

**RC** THE RĪGA  
CONFERENCE

**2020**



# **POLICY BRIEF**

**A CLEVER SERVANT  
BUT A DANGEROUS MASTER.  
SOCIETAL RESPONSES  
TO TECHNOLOGICAL  
DEVELOPMENT AND  
THE INFODEMIC**

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Gunda Reire

**THE RĪGA CONFERENCE**  
**POLICY BRIEF**

2020

*2020 began on a hopeful note, as all new years do. However, it soon changed to a year that brought us “the new normal” and a completely different understanding of “unusual times”.*

*Much has happened this year, beginning with the global pandemic, which affects all spheres of life – from healthcare, economy and politics to individual psychological aspects, not to mention the hectic U.S. presidential election campaign, unprecedented wildfires in Australia, the escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, the brutal and relentless suppression of peaceful protesters in Belarus in the wake of falsified presidential election, and all this against a backdrop where the international community also celebrated the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.*

*It has been estimated that a human brain processes about 70,000 thoughts daily, and 95% of them are the same as the day before. Small wonder that so many events are being framed in the context of Covid-19 this year, and thoughts are focused on it. However, this collection of Riga Conference Policy Briefs clearly demonstrates the complexity of international affairs and the fact that focusing on one of their facets is neither productive nor rational.*

*The influence of Covid-19 on international processes is quite considerable – starting from the questioning of World Health Organization’s operability and reputation, confusion in the European Union and the absence of resilience and solidarity, to an Infodemic, triggered by psychological factors and enabled by technology.*

*Meanwhile, the pandemic has not brought substantial changes to the Euro-Atlantic security policy in its classical sense. Russia has been pursuing large scale military exercises, developing its military capabilities and maintaining an active presence abroad. Strategic rivalry between the United States and China has spilled over from issues centering on the economy and international trade into an all-embracing ideological confrontation concerning values and technological dominance. The European Union has adopted its multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027 and approved a European Union Recovery Instrument; an intensive debate is underway on the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, on digital issues, development of the Single Market, solutions to migration, as well as values and the rule of law.*

*I urge the reader to remain open and curious about a wide range of topics in international politics and pursue their broader interests. The desire to think critically about even the simplest of issues and tasks fosters the path towards both constructive and creative solutions. Let’s work for better times together!*

**Edgars Rinkēvičs**  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia

*The modern world is globally interconnected, and citizens, goods, and services are constantly moving. Therefore it is obvious to observers that Europe and the World at large are exceptionally vulnerable to the consequences of the world-wide pandemic which cuts contacts, affects business, halts economic activity and endangers the world security and peace.*

*Frequently, people and governments underestimate the probability of negative scenarios. Almost nobody was ready to face the sudden challenge of Covid-19. Many of us hoped for the best and totally ignored good old Murphy's Law, which says "if it can go wrong, it will go wrong". The same applies to international security issues.*

*Of course, there are well-known excuses why security and defence issues were not a top priority for state institutions and the public. There are numerous other issues like employment, infrastructure, education which seems more important than investments in defence or military. Younger European generations, particularly in the Western European societies, are overconfident that security is eternal and granted them for free. No wonder that under such conditions and dominating public opinion many countries across Europe are still acting naively when it comes to decision making about security and defence matters.*

*In the meantime, international organizations, which in many ways have been upholding the peace and post-World War II order, are increasingly dismantling or dismantled. Under such circumstances, in international relations, the role of the nation-states increases, and they are ready to rely on their economic power or even military might to reach their political goals.*

*Post-Cold War multilateralism is slowly shifting from institutionalism to realpolitik. COVID-19 crisis is only speeding up these changes. As an example, The World Health Organisation and the European Union, both of whom should have been at the forefront of a comprehensive international response to this pandemic, have largely taken a backseat while individual nations have responded unilaterally.*

*What are the ways to deal with increasing threats to global security posed by the nationalization of international politics? How to evade the principle that "Might is Right"? How to re-establish the working world order based on mutual agreement, justice, and humanity reflecting the realities and necessities of 21st. Century? These are only a few questions I hope we can tackle in Riga Conference, taking into account the number of prestige thinkers taking part in this event.*

**Artis Pabriks**

Minister of Defence of the Republic of Latvia

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The Fourth Industrial Revolution is not a prediction anymore<sup>1</sup>; it is here and it reaches far beyond technology development and future economy. Its speed is exponential, accelerating deep systemic change in every aspect of human life and societal transformation. The question is whether societies around the globe are evolving at the same speed, and when they will not be able to adapt to the pace of technological development accordingly. Maybe it is happening in a subtle but overwhelming way already at the moment? What are the conceptual paths to address this paradigm change adequately – internationally, nationally, and on a societal and individual level?

We can already see both the disruptive and the highly creative nature of technologies' impact on human lives. A vivid example is modern information technology. It enables the spread of information at enormous speed and volume, and it affects national and international economies, politics, security and societies in general. An expression gaining traction, and coined originally by David J. Rothkopf, "Infodemic", is a fusion of the word "information" and the word "epidemic" that refers to a rapid, overwhelming and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information on particular themes and issues. Seen in this light, the Infodemic potentially can do more harm than the pandemic itself.

New technologies already have influenced the perception and the core value system of societies. A tantalizing question remains - for better or worse?

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the World Economic Forum founder and executive chairman Klaus Schwab wrote that we stand on the doorstep of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. See: Klaus Schwab, "The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond", World Economic Forum, 14.01.2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>, accessed 10.10.2020.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Shared view must be accompanied by corresponding behaviour and action;** otherwise there is a risk to become trapped in bureaucratic or linear thinking, to sink in declarative documents, or to raise awareness without effective problem-solving mechanisms.

**Technological division must be avoided;** the aim should be to support the most vulnerable and at-risk groups of societies in their journey through technological revolution.

**The rational voice must be stronger.** The science-based, official and analytical information still has its strong say in perception of societies and has a potential to reach audiences and to be communicated in attractive ways.

**Both digital and health skills must be boosted.** The challenge is to reach the whole society, especially those people who do not use modern information technology, do not attend any educational institution, are not active participants in civil society or live in vulnerable areas.

**The significance of social sciences must be acknowledged.** This will be particularly important in the realm of regulation, communication and governance.

**The inventory and update the democratic values and norms must be carried out.** The evaluation and assessment of the main elements of each of democratic values must be carried out, delineating their borders more clearly, while preserving what is at their unchangeable core

**The right balance between regulation and freedom of expression must be found.** Striking a balance between prohibition of hate speech and harmful information and fundamental freedoms is an important task.

**Systemic approach is needed, involving all stakeholders** of the public and private sector, fact-checkers, academia and civil society, nationally and internationally, and most importantly – individually.

## A BLESSING INTO A CURSE

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In human history, the technological development is a persistent aspect of its character. For the most part, the challenges and possibilities which are associated with the technological revolution are nothing new. Structural changes in the job market, changes in the behaviour of society, fears, doubts, and scepticism, the risk of stratification, of gaps and wedges, of the dominance of technology in daily life - these are all woven into the story of mankind's forward progress and have always been present in discussions.

Not that long ago - just 110 years back - when the horse-drawn carriage was on the verge of being replaced by automobiles powered by combustion engines, people thought them the products of a fevered imagination: "You're crazy if you think this fool contraption you've been wasting your time on will ever displace the horse"<sup>2</sup> was a typical comment in an article printed in April 1911. And yet in our times, it is a basic understanding that driverless cars shall be part and parcel of our future landscape, and so the question becomes rather which particular cutting edge inventions would be looked upon as products of malignant and truly nightmarish fantasy in this day and age?

This perhaps, for example? "Brainprints" joining fingerprints as the top measures of security<sup>3</sup>, Matrix-like digital reality merging with augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and brain-computer interface (BCI) and thus creating a metaverse that replaces today's Internet<sup>4</sup>, in which IBM's Watson and its sibling Ross that, by the way, currently exist, are joined by an army of non-human field experts and have become a normality, and the Artificial Superintelligence

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2 Alexander Winton, "Get A Horse! America's Skepticism Toward the First Automobiles", Saturday Evening Post, 09.01.2017, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2017/01/get-horse-americas-skepticism-toward-first-automobiles/>, accessed 10.10.2020. This article from the April 15, 1911 issue of the Saturday Evening Post was featured in the Post's Special Collector's Edition Automobiles in America.

3 Carolyn Gregoire, "In The Future, 'Brainprints' Could Replace Fingerprints", HuffPost, 04.21.2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brain-waves-fingerprint-identification\\_n\\_57166fe0e4b0018f9cbb42a9](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/brain-waves-fingerprint-identification_n_57166fe0e4b0018f9cbb42a9), accessed 10.10.2020.

4 David Tal, "Humans not allowed. The AI-only web: Future of the Internet P8", Quantumrun, 28.02.2019, <https://www.quantumrun.com/prediction/humans-not-allowed-ai-only-web-future-internet-p8>, accessed 10.10.2020.



exterminates humanity.<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, Ray Kurzweil, Google's Director of Engineering and a well-known futurist with a track record of racking up accurate predictions again and again<sup>6</sup> predicts that by 2029, computers will have human-level intelligence<sup>7</sup>, but by 2045 the society will have reached the point of technological singularity.

**The technological singularity** is a hypothetical point in time when technological growth surpasses the human understanding of it, becomes uncontrollable and irreversible and the technological superintelligence dictates the humanity. It results in unforeseeable changes to human civilization, where machines are smarter than human beings. The first use of the concept of a tech singularity was John von Neumann. Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk also have expressed concern that full artificial intelligence could result in disruptive results for humanity. Ray Kurzweil predicts that the singularity will be reached very soon – by 2045, and his timetable is consistent with other predictions. For example, Softbank CEO Masayoshi Son predicts that the dominance of super-intelligent technology will be reached by 2047. On the other hand, the singularity and human-machine synthesis is not addressed as a pure threat; rather as an opportunity for humankind to improve and empower itself.

Exponential technological development is not so much a story of how to catch something out there. This is a story about how we already are unable to catch up with the things we have created and continue to create. Very much on our own we are creating the new world while also being seemingly unable to figure out how to properly live in it. Technology is developing without pause and without missing a beat, but now a new world paradigm takes shape.

The hypothesis here is one where the digital revolution in societal development will eventually be comparable to the discovery of fire or, precisely, the controlled use of fire, which can be regarded as one of mankind's first great

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5 David Tal, "Will an Artificial Superintelligence exterminate humanity? Future of artificial intelligence P4", Quantumrun, 04.06.2018, <https://www.quantumrun.com/prediction/will-artificial-superintelligence-exterminate-humanity-future>, accessed 10.10.2020.

6 Of his 147 predictions since the 1990s, Kurzweil claims an 86% accuracy rate.

7 Christianna Reedy, "Kurzweil Claims That the Singularity Will Happen by 2045

Get ready for humanity 2.0", Futurism, 05.10.2017, <https://futurism.com/kurzweil-claims-that-the-singularity-will-happen-by-2045>, accessed 10.10.2020.

innovations. Or we could describe it in mythological terms, the coming of Prometheus. The precipitous and uncontrollable digital development can be compared to the advent of atomic energy and all its consequences, negative and positive. And the world we are familiar with, nuclear powers continue to play a leading role. So, we may well ask who will rule the digital era and what will be the lines of division?

The digital revolution heralds a paradigm change for society, the beginning of a new era, and it will transform basic aspects of human life. It is characterized by a “fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres.”<sup>8</sup> From a certain perspective, digital development induces the individual to become a participant in the wider community by linking individuals and groups together and creating tools that are catalysts for sharing ideas. The possibilities for humanity connected through basic information technologies and with access to unlimited information and knowledge are vast beyond reckoning. But we should expand our perception beyond the level of smartphones and social media. The possibilities will expand even more as scientific knowledge benefits from the development of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, and the fields of nanotechnology, robotics, biotechnology, energetics, and quantum computing. Jobs can be obtained and work performed in one’s living room with a single laptop. The digital revolution has raised competitiveness globally and so it has created conditions for consumers to benefit from reduced prices of goods and services. Technology also means fighting hunger and it makes a major contribution to global health. The challenge to humanity is managing to develop social science and law at the same speed and to the same degree; the failure will expose to the risk of only experiencing the side effects of the technological singularity.

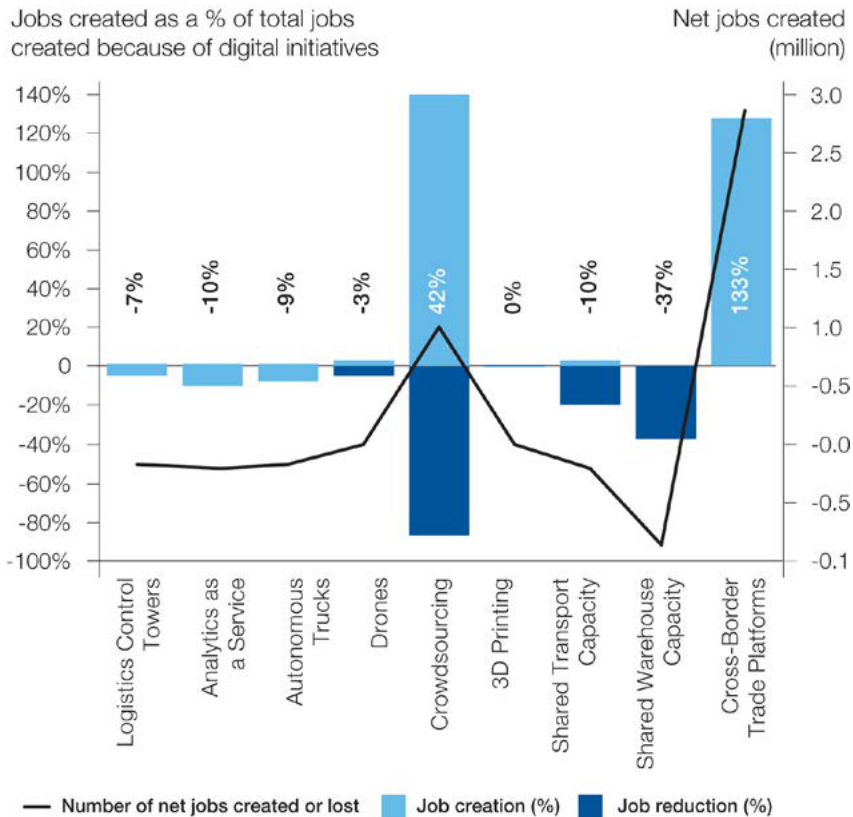
Looking from another angle, we may hardly notice the damaging effects that digital revolution brings along. The most visible level is a new type of crime - cybercrime. Nevertheless, there are also consequences that are subtle and not so tangible, yet have an overwhelming nature. Digital transformation breaks

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<sup>8</sup> Klaus Schwab, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond”, World Economic Forum, 14.01.2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>, accessed 10.10.2020.

apart the traditional sense of political and regional community. It can result in the loss of human contact, digital loneliness, and major changes in psychological outlook, perception and lifestyle. To live and not succeed in getting out of information bubble breeds passivity rather than discernment, and it significantly reduces the meaning and application of the core Western values - critical thinking and rationality. Even now, a whole family can live in a single house as if they were single people, and dependency on technology and addiction to modern technological devices and gadgets, especially for children and teenagers, is already a widespread problem.

### Projected net job creation from digital initiatives in logistics (2016-2025)



Source: "Understanding the impact of digitalization on society", World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/digital-transformation/understanding-the-impact-of-digitalization-on-society/>, accessed 10.10.2020.

The digital revolution will create greater inequality along with its potential to disrupt labour markets. Already now the demand for highly skilled labour has increased while the demand for workers with less education and lower skills has decreased, creating an enormous wage gap. While not all are cut out to be innovators, shareholders or investors, it is up to the remainder of the population to find a decent niche in the context of the digital economy. The central support of Western society itself - the middle class - is under threat and the sense of dissatisfaction and unfairness will only grow. It is predictable that social tensions will rise.

Truth be told, international law must adapt dynamically. It cannot get frozen and this is even more important in conditions where technology is in a state of constant development. It is essential to make an inventory and update the 20th century democratic values and norms thereby reinforcing them, and to do so merely on a national level is pointless - in an interconnected world, this must happen internationally. We must once again evaluate and assess the main elements of each of democratic values, delineating their borders more clearly, while preserving what is at their unchangeable core. For example, liberty, freedom of expression, openness to diversity, tolerance - such values in our rapidly changing world have already become vulnerable to attack. These and other values, in the digital reality, can be reinforced through being re-defined, so that they are not so easily exploited and manipulated in degrading democratic processes with the result that through a misunderstanding of values the people themselves could turn against the foundations on which their country is built. The edges and outlines must be found to identify and distinguish misunderstood values which threaten the existence of democracy from the substance and true meanings at the core of those values.

As they develop, legal norms have to keep pace with the relevant developments in technology, and in the context of the digital revolution, reaching solutions on a global scale will be decisive. The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a success story of addressing modern challenges and protecting individual rights not just as "soft" law but through binding legal norms. At the same time, this regulation only highlights the path to go. With increasing regularity, news comes to us that, for example, China is using Big Data and Artificial

Intelligence to conduct surveillance at a level and magnitude that the world has not seen before, and not having an over-arching agreement to deter and prevent this kind of intrusion into peoples' private lives is dangerous.

**The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** can be regarded as an EU success story in protecting individual rights of EU citizens in information age and fast-speed digital development. GDPR is a binding EU law for how organisations and companies must use personal data in an integrity friendly way. Each organization that processes personal data of any kind must ensure that the personal data it uses fulfils the requirements of the GDPR. The regulation safeguards the following rights for individuals: the right to be informed, the right of access, the right to rectification, the right to erasure, the right to restrict processing, the right to data portability, the right to object, rights in relation to automated decision making and profiling. Therefore, in Europe, privacy and data protection are considered significant, if not critic, components for a sustainable democracy.

The future of capital will be linked in the closest and most direct way with the development of technology. It is said that those who control technologies will control societies. Who will those in control be? Governments? Tech companies? There should not be much doubt on the role of business in the future digital world, but the specific role of government in a digital world without borders is an intriguing topic. The presence of Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and head of Facebook, at the U.S. Congressional hearings has become commonplace, and it points to the need for links between lawmakers and business as well as the enormous responsibility that companies bear on their shoulders in a democracy.

In turn, speaking of the role of government, one must underline that China has for a number of decades now been one of the fastest growing economies in the world and its involvement in global processes creates major contradictions in the Western world. NATO acknowledged already in 2019 that China's foreign policy agenda has brought great challenges to Euro-Atlantic security and values. Differences of opinion encompass a wide variety of fields and areas including issues of human rights, cyberspace, 5G infrastructure, and security in

the realm of high technology. These differences have their roots in China's individual model and the direction it has taken in developing its economy, its form of government, and military, which all have taken on global contours due to the abilities of projecting international influence which are at their disposal. One does not have to dig deep into secrets to see these lines of interest. In 2017, China adopted "A New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" outlining concrete research and development funding and goals to advance China as a global leader in artificial intelligence by 2030 adding an estimated \$150 billion to its economy. China's model is affecting the world's future in the area of digital development and it's possible the full potential of China's power to exert influence and the directions of its future strategic power and influence have not been adequately identified and assessed.

It's important that technology is not considered and understood simply from the viewpoint of consumers, thinking of communication, the means of buying products, the job market, or the vehicles. This is a process spread over a very broad canvas and it is significant for future power relations. Technology will in the near future bring systemic changes in our societies and how we live. In 2016, we were still talking about the consequences digitalisation would have for our society and the talk was centred on how "it is affecting issues such as jobs, wages, inequality, health, resource efficiency and security"<sup>9</sup> and how it is creating new roles (for instance, social media account managers), new types of organizations (for instance, cloud computing providers), and new sectors of the economy (for instance, digital security). Once again, these risks are nothing new - society was facing such things also, for example, in the time of the invention of the telegraph, and in the age of industrialisation, agricultural workers were constantly displaced and replaced by machines, while at the same time moving into new fields of work. But the risks today are bigger. Technologies will set the limit of our human identity and liberty, "more and more information about human beings – what we do, where we go, what we think, what we say, how we feel – will be captured and recorded as data, then sorted, stored, and processed digitally. In the long run, the distinctions between human and

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<sup>9</sup> "Understanding the impact of digitalization on society", World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/digital-transformation/understanding-the-impact-of-digitalization-on-society/>, accessed 10.10.2020.

machine, online and offline, virtual and real, will fade into the background.”<sup>10</sup>

However, to assert that technology will inevitably define and dominate the course of democracy is not a tenable argument today. On the other hand, if our way forward is not well planned and effectively coordinated, such a de-nouement cannot be ruled out. The world could easily find itself in a situation likened to Oppenheimer’s tragedy, with science at a moral crossroad. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, after the Trinity Test alluded to the Bhagavad Gita, when he described the feelings of the Manhattan project team as “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds”. His tragedy is an embodiment of the modern human, who fights with the consequences of self-created scientific progress. In other words - in the fight to bring about a better world, there is the risk of bringing about a world in which mankind and civilisation is destroyed. A world where societies are transformed, powers change and pivot, and the world order and international structures take a turn for the worse. Therefore, we should not obstinately cling to a belief or faith in progress in science and in the evolution of society without being aware of its shadowy sides and potential risks, nor should we fall prey to panicked thoughts and imagine that an apocalypse is just over the horizon.

## **INTERACTION BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN BEING: EXAMPLE OF THE INFODEMIC**

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William Blake says in “Jerusalem”<sup>11</sup>, when “the Reasoning Power in Man” is “separated/From Imagination,” it encloses “itself as in steel, in a Ratio/Of the Things of Memory”. In other words, the world develops, but for innovations to accompany development, one cannot be closeted away operating in isolation and restrictions of memory or life experience, and an essential element here is the imagination, which for Blake was strictly distinct from fantasy. Never

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<sup>10</sup> Jamie Susskind, *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Loc 136, Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem. The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, (1804–1820, with additions made even later).

theless, the usual way that a society looks upon technological development is closer to fantasy than a search for wider knowledge and the striving for true understanding of reality.

If we did an opinion poll on wildest dreams, we would most likely hit upon an apocalyptic scene - machines against men - the perilous future of technological development merging with artificial intelligence as so often depicted in science fiction. So also it goes spotlighted in popular culture with Hollywood's movies about "Last Human's" fight against terminators, cyborgs, and transformers. At the same time, a dash of reality to this perception is a claim to prohibit the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons through an international legally binding instrument. This requirement to prohibit the production of killer robots pre-emptively has already been on the table for a decade, because they would violate international humanitarian law and will enormously increase the risk of death to civilians during armed conflict, not to mention disrupting the very concept of responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

**Infodemic** is shorthand for "information epidemic", it blends two terms. The Infodemic describes creation and noncontrollable circulation of predominantly false or unverified information relating to the pandemic. As a result, it becomes difficult to learn essential information about the issue. Infodemic was coined in 2003 by the political scientist David J. Rothkopf in the article for the Washington Post column about SARS. Interestingly, the term has had its own viral success. Since the original coining, the term has re-emerged regularly regarding global health crises: in 2006 (Avian influenza), 2009 (Swine flu) and 2014 (Ebola virus). It has also seen a comeback during Covid-19. In 2020, on the outbreak of virus, WHO labelled it the spread of fake news, conspiracies, and unsubstantiated claims, which are not based on science. The United Nations uses this term, too. The Oxford English Dictionary recently officially added a raft of new Covid-19 related terms, and it includes also "Infodemic".

Nevertheless, apart from simplified fantasies which we have alluded to before, it is foreseen that intelligent machines will change and expand the hu-

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, "Losing Humanity. The Case against Killer Robots", Human Rights Watch, 19.11.2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/11/19/losing-humanity/case-against-killer-robots>, accessed 12.10.2020.



man ecosystem and disrupt it in unprecedented ways. In which ways, then? We don't have to look very far. It is happening right now before our eyes: it is the Covid-19 Infodemic. Technologies during the pandemic influence human behaviour in an unseen manner, triggering irrational responses, enabling the fear factor, shaping peoples' hearts, minds, and perception. It is obvious, that during these times humans struggle to keep up with the advance of technology.

It is estimated that the Covid-19 Infodemic has impacted more people than the underlying epidemic that triggered it. The Infodemic has spread quickly, exponentially, widely, and inexpensively across the world, slowing down the ability to react and consolidate societies, endangering lives and hampering recovery. Covid19 disinformation about the outbreak is "clearly beating reliable information when it comes to engagement on social media worldwide"<sup>13</sup> - it is disseminated significantly more widely than information from authoritative sources like the World Health Organization (WHO). By calling into question official sources and data and spreading conspiracies and non-verified information, the Infodemic has led people to ignore social distancing and lockdown rules, not to wear protective masks, ingest fatal home cures, thereby undermining the effectiveness of national and regional containment strategies.

## THE INFODEMIC, HATE SPEECH, AND VIOLENCE

Unfortunately, the harmful effects of the Infodemic go well beyond public health concerns, and they exceed and outstrip traditional attempts of criminals seeking to disguise themselves as representatives of governmental, international, or human relief organizations in order to steal money or sensitive information. In the United Kingdom, for example, the conspiracy theory linking the spread of the coronavirus to 5G wireless technologies spurred more than a hundred incidents in April 2020 alone - it resulted in acts of arson and vandalism against telecom equipment and facilities, as well as incidents of harassment against telecom technicians. The conspiracy spread in Facebook,

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<sup>13</sup> John Gregory, "The coronavirus 'infodemic' is real. We rated the websites responsible for it", Stat, 28.02.2020, <https://www.statnews.com/2020/02/28/websites-spreading-coronavirus-misinformation-infodemic/>, accessed 12.10.2020.

WhatsApp and YouTube, and it made the claim that radio waves sent by 5G technology are causing changes to people's bodies that make them succumb to the virus. There are also other similar examples.

In Australia, the European Union and the United States, the Infodemic framed people of Asian appearance as the cause of the pandemic; as a result, in varying contexts and circumstances they were abused and attacked, thus creating a new phenomenon - "coronaracism"<sup>14</sup>. In the very beginning of 2020, the hashtag #jenesuispasunvirus was coined by the French Asian community on Twitter, and it went viral also in English – #iamnotavirus. It is a clear example and evidence that the Covid-19 Infodemic must be addressed seriously, because it not only endangers public health but also amplifies hate speech, heightens the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations and threatens democracy, human rights and social cohesion.

The UN has issued the United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech, which underlines collective responsibility, gives general recommendations and states that the Covid-19 related hate speech "is being advanced through mainstream media and via online social media and tech platforms. Though it is often spread by private individuals, its consequences are most severe when it is propagated by political leaders, public officials, religious leaders and other influencers, or when it is part of concerted efforts by individuals or groups to spread hate or incite violence."<sup>15</sup>

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14 Jin Zeng, "Sensationalist media is exacerbating racist coronavirus fears. We need to combat it", The Guardian, 28.02.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/28/sensationalist-media-is-exacerbating-racist-coronavirus-fears-we-need-to-combat-it>, accessed 12.10.2020.

15 United Nations Guidance Note on Addressing and Countering COVID-19 related Hate Speech, United Nations, 11.05.2020, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Guidance%20on%20COVID-19%20related%20Hate%20Speech.pdf>, accessed 12.10.2020.



**Source:** Instagram, the account iamnotavirus.info, a post of 12.05.2020, accessed 12.10.2020.

Nevertheless, recommendations are worthless without enforcement. It is not possible to change people who are not themselves conscious of the fact that their behaviour is a problem and so the next step, besides detecting the problem and raising awareness, is that there must be real action to confront the problem and solve it.

## THE MULTILATERAL RESPONSE

A number of international organisations have become involved in combating the Covid-19 Infodemic. Responding to what arises in the information space, NATO analyses the data to understand sources of disinformation and the threat, at the same time adapting and synchronising the Allied perspective and narrative to disarm and ward off disinformation. NATO's action plan to

counteract Covid-19 disinformation has three priorities: “understand, engage and coordinate.”<sup>16</sup> In this context, NATO has been expanding its cooperation with partners to an extent not witnessed before, especially with the European Union, where information and the completed analysis are exchanged regularly.

UNESCO has approved several media support initiatives in developing countries, where the coronavirus crisis aggravates and challenges community media which often lack capacity and resources but play a crucial role in servicing the most vulnerable parts of society.<sup>17</sup>

### **Top 10 of Covid-19 fake news and conspiracies**

- The Coronavirus was made in a laboratory
- The virus was created by Chinese scientists as a bio-warfare weapon
- The virus cannot survive in a hot weather
- Taking a high dose of chloroquine will kill the virus
- Consuming large quantities of garlic will prevent the virus
- Covid-19 does not actually exist
- Protective face masks will make you sick
- The virus is a plot by Big Pharma
- The pandemic is part of a Gates-led plot to vaccinate and chip the world's population
- Coronavirus death rates are inflated

The Joint statement by UN, WHO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse, and IFRC states that “misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive” and inter alia calls on member states to develop and implement action plans to manage the Infodemic, and all other stakeholders - including the media and social media platforms through which misinformation and disinformation are disseminated, research-

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16 “NATO’s approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19”, NATO, 17.07.2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/na-tohq/177273.htm>, accessed 15.10.2020.

17 “UNESCO to support media in developing countries to face Coronavirus challenge”, UNESCO, 10.04.2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-support-media-developing-countries-face-coronavirus-challenge>, accessed 12.10.2020.

ers and technologists who can design and build effective strategies and tools to respond to the Infodemic, civil society leaders and influencers - to collaborate with the UN system.<sup>18</sup> Acting on an initiative by Latvia, 130 UN countries adopted the Cross-Regional Statement on the Infodemic in the Context of Covid-19.<sup>19</sup> The UN provides key sources of information for NGOs worldwide on opportunities to access, participate in and contribute to UN high-level processes and events, and it is mainly done with the help of the weekly newsletter. Do you recognize the UN style?

The pandemic spread rapidly. In these circumstances, the UN Secretary-General proposal for countries to institute a global ceasefire and to concentrate on the fight against the Covid-19 virus ended with the UN Security Council unable to agree on the text of a resolution.<sup>20</sup> United Nations reflect diverse P5 interests - the dynamic of U.S. and China bilateral relations complicate UN decision-making on addressing the pandemic and coordinating action to mitigate the damage it causes, while, on its part, Russia has been recommending to the lifting or softening of international restrictions on the pretext of concerns about the deliveries of humanitarian assistance during the pandemic.

Without wishing to undermine the UN efforts – the awareness-raising, coalition-building and the role as a forum for deliberations is also a significant function of an international organization, it must be noted that the WHO is an organization which has gone much further operationally in practical steps and solutions in this field. In response to the Covid-19 Infodemic, WHO invented a new concept of mythbusters – specialists working with social media and search companies like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google, Pinterest, Tencent, TikTok and others to fight the spread of false information, rumours and conspiracies. WHO has also launched messaging services in multiple languages

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18 "Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation", World Health Organization, 23.19.2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>, accessed 12.10.2020.

19 "Cross-Regional Statement on "Infodemic" in the Context of COVID-19", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 12.06.2020, [https://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/vestniecibas/P\\_ANO\\_Nujorka/Cross-Regional\\_Statement\\_on\\_Infodemic\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.mfa.gov.lv/images/vestniecibas/P_ANO_Nujorka/Cross-Regional_Statement_on_Infodemic_ENG.pdf), accessed 12.10.2020

20 "US withdraws support for UN Security Council global ceasefire resolution", Reuter, 09.05.2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200509-us-withdraws-support-for-un-security-council-global-ceasefire-resolution>, accessed 15.10.2020.

to share critical guidance on Covid-19. It is expected to reach up to 2 billion people and allows WHO to provide people directly with correct information and science-based facts.<sup>21</sup> WHO in partnership with Rakuten Viber has launched an interactive chatbot which informs mobile phone users about Covid-19 in multiple languages.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, bearing in mind that a big part of world's population remain offline, and most of these people live in low-income countries, in addition to the initiatives mentioned before, WHO cooperates with the International Telecommunication Union and is calling on all telecommunication companies worldwide to join this initiative to help disseminate information through text messages.<sup>23</sup>

The pandemic became a real reputation test for the WHO, which so far has been the least controversial of multilateral bodies. To a large extent, this organization lost its image of impartiality and reliable expertise by initially suppressing information about the coronavirus and showing a non-critical approach towards China. It has led to the initiative that more than 110 countries demanded an investigation into WHO's handling of the coronavirus crisis. The EU member states followed Australia's proposal for an investigation aimed at China, where Covid-19 began spreading, and drafted the resolution.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, WHO (and a number of national governments) changed their Covid-19 policy on the basis of totally made-up data from a little-known U.S. healthcare analytics company Surgisphere, which claimed to run one of the largest and fastest hospital databases in the world, and the findings were published in two of the world's leading medical journals – the Lancet and the New England Journal of Medicine.<sup>25</sup> Who's to blame? Those who commit crimes during the crisis with aim to exploit the situation and become rich and

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21 "WHO Health Alert brings COVID-19 facts to billions via WhatsApp", World health Organization, 21.08.2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-health-alert-brings-covid-19-facts-to-billions-via-whatsapp>, accessed 12.10.2020.

22 WHO and Rakuten Viber fight COVID-19 misinformation with interactive chatbot, World Health Organization, 31.03.2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-and-rakuten-viber-fight-covid-19-misinformation-with-interactive-chatbot>, accessed 12.10.2020.

23 "ITU-WHO Joint Statement. Unleashing information technology to defeat COVID-19", World health Organization, 20.04.2020, <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/Pages/STMNT02-2020-who-itu-joint-statement-covid-19-be-healthy-be-mobile.aspx>, accessed 12.10.2020.

24 COVID-19 response, Draft Resolution, A73/CONF.1 Rev.1, 18.05.2020, World health Organization, [https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/WHA73/A73\\_CONF1Rev1-en.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA73/A73_CONF1Rev1-en.pdf), accessed 15.10.2020.

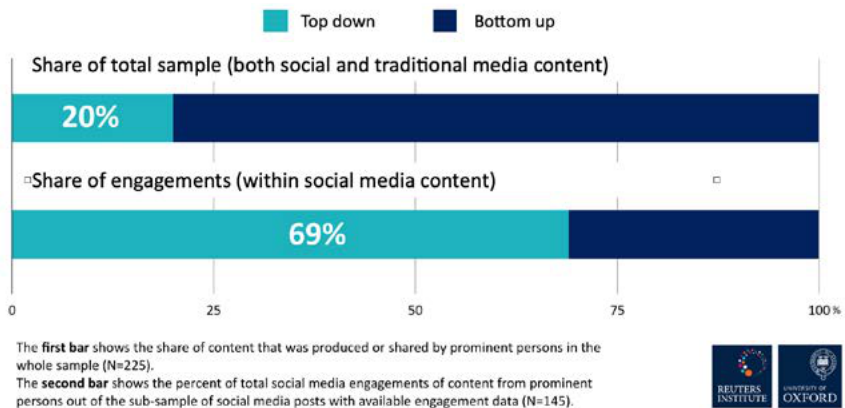
25 A lot has been published about this scandal. Reed, for example, "Surgisphere: governments and WHO changed Covid-19 policy based on suspect data from tiny US company", The Guardian, 03.06.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/03/covid-19-surgisphere-who-world-health-organization-hydroxychloroquine>, accessed 15.10.2020.

famous? Those who claim to be defenders for science-based arguments but fail to execute the lowest level of fact-proofing? Those who bear the responsibility for the global health but play political games?

In 2020, the European Commission concluded that “foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood, and globally”.<sup>26</sup> With these challenges in mind, multilateral institutions must continue to develop the capabilities in a transparent manner, analysing and deterring foreign disinformation and influence campaigns.

The effort of multilateral institutions to raise the trust in official and science-based information is of utmost importance, but it must go hand-in-hand with the responsibility, as exemplified in the case of WHO and the pandemic. Covid-19 disinformation moves both ways: top-down, from international organizations, governments, individual politicians, celebrities, influencers and prominent figures, as well as bottom-up, from every individual.

### Top-down versus bottom-up misinformation



**Source:** J. Scott Brennan, Felix Simon, Philip N. Howard, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation”, Reuters Institute, 07.04.2020., <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>, accessed 15.10.2020.

<sup>26</sup> “Coronavirus: EU strengthens action to tackle disinformation”, European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_1006](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/ip_20_1006), 10.06.2020, accessed 15.10.2020.

However, as research shows, the impact of these two types of sources of disinformation differs enormously. The so called top-down disinformation constitutes only 20% of all misleading claims about Covid-19, but its effect is dramatic – it generates 69% of total social media engagement.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, international organizations, governments, and even prominent scientific journals bear the biggest part of the responsibility in efforts to address the Infodemic.

## THE RESPONSE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS AND SEARCH COMPANIES

Online platforms and search companies are both a key channel for the Infodemic and an important player in limiting its massive spread. Founder, chairman and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg has admitted: “Even in the most free-expression, friendly traditions like the United States, you’ve long had the precedent that you don’t allow people to yell fire in a crowded room, and that – I think it’s similar to people spreading dangerous misinformation in the time of an outbreak like this.”<sup>28</sup> Some platforms have taken such radical steps as directing users to official sources when searching for Covid-19 information, reinforcing their efforts to detect and remove false, misleading and potentially harmful content related to pandemic, terminating online shops and removing listings that make false or deceptive claims about products preventing or even curing Covid-19. Moreover, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter and YouTube have published a joint statement on their collaboration with government healthcare agencies to combat fraud and disinformation about Covid-19.<sup>29</sup>

Many online platforms have started to support and rely on independent fact checking organisations as well as on automated content moderation technologies. In this collaboration false, misleading, and potentially harmful content

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27 J. Scott Brennan, Felix Simon, Philip N. Howard, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation”, Reuters Institute, 07.04.2020, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>, accessed 15.10.2020.

28 Facebook Press Call Transcript, 18.03.2020, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/March-18-2020-Press-Call-Transcript.pdf>, accessed 12.10.2020.

29 Joint Industry Statement from Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter and YouTube, 17.03.2020, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/fbnewsroom/status/1239703497479614466>, accessed 12.10.2020.



about Covid-19, that could risk public health, is being detected, removed and aggressively filtered out.

At the same time, recognizing the role of social media platforms in contemporary society, much more could be done in protecting and supporting them. What comes around turns around; ironically, the weakest point is ... technologies. Namely, it is acknowledged that online platforms already face a shortage of human content moderators to flag and remove inappropriate content and with a growing tendency increase their reliance on AI - automated monitoring technologies. However, these technologies have their own restrictions. YouTube has announced that, as a consequence of increased reliance on automated moderation systems, "users and creators may see increased video removals, including some videos that may not violate policies".<sup>30</sup> Indeed, there have been multiple incidents of automated monitoring technologies flagging COVID-19 content from trustworthy sources as false information. Therefore, there is a risk that with the aim of suppressing the Infodemic, automated systems will limit the availability of reliable information about Covid-19. Moreover, without adequate transparency accountability, automated content moderation presents a risk to freedom of expression, thus adding a new and unnecessary layer on top of the already existing complexity of the Infodemic.

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

It is customary that accountability is expected of international organisations, governments, companies, and there is nothing wrong about that. But research shows that great responsibility lies on the shoulders of individual people, too. The pandemic does not spread on its own. It is spread by people. And this applies also to the Infodemic. It does not happen in isolation. It is manipulated through new technologies, and often without understanding the consequences of their actions, it is spread by people. Surprisingly, in the context of the Infodemic, for the most part, there is no basis to speak of the existence of conspiracy theories or complex fake news on a large scale being

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<sup>30</sup> YouTube official blog, 16.10.2020, <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/protecting-our-extended-workforce-and>, accessed 10.10.2020.

disseminated to the information space. In fact, very little coronavirus misinformation is completely fabricated; it is not disseminated with the help of complex media strategies or usage of expensive technologies.

Most of the Covid-19 disinformation is not pure fake-news or conspiracies, it is a more dangerous form of information, which leads to confusion and somehow even contributes to the call for critical thinking. Namely, research shows, that the Infodemic predominantly involves various forms of reconfiguration, where some true information is complemented with additional misleading or even false details, twisted, recontextualised, or reworked. Less of it is completely fabricated. Interestingly, despite the concerns, no examples of deep fakes can be found – the manipulated content includes so called “cheap fakes”, which people tended to trust, share and comment upon anyway.

### Reconfigured versus fabricated misinformation

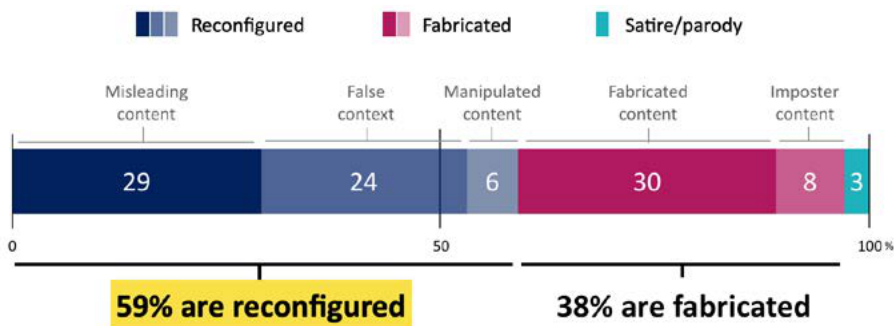


Figure 2 shows the proportion of reconfigured (N=133) and fabricated (N=86) misinformation in the sample (N=225) and the types of misinformation that constitute both reconfigured and fabricated misinformation.



Source: J. Scott Brennen, Felix Simon, Philip N. Howard, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation”, Reuters Institute, 07.04.2020., <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>, accessed 15.10.2020.

The Infodemic is a clear example of how technologies are changing humanity as we know it. The responses also show that there is a risk in not recognising the diversity and complexity of coronavirus disinformation, and its far-reaching consequences are high. Addressing the Infodemic demands sustained and well-coordinated efforts by international organizations, governments, social

media platform companies, independent fact-checkers, independent news media and every individual to understand the questions and risks, hold tightly to democratic values and norms, while finding and implementing solutions and navigating the pandemic.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Technological development is characterized by its exponential speed, scope, complexity, and systemic impact. Speaking metaphorically, these times are ruled by Janus, the two-faced God of changes, which was likely the most important god of the Roman archaic pantheon, responsible for beginnings and endings, progress from past to the future at the same time. The promise of human progress and innovation shaping our future must be addressed as seriously as the forces of potential disruption. While it is tempting to blame technology as one of the main culprits for societal problems, technologies are neither good nor bad - they are neutral. The only question is about peoples' intentions and ability to adapt themselves and help others to do the same.

### **SHARED VIEW MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY CORRESPONDING BEHAVIOUR AND ACTION**

International organizations, governments, civic society, think tanks and social media users already work toward a comprehensive and globally shared view of how technology is reshaping social, cultural, economic, and human environments, and this work must be continued. Nevertheless, there is a big risk to become trapped in traditional, bureaucratic, or linear thinking, to sink in declarative documents, to raise awareness without effective problem-solving mechanisms, or to be distracted by the overwhelming agenda and too many crises demanding attention.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL DIVISION MUST BE AVOIDED**

Technology has always been considered a threat to social stability; this sentiment is not new. Nevertheless, technology itself does not cause inequality, unemployment, income disparity or poverty. It is people who develop policies, decide to focus on or avoid certain trends and problems, choose between solidarity, inclusiveness and balancing mechanisms, distribute the wealth and benefits of increased efficiency. The aim should be to support the most vulnerable and at-risk groups of societies in their journey through technological revolution.

## **THE RATIONAL VOICE MUST BE STRONGER**

There is a saying that bad news is good news. In other words – scandals, rumours and conspiracies tend to be more appealing, more “interesting” - that is human nature. Nevertheless, research shows that the science-based, official and analytical information still has its strong say in perception of societies. The problem is that the voices of disinformation are louder and more widespread than rational voices. Therefore, the rational and correct information still has a potential to reach audiences and to be communicated in attractive ways. Highlighting, surfacing and prioritising content from authoritative sources, increasing co-operation with fact-checkers and health authorities and becoming the rational voice individually is the right path to go.

## **BOTH DIGITAL AND HEALTH SKILLS MUST BE BOOSTED**

Although technologies allow people to learn, work and keep social ties from home during the pandemic, the Covid-19 Infodemic also created an army of couch-epidemiologists. It is evident, that people need digital and health literacy skills to navigate and make sense of the content they see online and to be able to distinguish facts from opinions. They can be taught via digital tools, social campaigns, in schools and higher education institutions and the teaching

and training can be promoted by civil society and experts. The challenge is to reach the whole society, especially those people who do not attend any educational institution, are not active participants in civil society or live in vulnerable areas. The aim is to raise the ability of societies to verify the accuracy and reliability of information, to know where and how to seek for correct information.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED**

In the light of societal risks, technological development demonstrates, recent focus on research and technological development, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths) sciences must be complemented with deep insights of social sciences. This will be particularly important in the realm of regulation, communication and governance. These processes long ago have been designed to follow a strict “top down” approach, but new reality demands a systemic, dynamic, multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach.

## **THE INVENTORY AND UPDATE THE DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND NORMS MUST BE CARRIED OUT**

The evaluation and assessment of the main elements of each of democratic values must be carried out, delineating their borders more clearly, while preserving what is at their unchangeable core so that they are not so easily exploited and manipulated in degrading democratic processes. In an interconnected world and in the context of the digital revolution, reaching solutions on a global scale will be decisive.

## **THE RIGHT BALANCE BETWEEN REGULATION AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION MUST BE FOUND**

In discussions about adequate responses to the Infodemic, concepts of regulation and freedom of expression are often juxtaposed. Striking a balance

between prohibition of hate speech and harmful information and fundamental freedoms is an important task, therefore bearing an enormous inner potential of easing tension between individual liberty, human dignity and social good or the collective interest of the public.

## **SYSTEMIC APPROACH IS NEEDED, INVOLVING ALL STAKEHOLDERS**

To ensure that technological development is a guided process for the benefit of humanity, the response must be integrated and comprehensive, and a systemic in-depth analysis of risks and opportunities must be carried out. Responses must involve all stakeholders of the public and private sector, academia and civil society, nationally and internationally, and most importantly – individually.

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