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## International information policy: UNESCO in historical perspective

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## **UNESCO and Information Policy: an historical perspective**

### **Abstract**

This chapter provides a short history of UNESCO's activities related to information policy. It focuses on the political dynamics and debates surrounding the creation of UNESCO's two intergovernmental programmes explicitly dedicated to information: the General Information Programme (PGI), created in 1977, and the Information For All Programme (IFAP), which replaced the former in 2001. Both creation processes took place against the backdrop of highly politicized debates about information being a public resource or a commodity and the question of bridging the gap between industrialized and developing countries. The research is based on the analysis of archival records, interviews, policy texts and secondary literature, and seeks to situate UNESCO's efforts related to the formulation of national and international information policies in the institutional as well as the political contexts. It thus contributes to a better understanding of past and present policy debates about the value of information and global inequalities.

### **Key words**

UNESCO, Information Policy, UNISIST, Information For All, Information Society, Information Economy

### **Bio note of the author**

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# **UNESCO and Information Policy: an historical perspective**

## **1. Introduction**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is the only specialized agency of the United Nations with a clear mandate related to media, communication and information. UNESCO's mandate in this field is explicitly linked to a normative mission, putting communication and information in the service of intercultural understanding and the global exchange of knowledge. But in an international community, in which every member state is informed by distinct traditions, values, religious and legal norms as well as ideological beliefs, opinions about how to achieve such normative goals differ significantly. For this reason, ever since its inception, UNESCO has been dealing with controversial and often very politicized debates about the role of information and communication in society and the regulation of the increasingly complex informational environment for the benefit of the global community.

UNESCO's activities regarding media and communication, and those related to scientific and technical information are motivated by the same elements of the organization's mandate. But while UNESCO started to launch its first projects related to communication and media shortly after its creation in 1946, its activities related to information and, more particularly, information policy only took form in the early 1970s. In addition, most scholars interested in UNESCO's work in this field have focused almost exclusively on communication and media-related programmes and activities, while those more clearly dedicated to information and the exchange of information have received considerably less academic attention. This chapter seeks to close this gap in research by providing a short history of UNESCO's activities relating to information policy and the political dynamics and debates surrounding them. For this purpose, it quickly retraces the origins of the 'free flow of information' principle in UNESCO's mandate. The chapter then analyzes the circumstances of the inception of UNESCO's two intergovernmental programmes explicitly dedicated to information: the General Information Programme (PGI) and the Information For All Programme (IFAP). PGI was created in February 1977, at a time when theories about the information society and information economy first started to spread into the political sphere; it was dissolved in 2000 to give way to IFAP, a new programme supposedly better adapted to the challenges of the digital age. The empirical research presented in the chapter builds on both secondary literature as well as an analysis of primary

sources such as UNESCO policy documents, archival material and interviews with UNESCO actors.<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted between 2011 and 2014 as part of a larger research project on UNESCO's policy response to the information society.<sup>2</sup> By situating UNESCO's efforts pertaining to the formulation of national and international information policies in their institutional and political contexts, the chapter contributes to a better understanding of past and present policy debates about the significance of information and global inequalities.

## **2. The Free Flow of Information as a guiding principle for UNESCO**

The origins of UNESCO's mandate in the field of information and communication can be traced back as far as 1945 when the first conference for UNESCO's establishment accepted a proposal by the United States to add the field of mass communication to the new organization's responsibilities (UNESCO 1945). In the aftermath of the Second World War, for many of the Western governments participating in the conference, the internationalization of communication and information flows held the promise of exchanging and diffusing knowledge across national borders. In the humanistic spirit of the newly founded international organization they therefore saw the cross-border exchange of information as an appropriate means of promoting mutual understanding between countries.

But, despite their philosophical embedding, the issues of information flows and mass communication soon became highly politicized topics within UNESCO. Communist countries like the Soviet Union viewed the US insistence on extending UNESCO's mandate to media and information as a Western political propaganda move (Singh 2011, p. 110ff.). The principle of the 'free flow of information' in particular, which consists of the idea that no national borders should restrict the flow of information and media goods –such as movies and news reports– between nations, and which serves until today as one of the leading principles for UNESCO's work, was criticized by several member states of UNESCO as a means for cultural domination (Schiller 1976). This reproach was not entirely without justification as the motivations of the United States for extending

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<sup>1</sup> Most interviews informed the empirical research indirectly and direct quotes were avoided. Almost all findings from the interviews could be verified by other sources, such as archival material, official UNESCO documents or additional interviews.

<sup>2</sup> A more extensive analysis of UNESCO's activities related to information can be found in the publication of the larger research project this chapter is based on (Pohle 2016).

UNESCO's mandate to media and communication were more economic and geopolitical than humanistic in nature (Nordenstreng 2013, p. 51). When it became apparent that the United States was to emerge as the most important world power from the war, the US government established the principle of the 'free flow of information' as one of their main priorities for the post-war period. In a world in which existing orders had been devastated during the war and continued to shift due to growing decolonization movements, the US saw the domination of the information sector as a key factor for economic and cultural expansion and a way to promote Western values on a global scale (Carlsson 2003, p. 34; see also Schiller 1975, 1976). In addition, it was considered an effective means of containing the spread of communist ideas throughout the world (Preston et al. 1989, p. 21).

Although the US government did not attempt to hide the economic interests behind the 'free flow of information' and the 'freedom of information' principles, the UN agencies were very receptive towards these ideas, albeit for more idealistic reasons. In 1946, as well as inscribing the two principles into its constitution, UNESCO created a section on Free Flow of Information in its Department of Mass Communication, under the supervision of an American staff member. In addition, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that declared freedom of information as a fundamental human right and touchstone of all other freedoms protected by the United Nations (Breunig 1987, p. 58; Schiller 1976, p. 36). Two years later, in 1948, a United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information led to a further polarization of the divergent positions on the issue: the communist countries represented at the meeting complained that the Free Flow paradigm restricted their national sovereignty and could therefore not conform to the basic principles of international cooperation. In their opinion, the control of media and its content needed to remain in the hands of national governments and could not be regulated by intergovernmental agreements or international bodies. Eventually the US delegation, supported by its Western allies, succeeded in dismissing all these objections as communist attempts to dismantle freedom of expression and information for purely ideological reasons (Schiller 1976, p. 37; see also Elzinga 1996, p. 172).

Despite this success, some Western European governments and several developing countries also looked upon the US advancement of the free flow paradigm with increasingly ambivalent feelings. The US's commercial interests were perceived, in particular by Great Britain and France, as a threat to their own national communication and information sectors (Singh 2011, p. 111; see also Preston et al., 1989 p. 42ff). But these countries' discontent with the US strategy could not override their resentments against the communist block and its attempts to reduce freedom of expression. Eventually they agreed to two legal

agreements within UNESCO that endorsed the free flow principle: in 1948, the first instrument ever adopted by the newly founded organization, the 'Agreement For Facilitating the International Circulation of Visual and Auditory Materials of an Educational, Scientific and Cultural Character' demanded that customs duties and import licences for the mentioned goods be abolished. In 1950, the 'Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials' extended these rules to books, works of art and all similar cultural products (Breunig 1987, p. 60). Both agreements stemmed from US initiatives, but expressed the idealistic ideas UNESCO was founded on; they were, as such, positively received by a large number of member states, but wildly opposed by the Soviets and their allies.

In light of the confrontations between its members, one of UNESCO's main ambitions during the first years was to draw attention away from politicized debates and to dedicate its efforts to more operational questions regarding communication and information. It therefore started to implement a number of 'Technical Assistance Projects', which supported the development of national information and communication infrastructures and contributed to improving facilities for professional training. While the emphasis was initially placed on supporting war-devastated countries in Europe, UNESCO's focus later shifted to developing countries that had never before benefitted from a developed media or even social, political or economic system (Breunig 1987, p. 134ff.). The logic behind this shift to more operational projects was simple: in contrast to information and media content, technology was broadly considered neutral and value-free and its transfer was therefore viewed as an apolitical activity. Yet, critical voices soon arose that accused the Technical Assistance Projects of being just another means of economic and cultural domination since they allowed industrialized countries to introduce their technical products into developing countries and in doing so, to create new dependencies (Schiller 1976, p. 46ff.). As Preston described it: 'just as communications aroused fears of "cultural imperialism", so technical transfers stimulated cries of "development imperialism"' (Preston et al. 1989, p. 71).

For a very long time, tensions between member states regarding the idea of 'Freedom of Information' primarily concerned the organization's programmes dealing with mass media and journalistic information, while scientific and technical information took a less centre-stage position. The conflict over communication flows and an overrepresentation of Western information and media content escalated in the 1970s and early 1980s when many developing countries had gained political independence from the former colonial powers and chose UNESCO as a forum for their political claims related to a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) (Carlsson 2003; Hamelink 1997; Pohle

2016, p. 62ff.). Unsurprisingly, this struggle for more cultural and informational autonomy was strongly supported by the Soviets and other communist governments, but was met with fierce resistance by Western countries. Accusing UNESCO of supporting communist ideas the US eventually withdrew from the organization in 1984, followed by the United Kingdom and Singapore, depriving the organization of about one third of its budget and causing a financial and organizational crisis from which UNESCO did not fully recover for many years.

### **3. Organizing information: UNESCO's early information programmes**

The political conflicts as well as the loss of status and financial support caused by the NWICO movement and the subsequent US withdrawal were also felt by UNESCO's programmes dealing with information services and data used for scientific and technical purposes. Thanks to these activities that treated 'information as a subject in and of itself' (Tocatlian 2006, p. 129), UNESCO was described as the only UN agency with specialized programmes devoted to information *per se* (Rose 1989, p. 231). In 1976, UNESCO's General Conference approved the creation of a new intergovernmental programme, the General Information Programme, better known under its French acronym *Programme Général d'Information* (PGI). It did this with the ambition of finally ensuring the coherent development of UNESCO's work in the fields of scientific and technological information, documentation, libraries and archives (UNESCO 1976a). During the previous years, concerns had been voiced by the relevant professional communities about UNESCO's various programmes in the field of information increasingly overlapping and creating confusion by approaching the same problems differently and advising member states in different ways (ASIS&T 2012; see also UNESCO 1975a). UNESCO therefore decided to merge its two existing information programmes which consisted of a library, archive and documentation programme, called NATIS (National Information Systems), and an intergovernmental programme for cooperation in the field of scientific and technical information, called UNISIST.<sup>3</sup> The combination within PGI and the programme itself are highly interesting for the history of information policy-making for a number of reasons. First, the merger brought together two different professional communities whose beliefs

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<sup>3</sup> Although it was later often used as an abbreviation for 'United Nations International Scientific Information System', the word 'UNISIST' is not an acronym. Rather, it was invented in order to 'connote phonetically the part that the United Nations agencies, in particular UNESCO, should play in the promotion of an international system for information covering science and technology' (Rose 1989, p. 232).

were based on different traditions of information processing; therefore, they had different ways of perceiving information. Secondly, in the context of PGI, UNESCO developed ideas about the societal, economic and political role of information that were shaped by the theoretical thinking of the time, in particular by theories about the information economy and the post-industrial society. And lastly, within PGI, we can observe a major discrepancy between member states and professional groups over the role that governments should play in the formulation of overarching information policies and the control of information markets.

NATIS was created in 1974, following an intergovernmental conference on the planning of national infrastructures in the field of documentation, libraries and archives (UNESCO 1974). The meeting had been organized with the support of the major professional organizations and UNESCO's most important partners in the fields of librarianship, archives and documentation: the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the International Federation for Documentation (FID). The idea behind the NATIS programme was to provide UNESCO's member states with a set of guiding principles that would allow them to better coordinate their different information activities in the fields of archives and librarianship through the formulation of common policy objectives. It was based on an understanding of information as a resource that is accessible mainly via documents and other records stored in public libraries, archives and documentation centres. By supporting and coordinating these different public access points, governments were to provide their citizens with all types of information needed for the development of society, just as they were in charge of providing them with basic and secondary education (Fleury 1998, p. 86).

With this definition of information as a public resource, the programme was opposed to views that regarded information as a commodity to which a certain monetary value could be attributed, as many NATIS publications explicitly stated:

Some writers have described information as a commodity. This concept has led to attempts to consider the market value of information the price the user is prepared to pay for it having regard to its value to him. [...] However, so far, this approach has not produced any useful results. (UNESCO 1976b)

One can suppose that this perception of information was developed both during the short existence of the NATIS programme (1974-6) and as a result of UNESCO's longstanding consideration of the role of archives and libraries. The support of national archives and libraries had been among UNESCO's very first concerns: the UNESCO Bulletin for Libraries was published in April 1946 as the first of UNESCO's many specialized journals;



in 1948, a seminar on public libraries held in Manchester is considered to have been the first seminar ever organized by UNESCO; and just three years later, in 1951, the public library of New Delhi became the first permanent institution to be established by UNESCO within one of its member states (Sewell 1975, p. 125).

While NATIS focused on providing access to information on the national level, the second information programme UNISIST was more specialized and more international. Its goal was to guarantee the global interconnectedness of national information systems in the domains of science and technology. It was born out of the international scientific community's concern that the 'uncoordinated development of incompatible information systems and services in the 1960s was jeopardising the international exchange of scientific and technical information' (Tocatlian 2006, p. 129). During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the increased volume of available scientific information, the growing interrelations between scientific disciplines and the change from fundamental research to more applied research had led to a situation in which scientific data was more heterogeneous than ever before; and as a result, the systems for storing, indexing and referencing this data became increasingly diverse (UNESCO 1971a, p. 23ff.). Consequently, many saw a growing necessity for the harmonization of information systems within countries and across national borders and for the establishment of some kind of 'flexible and loosely connected network of information systems and services based on voluntary co-operation' (Roberts, 1988, p. 7; see also Rose 1989, p. 232), a distributed effort which eventually also contributed to the global spread of the internet.

In response to this demand UNESCO conducted a study on the feasibility of a World Science Information System in 1971. It contained important conceptual and epistemological reflections on the role of information as a universal resource for national and international scientific communities (UNESCO 1971b). A year later, in 1972, the UNISIST programme was officially launched by UNESCO's General Conference (UNESCO 1972). Its main objective was to coordinate existing trends towards cooperation in the field of scientific and technical information. The programme also sought to provide the conceptual framework for a network of interconnected scientific documentation services cooperating across national borders in order to promote the harmonious circulation of high quality scientific and technical information. Initially, it was limited to information produced and used in the natural sciences, but was later extended to social sciences and humanities (UNESCO 1975b).

Most of UNESCO's member states recognized the importance of information for research

and technical development and agreed on the need to harmonize and standardize scientific databases and information systems. Yet, the implications of the Cold War, which were clearly visible in the NWICO debates about media imbalances, did not stop short of information in the field of sciences. From its inception, the UNISIST project was strongly influenced by the perspectives of the United States and other industrialized countries. The committee charged with undertaking the feasibility study was chaired by the Foreign Secretary of the United States National Academy of Sciences and was supported by the Ford Foundation and the US State Department. They viewed the new programme as an opportunity to confirm the US's technical and scientific superiority and at the same time to weaken the Soviet influence in the field (Maurel 2005, p. 308). This Western domination of UNISIST encountered complaints by representatives of communist countries and, to a much smaller extent, developing countries. But, unlike the NWICO movement, this opposition did not provoke a major diplomatic crisis within UNESCO.

Yet, the increasing political interest in scientific and technical information and its usage for national economic development significantly influenced the general direction of the programme. UNISIST was initially developed as an international programme made by scientists for scientists; its goal was to allow intellectual elites to exchange information resources without interference by governments, similar to the internet in its early phases. But, from the mid-1970s, it was increasingly perceived as an intergovernmental programme that was at the service of UNESCO's member states rather than the global scientific community. Accordingly, member states started to expect UNISIST to be sensitive to the economic and political interests of states and to provide governments with some kind of consultancy or guidelines on how to use their valuable scientific and technical information more efficiently. This shows the ambiguity of technical programmes like UNISIST: in order to create the network of information systems that UNISIST was aiming for, scientists needed to rely on intergovernmental decisions and interventions to create national, regional and international infrastructures. They thereby grew increasingly dependent on governments and eventually saw their project being taken over by governmental interests (Fleury 1998, p. 85).

As a consequence of this development, the programme was later expected to exchange information through a loose network and to provide policies for the more efficient systematization and utilization of scientific information within a country. In this regard, it eventually showed similarities with the archives and library programme NATIS. In fact, although the two programmes started as clearly distinct but complementary programmes in the early 1970s, both progressed in a manner that led to a significant overlap of their

concrete activities. The convergence was due to the progressive correlation between different kinds of information that made it difficult to distinguish between their origins, usage, systematization and the institutions in charge of the information. This was further emphasized by the subliminal politicization of UNISIST which had moved, as noted, from being a programme for scientists to an intergovernmental programme at the service of member states. While the UNISIST's feasibility study still defined scientific information as an international resource that was independent from its direct context, it was later perceived as a strategic national value, whose creation and exchange had important economic consequences for both developed and developing countries (Fleury 1998, p. 86). Therefore, the idea of uniting the two programmes into one unique overarching information programme quickly came to light. In 1977, the merge was eventually concluded and PGI incorporated the two programmes under the structure that had been designed for UNISIST; the acronym NATIS was dropped and all activities related to the planning of national libraries, archives and documentation infrastructures were added to the UNISIST objectives.

#### **4. UNESCO and the information economy**

##### ***4.1. PGI and Information for Development***

The politicization of UNISIST resulted in yet another consequence: in May 1979, two years after NATIS and UNISIST were merged into PGI, UNESCO held a conference which led to the extension of the programme's mandate towards a more development-oriented approach to information. The meeting served primarily to develop UNESCO's input to the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), a major UN event, which was considered 'the last of the United Nations "mega conferences" of the 1970s addressing issues relating to a new international economic order' (UN ECOSOC 1997, p. 6). It aimed to respond to calls by developing countries for 'better access to the world's stock of science and technology' and to overcome the 'growing disagreements between "North" and "South" over such matters' (UN ECOSOC 1997, p. 6). The political nature of these ambitious objectives was reflected during the UNCSTD conference by major confrontations between developing and industrialized countries regarding different financial solutions for technology transfer. These disputes made it clear that there was an important shift in the attitude of developing countries, which increasingly sought endogenous technical and scientific capacities and tailor-made technical solutions

to replace their dependency on more technologically advanced countries (Agarwal 1980, p. 77).

In this broader context, the new key objective that emerged from the UNISIST conference in 1979 was 'to meet the needs of development planners, policy-makers and administrators at one end of the user spectrum and, at the other, the people on the grassroots level' (Tocatlian & Neelameghan 1985, p. 155). Subsequently, activities carried out under PGI were increasingly focused on enhancing the capacity of UNESCO's member states to handle, transfer and share information resources and to effectively utilize them for the purpose of development. To this end, PGI associated its activities with its member states through national information focal points and national committees, and regularly organized regional seminars in which representatives of the national liaison offices could exchange experiences. Instead of simply transferring information systems and information resources from the North to the South, developing countries were encouraged to develop 'endogenous capabilities' through education and training and to utilize local information, thereby becoming less dependent on the industrialized world (Tocatlian 1981, p. 147). With these ambitious objectives for PGI, UNESCO tried to respond to the calls of less advantaged countries with a turn towards a development perspective. But in contrast to the NWICO movement in the field of media and communication which was driven by the Global South itself, the call for more independence in the field of scientific and technical information had primarily been uttered by the professional communities in charge of these types of information. Indeed, during the late 1970s, scientists and information professionals expressed concerns that Western developed countries, such as the United States and some European countries, held monopolies over the production and usage of technical and scientific data, increasing the gap between the developed and the developing world.

In 1979, an issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, a French monthly newspaper commonly considered to take a left-wing perspective, was dedicated to 'La guerre des données' (The war of data) and brought together a series of articles in which leading French scholars in the field of technical information and information systems criticized the Western hegemonic position and the increasing consideration of scientific data as a commodity (Lefebure & Ronai, 1979). With references to the NWICO movement, one of the articles compared UNISIST's goal to create a world network giving access to the 'global information resource' with 'un nouvel ordre mondial de la documentation' (a New World Documentation Order). The authors, however, seemed particularly pessimistic about UNESCO's ambition with regard to UNISIST. In their opinion, UNESCO could not be expected to establish unique standards and norms for information databases on a global

level, mainly because its member states did not conceive scientific and technical information as a global resource, but rather as a value that one would not place at the disposal of other countries for nothing more than a moral benefit (Fleury 1998, p. 90).

Accordingly, the shift towards a more development-oriented approach for PGI was not simply motivated by UNISIST's limited success in establishing cross-border standards, norms and structures that would facilitate the free exchange of scientific data on a global scale. It also reflected the increasing economic value that the international community had started to attribute to information. Instead of working towards a free and open exchange of scientific and technical information via a network, the industrialized countries amongst UNESCO's member states preferred to provide development aid to help developing countries to enter the logic of the globalized information economy. In return, the developing countries opened up new markets for the commodity of scientific and technical information (Fleury 1998, p. 23). Following this logic, the economic aspects of information and the progress of member states towards an 'information economy' became PGI's new overarching objective, with UNISIST being 'now directed towards the social and economic value of scientific and technological information for development' (Tocatlian 1981, p. 157).

#### *4.2. Formulating policies for the information economy*

These early reflections on the information economy by UNESCO need to be situated in their historical context, given they did not occur in a vacuum, but were clearly influenced by the theoretical thinking of their time. The early theories of the information economy, which defined the coming of a new type of era or society through changes in the economic and occupational sphere (e.g. Bell 1973; Machlup 1962), introduced a new understanding of information policy, which went beyond the previously prevailing view. While information policies had, until then, been seen as part of science policy, and a concern thereof, they were now framed as a matter of economic policy. Accordingly, policy-makers became increasingly receptive to the creation of systematic national information policies, which were at the time mostly understood as 'a series of decisions taken by a national government, which are designed to encourage a better information infrastructure' (Orna 2008, p. 550). The preoccupation thereby shifted from the growth and management of scientific and technical data and publications to a larger understanding that included all types of information-related activities and knowledge-based activities (see also Godin 2008). This shift is also visible in UNESCO's recommendations concerning national and regional information policies. After PGI's creation, information policies were no longer

limited to political efforts 'to promote the establishment and strengthen the functioning of basic information, documentation, library and archives services at the national level'. Instead, PGI was based on a wider concept of information policy that was adapted to the 'role of information in economic and social development' (UNESCO 1977, p. 1ff.). PGI's director Jacques Tocatlian expressed this broader perception in more detail:

The socioeconomic level of a nation or its capacity for development appears to be closely linked to its capacity to mobilize and use information effectively in activities related to development – research and development, technology transfer, industrialization, business, management, planning, etc. (Tocatlian & Neelameghan 1985, p. 162)

Following the conviction that development needs to be endogenous and closely related to the countries' own cultures and traditions, the PGI realized that the advent of the information industry represented an obstacle for the poorer countries, which lacked sufficient information relevant to national needs and that were unable to make effective use of the available information. Only the highly industrialized countries possessed the human resources, financial means and technical capability to create and maintain a large and functioning information economy. The field of information was thus more than ever subjected to market forces. In addition, the growing range of informational products and services was designed for industrialized markets and not necessarily adapted to the needs of the developing world (Tocatlian 1981, p. 148ff.). For this reason, the PGI secretariat developed guidelines for national information policies, which should render information resources and services more responsive to the economic, social and political needs of the specific country. In 1990, UNESCO published a first practical handbook on national information policies, addressed to professionals involved in the management of information resources and services and the government officials responsible for this field (UNESCO 1990). It also organized a number of regional meetings on information policies and assisted up to 80 member states in their formulation (Montviloff 2013). However, while some countries responded positively to these efforts, others strongly opposed the very idea of unique policies by which the information economy should be coordinated and regulated on a governmental level.

These difficulties in establishing national and regional information policies were primarily due to member states' diverging perspectives regarding the role of government in the information economy. In a comparative study of information policies in different countries, the information specialist Nick Moore identified two broadly divergent models of the manner in which countries responded to the idea of an information economy. While one

model places emphasis on the state, to which they attribute a significant role for planning, coordinating and, in large parts, financing the creation of information infrastructures, the other model is determined by neo-liberal economic thinking that emphasizes the importance of market-led initiatives and the role of the private sector (Moore 1997, 1998). The latter, he argued, is predominant in the developed world, particularly in the United States and Europe, where the turn to an information economy is seen as a manner of securing a country's social standing and its position in the global economic system. The more state-centred model is instead mainly pursued by developing and newly industrialized countries, which seek 'a path towards future prosperity through accelerated economic growth' and emphasize political involvement in solving socio-economic problems (Moore, 1998, p. 21). Both perceptions were visible in the responses of member states to PGI's efforts to encourage the creation of overarching national information policies. While many of the developing countries amongst UNESCO's member states, supported by the majority of Eastern European countries, endorsed the idea of state-regulated information policies, others thought that these kinds of policies could only be sector-specific and should only be implemented if they could contribute to the better distribution of specialized information. The latter would be the case in particular for sectors in which liberalized market forces do not secure a sufficient distribution of information, for instance in the field of culture and education (Canisius 1990). In addition, it can be assumed that the experience of the NWICO debate and its consequences contributed to the opposition to centralized information policies by these countries. The idea of UNESCO promoting once more the idea of state intervention in the field of information certainly alarmed many member states' representatives and staff members and led to their scepticism with regard to PGI's efforts relating to information policies.

## **5. An intergovernmental programme for the information society**

In November 1989 —six days after the fall of the Berlin Wall— UNESCO adopted a New Communication Strategy in an attempt to leave behind the ideological struggles that had marked its first 40 years of efforts in the field of communication and information (UNESCO 1989). But instead of indicating how UNESCO was planning to overcome the structural economic, cultural and social differences that had given rise to these struggles, the new strategy simply reaffirmed the free flow of information paradigm and the development approach that had been introduced in the 1980s. In addition, it was the first time that UNESCO added the study of new information and communication technologies

(ICTs) and their socio-cultural and economic impact to its main priorities (Modoux 1995). Some years later, in 1997, the organization decided to take its existing activities related to ICTs to the next level by replacing its long-established programmes dealing with information and informatics —PGI and the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme (IIP)— with a new structure that would be more adapted to the challenges of the dawning digital age. IIP had only been created a decade earlier, in 1986, in order to replace the Intergovernmental Bureau for Informatics (IBI), an international organization also operating under the auspices of UNESCO. After IBI had run into serious political and financial trouble due to its director's political ambitions, including his call for a 'New International Informatics Order', UNESCO took over its less contested activities, including most development-oriented projects (Pohle 2012, 2016, p. 73ff.; see also Benchenna 2008).

The merger of these two intergovernmental programmes is interesting because it represented one of UNESCO's first steps towards finding an institutional response to what was now being called an 'information society'. In addition, it acknowledged the increasing convergence of information and communication technologies and their usage, which was becoming a major political concern for many policy-makers during this period, particularly in highly developed countries (e.g. European Commission 1997; OECD 1996). The rather unspecific term 'convergence' was thereby used to summarize all the different but intrinsically interrelated processes of change triggered by the arrival of digital technology and the increasing diffusion of the internet as a global digital infrastructure (Herzhoff 2009; see also Vowe & Henn 2015). This also included the changes in the way people thought about the governance of multidimensional policy fields such as communication, information and, even more, digital technology. Due to the technological and economic convergence of telecommunications with other media and information services, the formerly separate spheres of telecommunication regulation and regulation of mass media became increasingly connected. These regulatory convergence processes, coupled with the processes of globalization, are often described as some of the most important factors contributing to the strong neo-liberal and market-oriented policies that have been dominating the global information and media landscape since the 1990s (van Cuilenburg & McQuail 2003). Therefore, convergence cannot simply be seen as a phenomenon that derived from, and at the same time triggered, changes on the technological and economic level; it must, just as much, be considered a problem of policy and regulation. UNESCO recognized that these different dimensions of convergence had strong repercussions for the organization's activities and tried to bring them to the attention of policy-makers and practitioners through a number of publications released during the 1990s under the aspirational name 'World Reports on Communication and Information' (UNESCO 1997;



see also Courrier & Large 1997; Tawfik et al. 1999).

Despite these intellectual efforts, within UNESCO, the convergence of the two intergovernmental programmes dealing with information and ICTs turned out to be rather complicated.<sup>4</sup> This was due to the fact that PGI and IIP had very distinct identities, which—according to the PGI and IIP experts—could not simply be combined in a joint structure without one of them being lost: while PGI was concerned with the content of information and information technology, IIP was considered to regard informatics as a tool and, hence, to be concerned with the medium carrying the content. Accordingly, the professional communities represented in PGI's and IIP's intergovernmental bodies initially resisted the merger (Interview Quéau 2013). In particular, the specialists of librarianship, archives and information services, who had a longstanding relationship with PGI, feared that the dissolution of 'their' programme would cause them to lose UNESCO as their key policy forum for discussion and influence. In 2000, after a long drafting and negotiation process, UNESCO's member states eventually authorized the replacement of the two existing intergovernmental programmes (UNESCO 1999; UNESCO 2000) and the new Information For All Programme (IFAP) was officially launched on 1 January 2001.

Yet, despite the PGI and IIP members' efforts to design an entirely new intergovernmental programme, IFAP not only suffered from a vague formulation of the programme objectives, but also from a lack of consistency and clear identity — which caused one observer to remark that 'the programme has a tendency to be as vague as the phrase *information society* itself' [original emphasis] (Nilsson 1999, *no paging*). And indeed, IFAP's objectives and its main areas of activity constantly shifted between the aim of offering practical assistance—for example through training programmes and by supporting the production of local content (as formerly provided by IIP with regard to informatics)—and more conceptual or normative goals like the promotion of international reflections on ethical challenges of the information society or the development of national digitization policies (as previously done by PGI). Besides the difference in their nature, the objectives and areas of activity also differed with regard to their target beneficiaries: practical assistance

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<sup>4</sup> The handwritten minutes of meetings of PGI and IIP, reflecting the discussions and arguments of their bureaus, council and committee members, are available in the UNESCO Archives (UA: CI/INF/195). Most documents and comments submitted during IFAP's creation process were posted online and are still accessible, accessed 17 August 2020 at <https://web.archive.org/web/20001019103442/http://www.unesco.org/webworld/future/introduction.shtml>.

generally targeted the developing countries amongst UNESCO's member states, while many of IFAP's conceptual goals addressed more advanced 'information societies' and, accordingly, developed countries (de Rocca 1999; see also Gurstein & Tayler 2007, p. 22ff.). The combination of these two target groups for one intergovernmental programme led to confusion among UNESCO's member states and resulted in limited interest in the programme itself. States seemed aware that the organization had neither the resources nor the expertise to enable it to play a significant role for the implementation of practical development projects on the ground. Moreover, they were reluctant to endorse and finance a programme that had a mainly normative mandate and that aimed at finding policy solutions to societal challenges that either did not concern them—as was the case for many developing countries—or that went against their economic interests, like the very controversial support of copyright exemptions for online content (Metze-Mangold 2014).

IFAP's support for the latter derived from its objective to assist governments in developing national and supranational information policies that were supposed to provide and ensure the structural conditions for the creation, distribution and storage of information and for the accessibility of both online and offline content. Closely linked to the idea of formulating overarching information policies was the suggestion that, within the context of IFAP, UNESCO should continue to serve as a forum for international policy debates on the various subjects linked to information and to information management. Instead of leading to the adoption of policy frameworks coordinating the field of information on the national level, these international exchanges should focus on rules and regulations for the global information landscape, which was increasingly being transformed due to the internet and the newly created online content. While this could be—and was by many—considered as a renewed attempt to involve UNESCO in politicized debates about global inequalities in the field of information and communication, it can also be perceived as an attempt to meet not only the informational needs of industrialized countries but also those of the developing world—and thus to build a bridge between IFAP's two target groups.

The idea that the programme should contribute to closing the information gap and to increasing universal access to information runs like a golden thread through all exchanges in the context of IFAP's creation process. It is also this idea that eventually gave rise to the title 'Information For All'. Many actors even argued that a long-term objective of the new programme should be to establish intergovernmental agreements in favour of a human right to information (Dusoulier 1999). The idea, which was very much contested, was that developing countries would benefit not only on the informational level, but on various different levels if access to information were to be recognized as a right in itself:

With a view to the existing gap between the information rich and the information poor, which will persist in the medium-term, [the New Information Programme] has to develop and implement models which demonstrate how the information poor can be introduced to the right to access to information.... This will also enhance the development of cultural, political and social identities. (Canisius 1999)

There were, however, surprisingly few concrete proposals as to how the programme, with its limited budget and its indeterminate political influence, could contribute to bridging the digital divide. The few suggestions that were made simply proposed a closer cooperation with other actors, in particular with the private sector (e.g. Grainger 2000). This is interesting insofar as these suggestions show that the experts involved in IFAP's creation missed the strong critical perspective on the information economy that had characterized UNESCO's earlier information activities. Instead of viewing the growing involvement of commercial actors and private interests as a fundamental cause (or at least as a reinforcing element) of the global inequalities in the informational environment, the majority of experts welcomed them as a potential solution to the new challenges. Consequently, they did not question the underlying socio-economic structures that caused and exacerbated the global inequalities with regard to access and the distribution and creation of information and the spread and use of the internet. By avoiding any politicized debates about the commercialization of the informational environment, they might have missed the opportunity to design a new UNESCO programme that could have been able to tackle the most urgent challenges that the global community is confronted with in the digital age.

## **6. Conclusion**

IFAP continues to exist as UNESCO's key programme related to access to information and the development of information policies on the national level. Over the years, it only slightly adjusted its main objectives. Among other things, it added a much stronger focus on information literacy than the programme originally had planned. Activities related to this objective seek to overcome global imbalances in the informational environment through the empowerment of individual users, thereby enabling these individuals to meaningfully take part in the information society. As such, they were based on the idea that, in order to contribute to the development of all countries towards becoming information societies, it would not be enough to simply address the professional and structural conditions of information access, management and preservation as well as their regulation through national and international policies. Rather, it was also important to enhance the

individual capacities of users to make sense of the accessible information and to translate it successfully into knowledge. As a consequence, IFAP moved even further away from discussing structural and politico-economic solutions to digital inequalities. Since 2015, these questions are addressed more directly, albeit in very diplomatic terms, through UNESCO's Internet Universality initiative, which –once more– consisted in an update of the organization's position in the digital age. Building on an idea of Internet Universality and its vision of a human rights-based, open and accessible internet, nurtured by multi-stakeholder participation, UNESCO also developed an Internet Universality Indicator framework, which is currently used in several member states to conduct a national assessment of the internet environment (UNESCO 2018).

Interestingly, UNESCO's Internet Universality initiative continued down the path taken by all of the organization's information programmes, since the 1970s, that helped to avoid political struggles amongst its member states. Instead of offering a forum for seeking international solutions to global divides in the field of communication and information and alternatives to the political and economic factors contributing to them, emphasis was put on the situation within member states and on finding domestic policy solutions. Just as this shift in focus allowed UNISIST, PGI and later IFAP to divert the attention from political discussions about how the global information economy potentially increased dependencies of the Global South in the field of scientific and technical information, the current focus on national internet assessments helps to avoid discussion about today's data economy and its global repercussions. Many elements in the political debates that accompanied UNESCO's information programmes over the last decades show clear parallels to ongoing debates about data being a public good or a commodity and the potential effects of platform capitalism on digitally less advanced countries, including complaints about data imperialism or digital colonialism. But while UNESCO, as the only UN agency with a mandate for the field of information and communication, could potentially act as a mediator for these debates, its past experiences with the NWICO movement and similar struggles, make such a role too high a risk for an organization depending on funding and support by its richer member states.

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