Guilherme Canela, UNESCO
Stefaan Verhulst, New York University, GovLab
Ingrid Volkmer, University of Melbourne, International Digital Policy Lab

**Working Group Outline:**
**Information as a Public Good in the Age of Datafication and Artificial Intelligence**

**Background**

To achieve and sustain social progress, citizens require access to information, appropriate skills to interact - 'deliberate' - and opportunities to engage in public discourse. For decades, journalism has taken on the crucial role of the critical 'fourth estate' in democratic societies, which was safeguarded and protected. News media have taken on a leading role in democratic societies to provide 'objective' reporting, to set a national news agenda and enable citizens to engage in democratic processes.

However, information as 'public good' can no longer be related only to journalism and news media but is challenged by a dynamic information ecology of transnationally 'fluid' data and digital communication affecting public communication in countries of the Global North and Global South. Furthermore, it is no longer clear how information as public good can be defined, assessed and safeguarded in a globalized digital data ecology.

Despite – or perhaps especially due to - these new communicative realities, information as public good needs to be understood as a key driver of social progress that underpins democratic discourse, empowers individuals and communities, promotes scientific research and informs decision-making in public policy, education, healthcare, and economic development, being therefore an enabler to the full enjoyment of all human rights.

When information is treated as a public good, it ensures that everyone, regardless of their socio-economic status, can participate fully in society. That was the rationale for all UNESCO's member states to endorse unanimously, during its 41st General Conference, the principles of the Windhoek+30 Declaration, which precisely reaffirms that information is a public good. Such an international perception is needed to guide the new assessment of information as public good in a globalized data ecology where – especially – young citizens have their own perception of public good. To assess information as public good in an international and inclusive context, our Working Group will be guided by UNESCO's Windhoeck+30 declaration and UNESCO's guidelines regarding digital platform regulation.

**Challenges to information as public good: globalized data infrastructure, datafication processes, individualized public interaction, new governance approaches**

To address information as public good within a globalized data ecology, we see the following dimensions as key foci for our analysis:

(1) The continuous technological advancement of interactive tools, the datafication of civic interaction and the new relevance of artificial intelligence (AI) as a **new communicative and mediating infrastructure** presents both opportunities and challenges in treating information as a public good. These developments increasingly constitute the environment for civic interaction which needs to be addressed and assessed in their relevance for information as public good. These processes need to be

reflected as new components to the traditional policymaking goals and 'tools' of guaranteeing a free, independent and pluralistic information ecosystem, which were and still are essential to protect and promote information as public good.

(2) **Processes of datafication** of public interaction (from the datafication of all stages of democratic election processes to deliberation) to generative AI technologies, algorithmic content, individualized chatbots, streamline access to data in more conversational and user-friendly ways where data points are collected for commercial purposes. Furthermore, digital platforms and the rise of proprietary content make it increasingly difficult for citizens to search for and access quality information which poses significant barriers for citizens to access relevant information in 'normal' times but also in times of elections and times of crisis.

(3) Especially the increasing proliferation of AI-driven recommendation and moderation systems used by digital monopoly platforms is producing **subjective public interaction**, reinforcing personal biases and preferences while stifling pluralistic perspectives. This trend threatens the diversity of information is contributing to a monoculture that undermines democratic discourse and informed decision-making. Information and data asymmetries have long been a critical issue, with efforts such as freedom of information acts and open data initiatives seeking to democratize access. However, the advent of AI introduces new dimensions to this challenge.

(4) A **new governance approach** for regulation of the digital ecosystem is needed. Several actors are seeking to implement new rules for the governance of the digital ecosystem with the goal of addressing the above challenges and others. However, many of these proposals are not conducive to the idea of information as public good. Therefore, a coherent analysis of the models being discussed and implemented is urgent.

**Possible Areas of exploration**

Based on these assessments, incorporating developments in the Global North and Global South as outlined above, our Working Group will develop new governance models for the digital ecosystem, focusing on a human rights-based approach, transparency of AI and digital platforms companies, human rights due diligence, news media viability and user empowerment.

For example, our work will focus on:

- Algorithmic pluralism promoting the diversity in AI algorithms to ensure a multiplicity of perspectives in information mediation.
- Inclusive Data Practices ensuring comprehensive and equitable data practices preventing the emergence of "invisibles"—groups or issues that lack sufficient data representation.
- Equitable Access to data and AI: addressing the balance of the proprietary nature of data with the need for public accessibility, leveraging AI to democratize access to data and information.
- Regulatory parameters for better processes in governing the digital ecosystem

**Possible Outcomes**

Outcomes of this Work Group will contribute to an enhanced information diversity, fostering a richer, more diverse information ecosystem that supports democratic discourse.

Outcomes relate to three dimensions:

- Greater Data Inclusivity: ensuring that all voices are represented in the data landscape, reducing the risk of "invisibles."
- Improved Public Access to AI: democratizing access to data and AI technologies, enabling digital self-determination and as such empowering communities.
- Better human rights-based regulation to promote and protect information as a public good.

**Long Term Objective**

With the conclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals current cycle in 2030 by the United Nations, a new framework and, therefore, a new narrative for further protecting and promoting information as a public good as an end in itself, but also as a means to achieve other democratic, development and human rights goals are needed.

The outcomes of this working group aim to contribute to this long-term objective.