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UNESCO and INFOethics: Seeking global ethical values in the Information Society

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ABSTRACT

Between 1997 and 2000, UNESCO organized a conference series on the ethical and legal dimensions of the Information Society, called INFOethics. The article retraces the history of these meetings and UNESCO's search for global ethical values in the new informational environment. It analyses the different and conflictual discourses within the organisation with regard to universal access to information in a digital environment, and draws on Robin Mansell's reflections on social imaginaries of the Information Society to explain the divergent positions as results of the paradoxical nature of the Information Society itself. The article thereby contributes to understanding the origins of policy debates on the ethical dimension of the Information Society and the interests of involved policy actors.

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1. Introduction

> "Only the mindless confuse value and price."
> Antonio Machado, poet.
> Cited by Federico Mayor,
> Director-General of UNESCO, in his opening
> speech to the INFOethics conference in 1997

In November 2013, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) adopted during its General Conference a resolution on "Internet-related issues within the mandate of UNESCO, including access to information and knowledge, freedom of expression, privacy, and ethical dimensions of the Information Society". A significant number of UNESCO's member states were concerned about its possible effects on national security, innovation and economic growth. Hence, the resolution's adoption had been preceded by an extensive debate about the need for and content of such an international standard-setting instrument, which resulted in an important revision of the text (UNESCO, 2013: 2f). This debate was only the last episode in a long series of exchanges on the ethical dimensions of the Information Society that UNESCO witnessed during the last decades. It was moreover the most recent example of the difficulties UNESCO consistently has to face in its search for a global consensus on ethical values in the digital age – a search that already begun in the early 1990s, when the organisation started to wonder about the repercussions a world increasingly dominated by information and communication technologies (ICTs) would have on the individual well-being, and that has not found its conclusion until today.

This article retraces the evolution of this search and specifically focuses on a series of conferences called INFOethics, which took place between 1997 and 2000. Its purpose was to foster an open and critical exchange about information ethics

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"as the branch of the philosophy of information that investigates, in a broad sense, the ethical impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on human life and society" (Floridi, 2013, p. xii). During these meetings, hence years before Facebook was founded and more than a decade before the NSA-PRISM scandal would raise global awareness of the dangers new technologies might bear on individual civil rights, an international group of experts discussed issues whose sensitivity we only realize now, like the importance of privacy in cyberspace and the risk of commercial or governmental exploitation of user-generated data. UNESCO's efforts to find a global consensus concerning these new ethical challenges culminated in the preparation of a 'Recommendation on the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace'. But due to fierce opposition by some member states, it took UNESCO six years and many efforts until the recommendation was eventually adopted in 2003.

The article aims to fill a gap in research about UNESCO's role in the global governance of information and the Internet. While the organisation's engagement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and its involvement in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) have been extensively treated by various scholars (Carlsson 2003; Mansell and Nordenstreng 2006; Mastrini and de Charras 2005; Pickard 2007), the period between these two events has until now found little academic attention (Frau-Meigs et al. 2012).[1] Yet, it was during this intermediary period that UNESCO, as any other institution involved in global communication policy, had to react to the emergence of digital technology and develop coherent policy discourses regarding the changing role of information for society and individual well-being. Thus, the objective of this article is to show how, in the late 1990s, UNESCO slowly extended its conception of moral values related to information, and established information ethics as a subject of intergovernmental policy debates. Through this historical analysis, the presented research contributes to the understanding of origins and divergent positions regarding ethical questions and the value of information in an increasingly interconnected world.

The study is based on archive research, document analysis and interviews with UNESCO actors. It moreover uses an argumentative approach for the analysis of policy discourse.[2] Instead of solely looking at final policy documents to understand the position of a particular actor or a public institution, this approach has the particularity to analyse discourse as it is created during debates and other exchanges between policy actors (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Hajer 1993, 2006). It thereby considers how the process of meaning-making is influenced by the exchange of arguments amongst participants of policy debates as well as their political, diplomatic and socio-economic context.

The first part of the article gives a quick historical overview of UNESCO's engagement in global communication debates until the 1990s, and the difficulties it had to face in its struggle against global imbalances in the distribution and production of information. It then retraces the history of the INFOethics conferences and the issues discussed there, based on the analytical and chronological structuration of information ethics proposed by the information philosopher Luciano Floridi (Floridi, 2013). The article further describes UNESCO's search for a global consensus on these ethical questions and analyses the different conflictual positions within the organisation with regard to universal access to information in a digital environment. In the last part, the article draws on Robin Mansell's reflections on Information Society imaginaries (Mansell 2012) in order to explain the divergent perspectives as results of the paradoxical nature of the informational environment itself.

2. The origins of UNESCO's struggle for access to information

UNESCO's concern for ethical questions relating to information and its usage, as well as the difficulties it encountered during its search for a global consensus on information ethics can only be understood when looking at the historical background of the organisation's activities in the field of information and communication. The origin of UNESCO's interest in this field can be traced back as far as 1945, when the United States proposed to add the field of media and mass communication to the new organisation's responsibilities, that initially only covered the fields of culture, education and science (UNESCO, 1945a). In a world tired of mass media being abused for propaganda purposes, international communication held the promise of exchanging and diffusing knowledge all over the world in order to promote mutual understanding amongst people and nations and ultimately foster "peace in the mind of men" (UNESCO, 1945b). However, the cross-border exchange of information was not only motivated by humanistic but also by clear economic and geopolitical interests. The US government considered the information sector as a crucial medium for the growing American post-world war economy and therefore promoted the 'free flow of information' on the national and international level, claiming that no national borders should restrict the flow of information and media goods between different nations (Schiller, 1976). The principle's recognition by the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO consequently represented an international tool to overcome national frontiers and allow the diffusion of information and Western values on a global scale (Carlsson, 2003, p. 197).

But when, in the second half of the 20th century, many developing countries had gained independence after years of decolonization and wished to be integrated in the global media system, they started to voice demands for a more balanced

[1] Among the few notable exceptions are Christian Breunig's historical overview of UNESCO's activities until 1987 (Breunig 1997, 1996), and Veva Leye's analysis of UNESCO's focus on communication for development (Leye 2007a,b; Leye, 2009).

[2] Policy discourse can be understood in various different ways, although much of the literature on the subject avoids concrete clarifications or explicit definitions (Bacchi, 2000, p. 51f). Drawing on Fischer, Forester and Hajer, we understand 'policy discourse' as the ensemble of ideas, concepts, frames and definitions that gives meaning to a phenomenon of the real world and structure it as a concrete policy problem; by addressing the problem in policy texts, the world view behind it is stabilized and reproduced as common policy thinking'. For more details about the methodological approach, see (Pohle, 2013).

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