Why Do We Need to Discuss So-called "Information Integrity"?

Nina Santos* 04-03-2024

The term "information integrity" is employed more and more, especially by [international](#) [organizations](#) developing plans to counter disinformation and advance the production and dissemination of factual information. Now, the term has also been adopted by the Brazilian government. In 2023, at least four cooperation instruments were [signed](#) between Brazil and other countries using this term. In the context of Brazil's presidency of the G20, this idea has gained even more prominence and has guided actions related to combating disinformation, hate speech, defending the regulation of digital platforms, and building a democratic or healthy digital space.

In Brazil, the use of the term appears to represent an attempt to shift the debate on the current communications ecosystem from a negative perspective of combating negative phenomena–such as disinformation, hate speech, or conspiracy theories–to a positive and purposeful strategy. In addition, the Brazilian government has argued that the term is an opportunity to overcome concepts that are politically sensitive or insufficient to deal with the problem of falsehoods spreading on social and digital media.

It should also be said that the idea of information integrity conveys two important ideas: firstly, that it is a central debate for contemporary democracies; and secondly, that the normativity of information integrity has a collective bias, according to which the concept needs to be approached.

All of this is certainly very positive, but the fact is that there is no – or very little – non-American academic literature on the idea of information integrity, which raises concern about cultural bias and makes it difficult to construct the term theoretically and politically. After all, what does the term "information integrity" mean? What is presupposed in this idea, and how does it translate into other languages? What are the parameters to evaluate whether it adapts to different contexts? And, above all, does it serve the interest of the majority of the global population? What do we really need to be aware of when we discuss the current communications scenario from a perspective that is of interest to the Global South?

Retracing the history of the term "information integrity"

The expression "information integrity" has recently gained global notoriety, especially since [Policy Brief 8](#), published by the United Nations in June 2023. In this document, "information integrity" refers to "the accuracy, consistency and reliability of information. It is threatened by disinformation, misinformation

and hate speech" (p.5). Also in this document, the idea of "information integrity" is presented as opposed to "information pollution."

Policy Brief 8, which indicates the construction of a code of conduct for information integrity on digital platforms, proposes a "commitment to information integrity." According to the UN, this implies that: "all stakeholders should refrain from using, supporting or amplifying disinformation and hate speech for any purpose, including to pursue political, military or other strategic objectives, incite violence, undermine democratic processes or target civilian populations, vulnerable groups, communities or individuals" (p.21).

Just over a year earlier, in February 2022, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published the document "[Information Integrity: Forging a Pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust](#)." The purpose of the text is precisely to try to provide a basis for the use of the term, and in it there is therefore a greater effort to conceptualize it.

To the UNDP, "he concept of information integrity is borrowed from corporate systems, where it refers to information security and data protection within enterprises. Applied more broadly, information integrity is determined by 'the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the information content, processes, and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem'. It requires citizen access to trustworthy, balanced and complete information on current affairs, government actions, political actors and other elements relevant to their political perceptions and decision-making" (p.4). The references used by the UNDP to define the term are from organizations from the Global North, including citations to a document from a private firm, [Yonder](#), that is no longer available on the internet; and [another](#) from Club de Madrid, a global organization based in Spain.

It is important to highlight that from 2021 on, there is increasing literature on information integrity mainly – and I would say almost exclusively – from US and European institutions and researchers. That is not necessarily a problem *per se*, but it does require us to acknowledge the history of the term - and what is embedded in it. Doing so will allow us to discuss its meaning for different realities, demands and priorities in Global Majority contexts.

Problems with the term as it stands

1. It is necessary to emphasize the focus on space and flow, not on the unit

The idea of "information integrity" and especially the Portuguese translation "integridade da informação" can give the impression that the focus is on the unit of information, which needs to be intact. In other words, there would be a sender, a producer of the information, who would publish an information unit that should be protected, kept in its entirety until it is received. This idea is at odds with the communication scenario we have today.

Firstly, being able to assess the integrity of information presupposes the ability to define who produces information with integrity, and how they do so. Let's take a simple example: a government launches a vaccination campaign to combat COVID-19. This vaccination process is backed by international organizations, peer-reviewed research and a series of validation mechanisms. There are, however, disinformation campaigns that misrepresent the use of the vaccine and end up damaging vaccination coverage. Government information protection mechanisms would be needed to keep it intact and ensure that it reaches the recipient in a consistent and reliable manner. In this case, the idea of information integrity is justified by the public interest, especially with regard to the legitimacy of government mechanisms to deal with public health matters – an action that represents a small part of the fight against disinformation.

However, let's consider another example. A government decides to ban a public demonstration in a certain context, based on an interpretation that it would create risks to democratic stability. A social movement, on the other hand, defends the right to demonstrate and understands that, in reality, this is an attempt by the government to limit criticism of the system. The situation is fictitious, but we have seen experiences like this in various parts of the world, as in France regarding recent attempts to protest in support of Palestinians. In this case, in what sense is the integrity of information preserved? It's impossible to answer this question simply because the problem is not within the information itself or its integrity, but with understanding the entire social system that surrounds this process and that needs to be understood and interpreted beyond the information unit. In other words, the integrity of information cannot be considered outside the political and social context in which it takes shape.

In addition, the idea of information integrity could imply that the problem lies mainly in providing citizens with information considered trustworthy, complete, and reliable. In other words, by protecting the integrity of information, citizens would be able to fully exercise their citizenship. However, we need to consider that reception of information can be problematic – as it often is – and this is also a crucial communication problem.

Let's go back to the example of vaccines: let's suppose that the full information from a government reaches the citizen. Even so, they often decide not to get vaccinated. This is not because the complete information hasn't reached them, but because it doesn't make sense within the worldview they have adopted. This worldview formation is the result of various factors and communication flows, which can include conspiracy theories, disinformation operations and extreme political positions. These are communication processes, but it is not just the integrity of the information that will be able to contain them.

A third point that needs to be discussed stems from the fact that it is necessary to consider that a large part of the problems in the current communication

scenario lie in the flows. The digital paths that information takes to reach citizens (especially those through digital platforms) have intermediaries that did not exist in the traditional model of communication between sender and receiver. Therefore, there are a series of problems that do not lie in the information itself, but in the environment through which it circulates, which directly impacts its social effects. To draw a parallel, when we talk about election integrity, we are talking about "electoral integrity" and not "voting integrity." We think of the system, the social functioning of a sum of mechanisms, and not the unity of the voter's decision.

This focus on unity and the role of a strong, centralized transmitter is not for nothing. It comes from the context behind the use of the term, which is a context of struggle against external interference and protection of a hegemonic system of information dissemination.

2. Lack of consensus on the Portuguese translation

The term "information integrity" was coined in English and there is no single way of translating it to Portuguese. The Portuguese version of Policy Brief 8 and the international agreements signed by the Brazilian government talk about "integridade da informação," but there are also mentions of "integridade informacional," for example, which is not exactly the same thing. A less widespread idea is that of "integridade do ambiente/espaço/ecossistema comunicacional" (integrity of the communication environment/space/ecosystem). The basic problem is that, once again, we are importing an external concept without much discussion. This makes it difficult to choose a translation – and therefore a social meaning – since there is no accumulation of what it actually means.

3. Successive imports of global north concepts and a war that doesn't deal with our problems

Much of the discussion about the new communication scenario has been based on foreign terms that simply don't have a precise translation into Portuguese. This was the case with fake news, which, as several authors have pointed out, is not the same thing as "notícias falsas." It was also the case with the difference between "misinformation" and "disinformation," which is impossible to translate precisely in Portuguese, resulting in many putting both phenomena in the same bucket of "desinformação."

Now we are once again adopting a foreign term – and imagery – simply by trying to find a linguistic translation, without thinking about its real meaning. The references to the term used so far show that it is clearly related to attempts to protect the US communications environment from external threats, especially from non-Western countries. It's an idea that implies a geopolitical positioning that doesn't deal with our problems. It's true that external threats to the Brazilian – and the Global South – communications environment are real

and need to be studied and fought, but that doesn't seem to me to be the heart of the problem with the communications environment we have today.

I remember a story told by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva about his first trip to the G8 meeting in 2003. He says that he was approached by the then US president, George W. Bush, who asked him how Brazil would get involved in the Iraq war. Lula then [replied](#): "President Bush, Iraq is not Brazil's problem. I have another war to fight in my country, which is to combat the misery and hunger of the 50 million Brazilians who live the poverty line." In 2003, Lula stressed that he would use his international prominence to focus on the fight against hunger – and not the war in Iraq, as hegemonic actors would like. In 2024, a time of new international prominence for Brazil in which debates on information are at the center of the agenda, what is Brazil's proposal? Considering the reality in Brazil, Latin America, the BRICS, and the Global South, what is really relevant to us in the debate on a digital communication environment?

The opportunity to build an information agenda from the South

Today, Brazil occupies a central position in the discussion of digital transformation. As in 2014, when Brazil passed the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (Marco Civil da Internet), the country has a new opportunity to bring the concerns of the Global South to the forefront of discussions on how to build digital standards for our contemporary societies. This is largely due to the arduous efforts of different sectors of the government, civil society, and academia who, in a very perceptive and articulate way, saw this issue as a priority. This achievement is not trivial and needs to be celebrated.

To take advantage of this opportunity, we urgently need to develop our own interpretation of the problem. It's not about parochialism, about building something Brazilian for Brazil; on the contrary, it's about using the possibility of playing a leading role in international structures to question the established order and show that something produced from the South can deal with global problems.

I understand that the term "information integrity" tries to create a framework to build an imaginary of the digital space we want, which I think is more than necessary. Well, what do we want a healthy, fair and democratic communication space to mean? What should be the parameters to access it?

When we talk about communication and information in Brazil and in countries of the Global South, we are often talking about realities that are largely dominated by commercial, hegemonic, and extremely concentrated news organizations; we are talking about many countries in which communication via messaging apps is absolutely central; we are dealing with young and often unstable democracies; we are referring to societies with abysmal levels of social inequality, which impacts the way people consume information; we are talking about countries where not only does hate speech circulate, but it serves to

reinforce historical oppression, such as racism; we are dealing with countries heavily impacted by socio-environmental problems; and, with all necessary emphasis, we are talking about countries that are physically and imaginatively far from the headquarters of Big Tech companies, which treat these countries and their citizens as less important.

We need to dispute the idea of "information integrity" and bring these elements, which are central to the majority of the world's population, to the center of the debate. Our challenge is to combine the strength of civil society, governments and its intellectuals to bring to the world an innovative, creative and proactive vision of what we want from a democratic communication space.

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