Pre-Meeting of IFAP Virtual Latin America and Caribbean Conference

"Gaps, Debts, and positive surprises: what the pandemic has unveiled about our Knowledge Societies"

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*"Recalculating: Issues to investigate"*

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Good morning, good afternoon, good evening wherever in the world you are.

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused attention on the new operating system of society and its relation to rights and freedoms as well as the new ways in which those rights can and are being protected, expressed, undermined and exploited. For convenience, I will deal with the issues under 3 themes: "Digital Access and Literacy", "Law and Legal Frameworks" and third, "Health, Safety and Wellness".

## Digital Access

Using Jamaica's educational sector as an illustration, the country has responded to Covid-19 through multiple pedagogical solutions, including digital platforms. However, only 60 percent of households

have broadband access. Mobile penetration is very high at 111% of the total population but phones are not the most desirable devices for online learning. The situation is similar throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, where UNICEF reports that school closures have left about 95% of children without an education and many of them have no way of going online to learn.

Many teachers are also without access to the internet or digital devices and there is a critical gap in the training of students and teachers for teaching and learning in a virtual space.

Our discussions should therefore include the pace, scope and prospect for the universal use of digital teaching and learning solutions, as a rule and not as an exception. This is not just about access to devices or the quality of infrastructure but also the extent to which there is policy attention to content which takes account of linguistic diversity and different levels of literacy.

There is also the concern that we are battling a pandemic and an info-demic at the same time, compounded by a humongous crisis in journalism. Before Covid-19 hit, the traditional media industry was already in structural decline. Since Covid-19 several of them have had to lay-off staff and curtail operations due to a substantial reduction in advertising revenue ranging from 35% to upwards of 75% in the Jamaican media market. All media markets are being affected by this crisis, but there are projections that Latin America will suffer the most. The de-materialization of traditional media will also be accelerated through automation and use of artificial intelligence.

It is therefore important that we gather and analyse data about the quality and viability of local media, the impact of disinformation content; who is most vulnerable, to what extent they are being impacted.

## Law: and  Legal Framework for Communication

The response to these issues must also include a legal and regulatory framework which focuses on all vectors of information - across platforms, across devices, and across physical borders and jurisdictions. However, there are three key challenges which must be considered and tackled.

First, the pace of technological development now far exceeds the ability of most countries to develop the necessary legislative and regulatory frameworks.  Second, it is difficult to arrive at a regional or international consensus as to the new rules required, because of divergent national interests - especially at a time when public confidence in international agencies is probably at the lowest level since the end of the Second World War. Third, it is hard to determine the optimal combination of ways to limit harms while also protecting democracy, freedom of expression and personal privacy.

## Health, Safety and Well-being

The last area which I believe requires attention is that of health information, safety and well-being.

The outbreak of Covid-19 is accelerating the technological innovation and upgrades of the healthcare industry. Many of these solutions use AI technologies such as AI image recognition, data collection and AI voice follow-ups. A case in point is China's advanced face recognition,

tracking and other technological solutions to control the spread of Covid 19. Will these solutions become common-placed and permanent tools of social control in a post-Covid world?

In South Africa the three largest private healthcare facilities announced in July that they were leveraging emerging technologies to improve efficiency and the quality of care delivered in fighting COVID-19. This includes the use of artificial intelligence (AI),big data and machine learning. Shortly after the announcement one of them was hit by a cyber-attack incident, which was severe enough to force the healthcare firm to take its systems offline, in order to contain the attack. It did not reveal the nature of the security breach, only that patient care was not impacted. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has warned that these are not unusual occurrences and as the COVID-19 crisis accelerates, it is also exacerbating cyber risks.

The performance of technology in the public health systems and the protection of personal health information are the two sides of the same scale. One is not more important than the other. So, we must investigate the extent to which is AI being used in the fight against Covid-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean and how safe is our health and personal information which has been gathered during the pandemic?

Finally, we know that Caribbean and Latin American countries are confronted by chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and scientific evidence is revealing that people who present with COVID-19 plus one or more underlying NCDs are at a higher risk of developing severe virus-related symptoms and dying as well.

This NCD epidemic demands urgent attention. Leading global and regional health organizations have recommended the provision of nutritional information through food labelling as an important counter-measure.

We therefore need to explore and question the quality of nutritional information that is available on food packages throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as part of the fight against Covid-19. This includes the extent to which food labelling is mandatory or standardized to address issues such as nutritional information which is provided in a foreign language or not at all.

What I have sought to frame is a proposition that elements of the public health concerns about Covid-19 have also metastasised throughout the social, political, democratic and security ecosystems, and require a holistic and cross-sectoral response.

It is therefore important that when we come to consider the issues for discussion in November, they should include an investigation into the quality and viability of local media, the empowerment of citizens through media and digital literacy; and we must also consider the new ways in which our systems of information governance should evolve in order to maximize the positive advantages of the digital revolution while mitigating the harms.