SCO participation and UNESCO Information for All Programme. The event was organised by the Russian UNESCO IFAP Committee and its working body, Interregional Library Cooperation Centre, with the support of the Government of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area – Ugra, Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, and the Commission of the Russian Federation for UNESCO. The conference gathered about 150 representatives of government authorities and institutions of science, education, culture, information and communication, experts in philosophy, cultural anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, sociolinguistics, management, international relations, information technology, information security, teacher education, as well as politicians, diplomats, journalists from 35 countries.

2. The conference provided a platform to follow up on the discussions initiated within three previous international conferences on the same topic and reflected in their final documents – the Ugra Declaration (2018), the Ugra Resolution (2019) and the Ugra Memorandum (2021). The IV Conference focused on socio-cultural, ethical and philosophical dimensions of the impact of information and communication technologies, including artificial intelligence, on individuals and society. Conference contributions were based on the premise that these technologies are shaping a new sociocultural environment, characterised by ever-increasing complexity of technologies, devices and platforms and their large-scale distribution, leading, in particular, to an increase in the volume of transmitted information, disinformation and information noise, expanding availability of services and opportunities for establishing links between individuals, groups and communities, inclusion of humans in cyber-physical systems and blurring of boundaries between physical and virtual worlds.

3. Dramatic events in Ukraine, aggravation of the crisis of the existing world order and exacerbation and multiplication of global challenges influenced conference discussions and the mindset of their participants. However, it was agreed that the conference should continue to serve as a platform for open, honest and mutually respectful dialogue and cooperation, even in the period of acute contradictions.

Conference participants agreed on the relevance of key socio-cultural aspects of the digital transformation processes described in the Ugra Memorandum «Information and Communication in the Digital Age» (2021):

4. Rampant development of technologies is accompanied by the transition to a new political, social and economic situation in the world within which principles and norms of economic

development and socio-cultural relationships will dominate that are completely different from pre-digital ones. Transformations are taking place both at the level of key institutions, such as government and business, and in specific areas of human activity, for instance in medicine, education, culture and science. Without proper critical understanding, such changes may lead to unforeseen consequences, affecting and modifying the very essence of human existence, starting with ethical principles and basic cultural references. Being at the very heart of the process of changes, it is difficult not only to fully comprehend, analyse and evaluate these changes but even to capture them and evaluate future outcomes.

5.   Digital private monopolies, often grown up in an unregulated domain, are taking over cyberspace, as well as entire sectors of the material world propelling changes in the functionality of governments and social responsibility systems, in public and private economic activities.

6.   Covert collection, retention, management and manipulation of personal data have become a source of extraordinary profits for digital companies and government agencies, as well as a tool for controlling and managing the attitudes, behavior and psychology of individuals and communities. The fact that this situation contradicts citizens' rights and freedoms, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitutions of most countries of the world, has been outside the focus of attention in discussions up to this time.

7.   The introduction of rigid algorithm-driven control systems, including digital governments, the expansion and strengthening of universal surveillance and covert control, their acceptance by society and gradual tacit validation as a moral and even a legal norm upon the plausible pretext of ensuring security, as well as attempts to introduce social manipulation models intensify the opacity of social decision-making processes, the spread of non-representative and extra-legal forms of governance and the erosion of the legal framework of society and its structures. These implications enhance a dangerous decline of trust in governments and increasing protest potential in societies.

8.   Algorithms of digital platforms and social media trigger individuals' containment in filter bubbles and media echo chambers, exacerbating the atomisation of society and boosting the processes of isolation, social exclusion and radicalisation among individuals, social groups and even states. A massive decrease in the level of critical thinking is accompanied by waves of national and global-scale information epidemics (infodemics) and the increasing manifestations of public-private social engineering with technologies of total supervision and control.

Conference participants express concern over the following trends:

9.   The Internet of Things and the Internet of Data have been supplemented with the Internet of Behaviours which is facilitated by the mass adoption of face recognition, location analysis and big data technologies, as well as more noticeable efforts to develop implantable wearable devices and brain-machine interfaces. Such advances in technology expand the area in which decisions related to the activities of individuals are made without their participation, and people might significantly lose control over their own lives.

10.   On the one hand, advanced digital technologies have given an enormous impetus to scientific progress and contributed significantly to innovations and the emergence of new opportunities in various fields. On the other hand, the use of artificial intelligence technologies in surveillance systems reinforces autocratic tendencies in government

activities. Authorities, in turn, shape an increased demand for technology and stimulate the ever more rapid development of technological innovation, while public control over these processes and their support by relevant social and humanitarian scientific research is weakened or completely lost.

11. The implementation of the idea of a global digital world as a Metaverse, allowing not only to reproduce objects, actors, phenomena and interactions of the real world, but also to expand both their form and content, gives rise to a new social phenomenon that requires a comprehensive understanding of the risk of exacerbation and multiplication of socio-cultural problems and negative practices, the need to ensure cybersecurity, confidentiality and privacy, psychological and physical health, ethics and cross-border legal regulation.

12. Since the actual trend is to transfer as many "traditional" processes and documents as possible to the digital domain, in the foreseeable future government procedures, citizens' documents and data will flow in the format of bit streams. To this date, under the pressure of critical events, this process does not always ensure security requirements. This is a burning issue, since after this transfer is completed the major part of our life will depend on algorithms and the Internet of Things.

In view of the foregoing, the Conference calls on all interested parties to contribute to the implementation of the Ugra Declaration (2018), Ugra Resolution (2019) and Ugra Memorandum (2021), adopted under the general title «Information and Communication in the Digital Age». Particular attention should be paid to the following action lines:

13. Development of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research activities and debates, aimed at identifying, studying, comprehending and minimising negative impacts of digital revolution on the lives of individuals and communities, with a focus on socio-cultural implications of the introduction of automated decision-making systems, the limits of their control and balance of interests of governments, businesses, society and individuals.

14. Support and development of programmes aimed at improving the quality of secondary and higher education, strengthening complex perception of reality and rational critical thinking among representatives of all social strata and groups.

15. Promotion and facilitation of international cooperation in order to shape inclusive multi-level governance systems that recognise pluralism of cultural and human values and move towards the governance of digital technologies as a universal project to ensure a fair balance of goals, objectives and interests of citizens, the state and the private sector, including the voices of "digital resistance", as well as to propagate an effective, ethical and truly human-centred approach in public policy.

16. Support for the initiatives of certain states aimed at defining the Digital Codes of Ethics and, therefore, at their approval and translation into legislature and regulations capable of providing shared, valid and effective elements to guide digital innovation processes, as an opportunity and tools for the real progress of humanity.