



Information for All
Programme



African Centre
of Excellence
for Information Ethics



United Nations
Educational, Scientific
and Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair on
Language Policies for Multilingualism
Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC)
Florianópolis, Brazil

Three Day Online International Conference

on

Access to Information in Time of Crisis – The UNESCO Information for All Programme Priorities and the COVID-19 Pandemic

organized by

**India Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics (ICEIE), Centre for Digital Learning,
Training and Resources (CDLTR), University of Hyderabad (India)**

**African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics (ACEIE), University of Pretoria
(South Africa)**

**Russian National IFAP Committee, Interregional Library Cooperation Centre (Russian
Federation)**

**UNESCO Chair on Language Policies for Multilingualism, University of Santa Catarina
(Brazil)**

under the Auspices of

UNESCO Intergovernmental Information for All Programme (IFAP)

26-28 August, 2020

REPORT

This prestigious event brought together the UNESCO Intergovernmental Information for All Programme (IFAP) partners: Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa. An expression of gratitude to Dorothy Gordon, IFAP Chair and Evgeny Kuzmin, Co-Chair, Multilingualism who inspired this event. The online conference addressed global divides. It also linked not just North and South, but also attracted vulnerable groups, women, youth and the elderly. The conference has covered all six IFAP priority areas. The conference is highly relevant conference, especially in consideration of the Covid-19 pandemic and International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI, UNESCO). The rich agenda of the conference will lead to global cooperation, especially in support of linguistic diversity and preservation, role of information in crisis times.

Knowledge being shared and networking amongst the role players, addressing problems arising from digital divide, hacking, education, but also a discussion of opportunities. This pandemic has seen an impact on education:

- Pandemic's severe distribution of world's education systems: 1.5 billion school going children had to move from offline to online education; 24 million learners at risk of dropping out, losing decades of progress as well as severely impacting Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 4.
- User safety online, ethical and legal implications of the use of ICTs. Data protection, privacy, PVE and youth together with algorithms that limit diversity, echo chamber, filter bubble – impacting access to information. We should consider the constant surveillance.

The organising committee was represented by various countries and IFAP UNESCO and by the committee: University of Hyderabad which is at the forefront of taking forward IFAP priority areas, has plans to setup an IFAP office in India. The University has newly established India Centre of Excellence in Information Ethics (ICEIE) pioneering the science of information ethics in the country. Russia like India is one of the most multilingual nations in the world. Hence, preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity using emerging digital technologies is a high priority. IFAP South Africa in their activities with UNESCO offices in Kenya and Head Quarters (HQ) champions a number of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and Information Ethics (IE)-related activities. From Brazil, Brazilian Institute of Information in Science and Technology (IBICT) is prioritising research across 10 Latin American countries and represents IFAP interests in Brazil.

Inaugural Session:

The Inaugural session was chaired by Prof.B.Rajashekhar, Pro Vice-Chancellor, University of Hyderabad. Welcoming the participants he mentioned that it is a privilege for the university to lead a conference on such a vital topic like Information in COVID times. Prof.J.Prabhakar Rao, Chair person of the conference has highlighted aims and objectives of the conference. He has highlighted the relevance and significance of information especially in pandemic situation. Congratulating the organizers of the conference for bringing IFAP community in the conference, Ms. Dorothy Gordon, IFAP Chair has threw light on issues related transformative role of digital technologies, digital divide and digital governance. She emphasised that IFAP will contribute to built inclusive knowledge societies. Mr.Eric Falt, Director, UNESCO, India has mentioned about the role of IFAP in building equitable and knowledge societies. Mr.Timur Tsybikov, Head of the Department, The Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, Russian Federation said that Russia attaches great importance to IFAP because Russia is one of the highly multilingual and multicultural countries in the world. He also highlighted some of the steps taken by Russian government to protect the linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. By joining in organising the present conference by University of Pretoria, Mr. Carlton Mukwevho, Secretary General for SA NatCom for UNESCO, South Africa felt that the UNESCO, South Africa joins world community in taking forward IFAP objectives. He has highlighted some of the initiatives taken by UNESCO, South Africa such as Global Sign Research Project, African Regional Programme for Media and Literacy, etc. Ms. Bianca Amaro, Coordinator of the Brazilian Open Science Program at IBICT, Brazilian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations, Brazilian Institute of Information in Science and Technology, Brazil emphasised on the initiatives taken by IBICT to promote IFAP objectives such as creating Repository for teaching and research, forming Regional Latin America Network of Libraries etc. The inaugural session ended with vote of thanks by Prof.R.Siva Prasad, University of Hyderabad.



Prof.B.Rajashekhar



Prof.J.Prabhakar Rao



Ms. Dorothy Gordon



Mr. Eric Falt



Mr.Timur Tsybikov



Mr. Carlton Mukwevho



Ms. Bianca Amaro



Prof.R.Siva Prasad

The three-day online conference has deliberated on the following IFAP priority areas and related themes:

Day One - 26 August 2020

Participants: 112

Session 1: Multilingualism

Themes: Promotion of multilingualism, prioritisation of the ethical considerations in language policies

Chairperson: J. Prabhakar Rao (India)

The issue of the general loss of complex speech in general, in the face of a visual culture, is noted. We are encouraged to rethink policy regarding learning languages. We need to introduce more languages in school and even earlier, so we make use of brain plasticity in learning languages. It has now been demonstrated that acquisition of more languages improves the functioning of the brain. We understand that acquisition of numeracy and literacy skills in languages other than the L1 has severe implications for future academic ability¹. We need to promote the basic ideas and political and practical approaches to support, preserve, and revitalize indigenous and minority languages that have been formulated in final documents of UNESCO IFAP conferences held worldwide since 2008 on promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity. Teaching and learning more foreign languages in education systems should be encouraged together with the promotion of all languages, not only small indigenous languages on the verge of extinction. The support of serious development of new areas of science – politics, economics, ethics and futurology of the language sphere and multilingualism – should be initiated.

We emphasise the promotion of multilingualism, not languages². Not encouraging other languages at the expense of larger ones, but rather multiple languages. A provocative recommendation was made to include another goal into the SDG framework: Add SDG 18: Access to and production of socially relevant knowledge in all languages. Encourage the education of parents to use multiple languages when raising their children. Ethics to be central in the consideration of the role and value of languages. And see also UNESCO's response to COVID-19 and languages³.

¹ Dr. Evgeny Kuzmin (Russia), Multilingualism and Access to Information: Challenges and Opportunities in Crisis and Post-Crisis Time

² Dr. Gilvan Muller de Oliveira (Brazil), Multilingualism of Indigenous Peoples: Threats and Opportunities in the Face of the Covid19 Pandemic

³ <https://en.UNESCO.org/news/media-and-communications-indigenous-peoples-pandemic>

Many languages are extinct or in verge of being extinct, Language Documentation and Archiving is the best way. But language documentation and archiving are still not being given due attention⁴.⁵



Dr. Elin M. Emilsson



Participants of the Webinar

Session 2: Information Preservation

Themes: *lack of trust in government, implications of archiving and digitalisation on future generation and retention of knowledge.*

Chairperson: Evgeny Kuzmin (Russia)

HIV-Aids gives us many lessons on how to handle stigma associated with COVID-19 for example, the public needs an assurance from medics and other stakeholders that being infected is not a death sentence; community support groups; advocacy; care and financial cushioning by the government; among other measures. It is fascinating how the patterns of reactions are similar all over the world. The mistrust towards government in general is strong. This worldwide mistrust/distrust towards government, media and science reflect important public perceptions about the previously behaviour of these institutions. Citizens must be brought on board to engage with MIL together with government. Ethics and MIL are important because it opens the space for information access for all⁶.

Our life is increasingly dependent on Internet technologies. During a crisis, this dependence becomes critical. We leave fewer "traces" on paper and other physical media as opposed to digital

⁴ Dr. Prasannanshu (India), Multilingualism as a Reality, and a Remedy to the Pandemics' Challenges: A Look at the Governmental Role and Response to the Vulnerable Populations' Survival

⁵ Elin Emilsson: see online recording

⁶ Dr. Hellen Amunga (Kenya), The Impact of Governmental Communication of Pandemic- Related Data on The Public's Response to A Crisis: Insights from Kenya's Handling of Covid-19

traces. Most of the data exchange takes place in cloud storage, which we do not control. Countries like Russia have no sovereign repository of Internet history. It's time for national governments to realize that the digital space is not just an addition to offline life, but exactly the same inalienable reality, which can become much more significant during a crisis. Volunteering of few public libraries is clearly not enough here⁷.

Difference between internet resources and libraries. Most people just use Google, but the information is not necessarily verified. Libraries contain information verified, submitted by scholars, etc. Must create awareness on libraries. The best institutions to guide you are the libraries. Libraries can offer quality education and quality resources, as opposed to the internet only. Need to consider policies and to encourage people to become aware of the importance of libraries. We also need to take note of the ethical considerations in gathering and documenting information from disconnected communities. The pandemic is crucial, and this information should be archived. Luckily, everything is digitalised nowadays. But not everything online is quality controlled. One might encounter mis/disinformation⁸.



Participants of the Webinar

Conclusion

Uncertainty whether digital medium is a sustainable archive going into the future. Consider stone artefacts still surviving, thousand years later. There are semantic and pragmatic questions related to time – especially regarding long term archiving. Jacques Derrida stated that archiving is the fight, the struggle against death. Against entropy. These questions are also part of the ethical and information ethical considerations. Digital amnesia is a complex phenomenon. And consider our own modest relationship with information – feeling overwhelmed – between all the various information

⁷ Dr. Andrey Zaytsev (Russia), Time of Crisis as an Indicator of Dependence on Information Technology: What digital history we will be able to preserve?

⁸ Dr. Ramesh C Gaur (India), Accessing Heritage during a Global Covid-19 Pandemic: Are Indian Cultural Institutions prepared to engage users in such situations?

platforms. As Rafael asked, what will happen in a thousand years? Books? Digital information? How will it be transformed? Who will select it? It requires very complex, integral, multi-lateral considerations etc.

Day Two - 27 August 2020

Number of participants: 84

Session 3: Information for Development

Themes: Covid-light vs Covid 3.0, Digital Resilience, the Promotion of Critical Thinking together with Science and Technology and Information Literacy education from school level

Chairperson: Greg Simmons (Sweden)

We should build truth and trust, especially in times of crisis. What if this is Covid-light, compared with Covid v.3. What are the guidelines that will inform us how to access and use information? In this instance we encounter the differentiation between policies, legislation and codes of practice. In consideration of our various and unique cultural backgrounds, compounded by the realities of Covid-19 and levels of mis/trust in government and GAFA, perhaps it is time to insist on a global, general set of international guidelines with an integrated set of cultural facets for management information in time of crisis; to compile a universal framework for monitoring increased access to information in time of crisis and that all SDG's are incorporated in such universal frameworks and a collaboration with African governments and UNESCO / IFAP in designing a similar but practical framework for developing and Least Developed countries⁹ (LDC).

Issue of trust and mistrust of those in authority whose information can be believed, versus those who are aligned with "conspiracy" theories. It is imperative to include scientific method and critical thinking in information literacy. The gap between science and society, an ineffectual dualism, must be closed. Dialogical strategies are required to promote investment in life-long citizen education in science and how it potentially assists in building trust within the population. However, it should be noted these interventions are long-term processes¹⁰.

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that resilience in health matters is fragile in a globalized world, but especially in the context of a geopolitical rivalry between great powers. The Coronavirus pandemic has turned into a geopolitical issue, as a result, a new hierarchy of world power may emerge because of this crisis. Politicising information sharing is increasingly becoming a

⁹ Dr. Coetzee Bester (South Africa), Dr. Rafael Capurro (Germany) and Dr. Johannes Britz (USA), Access to Information in Time of Crisis – A Holistic Model for Information in Developing Solutions in Communities

¹⁰ Dr. Daniel Pimienta (Dominican Republic), Impact of Infodemic situation caused by Covid19 Pandemic and Recommendations

growing concern today. Ethical considerations essentially would encompass credibility, reliability, and authorized access. Diversity is needed to address the dependence on GAFAM, which is reinforcing dominance of big states and the unipolar world perspective. Cooperation with and through international organisations might be a more effective, multipolar way, to moderate the difficult climate of demographics patterns within geopolitics¹¹.

The quote refers: it seems that “Jean Baudrillard was quite right at that time when he said we live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning”. Points about e-inclusion gaps and issues in digital resilience were raised. We need to investigate how digital resources are used, not only whether there is access to it. The digital divide is not only an access issue, but also an information literacy one. Many social groups are excluded from the advantages of being a Knowledge Society, therefore information literacy should be included in school plans from the very beginning. International cooperation and national, governmental communications need to be improved¹².

There seems to be an emerging consensus – inequity in technology access has led to lesser access to “developmental” information, causing more underdevelopment particularly among the already marginalized and vulnerable sectors. Geopolitical setting is also being redefined by transnational technology companies which have no respect for sovereignty. It should be noted that trust in governments has not sprung from corona crisis, but the observance of lack of trust has accelerated. Governmental withholding of information which facilitates free flow of irresponsible, fake, and wrongful information, makes the people vulnerable and impacts access to information. There is a dilemma between providing accurate and credible information and ensuring the well-being of society¹³.



Dr. Greg Simons



Dr. Coetzee Bester



Dr. Rafael Capurro



Dr. Daniel Pimienta



Dr. Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann



Dr. Susana Fiquelievich



Prof. R. Siva Prasad



Prof. J. Prabhakar Rao

¹¹ Dr. Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann (Belgium), How can Access to Information build Resilience to avoid Future Crises?

¹² Dr. Susana Fiquelievich (Argentina), Access to Information and Digital Tools for Present and Future Crises in Latin America

¹³ Dr. J. Prabhakar Rao and Dr. R. Siva Prasad (India), Denial of Information: Sustaining Inequalities and Subjugating People

Session 4: Information Literacy

Themes: Adoption of National MIL Policy frameworks, MIL teacher training and integration of MIL from early childhood onwards for lifelong learning, multidisciplinary collaboration across a number of sectors

Chairperson: Vasuki Belavadi (India)

We need to realise Covid-19 made old issues and problems, which have pre-existed, obvious. But these issues were not given priority attention. Examples include the digital divide, the technology divide, the consistent threats to Freedom of access to information and freedom of expression. Other core aspects to be addressed include¹⁴:

- Power of technology companies, i.e. Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon (GAFA).
- Perception of low-level of science and health literacy
- Science and technology not giving adequate acknowledgment from mass media companies.

MIL literate teachers are a crucial point. There is major interest in the mobile course for self-education of teachers. The results and methodology will be shared, so the project could be scaled up or replicated in other regions. In Russian speaking countries, MIL is not integrated into teaching curricula. There is a need to promote the ideal of MIL implementation. This is done by piloting the Russian course in collaboration with IFAP on teacher education in cooperation with UNESCO Chair on MIL¹⁵.

As most developed countries move fast towards MIL, the LDC and developing countries have little to show for Information Literacy efforts. It remains a "relatively new concept" even at University level. There are still challenges such as the lack of teacher training. Integrating MIL into education is not enough. We need more stakeholders to get on board in MIL mainstreaming and one way is to engage with nongovernment and civil society organizations, such as the youth organizations, so they can integrate MIL into their own policies and help in advocating for MIL policies in the government. If we act alone, our impact will be limited. Critical engagement with the government is key, together with partnerships with nongovernment and civil society organizations¹⁶.

The fight against Covid-19 must be a multidisciplinary effort. More indigenous languages should be in play in unpacking pandemic. More media and statistical literacy skills should be

¹⁴ Dr. Ramon Tuazon, (Philippines), MIL Public Policies in Times of Crisis

¹⁵ Dr. Tatiana Murovana (Russia), Distance Teaching without MIL: What We have Learned from the Coronavirus Lockdown

¹⁶ Dr. Therese San Diego Torres (Philippines), Mainstreaming Media and Information Literacy (MIL) with Youth Organizations

cultivated to enable citizen empowerment considering infodemic. A policy stance that is supportive of establishment of community radio stations as lifesaving during the pandemic and beyond with programming quotas from national broadcasters¹⁷.



Prof. Vasuki Belavadi



Prof. Ramon Tuazon



Dr. Tatiana Murovana



Prof. Therese San Diego Torres



Prof. Dokora

Conclusion

It is time for civil society to get into alliance with governments to resist the influence of Technological Giants (GAFAM and more) in the knowledge society. There needs to be an equilibrium of the government's role in guaranteeing freedom of expression while regulating quality of information and the role of the private sector and its social responsibility.

Day Three - 28 August 2020

Participants: 75

Session 5: Information Accessibility

Themes: Information blackout, access to accurate and quality health information, transparency by health service providers and governments, human dignity is paramount

Chairperson: Gilvan Muller de Oliveira (Brazil)

There is a dilemma facing COVID-19 related information preservation efforts throughout the world. It is hard to make any government/deep state and media monopolies to be transparent and accountable. Imperative to establish universal standards – demanding that restrictive action against information sources is only taken against specific, demonstrably false, information. Transparency and accountability for restrictive actions by governments and digital platforms – ensuring open and

¹⁷ Dr. Dokora, L D K, Mr. I Madziko, and Dr. M Mavesera (Zimbabwe), The role of media and information literacies (MILs) in combating COVID-19 infodemic: Some experiences from Zimbabwe

public scrutiny for actions that limit information accessibility. Require open dialogue – preventing actions that counter free access to information in a unilateral manner. This is a complex system¹⁸.

An interesting statement was made: "when information access to information is in crisis", for example where to go unlike in case of patient who can visit ICU¹⁹. We will need a whole new set of skills and tools to manoeuvre this new 'pandemic information landscape'. Facing this awful situation, one must prioritise human dignity as a core principle. Four aspects arise: 1) human life, we should survive this pandemic, 2) Access to health information, where do I get it? Public vs private hospitals?, 3) human dignity is gone when you are dead, and so we must ensure 4) justice, good governance and transparency. This kind of boldness as a 'gentle protest', against the ills of government agencies, against citizens and especially during a pandemic when they (citizens) need more protection, compassion, and other forms of help.

A huge challenge arises: how educated individuals choose to share false information because it is aligned with their beliefs. We all have our own biases, but how do we empower/educate each other to manage these biases? One can attempt by combining different disciplines to make the strategy more robust to empower and educate people. Working on different formats across different platforms. But this is not that simple, must be a global effort. We are a part of society, not apart from society. Inclusion should be paramount²⁰.

How quickly can the information be made available to the public? That is an important consideration. One can use WhatsApp, but that is not the right medium, due to distortion. One may not be worried about **which** platform, but more about how effective and accurately this information can be communicated to the public²¹. In consideration of AI and Blockchain, we believe that AI and blockchain can be good fighters against the health calamities as well as the information calamities. Blockchain will ensure that distortion is avoided, since one can go back and monitor. It is recommended to build a national database of all the hospitals across a country. Data centralisation and data circulation will be central to the discussion of what and where we pick what to preserve about COVID-19, given all the global challenges associated with COVID-19 data and information?

¹⁸ Dr. Anna Belkina (Russia), The Dangers of Shutting Out Voices in the Time of COVID19

¹⁹ Dr. M. Sridhar Acharyulu (India), Governance Issues during Covid19: Information Deficit Aggravates Migrant Crisis in India

²⁰ Dr. Thaiane de Oliveira (Brazil), Open Science and Disinformation in times of Epistemic Disbelief: The Challenges for a Democratization of Knowledge

²¹ Dr. Burri Ranga Reddy (India), Access to Information in the Time of Crisis: Perspectives from COVID 19 Management



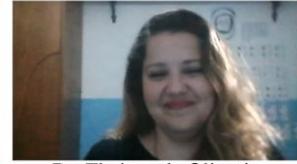
Prof. Gilvan Muller de Oliveira



Anna Belkina



Dr. M. Sridhar Acharyulu



Dr. Thaian de Oliveria



Dr. Burri Ranga Reddy

Session 6: Information Ethics

Themes: Scale of information crises, critical thinking skills, interdisciplinary and multistakeholder collaborative efforts, the role of community radios

Chairperson: Coetzee Bester (South Africa)

In physical terms a crisis event is the simultaneous presence of: a threat to values; a period of uncertainty; and entails issue of time constraint. In an intangible sense a crisis invokes a volatile political environment where attempts are made to prime and mobilise publics for or against political calls and proposals. A physical crisis always has an accompanying crisis of information²². Accurate, timely and reliable information even more critical during time of crisis objectively speaking, subjectively attempts to manipulate increase. COVID-19 fits the three simultaneously appearing criterion as a crisis. One sees a threat to values, such as human health and life, economic well being, freedom of movement. Ideally, an international advisory body with public good and public interest as its core concern and able to cut through the subjectively politicised layers of the information domain to provide objective assessments and advice (easily accessible), could potentially break or at least weaken the current cycle. This must be supported by an active endeavour towards improving critical thinking skills. If the pandemic lasts for longer time, there are longer term consequences: there will be a massive backlash against lockdowns, it is beginning to happen and thus public trust even more eroded towards public authorities, media and so forth. Economic consequences will also be massive. Therefore, it is not always a question of scarcity of information, though it may be true of some areas. The quality of information becomes concerning now. There are financial incentives to publish newsworthy items, hence the media also contribute to this issue. There needs to be a clear

²² Dr. Gregory Simons (Sweden) Right to Information and not Manipulation: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

distinction between people dying of corona virus and those dying with corona virus (together with other health occurrences). Context must be supplied to address the ecosystem of fear.

If digital might be considered as “the” building block of our societies (social, economic, political), our lives, our identities, how can we, as human, keep control of such a fast, complex, protean, ubiquitous innovation with unpredictable applications²³? We need to consider the collective challenges our digital societies are facing. To address this, we must set up interdisciplinary, multistakeholder, transparent national and international Data Ethics Agencies as a point of necessity. Information ethics is the missing element in education reform initiatives worldwide and must be embedded in as many courses across disciplines.

We should not underestimate the role of community radios, and other alternative media (TV, newspapers, etc.) that engages with the community, particularly to the extent it can contribute to information for all during Covid19. It helps us reaching the unreached²⁴, by creatively blending/integrating the ICTs with community media to address the digital divide and include vulnerable communities in the infosphere. It is not necessarily a panacea but adds to the democratisation of information.



Conclusion

Misinformation must be debunked – during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media have been sites of ‘infodemic’ fuelled by myths, stigmatization, conspiracy theories, and rumour-mongering that have led to serious consequences. It is essential to build collective fact-checking capacities of local communities to counter misinformation. Information ethics is concerned with how people can better their lives, and to become an inclusive and equitable society. By applying an information ethical perspective, it will assist towards bridging the digital divide, inherently contributing towards ensuring access to quality and accurate information.

²³ Dr. Yves Poulet (UNESCO, Paris) Why We Need Info-Ethics?

²⁴ Dr. Kanchan K. Malik (India), Vocal for Local Information During COVID-19 Pandemic: Role of Community Radios in Addressing the Digital Divide in South Asia

Valedictory Session

This session was chaired by J.Prabhakar Rao, Chairperson of the conference. The session begins with a brief report on the deliberations of the conference by Ms. Rachel Fischer (South Africa). Delivering valedictory address Mr. Jaco du Toit, Chief of Section Universal Access to Information has mentioned that Information and timely access to it will enable the governments to take all important decisions especially in COVID times.



Prof.J.Prabhakar Rao



Ms. Rachel Fischer



Mr. Jaco du Toit

He also said that the rich inputs provided by this conference would contribute to make policy decisions with record to help management in present crisis. This conference is very much relevant because UNESCO celebrates International Day of Access to Information on 28th September 2020. Prof.J.Prabhakar Rao has introduced Hyderabad Declaration which includes Recommendations by the speakers under each IFAP priority areas for the discussion and approval of the conference.

Prof.J.Prabhakar Rao
Chairperson