

# Facts, Truth, and Post-Truth: Access to Cognitively and Socially Just Information

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## Abstract

This article addresses facts, truth, post-truth, and the impact on access to cognitively and socially just information. It is predominantly situated within the post-truth context where information is manipulated to such an extent that it becomes disinformation, disguised as truth.

The article consists of four main sections: the first section will provide an introduction and overview of key concepts intrinsic to understanding the concerns at hand. The next section is a case study of the role the PR firm, Bell Pottinger, played in South Africa and Iraq and the cognitive and social injustices visible in the corresponding events. The selection of these countries provides an opportunity to demonstrate the effect of post-truth and whistleblowing in relation to the challenges experienced in the Global South. The third section, on Cambridge Analytica and Digitality, is a discussion of the infamous Cambridge Analytica and its interferences in political campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago and the U.S.

These discussions lead to the final section as an antidote to post-truth influences, which reflects on the way forward. This section makes recommendations for South African and international initiatives based on UNESCO's intergovernmental programme known as the Information for All Programme (IFAP).

**Keywords:** cognitive justice; disinformation; fake news; post-truth era/politics; social justice

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## Introduction

This article will focus on the role of information in the fairness with which economic, political, and social benefits and burdens are distributed in society. It is predominantly situated within a post-truth context where information is manipulated to such an extent that it becomes disinformation, or a kind of 'fake news', disguised as truth. This has particularly been seen in the South African political discourse over the past few years where political ideology, mainstream media, and social discourse do not always appear to be aligned to benefit society, but rather adheres to the interests of a select group of individuals abusing positions of power who manipulate the narrative of the society to further self-interest. Considering this, this article will predominantly focus on two case studies: the actions of Bell Pottinger in South Africa and the global impact of Cambridge Analytica's actions in promoting disinformation. Both case studies were made public through the actions of whistle-blowers. Whistleblowing is proposed as one antidote to the challenges exposed in the case studies, where involved parties expose the truth amongst the manipulation of media and facts. Margaret Mead said one should "never doubt

that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has". (Mead, n.d.). Whistleblowers are essentially those individuals, who expose potentially corrupt behaviour, which could result in them risking retaliation by, or exclusion from, the organisation. Going forward, the discussion will therefore address the importance of access to transparent and quality information, the impact of post-truth era disinformation and the role of whistle-blowers in combatting the effects thereof. Furthermore, a matrix is provided of UNESCO's Information For All Programme (IFAP) as a means to address the economic, political and social challenges brought about by the spread of disinformation.

### Background

In order to understand the informational ethical concerns surrounding the post-truth era, key concepts intrinsic to understanding the concerns at hand need to be discussed. Concepts to be covered include disinformation and post-truth. Disinformation is false information spread with harmful intent towards a person, social group, or country (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Post-truth is a term to describe a situation where facts are ignored and considered less important than personal beliefs and where emotional appeals are used to influence public opinion, resulting in us living in a post-truth era, which is "an era in which audiences are more likely to believe information that appeals to emotions or existing personal beliefs, as opposed to seeking and readily accepting information regarded as factual or objective" (Cooke, 2017, p. 212).

Together with the notions of disinformation and post-truth, the main themes of this article are cognitive and social justice. Cognitive justice is not just tolerance towards alterity, also understood as difference, in knowledge representation, but also active endeavours towards inter- and intracultural dialogues and recognition of diversity. It is realised through "open and flexible designs that do justice to different ways of knowing and being" (van der Velden, 2009, p. 38). Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues in similar lines; that the empowerment of the Global South can be achieved once we recognise a plurality of knowledges and situate our "epistemological perspective" within the Global South, contra Western/Eurocentric ways of doing and being (de Sousa Santos, 2007, p. 66).

The notion of the 'South' is employed to question the dominance of the "Eurocentric foundation of [...] knowledge production and circulation" which could potentially marginalise or delegitimise Indigenous knowledge from the geopolitical 'Southern' or 'Third world' (Zembylas, 2017, p. 399). Consider, for example, the increased deference in discourse that is accorded to individualised value systems or clinical medical science that is valued by the 'North' or 'First world', as opposed to communal values or more traditional naturopathic medicine often valued in the 'South'.

Social justice, as an equally important concept, is the fair and equitable access to and use of information. It also recognises one's right to quality information and one's ability to contribute to the knowledge society (Britz, 2006). In terms of intercultural exchanges, one cannot assume that value systems are the same globally. Though there may be similarities, there certainly are marked differences too. This notion is supported by Capurro and Britz when they write "In Search of a Code of Global Information Ethics: The Road Travelled and New Horizons", that the values and principles contained with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) may be interpreted differently by various cultural frameworks (2010). They continue that there may indeed be common terms and common grounds for sharing these values and principles, but that issues such as "solidarity, social justice or indigenous knowledge" are of more importance in "some regions of the world" compared to others (Capurro & Britz, 2010, p. 33).

Therefore, a cognitively and socially just society is one that allows for diverse discourse resulting from equitable access to information and a broader understanding outside of an individual's personal belief system. Staying only within one's personal belief system will make one vulnerable to being misled in a post-truth era. We would therefore go one step further, and suggest that for cognitive justice to be realised, even though different forms of knowledge ought to be considered valid and deserving of representation, it must be created, distributed, and consumed responsibly. Together with this cognizance of cultural situatedness, which in turn influences the research approach, will promote awareness of a difference in representation. For instance, replication, verification, falsifiability, and so on, are considered to be intrinsic to a (Western) research method, ensuring value-free results (Coleman & Dionisio, 2009). But what if one were to place political values and morals at the centre of the research project, avoid structured theoretical frameworks, implement multi-method research approaches, and include a plurality of or rival and alternative knowledges (Coleman & Dionisio, 2009). A balance must be struck between the safe and responsible use of information and potential epistemicide, where the validity of cultural knowledge and dialogue is being undermined in the search of a unified theory (Zembylas, 2017). The death of knowledge through the manipulation of information, ultimately prevents citizens from enjoying the rights outlined in the definition of social justice. In this instance it becomes clear why this is a concern related to access to information. If the public are given access to fake information or news, or their access is manipulated, the cultural discourse of a society will be fundamentally changed. This is an act of cognitive and social injustice.

In South Africa, the case study involving Bell Pottinger and the role they played in State Capture, has stood out as a particular reference to media manipulation as part of post-truth political discourse and the social injustices visible in the corresponding events. Media manipulation is a manifestation of coerciveness by means of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media, employed by media, politicians, and people in positions of power, to influence one's awareness of the self and the world (Siwak, 2018). Due to our various digital activities and 'presences', one becomes more susceptible to online or digital influences. This is particularly the case when one's digital activities are used by organisations to create a digital profile or identity. As seen in cases such as Cambridge Analytica, which is discussed later in the article, these profiles are used to 'push' tailored information that echoes one's personal belief system, thereby making one vulnerable to post-truth disinformation. Therefore, we are not only having real life embodiment, experiences, and influences, but also digital embodiment, experiences, and influences, known as 'digitality'. This digitality is therefore the expression of oneself in the digital space, together with the creation of related values and relationships which are only made manifest online. Siwak refers to the coercive effects of this digitality on "personal relations and desires" (Siwak, 2018) in the offline, non-digital world. A similar coerciveness can be observed in the South African instance of State Capture, brought to light by the #Guptaleaks.

### State Capture and the Gupta Leaks

The concept of State Capture was first identified by Hellman, et. al (2000) during a 1999 survey on behalf of the World Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. They defined it as "the efforts of firms to shape the underlying rules of the game (i.e. legislation, laws, rules and decrees) through private payments to public officials" (Hellman, et.al, 2000, Summary findings). In South Africa, this term is used to describe the tactics of a complex web of key individuals or 'oligarchs' to take advantage of government tenders, a culture of corruption, and the weakening of legislation and law enforcement agencies to maintain dominance of a market. In South Africa, these tactics were predominantly effectuated by the Gupta family

through their relationship with former South African President Jacob Zuma, as well as a network of informally constituted elites amongst the public and private sector (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017). This network worked over many years to manipulate the appointments of specific individuals into power positions in government departments and state owned companies to assist in advancing business interests of the Gupta family and their associates. This was done by redirecting high value contracts and tenders to enrich individuals and organisations in the network. The network also acted to ensure that accountability mechanisms, which prevent illegal and unethical associated practices, were not in place, thereby effectively crippling safeguards which ought to have ensured corporate governance.

The Gupta family received some media attention before 2013, mainly due to their apparent relationship with former President Jacob Zuma. However, in mid-2013, a spotlight was shone on the family and their political and societal influence. They landed a private plane, carrying guests for a family wedding in Sun City, at a military airbase in the capital city of Pretoria. It is against the law for private citizens to make use of a military airbase for personal reasons. This seemed to be a turning point for the family, with the media and civil society scrutinising what appeared to be more than just a casual relationship with the President.

In mid-2017, two whistle-blowers, with the assistance of investigative journalists, released a cache of emails known now as the *#Guptaleaks*. The emails appeared to have come from a computer or server inside Sahara Computers (Pty) Ltd, a Gupta-owned company. Amongst a number of revelations of corruption and political influence, the emails also revealed that around 2016, the Gupta family, through their company Oakbay Capital (Pty) Ltd, hired public relations (PR) company Bell Pottinger based in the United Kingdom (UK) to start a campaign using fake news, disinformation, and other propaganda (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017; Segal, 2018). This campaign saw the development of the White Monopoly Capital narrative, placing blame on economic apartheid for the social inequalities in South Africa and twisting the meaning of Radical Economic Transformation, all with the purpose of distracting the public away from the activities related to the state capture related corruption (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017).

The campaign developed by Bell Pottinger was part of a multi-pronged approach by the Gupta family to redirect public discourse away from their actions, using social media, fake websites, and their own media houses: *The New Age*, a printed newspaper, and ANN7, a national television news channel (Finlay, 2017). Armed with thousands of Twitter “Guptabots” and other fake social media sites, they began a campaign now known as race-baiting, specifically aimed at further inciting racial tensions in South Africa. The South African social media environment became contaminated with disinformation influencing public and cultural discourse in South Africa. External campaigns also managed by Bell Pottinger, and paid for by the Guptas, included Black First Land First (BLF), a revolutionary socialist political movement that drove the same rhetoric and confronted, both online and physically, any journalists that spoke out against the Guptas or their business partners. An example of such an attack is when Peter Bruce, former *Business Day* and *Financial Mail* editor, was attacked outside of his home by members of the BLF, telling him to “go back to Europe” and wanting to occupy his home. He had written a number of opinion pieces about the Gupta family (Goba, 2017). Karima Brown, a seasoned investigative journalist, was also assaulted by BLF supporters at the demonstration outside the home of Peter Bruce (Magwedze & Kubheka, 2017). In a country with such a young democracy, still struggling with economic imbalances, press freedom, and cognitive and social justice issues, this campaign had far reaching effects on South Africa’s progress.

The Bell Pottinger story has demonstrated how an organisation, regulated in their own country, can cause havoc and a breakdown in cognitive and social justice in another country (with little to no personal or professional consequence), if it had not been for the whistle-blowers that released the #Guptaleaks. Bell Pottinger are by no means the only strategists employing disinformation and fake news to fulfil a questionable contract. According to Chutel et al (2017),

Major public relations agencies have historically not shied away from controversial contracts, especially given the lucrative retainers they offer. It would be unfair, however, to paint PR companies as the villains of the information age. In both the US and the UK, where the industry leaders are headquartered, the PR community has a clear set of ethical guidelines against which to measure the actions of agencies, as the Public Relations and Communications Association did when it expelled Bell Pottinger. (2017)

However, Bell Pottinger, working in another country, seemed to have forgotten and contravened these ethical guidelines, as well as general universal values of ethical behaviour.

As a result, the Public Relations and Communication Association (PRCA) acted against Bell Pottinger, which subsequently went under administration. This is an example of an otherwise global phenomenon where those with a modernist transactional approach, superimpose their interests above those with a post-modern interactional approach, resulting in cognitive and social injustice (Verwey & Muir, 2019). What this means is that dialogical and interactional communication, which are representative of communal values and collective experiences, are undermined. Instead, preference is given to individualist values which seek to serve the interests of the individual, or in this instance, the client. According to Verwey and Muir (2019), “the moral and business failure of Bell Pottinger cannot simply be understood as a failure to adhere to industry codes of conduct, or as simple greed, criminality of complicity in the state capture project” (p. 98). It should be understood at a much deeper level as a failure of moral philosophy that resulted from a lack of respect for communal values and the societal context in which Bell Pottinger plied its ‘dark arts’. The actions of Bell Pottinger were not just a matter of “clever” public relations, but a method of sowing dissent and division amongst the members of a young and polarised democracy. What is needed to rectify this conflict between communal and individual worldviews or value systems, is an ethics of inter-subjectivity. It is argued that by establishing “otherness, difference and marginality” as valid modes of approach to experience, inter-subjectivity opens the way for acceptance of plurality and difference, essentially the core argument of cognitive justice (Verwey & Muir, 2019).

It should be noted that this is not the first instance of this interference in political and societal discourse by Bell Pottinger. Another example was seen between 2006 and 2011, when Bell Pottinger carried out work for the US Pentagon and Department of Defence for “top secret influence operations during the Iraq war” (Purkiss & Fielding-Smith, 2018), valued at over half a billion dollars. According to Martin Wells, a former employee of Bell Pottinger, who spoke out about this contract, these operations included the creation of “short TV segments made in the style of Arabic news networks and fake insurgent videos which could be used to track the people who watched them” (Black & Fielding-Smith, 2016) on behalf of the U.S. military. This resonates with David Joselit when he argues that “anything can now be called fake news, as long as the accuser [or creator] possesses the power (i.e., the platform) to publicise his or her claims” (Joselit, 2017, p. 15). In essence, information inherently is always a power-laden construct, for it can be politicised and ab/used by those with the means and authority to do so.

## Interpreting Cambridge Analytica through Digitality

The role of agency, especially individual agency, is an aspect that becomes questioned by two Cambridge Analytica scandals. This is illustrated by the revelations of whistle-blower, Brittany Kaiser, in the documentary “The Great Hack”, which discussed Cambridge Analytica’s involvement not just in the Brexit election, but also in the 2013 Trinidad and Tobago election (Bradshaw, 2019; Seadle, 2019). In a recording of Cambridge Analytica CEO Alexander Nix, he stated that during another campaign contract in Trinidad and Tobago, working for majority-Indian United National Congress (UNC) party, they found the youth in both the Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities were feeling disenfranchised. With the population split between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians being almost equal, Cambridge Analytica representatives knew they needed to appeal to culture to help swing the vote.

They decided to run a non-political campaign targeting the youth to generate a culture of apathy amongst the youth when it came to voting. In the recording, Nix states: “We came up with this campaign which was all about ‘Be part of the gang, do something cool, be part of a movement.’ And it was called the ‘Do So’ campaign [...] Do So. Don’t vote. Don’t be involved in politics. It is like a sign of resistance against - not government, against politics. And voting” (Hilder, 2019). Nix further justifies the value of the campaign stating:

‘the reason why this was such a good strategy is because we knew, and we really really knew, that when it came to voting, all the Afro-Caribbean kids wouldn’t vote, because they ‘Do So’. But all the Indian kids would do what their parents told them to do, which is go out and vote. And so all the Indians went out and voted, and the difference on the 18-35-year-old turnout is like 40%, and that swung the election by about 6% - which is all we needed!’ (Hilder, 2019)

This relates to Joselit’s argument that we are caught in “a cacophony of irreconcilable truths”, where it appears we have lost the ability to distinguish between blatantly false or true information. Those that have the means and the authority, have the power to present the most spectacular—and hence most ‘true’—information (Joselit, 2017), leading to cognitive conflict. Post-truth is a term to describe a situation where facts are ignored and considered less important than personal beliefs and where emotional appeals are used to influence public opinion, resulting in us living in a post-truth era. Cambridge Analytica, knowingly, adopted a post-truth strategy in their campaign, using culture, emotional appeals, and personal beliefs to influence the opinion on a specific portion of the population.

Another whistle-blower was Christopher Wylie, who exposed the organisation in 2018, implicating how personal information collected from Facebook users allowed Cambridge Analytica to create tailored political campaigns targeted at those same users, that echoed their personal belief systems. This was not only done in the U.S., but also in more than 30 other countries (Ghoshal, 2018). Insofar as the Facebook users ‘agreed’ to the terms and conditions of the applications they used, one must consider to what extent were they aware of the consequences. And specifically, if they were aware, why did they still agree to the application accessing their personal, and their friends’ personal information, available on Facebook? Is human agency exchanged for benefits mediated by information technology?

In his article “Digital Communication and Agency: Unseen Infrastructures that Influence our Communicative Capacities Online”, Jakub Siwak (2018) utilises Gilles Deleuze’s notion of ‘digital

societies of control' to problematise how our agency, as information users and providers, is potentially negated by digital communication. Siwak questions how much agency we have as individuals to formulate and express our political ideas and partake in democratic processes. Much of this supposed agency could be manipulated by unseen forces. This article does not consider Michel Foucault's surveillance, dossiers, and panopticism as found in his writing on disciplinary societies (Foucault & Sheridan, 1991), but Foucault's stance is a useful foundation for appreciating Deleuze's concept of control societies. Disciplinary societies are predicated on the concept that society can be disciplined, observed, and kept docile—in short, be regulated. Conversely, control societies expand on disciplinary societies by means of technological advancements which "extend their reach through interconnected, flexible and networked architectures" (Siwak, 2018), ensuring digital surveillance and entrenching capitalism.

Due to the ever-changing, expanding, and advancing nature of technologies, everything in control societies becomes transformable, but also observable. Siwak, vis-à-vis Deleuze, argues that this is the precise function which the state and capitalism seek to achieve: one is constantly engaged with the features of digital, information and communication technologies ingrained in societal, political, and economic organisation, impacting one's ability to operate autonomously. This is exacerbated by the datafication of individual identifiers, such as one's age, gender, income, and so on, which in turn lead to targeted, personalised advertising based on predictive models of purchasing behaviour. One can then also see this manifested in the targeted interferences of Cambridge Analytica; the ability to sway voter preferences by data collected from individuals' Facebook pages. This is the "progressive loss of agency" which dissolves autonomy, critical thinking, and individuality (Siwak, 2018). One is continually connected, being updated, receiving, and contributing information. He argues this is reason for Facebook's popularity, and other social media platforms, for users are willing to disclose this information in turn for perceived benefits.

Interpreting Deleuze, Alexander Galloway (2004) argues that these control societies are based on "hyper-speed, digital simulation and replication [and] leave virtually no space for adversarial reflection, creativity [and] modes of experience different to ubiquitous dividuality" (p. 22). Accordingly, in the control societies it becomes difficult to distinguish between the 'individual' and the 'mass', leading to the deindividualized 'dividual' and 'samples'. It becomes a dangerous issue when the state, or government, no longer sees its citizens as participants in free society, but rather 'things' to be controlled and manipulated.

Once again referring to the media manipulation as a manifestation of coerciveness, the coercive effects of this digitality become clearer. It is coercive for it can sway one's opinion, and if one does not partake in these platforms, you may become an 'unknown variable' which is much harder to control, leading to 'peer pressure' in participating online (Joselit, 2017). Much more than this, the online peer pressure may result in active peer pressure to partake in real-life political activities such as voting, demonstrations, protests, for example, as seen in BLF and the Trinidad and Tobago voting campaign. This is supported by the research conducted by Jost et al. on how social media facilitates political protest. They argue that social media is an efficient medium for the quick communication of information about events and political developments, "facilitating the organization of protest activity" (Jost et al., 2018, p. 86). They do however underscore that while it may assist citizens in collective action towards public engagement, social media is also an instrument for authorities to detect, monitor, and suppress such activity. In consideration of Cambridge Analytica, it is interesting to consider then how organisations, together with government, may be more concerned with finding ways of influencing and

controlling citizens, than to provide platforms for civic participation, deliberation, and free speech.

The discussions of Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica are relevant for two reasons: 1) it is indicative of how corporations and political entities alike can manipulate societies, influencing decisions such as whom to vote for and to encourage civic protests based on alternative facts or disinformation; and 2) it is a manifestation of hegemony and cognitive injustice for it effectively commits epistemicide by subjugating ‘true knowledge’ with ‘popular knowledge’ (De Sousa Santos, 2007; Joselit, 2017; Zembylas, 2017). Whereas hegemony is the “dominance of one system over another” and epistemicide the “murder of knowledge”, cognitive injustice becomes attained by alternative facts when it is politically, culturally, socially, ideologically, and technologically legitimised to serve the interests of the few (Fischer & Klazar, 2019). One might argue that alternative facts is another perspective of perceived facts, which allows for a plurality of knowledge representation, but certainly it should not be at the expense of society. This harkens back to the ethics of inter-subjectivity, which positions the needs of others, and the community, over and above the privileging of the few or the individual (Verwey & Muir, 2019).

In terms of the fight against post-truth globally, as seen in the above discussions, two instances of cultural hegemony impacting public discourse are at play. Fundamentally at the root of this is access (or the lack thereof) to quality information. The authors review the fact that the examples are not unique, and they postulate the possibility that this is a manifestation of a global phenomenon where information, as a commodity and a tool, is manipulated by those in power. Therefore, the misuse of authority becomes an issue of ethics—as the analysis of good and bad conduct—and a social injustice. It becomes a social injustice when members of society are excluded from fair, open, and transparent discourse. Both instances—Bell Pottinger in South Africa and Cambridge Analytica globally—were brought to light through whistle-blower disclosure. They effectively opened access to information and allowed for more transparent discourse to force those in power to account for their actions. Since social justice promotes equitable access to benefits and opportunities to all, and particularly among the least advantaged members of society, the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and access to information have never been so critical.

### **An Antidote to Post-Truth Influences**

The question then is, what happens when information is not created, distributed, and consumed responsibly as a result of political manipulation? Cognitive and social injustices are then used as a mechanism by the ideological state apparatus to influence the thinking and decision-making of its citizens. Post-truth seeks to directly promote its own (post-)truth. This is manipulative and unjust. Lies, propaganda, and manipulation of facts is by no means new. However, due to the ubiquitous nature of ICTs and the broader channels of distribution used by the media, the distribution of manipulated information results in new challenges.

The ability to generate post-truth information, that is pushed directly into our homes and personal space and echoing personal biases through social media, makes it so much more powerful. The use of ‘bots’ and artificial intelligence (AI) means that the scale at which post-truth information is produced far exceeds any Soviet Union or U.S. war propaganda poster. The scale of fake news and post-truths has a direct impact on cognitive and social justice, influencing economic, political, and social freedoms at all levels.

These concerns lead the way forward, towards making recommendations for South African and international initiatives that will equip society to better deal with occurrences of post-truth. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has an intergovernmental programme known as Information For All Programme (IFAP). Its six objectives include: information for development, information literacy, information accessibility, information preservation, information ethics, and multilingualism in cyberspace (UNESCO, 2017). IFAP seeks to ensure equitable access to and use of ICTs. However, in consideration of its various parts, it could function as a normative tool to guide efforts in education and policymaking. Though many would agree the prevalence of disinformation are disconcerting, there tends to be a lack in accessible normative tools that equips one to differentiate between these types of information. It is precisely the aims of the UNESCO IFAP and the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy programmes to furnish one with the requisite skills to access, search, critically assess, use, and contribute content wisely, both online and offline (UNESCO, 2016).

The following matrix is provided to 1) give an overview of the IFAP objectives, 2) postulate questions applicable to the specific concerns related to the case studies, and 3) recommend activities which could be hosted in countries to combat fake news and disinformation practices, thereby empowering citizens to become more active participants in their democracies and the knowledge society.

Table 1: IFAP Matrix towards educating and empowering citizens<sup>1</sup>

IFAP Objective	Guiding Questions	Recommended Actions
<p><b>IFAP Objective 1: Information for Development:</b> Information is key to development, transparency, good governance, and a central requirement to addressing information poverty.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the manipulation of information influence developmental requirements of a country?</li> <li>• Does the manipulation of information directly, or indirectly, impact the development of social, economic, and political practices within a country?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to the development of skills that help citizens identify quality information;</li> <li>• supporting civil society, the private sector, and government to develop guidelines for best practices;</li> <li>• expanding the reach of oversight bodies, such as Public Relations Institute of South Africa, and collaboration with the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC);</li> <li>• promoting freedom of information and access to public information as key to the role of information in development and good governance.</li> </ul>

**IFAP Objective 2:****Information Literacy:**

Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use, and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational, and educational goals.

- How does being information illiterate disempower citizens to effectively distinguish between accurate, mis- and disinformation?
- What is the responsibility of government towards promoting literacy levels of citizens?
- Supporting the development of human capabilities (capacity-building) in accessing, discerning, critiquing, using, and creating information (information literacy) and participation in an online environment (digital literacy);
- promoting the inclusion of the new literacies into national education curricula.

**IFAP Objective 3:****Information Preservation:**

The pace of ICT development challenges the safeguarding of documents and the ability to stay abreast of updates and technological developments. This also presents challenges to the preservation of Indigenous and traditional forms of knowledge.

- How does fake news impact the preservation of information, as a representation of actual or fake events, within a particular milieu?
- If the cultural and public discourses are manipulated, to what extent does it affect the perception of traditional and Indigenous knowledge?
- Promoting the preservation of cultural and Indigenous heritage;
- supporting the development of preservation standards and management tools;
- collaborating with international and local NGOs to increase awareness of the importance of information preservation.

**IFAP Objective 4:****Information Ethics (IE):**

Concerns all ethical considerations resulting from the information lifecycle. Also extends to notions of freedom of expression and freedom of access to information, social justice, and social responsibility.

- How can government, media, and people in positions of power, enact their social responsibility towards developing an information ethical society which promotes freedom of access to quality information?
- How can information ethics education prevent cognitive and social injustice in the future?
- Promoting freedom of access to information and development and promotion of governmental public domain information;
- integrating IE into the mainstream discussions on ethics and integration into educational curricula;
- collaborating with other IE centres and initiatives to provide training on IE and e-government.

**IFAP Objective 5:****Information Accessibility:**

Citizens should have access to crucial information that impacts their livelihoods and should not be precluded from accessing information that should be in the public domain. Access to quality and accurate information should be ensured at all times.

- What role does government and media play towards empowering citizens to freely and equitably access quality and accurate information?
- Does the post-truth era imply that we are in an era of censorship, under the guise of freedom of access to information? And if so, why?
- Working with governments at both the country level and in international forums to advocate for an open platform Internet which is accessible to all;
- supporting the development of “open” information processing tools, interoperability standards, metadata, content ordering, interfaces to digital collections, search, and preservation tools.

**IFAP Objective 6:**

**Multilingualism:** Language is a primary means for communicating information and knowledge. Citizens should be able to access and communicate information in a language they understand.

- Do governments have an obligation towards providing education in all official languages, to ensure citizens are better equipped to read, understand, and distinguish information presented to them via public and other media platforms?
- How does the manipulation of language representation exacerbate the distribution of fake news?
- Promoting a better understanding of open and multilingual access to information through thematic debates and regional campaigns;
- collaboration with international initiatives on multilingualism in the cyberspace;
- supporting the creation of linguistically and culturally diverse content in cyberspace and offering possibilities for the preservation of endangered languages.

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## Conclusion

The case studies on Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica are instances of developing issues related to all six IFAP priority areas. The manipulation or restriction of access to information is fundamentally unethical, and, if actively practiced and endorsed, becomes a cognitive and social injustice. Unfortunately, this practice is seen all too often in situations where Western institutions seek to subjugate their Global South counterparts, albeit argued for liberal or democratic purposes, as seen in the case studies of this article.

Notwithstanding the various codes of ethics and conduct, which ought to guide behaviour, manipulation of information, for the benefit of the few, still occurs. One should then argue that

for the needs of the many, and to ensure cognitive and social justice, information should be created, distributed, and consumed responsibly. This should be done in order to achieve developmental goals, universal literacy, and free and equitable access to information. This information should then be preserved for the good of the community, presented in a language they can understand, unchanged by hegemonic forces, and observing ethical considerations throughout the information lifecycle.

Hence in the spirit of promoting social and cognitive justice, including its inherent construct of fair distribution of both benefits and burdens, voices in the Global South become critical in achieving a more holistic understanding of the role of diversity, inclusion, and information access. If one is to manage information responsibly, one needs to raise the standards of society through education, communication, and empowerment, as aligned with the six objectives of IFAP.

When political leaders and people in positions of power behave irresponsibly and leverage communication technologies to manipulate facts to an 'alternative truth' that suits their rhetoric, it can have far reaching consequences, as seen in the case studies. The post-truth era concern is therefore not just what media, political leaders, and people in positions of power are saying but is further compounded by how pervasive ICTs are in micro- and macro-environments. Due to this, the role of whistle-blowers and active citizens as antidotes to this growing epidemic of fake news and disinformation distribution cannot be over-emphasised. As is stated by George Orwell, "in times of universal deceit, telling the truth will be a revolutionary act" (Orwell, 1948).

### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> The recommended activities are extracted and adapted from UNESCO's Information For All Programme Strategic Planning (UNESCO, 2017)

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