

The End of Infodemic? The 2021-2024 UN Effort to Ensure the Integrity of Public Information

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Abstract: This article examines the United Nations' efforts between 2021 and 2024 to promote the integrity of public information through the development of the Global Principles for Information Integrity. Responding to the growing threat of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, the study analyses how the UN sought to construct a non-binding, multilateral and multistakeholder response. Using qualitative textual analysis of UN reports, resolutions, and policy documents, the article traces the institutional process initiated by the Secretary-General's call for a global code of conduct and culminating in the adoption of the Global Principles in 2024. The findings highlight both the potential and the limitations of multilateral cooperation in a fragmented information environment marked by geopolitical rivalry and technological change. The study contributes to debates on global governance by illustrating how normative frameworks can be mobilized to address information integrity while navigating tensions between human rights, state interests, and platform governance.

Keywords: Information environment, Regulation, International cooperation, Multistakeholder, Integrity

1. Introduction

The increasing role of purposefully spread false, misleading, or inaccurate information online has become a global concern, and the United Nations (UN) is attempting to take a role to counter the phenomenon on multilateral basis. The UN has recognized disinformation as a threat and has also underscored the fundamental importance of freedom of information and access to accurate, reliable information as a human right. In 2021 its Secretary-General called for the end of "infodemic" challenging fact-based world by calling for a global code of conduct." (United Nations General Assembly, 2021a, 2)

The concept of "infodemic" refers to a particular kind of information environment in which the access of individuals to factual and timely information is weakened, with disinformation providing one element in the context. (Briand et al., 2023) The call for a global code of conduct in promoting the integrity of public information was a step onwards in countering disinformation at a global level, and after the Secretary-General started the building of a political momentum for such an effort, the work culminated in 2024 with the launch of Global Principles for Information Integrity.

Our research problem focuses on the integrity of public information as a topic for viable multilateral effort, i.e. how the UN processed the challenge. Our research question derived from the research problem is how the Global Principles were created and how the creation of the Global Principles reflected the state of multilateralism in attempting to set up a global response to the spreading of malign information.

The study contributes to the better understanding of multilateral dynamics in the UN decision-making in the context of how non-binding efforts can be made to guide member states and other stakeholders to establish common rules to regulate the current information environment.

2. Current Scholarly Discussion and the Case for Study

The UN is the leading multilateral organization in the world, but it has increasingly been under strain to draft relevant and effective responses to global challenges, highlighting weakening state of the UN and multilateralism as a broader phenomenon. (Weiss, 2016; Mingst, Karns and Lyon, 2022) As defined by John Ruggie (1992), multilateralism means cooperation between three states or more and is institutionalized in a particular context. Multilateralism relies on acceptance of common facts by states participating in the cooperation. If the sense of common facts is decreasing, this weakens the foundations under multilateral organizations (Martin, 2024).

Finding a commonly shared stance in mitigating the impact of malign and intended dissemination of information, especially hate speech, misinformation and disinformation continue to be a major global challenge (Ministry of Defence, 2024). The UN has started to work with countering malign information, and the

theme has gained attention especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, when the debates on health measures featured mass spreading of dis- or misinformation. (United Nations General Assembly, 2022b) Furthermore, the UN bodies can also act as forums for countering but also disseminating of disinformation as discursive activity (Taranenko, 2024).

In terms of regulatory responses, Christopher Marsden et al. suggest that effective governance requires a combination of legal frameworks and technological solutions, including the use of artificial intelligence (Marsden, Brown and Veale, 2020). This aligns with the findings of concerning the regulation of AI technologies to combat disinformation, emphasizing the need for democratic governments to adopt measures that enhance societal resilience and promote informed citizenry (Mega, 2023). Also, the UN work to regulate AI technology is noted (Fournier-Tombs, 2021). The UN's involvement in these regulatory discussions is meaningful, as it can facilitate international cooperation and the sharing of best practices among member states.

Often, discussion on global codes focuses on ethical practices, norms and standards in areas like environmental protection, corporate social responsibility, or migration (Armstrong, 2000; Vogel, 2008). In the field of finance, the UN has for decades promoted the use of global code to define rules and relations between transnational corporations and states (Sauvant, 2015). Similarly, the question of information-related threats link corporations with states. Promoting a particular kind of global code is a relevant perspective on the UN's role in addressing disinformation, given its mandate to maintain international peace and security and promote human rights while acknowledging in particular the role of the UN General Assembly in seeking consensus among the international community in a way that promotes both global democracy and involvement of civil society actors. (Thérien and Bélanger Dumontier, 2009) Furthermore, from the perspective of international relations theory such as constructivism, the global code relates to a question of whether there is and should be universal principles related to mitigating – and countering – disinformation, as a form of social norm (Björkdahl, 2002).

In this perspective, promoting a particular form of global code in the context of malign information could shed light on the UN's activities in setting up a global consensus and seeking to mobilize the member states of the UN, i.e. the global community at large to develop common measures to counter the phenomenon. Indeed, multilateral cooperation can take place in the context of regulating or shaping the information environment. However, the ways in which both the countering of malign information and in particular the focus on the protecting integrity of information can be combined should also shed light on the processes within the UN and how its role is viewed within the organization and outside of it, thus simultaneously engaging with the sense of multilateral organizations being under crisis (Schuette, 2024).

However, the promotion of global code has not been typical for UN activities. In fact, among the UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases only 67 findings (press.un.org/en/sitesearch) can be found with the search term “global code” and in the UN Digital Library full text search between 1999 and 2024 only 592 records can be found to feature the search term, when applied in the system in June 2025. This highlights the relatively limited attention that the idea of global code has received in the UN's work so far.

3. Methodological Considerations

Our approach focuses on the exploration of the process in the UN to establish a global code on integrity of public information and recommendations and guidelines the UN provides for its member states and to other relevant stakeholders (e.g. private companies and non-governmental organizations) regarding information-related threats to such integrity. Sources for this article were extracted from the UN Digital Library with a full document search, with the help of keywords “‘global code of conduct’ AND “integrity of public information” (45 documents) as well as “counter disinformation” (156 documents) from the period 2021-2024. The search provided, among other types of documents, reports and resolutions of the Secretariat, the Security Council and the General Assembly.

Furthermore, the documents needed to feature commentary remarks on the state's role in countering disinformation or on the global code of conduct in the context of countering disinformation, and this served as the basis for close reading of documents. Documents were analyzed with contextualized, qualitative textual analysis in which the attention focused on the UN process to create the global code.

4. The Creation of the Global Code to Maintain Information Integrity

In the late 2010s member states of the UN accepted the view that various challenges impacting humankind, such as climate change and conflicts, were interconnected and thus requiring interconnected responses also

from the UN. As a result, in 2019 the UN adopted a Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. Instead of paying attention to disinformation in particular, the strategy focused on any kind of communication in speech that contains attacks or pejorative language in reference to individuals or groups (United Nations, 2019). Furthermore, effort by both states and companies to counter disinformation seemed occasionally to contradict with human rights, thus requiring new approaches with multistakeholder basis (United Nations General Assembly, 2021b). The Secretary-General António Guterres responded to increasingly challenging information environment with a report *Our Common Agenda* published in August 2021. In the report, the secretary-general called for the members of the international community to develop a “common, empirically backed consensus on the public good of fact, science and knowledge”, as an effort to increase trust. Furthermore, he called for an institutional approach to disinformation by countering hate speech and online harassment and called for a “global code of conduct” that would promote integrity of public information. The underlying theme was the role of trust and mistrust towards both the technology and digital space, and a vision of a need to manage “our digital commons as a global public good”. (United Nations General Assembly, 2021a, 17-18)

In his statement on the priorities for the year 2022, delivered in January 2022, Guterres highlighted the idea of multistakeholder approach to digital space and integrity of public information. He perceived the regulation of the digital world highly important but prone for risks, such as data misuse, misinformation and cybercrime, and linked the regulation in particular to different forms of business models taking place in the digital world. He also talked about the global code he had proposed as a multistakeholder effort linking governments, media companies and “regulators” together and saw it as a way to end both the “infodemic” and the war on science, while promoting integrity of public information both online and offline, and wanted the states to commit to the global code. (United Nations General Assembly, 2022a, 4-5)

4.1 Role of Hate Speech and Other Malign Information Activities

In late 2021, the General Assembly adopted a resolution (United Nations General Assembly, 2021c) in which it connected countering disinformation to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, based on the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech in 2019.

In the resolution the General Assembly called states to “counter all forms of disinformation through policy measures, including education, capacity-building for prevention and resilience to disinformation, advocacy and awareness-raising”, and the resolution both welcomed and took note concerning the Secretary-General's call for specific “global code for conduct that promotes integrity in public information”. Furthermore, in the resolution the Assembly requested from the Secretary-General a specific report concerning the views of the UN member states, UN entities and other relevant stakeholders to provide ideas about best practices related to countering disinformation. (United Nations General Assembly, 2021c, 4) All in all, the resolution was a clear commitment by the General Assembly to place the issue of disinformation on the global agenda, and it paved the path for further work on the topic. The request for a report was a typical reaction and reflected the interest to emphasize the changing information – and thus operating – environment and next to broaden the discussion to cover all member states, UN entities and stakeholders otherwise relevant to the topic to mobilize international reaction.

From here the focus was on effort by the UN Department of Global Communications, led by the Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications. There the member states were supportive of the vision to establish the global code and reacted positively to an inclusive approach in its development. (United Nations, 2022, 7, 29) The idea of a global code was transformed into a document titled *Global Principles for Information Integrity*, highlighting the normative-aligned approach to mobilize both member states and other stakeholders to follow the guidance.

The Department of Global Communications in the General Assembly organized a global consultation round regarding the development of the Global Principles for Information Integrity. According to the report of the Secretary-General, the consultations round took a year to complete and involved several stakeholders, such as governments, civil society, the private sector, media and academia, and the process also involved dialogue with the Committee on Information as well as engagement through the system-wide Working Group on Information Integrity. After such a process, the official document was drafted. (United Nations General Assembly, 2024)

4.2 Content of the Global Principles

In 2023 the Secretary-General's office launched a policy brief aimed at developing what the global principles on information integrity could be. The brief also defined the concept of information integrity in the context of

threats. Indeed, the policy brief highlighted the digital information environment and the role of multiple different actors shaping the environment and linked the search for a global code to the upcoming 2024 event Summit for the Future as well as to work related specifically to information integrity in digital platforms. (United Nations, 2023, 5) The Global Principles were published in 2024 few months before the Summit for the Future and included five principles: societal trust and resilience; healthy incentives; public empowerment; independent, free and pluralistic media; and transparency and research and focus on providing recommendations to “all stakeholders regarding coordinated international action for safer and more humane information spaces that champion human rights, peaceful societies and a sustainable future.” In practice this has meant a somewhat liberal approach to new technological environment, but in the framework of the UN focus on fostering the role of human rights: “Information integrity entails a pluralistic information space that champions human rights, peaceful societies and a sustainable future. It holds within it the promise of a digital age that fosters trust, knowledge and individual choice for all.” (United Nations, 2024c) In the launching event of the Global Principles in June 2024, the Secretary-General described them as a starting point for solutions to counter misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in the context of proliferating role of generative artificial intelligence and strengthening democracy (United Nations, 2024b), but as the policy brief had already highlighted in 2023, such an effort related above all to the UN to set the aim in the international level and then invite member states to follow in the national level (United Nations, 2023).

Furthermore, Guterres went on to describe the key audience for the Global Principles: the big tech companies to take responsibility over the impact of their products; advertisers and the PR industry regarding the monetization of harmful content; creatives of not wasting their talents to greenwash; PR agencies to better select their customers; media outlets to raise and enforce editorial standards; and governments to commit to free and plural media landscape (United Nations, 2024b). Nation-states, while in the focus of the UN system, simply were unable to shape the information environment to the extent necessary for the fulfilment of the UN secretary-general’s vision.

4.3 Commitment to Multilateralism in the Context of Increasingly Maligned Information Environment

Understood in the context of multilateralism as a dialogue between governments’ representatives to work out common approaches to common concerns (Schechter, 2011), the search for a global code reflected such an effort, a common approach to a common concern. In the context of the United Nations as the leading platform of multilateral cooperation and multilateralism suffering from a state of crisis (Newman, Thakur and Tirman, 2006), the issue of countering disinformation with promoting guidelines and encouraging states to act and to develop and share measures become particularly consequential. This applies particularly well to the chosen approach that goes beyond nation-states. Multistakeholder approach the UN promotes emphasizes an approach in which the member states are only one group of actors, among many others that shape, either intentionally or unintentionally, the global information environment.

In recent years multilateralism has experienced multiple forms of cooperation emerging, such as minilateral solutions particularly in the context of crises and crisis management (see Patrick, 2015) and discourse on multilateralism as a flexible and effectivity-based approach to international cooperation. (Bouchard, Peterson and Tocci, 2014; Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Dahl, 2022) Multistakeholder approach is part of a quest to foster more effective forms of cooperation by expanding the diversity of actors participating in global governance over secure information environment. Based on the process to create Global Principles for Information Integrity, the multilateral cooperation showed it can create principles with an aim to shape the complex information environment that surrounds both member states and the UN itself. However, as tends to be the case with the member states’ relations with the United Nations, the question of whether principles will be applied to decision-making at a national level focuses on the level of commitment towards these principles. In the context of multilateralism, clear commitments at national level can be difficult to find (Fontaine-Skronski, Thool and Eschborn, 2023, 2) and a similar idea may well apply to the question of how to protect and strengthen the integrity of public information. Indeed, already in 2024, some evidence emerged. In the Summit of the Future, held in September 2024, information security was also well present. The Summit was a high-level event designed to bring world leaders together and try to find an international consensus on a better present and future and make commitments to jointly agreed goals. The Summit originated from *Our Common Agenda* report of the Secretary-General and the states participating in the event adopted a document titled *Pact for the Future*, highlighting various commitments the states had made in the Summit. Some commitments were made under the banner of information integrity, and in the context of threats posed by misinformation and disinformation. There the commitments included digital media and information literacy

measures to strengthen resilience towards malign information and measures related to dissemination of independent, fact-based and accessible information. (United Nations, 2024a, 45)

4.4 Discussion: Are the Global Principles Enough?

Social media and digital communication tools are now firmly embedded in state strategies to influence audiences and challenge adversaries. This has not gone unnoticed by the world's major powers, each with a rich history of employing psychological operations, some of which have been controversial in their methods. For instance, the United States recognizes information as an instrument of national power (Department of Defense, 2013). China, meanwhile, has expressed its intention to contest what it sees as Western dominance over global discourse (Zhao, 2016).

This renewed great power competition is increasingly unfolding in the digital domain. Russia, for example, has been linked to efforts to interfere in foreign elections and spread disinformation across global platforms. (Maréchal, 2017) China has intensified its influence campaigns, aiming to challenge U.S. influence in the international information environment. One of the largest known disinformation networks, referred to as Spamouflage, has been attributed to China. According to Meta, the network included more than 7,000 Facebook accounts, 954 pages, 15 groups, and 15 Instagram accounts. These accounts operated across at least 50 different platforms and forums, primarily aiming to promote pro-China narratives and to discredit the United States and other Western countries. (Meta, 2023)

Influence operations, once primarily associated with authoritarian regimes, are now also used—albeit differently and often on a more limited scale—by democratic states. Beyond the major powers, other states have also been implicated in information operations. France, for instance, has been accused of using disinformation tactics, including social media trolls and bots, to counter Russian influence efforts in Africa. (Gleicher and Agranovich, 2020)

While Russia, China and other authoritarian states have sought to insulate their information environments as a form of defense (Bendix, 2026), smaller states often lack the capacity to do so. Instead, they remain dependent on global platforms—such as Western social media or Chinese infrastructure—not out of strategic choice, but due to practical necessity.

As members of the UN Security Council face increasing competition in the global information space, it is fair to question whether the major powers are genuinely committed to supporting the Global Principles or if their differing priorities will continue to drive their actions. The behaviour of key actors often reflects a more self-interested and pragmatic approach.

In this context, smaller states increasingly find themselves relying on multinational alliances—such as the European Union or even the UN itself—to amplify their voices and defend their interests. Initiatives like the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), which aims to regulate online platforms and increase transparency, offer one example of how collective action can strengthen digital resilience. (Heldt, 2022) Yet this dynamic—where larger powers dominate the information space—not only undermines the spirit of a genuine multi-stakeholder approach but also risks reinforcing a 'might makes right' logic, often at the expense of the sovereignty of smaller states.

The success of new UN agreements remains uncertain. While the Global Principles offer a valuable starting point, they may not be enough to address the challenges posed by geopolitical tensions, rapid technological disruption, and differing conceptual approaches to information. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these principles will depend on whether sustained cooperation and political commitment can be achieved—an outcome that remains uncertain in today's volatile global climate.

5. Conclusion

In this study we asked how the Global Principles were created and how the creation of the Global Principles reflected the state of multilateralism in attempting to create a global response to the spreading of malign information.

Our study shows that the UN took an actor-bound approach in creating Global Principles by first acknowledging the existence of information threats and then, together with the relevant UN entities, worked both to consult member states and other stakeholders to find a common response to the challenges malign information was showing. The process, after the first call for global code took place in 2022, took two more years to come up with a document outlining the principles for the Summit for the Future to consider and help

commit states to the principles, thus showing gradual multilateral process to study the challenge and the defined suitable responses.

The global environment increasingly highlights the role of great power rivalry. In this context, reaching international consensus on issues may be increasingly difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, to have some level of regulation among great powers and creating rules and norms of states and non-state actors to follow should be done with enough mobilization. In this evolving situation it is increasingly important to link efforts to counter the spreading of malign information with human rights law and principles. Here the future promotion of Global Principles and mobilization of states to implement the principles becomes important and could bring hope to aim next for stronger form of international regulation.

Ethics declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI declaration: Three AI-based research tools were utilized in the reporting phase: Jenni.ai (<https://jenni.ai/>) for text editing the first draft of the manuscript and Scite.ai (<https://scite.ai>) to help in the drafting the literature review, although in the further revision rounds their impact became almost non-existent, and Microsoft 356 Copilot to create a draft abstract.

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